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VIRTUAL REALITY JOURNALISM: CHANGING THE NARRATIVES OF NEWS

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The components of innovation and technology have always played a crucial role in progression of journalism, especially newsgathering aspect of reportage and news dissemination. In past, where the newsgathering and dissemination techniques were based on writing, typing, telegraphy, telephone, wireless, the recent past witnessed a colossal transformation in it with the emergence of Internet. Now, news can be gathered with the comfort of Internet, transmitted digitally in binary codes and reach the masses spread across the globe, compressing time and distance barriers. Today, even social media update like a 'tweet' can become an important and swift source of newsgathering and dissemination. Lately, we also saw the emergence of drone journalism, where the unmanned aerial vehicles are been used to gather news, especially from dangerous zones like wars and natural calamities etc.

More recently the integration of virtual reality and 3-D (three-dimensional)

environments in journalism has opened a new domain in journalism. The term virtual-reality (VR) was first coined by Jaron Lanier in 1987, the era, which witnessed an intense research endeavor happening in the field of VR.¹ However, the roots of VR can be traced back to 19th century in form of panoramic paintings of battles etc. In modern times the emergence of smart phones, high-density displays, increase digitalisation, improved 3D technology has provided breeding grounds for VR to flourish. Its impact can be felt in various facades of life and journalism is no exception. The VR technology gives the viewer an impression that they are actually on the ground zero, witnessing the real event as it is unfolding. Thus bringing them up close and personal to the real event, a process that will create great impression in their minds and hearts of the viewers.

Lately news organisations are turning towards VR and 3-D technology to provide their viewers not only with sound and images but also 'feel' of news. In October 2015, the New York

Times (NYT) in collaboration with Google announced to distribute free virtual reality headsets to its readers. With these VR sets, the readers can watch VR films made by the NYT. The Google Cardboard device (Fig 1 and Fig 2) is simply a piece of cardboard that turns any smartphone into a virtual reality headset will provide its reader with 360-degree video, or what some call “immersive” video.² This was followed by Associated Press (AP) plunge in VR as journalism tool in partnership with RYOT, a Los Angeles-based production company.³ One common feature in both NYT and AP use of VR is that both the news organisation have shifted to the use of VR and 3D environments to roll out news based on refugees/ immigrants plight and present 360 degree panoramic view to the audiences so that they can ‘feel’ the news, thus marking the paradigm shift in the news narration part of the news reporting. Both the news organisation are using short film based on news items transmitted via VR technology thus reinventing ‘immersion journalism’.



Fig 1⁴ and Fig 2⁵: Google Cardboard device

Immersion Journalism's methodology is to engage the reader's emotion and imagination using literary techniques to convey a story whose focus is on the experience, not the writer. The

purpose of any immersion journalist is to determine the essence of "what it feels like," not "what occurred"⁶. And in this process the VR technology helps in creating the similar life like environment before the readers.

Another common feature about both these endeavours is that they both have tried to bring the horrors of displaced people to the viewers. Where the NYT VR project film is “The Displaced,” about children uprooted by war⁷, the AP first film is 'Seeking Home: Life Inside the Calais Migrant Camp', a story about the largest migrant camp in Northern France.⁸

As quoted by Dean Baquet, the executive editor of the New York Times Magazine, the 'The Displaced,' *“created the first critical, serious piece of journalism using virtual reality, to shed light on one of the most dire humanitarian crises of our lifetime.”*⁹ According to NYT magazine editor Jake Silverstein, *“The power of VR is that it gives the viewer a unique sense of empathic connection to people and events.... It has huge potential, to help bring viewers news and stories from the most inaccessible places”*.¹⁰

It is expected that the VR technology is going to transform the way we watch movies, play games, communicate, educate and a major change is expected in the field of journalism, both from newsmakers and news consumers' perspective. The NYT and AP virtual reality projects are steps in that direction. Despite the new avenues that the virtual journalism is

capable of opening, there are serious debates happening regarding the ethics of reporting, objectivity in news.

To conclude, the virtual reality is another convergence of traditional journalistic proficiencies with technology that has started creating ripples in the field of journalism. These technologies not only brought with them the increasing elements of timeliness, accuracy, reach, feel but also somewhere have start questioning the very 'human element' of 'newsmakers 'or 'news consumers.' The integration of VR technology in journalism has started to blur the boundaries between the reality and virtual reality, real experience and the virtual experience. The situation will get more challenging with the emergence of 'virtual-reality journalism broadcast' and its impact on various reporting, especially the war reporting.

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(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹Who Coined the Term "Virtual Reality"? Virtual Reality. 2015. Accessed on October 30, 2015. <http://www.vrs.org.uk/virtual-reality/who-coined-the-term.html>.

²Ingram, Mathew. "New York Times Enters the World of Virtual Reality with Google Partnership." Fortune. October 20, 2015. Accessed on November 5, 2015. <http://fortune.com/2015/10/20/nyt-google-cardboard/>

³Terdiman, Daniel. "Virtual Reality Journalism Is Coming to the Associated Press." Fast Company. November 5, 2015.

Accessed November 8, 2015. <http://www.fastcompany.com/3053219/fast-feed/virtual-reality-journalism-is-coming-to-the-associated-press>.

⁴ <http://www.slashgear.com/google-cardboard-gets-serious-vr-headsets-for-the-masses-10359008/>

⁵ <http://www.cnet.com/news/googles-cardboard-vr-headset-is-no-joke-its-great-for-the-oculus-rift/>

⁶Dash, Leon. "Immersion Journalism." Open School of Journalism. Accessed on November 7, 2015. <http://www.openschoolofjournalism.com/distance-education-program/courses/immersion-journalism-jg190>.

⁷ Ibid n-ii

⁸Ibidn-iii

⁹Somaiya, Ravi. "The Times Partners With Google on Virtual Reality Project." *New York Times*. October 21, 2015. Accessed October 31, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/21/business/media/the-times-partners-with-google-on-virtual-reality-project.html>.

¹⁰ Ibid