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Title: Immersive journalism as storytelling

Year: 2018

Version: Published version

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Please cite the original version:

Sirkkunen, E., & Uskali, T. (2018). Immersive journalism as storytelling. In H. Väättäjä, M. Turunen, I. Ilvonen, E. Sirkkunen, T. Uskali, C. Kelling, . . . J. Karhu (Eds.), *VIRJOX : Engaging Services in Virtual Reality* (pp. 24-27). Tampere, Finland: Tampereen teknillinen yliopisto. Retrieved from <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-15-4277-0>

4. Immersive journalism as storytelling

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Journalists have always tried to create the most realistic representations possible. In this sense, VR offers perhaps the most effective medium for journalists to replicate the effect of ‘being there’ for audience members and VR users (Sirkkunen et al., 2016). The most advanced VR headsets and controllers allow for a full range of interactions in virtual environments. 360 videos (or spherical videos) are much more limited in terms of interaction; they capture an entire scene in which users can look up, down and around. However, 360 video is still a big step towards immersive 3D experiences. Cheap headsets for 360 video (such as Google Cardboard) are currently the most popular devices for using 360 video, which is why some newsrooms have started to experiment with 360 video journalism. In the VIRJOX-project we have explored, what are the main features 360 video journalism (Sirkkunen et al., 2017a) and what kind of narrative means and production models have been used in the 360 productions so far (Sirkkunen, 2017b).

Genres of 360 journalism: from live to documentaries and fiction

The tentative genres of 360 journalism that we analysed seem to at least loosely follow those used in journalism in general. There seems to be a separation between hard news (short on location reports), documentaries (longer, more complicated narratives), and fiction (experimenting with elements of drama and 1st-person narratives). Tentative genres found from our sample are 360 live streaming, 360 video news, 360 video documentaries, and 360 video fiction (see Figures 13–16).

Figure 13: 360 live streaming, used in NBA games, concerts, political rituals like for example president Trump’s inauguration. Also user generated content such as 360 live streaming in YouTube, Periscope, and Facebook is becoming popular.

Figure 14: 360 video news, duration 1–3 minutes, visiting distant places, showing wonders of nature, art exhibitions, visiting war zones and refugee camps. Often used journalist’s voice-over narration or reporter on the spot reporting. Quite often there is no vocal narration at all like in the New York Times Daily 360 news.

Figure 15: 360 video documentaries, duration 4–20 minutes, often aimed at creating empathy or other emotional response, various narrative strategies in use, some are avoiding photo realism using animated characters.

Figure 16: 360 video fiction, mostly produced by the New York Times. A good example is *Lincoln in the Bardo*, a 360 video version of the novel by George Saunders or *LA Noir* short stories in which user is no casual observer but a character in a bar of 1940's Los Angeles.

We have found some interesting content trends in 360 video journalism. First, live 360 video news and short 360 video news rely on the VR effect that 360 video affords – users can experience the story themselves. The short 360 video news have been the most popular genre in VR journalism so far. The most active newsroom is the New York Times which has produced in 2016–18 351 short 360 video news pieces, following Euronews with 140 pieces. Second, the longer and more developed 360 documentaries are more versatile in terms of narrative structure. Journalists in this case clearly have had more freedom to explore ideas outside of standard journalism (e.g., concepts and techniques from other genres, such as gaming and movies). Ultimately, our findings indicate that 360 journalism not only recycles ideas from previous genres of journalism but is also paving the way towards new forms of narration and expression that are about witnessing, experiencing and understanding news and other stories in a novel way.

Production becomes lighter and easier

We asked professionals (N=11) from the US, Great Britain, Finland, and Sweden producing journalistic VR about the core features of VR journalism. Our interviewees stated that the ability to offer a strong sense of presence is the key to understand what kind of themes and topics should be presented in VR stories. Another important feature is whether there is something to experience viscerally, with our senses. Third important feature is the possibility to show the world from a new angle and possibly from first-person point of view.

When talking about the most important narrative features of VR, our interviews showed that avoiding conventional narration is the key to immersive experiences. The user should have the freedom to hover in the virtual space as she or he wants. This means that there may not be a narrative at all or that there must be several ways of navigating in the story. In the more complicated stories, the writing process resembles more the making of a game than conventional news narrative. Sound, and if possible, touch are at least as essential senses as the visual information of a story.

However, the production of VR content is still in its early phase and the work practices are still evolving. Already, according to our interviews, we can claim that the production of VR documentaries particularly have evolved from labor intensive model, where over 50 specialists created a VR documentary (see for example *The Displaced*, the New York Times, 2015), into a lighter teamwork, of just 2–3 professionals. The amount of staff depends on the general strategy and the resources of the organisation. For example Euronews (with a sponsorship of Samsung) has been able to make substantial amount of short 360 video news with relatively cheap equipment and with only short introduction on the making of 360 video. On the other end there are expensive documentaries that have taken months of processing.

Questions of ethics on the rise

There is a growing concern on how the psychic consequences and risks of VR should be dealt with in the future. There seems to be a consensus among most of our interviewees that the users should be warned in advance about the possible traumatizing content. There are open questions like are the disclaimers enough how to prevent sensitive users to become traumatized, what are the codes of representing reality in journalistic VR, and how advertising and for example production placement should be dealt with in these surrounding.

Also, other so called bottlenecks for VR journalism were detected, especially the lack of audience. VR as a new technology has not yet penetrated into the mass markets. In addition, the dissemination of VR content is difficult for the newsrooms because of the different competing platforms and technologies. This is why many experts were cautious of VR journalism's near future success. Actually, for example augmented reality (AR) was seen as more promising new tech for journalism by some of our interviewees.

Of course, more audience research and usability research is still needed. The whole VR industry has been hyped so much that there is clearly a need for a reality check. There is also a need for systematic audience research in order to know what are the possibilities of VR becoming the next mass medium and VR becoming an important tool for journalistic storytelling.

Read more & references

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