

# NEWS BYTES

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“Let us be alert to the season in which we are living. It is the season of the Blessed Hope, calling for us to cut our ties with the world and build ourselves on this One who will soon appear. He is our hope—a Blessed Hope enabling us to rise above our times and fix our gaze upon Him.” Tozer

## Zuckerberg's “Meta” Will Be in the Business of Messing with Minds

By Rita Joseph November 9, 2021 at 3:17pm

Blurring reality has always been hazardous. For the mentally fragile, the potential for blurring the divide between reality and the pretend worlds of the internet is about to get a whole lot more dangerous.

Last month, two apparently unrelated announcements made headlines.

An abducted little 4-year-old girl, Cleo Smith, was found alive, and Mark Zuckerberg announced his plan for renaming Facebook and creating his new three-dimensional metaverse.

So where's the connection? You spot it.

Here's how journalists Paul Garvey and Paige Taylor described Cleo's accused abductor Terence Kelly's dangerous descent into the world of make-believe for The Australian:

“In a dilapidated duplex in a rundown part of Carnarvon known locally as The Bronx, Terence Kelly – the man alleged to have abducted four-year-old Cleo Smith – built himself an elaborate online fantasy. Mr Kelly, increasingly isolated in the years since the death of a woman locals considered his grandmother, appears to have crossed over into a virtual world of Bratz DeLuca: a name appropriated from one of his favourite make of dolls.

“Alone in his housing commission home, with no close family of his own, Mr Kelly operated what appears to be several – and potentially dozens – of different Facebook and Instagram accounts for him and his imaginary children. In at least one instance, he appeared to use photographs from the profile of a woman and her daughters and use them for the profiles of his fake family. He tagged many of the posts as being in Cronulla, a continent away from Carnarvon. And he did so while sitting surrounded by an elaborate collection of dolls, stretching from wall to wall, and from floor to ceiling.”

Yes, you got it! Zuckerberg's Facebook. The authors go on to say of the accused abductor that "the fantasy family he constructed [was] documented primarily through Facebook pages."

It seems that he "crossed back out of that fantasy world and drove out to the Blowholes campground, 75km north of Carnarvon, to abduct Cleo."

On the creation of fake online profiles by people with a weakened grip on reality, James Ogloff, director of the Centre for Forensic Behavioural Science at Swinburne University, said, "All of us have some sort of fantasy ... but we're in touch with reality. We know what's real and what's not real. The question is whether you cross that line of irrationality."

## **A Parallel Digital World: Augmented Reality or Alternate Reality?**

We all need to think about this.

We are being offered digital twinning of the real and the virtual. As researchers wrote in a study published by IEEE MultiMedia, "[D]igital twins are being redefined as digital replications of living as well as nonliving entities that enable data to be seamlessly transmitted between the physical and virtual worlds."

As IT commentator Ronke Babajide wrote in a recent Medium post, "The Metaverse won't be a game world. It'll never 'reset' or 'pause' or 'end', it'll go on indefinitely like the real world. It'll be synchronized with our real world and there will be no limit to the 'users' of this parallel digital world."

"The Metaverse is more like Augmented Reality and meant to improve your real life, we're already using some of the technology in education, medicine and games, or even the augmented view of Google Maps," she added.

It all sounds good — but is it?

In an article for Quartz titled, "What parents need to know about the coming metaverse," Adario Strange sounded a warning.

"[W]hile many now know what the metaverse is — broadly, immersive digital experiences accessed through virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) devices — its cultural import and how it may change our behaviors is less clear. This is particularly true with regard to the most vulnerable new metaverse initiates — children," he wrote.

He went on to argue that protecting children in the metaverse will need to go beyond warning labels.

Strange cited 2008 research by University of Zurich neuroscientist Thomas Baumgartner that noted the disturbing differences in how adult prefrontal brain regions process VR versus the brains of children subjected to emotional virtual stimuli.

He quoted Stanford professor Jeremy Bailenson's 2018 book "Experience on Demand": "But VR engulfs us. ... We slide occluding goggles over our eyes and cover our ears with headphones, overriding our two primary sense systems with simulated digital signals. ... VR is the apotheosis of every media fear and fantasy we've ever had."

Fair warning.

## **Serious Research Has Yet to Be Done**

So what will happen to children and to mentally fragile adults when they are fully immersed in a 3D VR and AR world, when they find themselves inside a disorienting and unnerving different other-world space?

No one seems to know yet. Serious research has not been done. The conclusions of a preliminary two-page research study from 2019 are not reassuring:

"We find that users' definitions of 'online harassment' are subjective and highly personal, making it difficult to govern social spaces at the platform or application level. We also find that embodiment and presence make harassment feel more intense. Finally, we find that shared norms for appropriate behavior in social VR are still emergent, and that users distinguish between newcomers who unknowingly violate expectations for appropriateness and those users who aim to cause intentional harm."

Not good enough, Meta!

Indeed, the existing research on the social consequences of this metaverse invention is pitifully inadequate.

## **The Metaverse Must Not Operate Outside the Rule of Law**

So what's the hurry?

Well, clearly for the Big Tech oligarchs, there's money to be made. That's the big hurry. Perhaps the best way to give them pause is to bring them inside the rule of law right now.

Protection for children and for the mentally vulnerable, a responsible limitation of potential harm, must be set in place. Right now — not post facto.

But Zuckerberg is planning to deal with any tragic consequences afterward. He just announced that he expects this year to spend more than \$10 billion on AR, VR and metaverse infrastructure.

Perhaps Meta should spend \$10 billion first on assessing the metaverse's potential harms to children.

There was no amount announced for precautionary research on the possible harm to children whose brains are still developing and potential harm to psychologically disturbed adults.

Neither was there any announcement of any amount that he might expect to spend to treat and compensate metaverse harms that result from its use by psychologically fragile potential users of the metaverse like Terence Kelly.

Under the rule of law, a brake must be put on the development of the metaverse until an adequate legal safety net is in place to protect the vulnerable from real harm.

In the real world, where real \$10 billion annual budgets are being spent to build this metaverse, real \$10 billion fines must be readied to be imposed on those business entities that facilitate real mental disturbance and real harmful behaviors on those who are unable psychologically to deal with the manipulative mind-meddling of this Big Tech monstrosity.

## **\The Metaverse Will Mess with Creation**

One of the most disturbing aspects of the developing metaverse was prefigured in the original 1992 science fiction novel “Snow Crash” by Neal Stephenson, in which religious faith is disparaged.

“All people have religions. It’s like we have religion receptors built into our brain cells, or something, and we’ll latch onto anything that’ll fill that niche for us.”

Therein lies a very real danger to us all — the idea that our faith and the faith of our fathers is just an imaginary iteration like so many other novelties in the new metaverse.

But we know our Creator is real. There is a real heaven and a real earth. Jesus Christ is a real person. We have the historical evidence of the New and Old Testaments, reliable source material.

We must not allow this new metaverse to get out of hand to mess with everything that is good and true and right in our real lives.

We must not allow this new medium to mess with our hearts or with our deepest principles and commitments.

We must arm ourselves and protect especially our children and our child-like adults from the worst threats of the metaverse’s messing with our minds.

## **Israel to Expedite Airlift of Ethiopian Jews as Country’s Civil War Rages On**

11-10-2021 Emily Jones

JERUSALEM, Israel – Israeli leaders are expediting plans to potentially bring thousands of Ethiopian Jews to Israel as the East African country continues to be rocked by a bloody civil war.

The plan applies only to Ethiopians who already have first-degree relatives in Israel. This could mean up to 5,000 Ethiopians will be airlifted but it is unclear when the process will be completed and how many will be allowed to make Aliyah (immigrate) to Israel.

Aliyah and Integration Minister Pnina Tamano-Shata and Interior Minister Ayelet Shaked reached the compromise on Tuesday after a tense disagreement, according to Israeli media reports

Shaked opposed airlifting the Ethiopians, arguing that most of the new immigrants were not actually Jews and that the lives of those still in the East African country are not in real danger.



Tamano-Shata, who herself is Ethiopian, threatened to resign if no more people were airlifted, Haaretz reported.

Israeli officials believe at least 7,000 Jews are remaining in Ethiopia and many of them live in the Tigray region – the epicenter of the country’s year-long civil war. Since December, Israel has airlifted 2,000 Jews out of Ethiopia and brought them to the Holy

Land, but activists say more needs to be done.

Israeli media reported on Sunday that the National Security Council is against airlifting Ethiopians, citing a "threat" of non-Jews "seeking to take advantage of the economic system in Israel." The council also said in a document published by Israel’s Channel 12 News that thousands of Ethiopians waiting to immigrate to Israel were in no immediate danger.

The process of bringing Ethiopian Jews to Israel has encountered repeated delays and many wait decades before they can immigrate. But the civil war has increased pressure on Israeli leaders to accelerate the stalled immigration of Ethiopian Jews.

“Thousands are still waiting to make aliyah (immigrate) to Israel, and some of them are threatened and in a worrying situation. We must continue to act to bring them over to Israel quickly,” President Isaac Herzog said last week.

## Israel Keeping Close Eye On Hezbollah's Amassing Of Forces In Lebanon



Lebanon, the least stable country in Israel's environment at this time, is home to Iran's strongest proxy, Hezbollah, which continues to get stronger despite the many crises plaguing its host country.

Lebanon's multi-faceted dysfunction at the political, economic and social levels has seen its citizens plunged into misery with many of them staring into the abyss of a humanitarian crisis (the country has recently declined

Israeli offers for humanitarian assistance).

At the same time, Hezbollah is growing more entrenched in Lebanon's political system, while building up its military force, according to Maj. (res.) Tal Beerli, who heads the research department at the Alma Center in Israel and who served for 20 years in the IDF's Military Intelligence Directorate.

With Iranian assistance, Hezbollah is importing drones, rockets and surface-to-air missile systems, and examining ways to build precision-guided missiles on Lebanese territory--an activity that Israel has explicitly warned it would not tolerate due to the capability this would give Hezbollah to target strategic sites in Israel.

Beerli told JNS that the crisis in Lebanon "has not at all influenced Hezbollah's military situation. Hezbollah is strong, and is continuing its military force buildup."

In recent weeks, Israel has reportedly stepped up its gray-zone strikes in Syria, targeting efforts to smuggle advanced weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon; this increase "simply proves that the force buildup is ongoing," stated Beerli.

A dramatic and rare daytime strike on Oct. 31 in Syria--attributed by international media reports to Israel--was likely designed to stop an imminent transfer of weapons to Hezbollah, assessed Beerli.

Similarly, a rare early evening bombing of targets in the western Syria areas of Tartus and Homs, not far from Lebanon, on Nov. 8 was probably part of an attempt to stop arms from reaching the terror organization's Lebanese warehouses.

"This suggests that Hezbollah is building up force all of the time. Someone is trying to prevent it, but the intention and the activity is there. Lebanon's crisis has not influenced this at all. The only side that can harm Hezbollah's force buildup is Israel," said Beerli. Alternatively, he added the Iranian policy towards Hezbollah would change, although such a scenario appears far from realistic at this time.

It is safe to assume that Israel's intelligence community is closely monitoring Hezbollah's accumulation of firepower and keeping a watchful eye on any new attempts by Hezbollah to initiate domestic precision-missile production.

Israel considers the development of an indigenous Hezbollah missile industry to be a highly destabilizing event that cannot be tolerated and has made continuous efforts to both disrupt the force accumulation process and deter Hezbollah from using the weapons that it does have.

In terms of willingness to activate that force, Beerli said Hezbollah has passed up recent opportunities to do so, both within Lebanon and against Israel.

'A testament to self-confidence, not weakness'

The October gun battle in Beirut between Lebanese Christian Forces, headed by Samir Geagea, and Hezbollah and allied Shi'ite Amal movement operatives could have led to a decision by Hezbollah to exhibit its force in the same way it did in May 2008, when it took over Beirut's airport and media outlets after a government decision to remove its internal communications system and the pro-Hezbollah head of airport security. Yet it refrained from acting.

"In my view, this is testament of Hezbollah's self-confidence, not weakness," said Beerli. "It is clear to everyone in Lebanon that Hezbollah is the most powerful organization. Geagea has a small armed militia, but it can't deal with Hezbollah."

In addition, shrapnel that fell in Lebanon on in November as a result of the recent strikes on Tartus and Homs, which injured Lebanese civilians and damaged properties, could have been an excuse for Hezbollah to respond--but here, too, the organization preferred to avoid using force. "This strengthens the assessment that Hezbollah has no interest in taking special action unless 'someone steps on its sore spots,' " said Beerli.

"There is a very clear separation between Syria and Lebanon. Hezbollah will not respond to incidents in Syria unless one of its direct members is killed on Syrian soil, and Hezbollah attributes this to Israel," explained Beerli. "Hence, the attacks in Syria have had no influence on Israeli-Hezbollah dynamics."

Hezbollah's base--made up of the majority of Lebanon's Shi'ite population--has remained stable, despite some Shi'ite opposition voices Beerli described as exceptions that remain passive.

At the political level, those in Lebanon who oppose Hezbollah--members of the March 14 bloc--have been in opposition to it in any case, irrespective of Lebanon's recent crises, he added.

On the other hand, Hezbollah has been exploiting the crisis by activating its connections and capabilities to "demonstrate that it is a suitable alternative that can provide answers to the country's ills," said Beerli.

Still, he added, this is largely an effort aimed at sending messages to Hezbollah's own base, and this is not expected to change the already divided Lebanese population's perception of the organization. Hezbollah will ultimately continue to have the final say on what happens in the land of the cedars.