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Can Zuckerberg convince Washington that Metaverse is not evil?

Meta's team is laying out its vision for this imaginary world in meetings with sceptical conservative think-tanks and nonprofits

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Mark Zuckerberg has a problem money can't fix: convincing Capitol Hill that the metaverse — whatever that is — isn't evil.

His strategy is to start with a soft campaign to woo Washington insiders before deeply sceptical legislators begin to debate the controversial company's next act. This is a change of gears for a Silicon Valley behemoth whose early motto was to “move fast and break things” and that outspent all its peers to fend off legislation to curb the dominance of Big Tech.

A whistle-blower blasted the company and its founder at an October Senate hearing, decrying Zuckerberg's outsized influence and calling for more regulation to stop the network giant putting profit above the public good. On the heels of that controversy, Facebook was rechristened Meta Platforms, and its Washington team is already working to lay a favourable foundation for the push into this potentially lucrative landscape before legislators and regulators drill into what kind of harm it could cause.

Meta's product and policy teams are introducing this future virtual world to think-tanks and nonprofits, according to people familiar with the discussions, holding conference calls in recent months to lay out the company's vision.

“There's a lot of scrutiny on them, and they are trying to move into a new space and bring the temperature down at the same time,” said Neil Chilson, who has participated in Meta's calls and is a senior fellow at Stand Together, a nonprofit associated with industrialist Charles Koch.

For now, the effort is focused on outside groups, especially free market and libertarian-leaning organisations, many of which Meta supports financially. The calls centre on policy discussions, according to people who have participated, as the company tries to anticipate issues that could arise when users socialise, work, shop and play in new virtual worlds. 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.

A Meta spokesperson confirmed that the company is leading discussions about the metaverse, but declined to provide details, saying the team is working on issues that are still years away. A main goal is to ensure that features are “appropriate to the new technologies and effective in keeping people safe”, said Meta spokesperson Kristen Morea.

The conversations show how far Facebook — now Meta — has come from its early days in Washington when the company sent staffers to congressional offices to show lawmakers how to open accounts and use the social media platform to reach constituents.

Today, one of the few things shared by Democrats and Republicans is their unease over Facebook’s handling of misinformation, hate speech and protecting children online — all issues that would carry over to the metaverse. Addressing these would be even more difficult in a virtual space where fleeting interactions are much harder to monitor and report.

Legislators across the ideological spectrum are already suspicious. Tennessee senator Marsha Blackburn, a conservative Republican, was unconvinced by Facebook’s name change. New York representative Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, a progressive Democrat, compared the company and its future plans to a metastasising cancer.

But Meta has found an ideological affinity with influential groups that lean conservative, favour light regulation and defend freedom of speech. Meta’s policy team went to great lengths to keep conservatives on its platform happy during the Trump administration. It wasn’t until the former president’s posts were linked to an attack on the Capitol that Facebook suspended his account for two years.

In Zuckerberg’s ideal vision of the metaverse, users don virtual reality headsets to meet other people in distant or imaginary places. His critics’ fears are more dystopian: the spread of misinformation, political polarisation, and the distortion of human interactions.

Zuckerberg has emphasised that Meta won’t be the only company building the metaverse. Microsoft and Apple are also moving towards this technology frontier.

The company is still working to head off other challenges in Washington, including tech-focused antitrust legislation. Some of the same think-tanks that participated in the calls on the metaverse have also opposed those measures, echoing tech companies’ warnings of the affect on innovation, national security and popular consumer products. So far, Congress has struggled to pass legislation to rein in the big internet platforms and any regulatory threat to the metaverse is remote.

Meta lists the American Enterprise Institute, Cato Institute and the Taxpayers Protection Alliance among its third-party partners, all of which have been in touch with the company about the metaverse. The R Street Institute has received funds for unrelated projects from the Chan

Zuckerberg Initiative in the past, but isn't now supported by Meta. The financial support for think-tanks and nonprofits isn't included in the more than \$20m Meta spent on lobbying last year.

Meta already has close ties to many of these entities. Anne Hobson, a Meta public policy manager focused on virtual reality, previously worked at R Street and George Mason University's Mercatus Center, which embraces free-market ideas. Lori Moylan, another Meta public policy manager, spent more than eight years at R Street and also worked at the American Enterprise Institute and the Mercatus Center.

A key question will be how users' identities and digital goods move about in the metaverse, said Mark Jamison, a technology expert at the right-leaning American Enterprise Institute. (He has participated in Meta's calls and was given an Oculus headset by the company.) Jamison and others said the calls also covered how to give people the tools to shape their own experience and protect themselves from harmful exchanges. Other major concerns include privacy and safety.

"People have justifiable concerns looking at the history of Facebook," said Kurt Opsahl, deputy executive director and general counsel at the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a group focused on civil liberties online.

Meta doesn't have much time before the debate about the metaverse turns hostile in Congress. An aide to Democratic senator Ed Markey said his office is actively looking at virtual reality and the metaverse, especially its affect on children and teens.

And senator Richard Blumenthal, the Connecticut Democrat who led last year's investigation of Facebook, said the outrage over the company's past scandals will follow it into future endeavours.

'It's changing its name, but its MO, its basic business is still the same,' Blumenthal said. 'It can change its name and colour, chameleon-like, but it's still the same animal.'