

The value advantage and rational reflection on immersive journalism in emergent events

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Abstract: Within the realm of traditional media, news reporting predominantly relies on textual content and photographs, requiring the audience to decipher and extract information from the media. However, immersive journalism goes beyond this approach by enriching the audience's understanding and involvement in the news through interactive and multi-dimensional methods, effectively integrating them with the news text. Sudden events, characterized by their complexity, suddenness, and unpredictability, swiftly capture widespread attention. Augmenting the audience's immersion in these events not only deepens their comprehension of the overall event, but also triggers emotional resonance. By immersing the audience in the scene, casting them as "witnesses" or "participants" rather than mere "observers" of the news, they undergo a distinctive experience that encompasses a profound perception of the news scene, its sounds, and the emotions and feelings it evokes.^[1]

1. Introduction

In recent years, the rapid advancement and maturity of various technologies, notably Virtual Reality (VR), have garnered widespread enthusiasm from news media around the globe.^[2] Both domestic and international outlets have integrated VR and other similar technologies into their daily news production process, giving rise to a new form of news reporting known as immersive journalism.

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, The New York Times' team utilized 3D modeling technology to construct an extraordinarily precise model of the novel coronavirus. This model was seamlessly incorporated into their news articles, allowing readers to directly engage with the model on the web page and explore the virus's structure from multiple perspectives. This innovative reporting method facilitated an intuitive grasp of the virus's shape and characteristics, thereby deepening the audience's comprehension of the pandemic's impact. Additionally, The New York Times employed VR technology to craft a series of panoramic news stories surrounding the pandemic. These news pieces enabled audiences to virtually "walk into" hospitals, laboratories, and communities, adopting a first-person viewpoint. By experiencing the tireless efforts of healthcare professionals and witnessing the profound consequences of the pandemic on daily life, these immersive news narratives not only provided visually engaging information but also elicited profound emotional responses. They fostered a more empathetic understanding of the pandemic, offering insights from a distinctly human perspective.

2. Scene-based Immersive Journalism

As an emerging medium, Virtual Reality (VR) technology offers a fresh narrative landscape for news reporting. With its inherent immersive qualities, interactivity, and limitless potential for imagination, VR allows us to construct highly realistic scenes within virtual environments. By igniting people's imaginations, the audience can delve into a completely novel sensory experience, thereby enhancing their understanding and reception of the conveyed content. When we harness this burgeoning medium in conjunction with sudden events, merging "VR + sudden events," it instigates a range of transformations at both the content and audience levels.

2.1 Scene Restoration: Reducing the Breeding Ground for Rumors

In the contemporary media environment, the mechanism for generating and spreading rumors involves three key factors: structural stress, triggering events, and the concurrent weakening of normal social communication systems as non-standard communication methods come into play. Within this framework, sudden events, due to their unpredictable nature and potential threats to community and individual safety and well-being, are more susceptible to rumor generation and propagation. In such circumstances, the transparency, authenticity, and comprehensiveness of news reporting become of utmost importance. Transparent, authentic, and comprehensive news coverage serves a dual purpose: it provides accurate and timely information to satisfy the information needs of society, thus diminishing the allure of rumors, while also enhancing the public's media literacy and critical thinking skills, enabling them to approach unconfirmed information with composure and rationality. Immersive reporting maximizes the authenticity and objectivity of news primarily by leveraging cutting-edge technologies such as Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR), which transport the audience to the scene of the news event. By allowing individuals to personally experience and witness the event, immersive reporting provides a genuine understanding of the situation. This method effectively restores the entirety and intricacies of the scene, reducing the audience's reliance on imagination when it comes to sudden events and, consequently, curtailing the breeding ground for rumors. Moreover, the unique interactivity and spatial features of immersive news reporting lead to a process of information transmission and interpretation that leans towards a faithful reproduction of the scene, rather than heavily relying on the reporter's selective and accentuated interpretation of facts. This immersive approach grants the audience a more active and participatory role in the process of information interpretation, offering a presentation closer to the original event. By mitigating potential biases and distortions in the dissemination process, this distinctive form of reporting better ensures the objectivity of news information.

2.2 Scene Empowerment: Transitioning from spectators to "Experiencers"

Immersive journalism provides audiences a liberating space for experience. Within this immersive viewing realm, audiences can become more intimately connected to the news event, ultimately bolstering the credibility of the reporting.^[3]

In major sudden events, immersive news reporting not only captures the audience's attention but also facilitates a more comprehensive and profound understanding of global events. For instance, the devastating 2015 Nepal earthquake stands as one of the most significant natural disasters in recent history, resulting in a substantial loss of life and extensive property damage. Shortly after the earthquake, news agencies worldwide dedicated themselves to tracking and reporting on this staggering event. To vividly portray the earthquake's destructive force and depict the current state of the disaster-stricken region, the RYOT team utilized virtual reality technology to transport the audience to the very scene of the post-earthquake devastation in Nepal. By immersing the audience

in the aftermath of the disaster, they were able to witness firsthand the destruction, the hardships faced by those affected, and the arduous process of rebuilding. This immersive experience allowed the audience to feel as though they were physically present in the disaster zone, actively participating in the struggle between humanity and the forces of nature.

Consequently, this approach not only significantly heightened the audience's sense of involvement, deepening their comprehension and attention towards the Nepal earthquake and its repercussions, but it also evoked a profound emotional resonance within them. No longer passive bystanders, the audience transformed into experiencers, having a profound sense of engagement and emotional connection.

3. Rational Reflection: Unveiling the value advantages

Immersive news reporting holds remarkable value advantages in the realm of emergency events, as it enriches the audience's perceptual experience, diminishes the uncertainty surrounding communication content, and upholds the principle of objectivity in news reporting more effectively. However, even as we acknowledge these advantages, it is crucial to engage in rational reflection.

3.1 Timeliness: Immersive reporting struggles to be the first landing point of news

Immersive news reporting brings forth a whole new experience with its distinctive narrative style and heightened interactivity. However, achieving this innovative reporting format necessitates stringent technical standards and substantial resource investment. Technically speaking, immersive news reporting relies on advanced technologies like VR and AR. This demands not only proficient skills from technicians but also high-end hardware devices. From a resource standpoint, the input required for immersive news reporting in content production, technology research and development, and equipment procurement surpasses that of traditional news reporting, potentially creating financial strains for media organizations.

Due to the dual thresholds of technology and resources, the initial outlets for immersive news reporting are often professional media organizations boasting strong technical capabilities and ample resources. In comparison to traditional news reporting formats that can be published by a variety of sources (including individuals and small news websites), immersive news reporting may exhibit some limitations in terms of publishing diversity. Consequently, it may not initially take precedence as the primary means of delivering breaking news.

Furthermore, immersive news reporting may encounter challenges regarding timeliness. In contrast to traditional text or image-based news, the production cycle for immersive news reporting is typically longer. Each stage, from shooting to post-production and publication, demands significant time and effort. Thus, when it comes to sudden events requiring swift responses, immersive news reporting may struggle to compete with traditional news reporting.

3.2 Narrative mode: A test of the audience's media literacy

The hallmark of "immersive news" lies in its ability to transport the audience to the very heart of news events, granting them an experience akin to being physically present. In contrast, traditional news reporting, be it through text, images, or videos, offers a generalized overview of the event, often adopting a detached, third-person perspective. Such a perspective arises mainly from the pursuit of objectivity and truth in news reporting, wherein reporters are obliged to maintain a neutral stance throughout the reporting process. However, augmented reality-based news reports enable the audience to immerse themselves in the event, perceiving it from a firsthand perspective. This firsthand experience is more immediate and vivid, instilling in the audience a sensation of

being on-site. In this narrative mode, the role of the reporter becomes relatively diminished, while the audience's active participation is heightened. This approach presents new challenges to the media literacy of the audience. No longer passive recipients of information, the audience must now possess the ability to independently interpret and comprehend the news. This novel reporting format can be seen as an innovation in news communication, reshaping the relationship between audience and news, fostering a deeper and more comprehensive understanding and connection to news events, and placing greater demands on the media literacy of the audience.

3.3 Immersive communication: Unavoidable ethical issues

News ethics assumes particular significance within the realm of immersive news reporting, as this novel form of journalism, given its profound emotional impact, brings forth fresh ethical challenges.^[4] Reporters find themselves tasked not only with crafting an alluring and vibrant virtual world that immerses the audience but also with upholding objectivity, fairness, and accuracy in their reporting of events. Striking a delicate balance in this endeavor demands continuous exploration and thoughtful deliberation.

Furthermore, immersive news reporting grants reporters greater creative freedom, allowing them to present news content in more intricate ways. However, this newfound freedom also necessitates a more cautious approach to address their subjective inclinations. When producing news reports, reporters must weigh how to wield this potent narrative tool to guide public attention while safeguarding the fairness and accuracy of the news.

Moreover, as immersive news reporting can elicit heightened emotional reactions from the audience, reporters must contemplate the psychological impact this reporting format may have on them. For instance, when reporting on distressing or tragic events, reporters must exercise discretion in choosing how to present these emotionally charged contents to prevent imposing unnecessary psychological strain on the audience. Immersive news reporting has opened up new frontiers in news communication, bringing forth ethical quandaries that demand resolution. News practitioners must strive for a harmonious equilibrium between innovation and ethics, ensuring the news's fairness and accuracy while affording a more enriching news experience.

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