

# **Immersive Journalism: From Audience to First-Person Experience of News**

Sara Pérez Seijo

Universidade de Santiago de Compostela

[s.perez.seijo@usc.es](mailto:s.perez.seijo@usc.es)

**Accepted version of the chapter published by Springer**

## **How to cite:**

Pérez Seijo, S. (2017). Immersive Journalism: From Audience to First-Person Experience of News. In: Freire, F., Rúas Araújo, X., Martínez Fernández, V., García, X. (eds) *Media and Metamedia Management*. Advances in Intelligent Systems and Computing, vol 503. Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-46068-0\\_14](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-46068-0_14)

# Immersive Journalism: From Audience to First-Person Experience of News

Sara Pérez Seijo

Universidade de Santiago de Compostela

[s.perez.seijo@usc.es](mailto:s.perez.seijo@usc.es)

**Abstract** This research is focused on checking the theory about how the application of virtual reality techniques in the audiovisual pieces alters the spectator level of implication with regard to information. To demonstrate, the author revises the academic theory and analyses several audiovisual pieces made with virtual reality. According to the study, journalism trends point to the audiovisual landscape, and they do it with the new technologies on the market. Innovation laboratories of the main European public televisions want to apply virtual reality techniques to their own audiovisual pieces, in order to make information closer to the spectator. Therefore, these new products allow the viewers being an actor of the information or recreated reality thanks to the high immersion level.

**Keywords:** Immersive journalism; Immersion; Virtual reality; Empathy; Recreated scenarios.

## 1. Theoretical Framework

The application of VR techniques and the implementation of new immersive formats in audiovisual products has become an increasing trend in the media market. The methods initially tested and used in video games to offer users an ever-closer experience to reality are being introduced in the media. The public demands for greater objectivity and a closer touch about the reality of what has happened, and producers seek to fulfill that demand by providing closer contents about the events they report. The aim is immersion, to take the user to the scene, the exact time, the event itself. And for that, immersive and virtual tools are used which make possible to offer the audience a real experience.

Currently Nonny de la Peña is considered to be the godmother of VR and is recognized for her work in the field of immersive journalism. However, the potential of immersive narratives in the news scene has been the subject of study since the nineties, especially in the American academia. The evolving experiences and possibilities that VR put on the table at that time raised the curiosity of many researchers that decided to focus their efforts and time to study the potential impact in journalism. In response to this new emerging technology, universities such as Columbia, through the Center for New Media, tried to carry out the first hands-on experiments. One of these trials took place in 1997 during the celebration of St. Patrick's Day in New York City. The students used 360° video to capture the demonstrations of gay community organizations and their subsequent police detention. These experiments were not only based on current events at that moment, but Columbia University also experimented with the recreation of past events. One of these tests was the reproduction of the student revolt of 1968 in the university campus, through augmented reality technologies.

Paced with these new techniques that seem to allow a higher degree of engagement in the stories, the University of Minnesota in 2000 and 2001 organized two seminars through the Institute for New Media Studies. The first one was *Playing the news: Journalism, interactive and narrative games*, an event focused on lecturing about the possible influence of the video games logic in the creation of press reports. One year later, the University of Minnesota held *Sensing the news: What could the new technologies mean for journalism in order to remark the potential of the latest technology and its ability to offer a sensory immersion experience never-before-seen*.

Virtual and augmented reality provide new possibilities to journalism. However, the implementation has been slow. The problem is held against the high costs of such technologies and the resulting required supplies as well as the need for specialized professionals in handling, creation, production and implementation of these tools and techniques in journalism. Despite this, nowadays several media try to incorporate these new possibilities in order to provide the audience with immersive experiences so they can inform them of a more comprehensive and efficient through a first-person interaction way. This is what public television such as the BBC or France TV, or traditional media like The New York Times are trying to strive for. This is where the researcher De la Peña has tried to join with the leading group at the University of South Carolina, Immersive Journalism. By the implementation of techniques and tools of VR, De la Peña has carried out several immersive projects on real events. The flagship of her work has been the so-called Project Syria, held in 2014. This production is a 360° recording which allows the user immersion by using VR goggles. Probably the user has never been there in the middle of the war, nor have seen any of the people that has been able to observe via that "fourth screen" (Domínguez 2015: 415). However, to some extent how has it felt to be in middle of the conflict. So far the events have reached the audience through news or documentary video, but the 360° recording techniques are able to take the receiver to the main scene like never before. VR, either from the hand of journalism or video games, allows, in the words of the multinational Sony, the opportunity to experience a sense of transforming presence with enough capacity to trick the mind into believing that the virtual environment is real.

## **2. Methodology**

This paper is going to study the consequences that the VR techniques have in the degree of the receptors' interaction, based on a theoretical revision of the academic research about this topic which have been done up to this point, highlighting the more current ones. Both studies about the application of the VR to journalism, and psychological analyses have been taken into consideration in order to investigate users' immersion level. Furthermore, recordings about how people react when testing VR products have been viewed, together with testing experiences of immersion in PC version of *Ferguson* (reproduces the Ferguson gunfire, in Missouri), and *The Suite Life* (immerses the user into luxurious spaces).

## **3. VR in Journalism**

According to *Sony*, 2016 has already gained some nicknames, such as the "Year O" of VR. The technological and audiovisual industry refers to this year as the moment when VR will fully break out into the mass market. Although the video game industry has been testing and experimenting with these techniques in their entertainment products, it seems

that for the first time this technology will jump to many more areas. One of them is journalism. European public broadcasters such as the *BBC* or *France Télévisions* group are already implementing on their audiovisual creations the possibilities offered by VR. However, it is still an inexperienced market.

Thanks to *Oculus Rift* glasses-which Facebook bought in March 2014, to the *Samsung Gear VR* or even the *Google Cardboards*, the VR technology is becoming more accessible to everyone. Little by little it has being incorporated to the market and it is breaking into journalism, a scenario in which it has a lot of sense. Why? According to Chris Milk, musical director and one of the current model of production concerning VR, 'journalism tries to move people to an event that they were unable to attend' (Constine, Feb. 1, 2015). Therefore, VR aims to bring much closer than it has been done so far the event that the public is being informed. This is not being done by a multimedia or textual article, but by trans- porting the user to the event thanks to a reconstruction of the incident and a pair of VR glasses.

Film director Thomas Wallner once said that the application of these techniques to journalism is leading to "a kind of media that has not existed until now" (*Méta-media*, spring-summer 2015), since never before the spectator was so close to a narrated event. Thus, has been proven by people like Nonny de la Peña with her productions, for instance *Project Syria* or *Gone Gitmo*. The last mentioned project allows the subject, by means of gloves and VR glasses, 'being in the digital shoes of a Guantanamo's prisoner that is listening to the interrogation to which someone else at the other side of the wall is being submitted' (Domínguez 2015: 415). De la Peña and the crew *Immersive Journalism* have got to reproduce, through the platform *Second Life*, a real scene thanks to the data extracted from diverse public references. *Gone Gitmo* is therefore an immersive journalistic experience that allows the individual to be translated to the facilities of Guantánamo Bay's prison. Thanks to the technology of VR employed in the recreation, their producers assured that 'the participants had the illusion of being in that place' (De la Peña et al. 2010: 297). If a person is observed while wearing a pair of VR goggles, probably their movements will not be understood. However, for the user they will make sense in that fourth wall because "the actions taken have implications in VR" (De la Peña et al. 2010: 297), such as standing in front of a mirror and being reflected. The participant plunges totally into the story thanks to an immersive experience that, added to "bis first-person perspective inside the virtual body together with the synchronization between the movements of the head and his breathing, may lead to a situation in which the participant feels as the owner of the virtual body" (De la Peña et al. 2010: 298).

In this context, the so-called immersive journalism is growing and maturing. De la Peña et al. (2010) has described it as a way of producing news in a format that allows people to get a first-hand experience of certain news events. By saying this, he means that the user has the possibility of interacting in a secondary reality (recreation) that recreates a primary reality (news events) in a digital avatar quality, so the participant will be able to try a fully immersive experience when jumping into the event, thanks to a pair of VR goggles.

#### **4. Ethical Issues of Productions with VR**

As a result of the VR pieces that recreate certain events, there may be many ethical problems that could question the veracity and honesty with whom they have been made. Kent (2015), a professor at Columbia University, raised this question: Is the journalism produced with VR thought to be an event in itself, to be an artistic concept of the event,

or to be something similar to a historical novel "based on real events?". This dilemma lays on the table a variety of ethical issues that can arise with this new form of narration offered by the immersive journalism.

The main problem appears as a result of elaborating productions with VR from 2D pieces. Those images that only have a 2D view are flat, that is, it is totally impossible to discover other views of the object or subject of the scene that have not been captured by the camera at the time when they were photographed--except that they can be shooting again, obviously. These productions have limited angles or points of view of the object or subject, so various ethical dilemmas arise when recreating them. If we do not have other angles, should they have been recreated likewise using the common sense of the imagination? Should we blur those pieces in the 3D representation as a symbol of inaccuracy? When reproducing a 2D piece to change it into a 3D one, producers should make many important decisions such as the ones exposed. Imagining the back of a print vase, the lateral form of a figure, a person's face silhouette or the subject to reenact... a series of things without all the necessary angles to reproduce. So, is it really ethical to reenact something from whom we do not have all the information?

In order to offer a solution to this difficulty that professionals can face, *The Online News Association* created a section in its webpage called *Build Your own Ethics Code Project*. It is about a space whose purpose is to reach an agreement between the ethical rules of a project that is going to be elaborated with VR techniques and everyone taking part in its production. Although this has been a first step, it is only a temporary solution before the problem of the ethic regulation of 3D recreations, as this technology still has a long way to go until a complete and official ethic code is consolidated.

Apart from the 2D-3D difficulties, there are other problems linked to the digital elimination of objects in the scene. *Associated Press* launched in August 2015 a VR project whose aim was to explore diverse luxury spaces in first person. *The Suite Life*, available in the *Oculus* Shop for the glasses *Samsung Gear VR*, transfers the user to places that only a few pockets can pay, for instance the luxurious suite *Ty Warner Penthouse* in the New Yorker hotel *Four Seasons*- Every single scene was photographed with 3D cameras from *Matterport* to be recreated 'a posteriori' by means of VR.

The pieces elaborated in *The Suite Life* can boast about an excellent reconstruction quality, but in one of the spaces the camera used to photograph the place has slipped through. This happened in a hotel room full of mirrors, so it is understandable the difficulty that supposed to photograph the place avoiding the appearance of the camera in the images. In this way, in one of these multiple photographs, a camera on its tripod can be observed. Kent (2015) considered the possibility that a number of professionals would opt for deleting the camera digitally, since it is not part of the room and therefore only slows down the vision of the place. However, there is an inconvenient: *Associated Press* forbids the manipulation of its images. The conclusion is that the camera stays where it is.

#### **4.1. The Empathy Machine**

It is in this discussion about the ethical limits where the goal of the VR pieces emerges: to cause empathy. The VR aspires to come into the land of feelings. It has the intention to outsmart the human mind tricking it into believing that what he is seeing is real, and he can interact the scenario. However, this process is just the result of a recreation that views through the VR glasses that the user is wearing. Therefore, he is not there and he cannot

touch what he is watching. Apart from this disadvantage, the VR allows the user to experience a perception of physical presence on a scenario "through an immersive system that allows the participant the access without precedents of the views and the sounds", and "the feelings and emotions" (De la Peña et al. 2010: 291). The feeling of immersion has the purpose of creating empathy in the user, but this is a goal which is away from the merely fact of telling a story (Kent 2015). Achieving that the receiver tests an emotion towards the journalistic story is not easy. Now, how far are we prepared to go in order to create empathy?

## 5. Conclusions

The immersive journalism is materialized in the production of news in a way that allows us to obtain a first person experience of events or situations described in informative reports. In this way, through the immersion in the event, a connection between the receiver and the new is developed. The user, once he wears the glasses of VR, turns into a digital avatar which allows him to get fully into the story. The hyper-realism of the scenery impedes the mind of the user to realize that what he is seeing is a recreation of the reality (secondary reality), not the reality itself (principal reality). Unlike the named *newsgames*, the immersive journalism does not imply a progress of the receiver on the action. The user is a merely viewer, he has not to take any decision in order to progress in the story. Although since the moment when he can feel emotions and show instinctive corporal reflexes, the subject becomes an actor of the information. The feeling of presence experienced by the user is so strong that the human mind does not realize (distinguish) the fact that he is in a false reality. Consequently, the individual has the necessity of acting as if he was in the principal reality. Although the VR and the immersive journalism offer a wide range of possibilities never experienced until now, its practice causes multiple ethical discussions about how the principal reality is presented to the audience. Many journalistic organizations try to offer a solution to these problems but this format is still being consolidated. Therefore, at the moment it is just developing. The road to be followed is still very long and it is just beginning.

## References

- Associated Press. (2015). *Exploring "The Suite Life" of virtual reality*. Retrieved September 12, 2015, from <https://www.ap.org/content/press-release/2015/exploring-the-suite-life-of-virtual-reality>
- Associated Press. (2015). *The suite life*. <http://interactives.ap.org/2015/suite-life/>
- Constine, J. (2015). Virtual reality, the empathy machine. *TechCrunch*. Retrieved September 10, 2015, from <http://techcrunch.com/2015/02/01/what-it-feels-like/>
- De La Peña, N., Weil, P., Llobera, J., Giannopoulos, E., Parnés, A., Spanlang, B., et al. (2010). Immersive journalism: Immersive virtual reality for the first-person experience of news. *Presence: Teleoperators and virtual environments*, XIX(4), 291-301.
- Domínguez, E. (2015). Periodismo inmersivo o cómo la realidad virtual y el videojuego influyen en la interfaz e interactividad del relato de actualidad. *El profesional de la información*, 24(4), 413-423. Retrieved September 5, 2015, from <https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2015.jul.08>

Kent, T. (2015). *An ethical reality check for virtual reality journalism*. Retrieved September 6, 2015, from <https://medium.com/@tjrkent/an-ethical-reality-check-for-virtual-reality-journalism-8e5230673507>

Méta-media. (2015). La TV demain: 10 enjeux de transformation. Retrieved August 30, 2015, from <https://www.meta-media.fr/2015/06/16/cahier-de-tendances-printemps-ete-10-enjeux-pour-la-tv-10-fiches.html>