

# GIZMODO

## Meta Wants Some Fresh New Ideas for the Metaverse, so It's Asking Libertarian Think Tanks

Because what could possibly be more hip than asking the American Enterprise Institute how to build your hot new tech product?

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Meta, the freshly rebranded parent company of Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, is reportedly seeking insights from right-wing think tanks and nonprofits as it goes about its grandiose plans to usher in a whole new era of digital reality.

Meta has yet to really clarify what its promised metaverse really means—at least beyond it being like *Second Life*, except with virtual reality headsets, interminable business meetings, and Meta somehow shaking down everyone logged into it. Yet the company is already treading lightly with conservative and libertarian groups in what looks a lot like another pointless effort to stop Republican pundits and politicians from yelling at them about it. According to Bloomberg, Meta has quietly held discussions about the metaverse with third-party DC think tank partners like the American Enterprise Institute, the Cato Institute, and the Taxpayers Protection Alliance, seeking to reassure their concerns and collect input as it shapes the foundations of the metaverse.

One policy director from the R Street Institute told the news agency that basically, Meta wants to slither away from the practically constant stream of scandals it has spawned in recent memory:

It's all part of a “soft push” to move past last year's controversies, said Wayne Brough, a technology expert at R Street Institute, a free-market think tank.

According to Brough, who was invited to participate in the calls, “they want to separate the metaverse” from the company's political baggage.

Neil Chilson, a senior fellow at Stand Together, a nonprofit backed by industrialist and Republican mega-donor Charles Koch, participated in the calls and told Bloomberg, “There's a lot of scrutiny on [Meta], and they are trying to move into a new space and bring the temperature down at the same time.”

Yeah, good luck with that.

According to Bloomberg, individuals who participated in discussions between the conservative think tanks and Meta said that they centered around issues like how IDs and digital goods will flow around in the metaverse, tools that would allow users to shape their own experiences,

privacy, and safety. Will Duffield, a Cato policy analyst, told the news agency Meta was being proactive in soliciting feedback and advice on those issues. What exactly all this means is a little unclear, although one can imagine the discussions probably involve laissez-faire alternatives to government regulation.

Conspicuously unmentioned is the issue for which all of these others have served mostly as window dressing for Republican politicians—the baseless but widespread claim that Facebook goes out of its way to  censor and harass conservatives. In the past, when members of Congress have had the opportunity to grill tech executives at hearings, the  GOP side has largely taken advantage of it to see who can grandstand the most about *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and nefarious Silicon Valley leftists.

As Bloomberg noted, some of the groups involved in the discussions receive funding from Meta separately from its (as of 2021) \$20 million annual lobbying budget. Whether this has been any more effective than CEO Mark Zuckerberg’s and his policy team’s  many other efforts to win hearts and minds on the right by cowtowing is debatable. One could more broadly question how exactly consultations with the ideological allies of the business establishment fit in with an effort to reverse the Facebook (sorry, Meta) brand’s struggles to convince young people  it’s not deeply boring.

“As we’ve said  here, we continue to engage experts in government, industry and academia on a bipartisan basis to think through issues and opportunities in the metaverse,” a Meta spokesperson told Gizmodo via email. “The metaverse isn’t a single product one company can build alone.”

Meta’s fortunes on the business front will be up for debate later on Wednesday when the company reports its fourth-quarter earnings. Zuckerberg has acknowledged that the pivot to the metaverse will cost the company billions of dollars in the short term, and investors will be curious to see whether Meta can actually explain its business plan in plausible terms. Analysts widely expect Meta to  provide additional insights into the finances of Reality Labs, its experimental division that is spearheading the metaverse push.

Even within Meta, whatever large-scale products will end up emerging from the pivot are still viewed as largely theoretical, according to the  New York Times, unlike previous shifts in tech like the mobile revolution, which occurred after smartphones had already become ubiquitous and the engineering behind them highly refined. The Times noted that many numerous current and former employees had described internal disruption as Meta pushed them into AR/VR roles and signaled that staff are expected to be rosy about metaverse projects or find jobs elsewhere. Some told the paper that they believed Meta was charging ahead while pushing problems with existing core products like Facebook and Instagram under the rug.

“Investors are going to require more visibility into what they are underwriting for management’s desired next leg of growth,” RBC Capital Markets analyst Brad Erickson wrote in a research note,  Bloomberg separately reported.