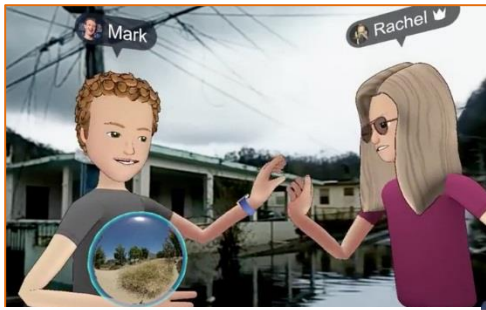




Virtual Reality, Immersive Media, and Journalism: The Ethics of Facebook’s Virtual Trip to Puerto Rico



Screen capture from Facebook.com

Immersive media technologies increasingly provide opportunities for engagement with media texts in more expansive ways than traditional modes of media consumption. Virtual reality technologies open up new possibilities for journalists and news organizations that are looking to provide more powerful experiences to convey the news. However, the merging of journalism and virtual reality technologies create new ethical challenges for digital reporting. “Virtual reality”

is an ambiguous term, but it most often denotes the use of 360-video, spherical videos, and computer-generated experiences. These technologies are valued for their immersive qualities and their ability to elicit greater empathy, emotion, and understanding from viewers for events happened outside of their everyday experience.

In October 2017, Facebook executive Mark Zuckerberg released a video showing the capabilities of Facebook’s virtual reality (VR) headset and a platform called “Facebook Spaces” by touring Puerto Rico in virtual reality after the devastation of Hurricane Maria. The presentation combined an immersive 360-video captured by *National Public Radio (NPR)* with Facebook’s virtual reality engine that allowed users to create avatars of themselves and virtually travel to and interact with new locations through a VR headset. The video provided an example of the potential applications of VR as a combination of reporting and journalism, and it highlighted the immersion that Facebook could provide to a large audience through Facebook Spaces.

Reaction to the video was not confined to expression of awe at the new technology. Many were outraged, criticizing Zuckerberg’s use of VR to capture the experience of the devastation, loss, and damage in Puerto Rico. Critics argued that even though VR is sold as “virtually” real, the immersive qualities that make the images seem so vivid were not equivalent to the painful reality of the situation. They claimed that the visceral response that VR induces only creates a pseudo-understanding of the reality of a situation or of the experiences of others; from an emotional—but simulated—experience, viewers are left *feeling* and *knowing* that they understand the lived experience of those affected by a real tragedy. Many argued that Zuckerberg’s declaration in the video that “it feels like we’re really here in Puerto Rico,” while praising the immersive experience that *NPR*’s 360-video created, is “so far off from the actual experience” of those actually in Puerto Rico (Kastrenakes, 2017). Another line of criticism focused on the ability of VR to evoke a powerful emotional response from viewers: immersive VR experiences can play “powerfully upon our emotions” and can impact users in a negative way by encouraging irrational or ineffective reactions because of this powerful emotional reaction (Bailenson, 2018). Many viewers critiqued Zuckerberg’s demonstration of the technology as evoking these powerful emotions only as a means of



selling and promoting a Facebook product. By engaging in “voyeuristic tourism” and “using [this] tragedy” as a means of drawing attention to a service rather than the tragedy itself, many argue that the video manipulated users into further engagement with Facebook Spaces and VR, rather than to actually help with relief efforts in Puerto Rico (Kharpal, 2017). Thus, VR’s strength of evoking moving experiences was portrayed as its greatest weakness—it can easily become a way to distract people from real experiences or as a way of using very emotional, but simulated, experiences to provoke less-than-fully-rational responses.

Not all are discouraged by the prospects of VR in journalism, however. Those that did not sense any ethical problems with Zuckerberg’s use of VR technology and the 360-video captured by *NPR* argued that the enhanced visceral response of virtual reality is a powerful tool in evoking empathy and understanding. Barbara E. Allen argues that VR allows you to “see, and hear, and feel the human impact of a story” precisely by eliciting empathy from the powerful emotional reactions viewers have to being immersed inside of an event. In this manner, many argued that the immersive technologies used by Zuckerberg and *NPR* allowed for viewers to uphold the goals of journalism by helping audiences to understand more clearly the experiences of those in Puerto Rico. By imagining what it is like to be inside of an event through an interactive VR experience, Molly Swenson describes the journalistic payoff; viewers may realize the import of the story when they think “oh my God, what if I couldn’t take off this headset and this is my reality” (2013)? This moment of simulated experience triggers a powerful emotional response, one that may motivate audiences to action that affects positive change in a way that traditional journalism may not.

The controversy over VR in journalism orbits around the question of what parts of experience are valuable, and how we value emotions and information in journalism. Zuckerberg argued that “one of the most powerful features of VR is empathy” and that his goal was to show how VR can be effective in raising awareness and understanding of events happening in different parts of the world (Kharpal, 2017). But how important are emotions for a journalist’s quest to convey newsworthy information, and how might emotional reactions obfuscate or hinder the sort of rational decision making that journalists see as stemming from their work? What is the real journalistic value of immersive, but technologically created, VR experiences?

Discussion Questions:

1. Was Facebook’s use of VR technologies in response to the disaster in Puerto Rico unethical? Why or why not?
2. One can write a story full of information about a tragedy, but how important is it to convey the experience of *what that tragedy is like*? What more does a viewer know if they have all the information about Hurricane Maria’s destruction *and* they experienced the site of this disaster?
3. Conveying information is a crucial goal of journalism, but how important is evoking emotion from one’s audience? What are the journalistic benefits of getting a strong emotional reaction from one’s audience?



4. What might be the problems of journalists using VR technologies to create strong emotional reactions among their audience?
5. When might the values of conveying information and creating strong emotional reactions come into conflict in journalistic practice? How might a journalist use VR technologies and balance these two concerns?

Further Information:

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