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IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT EMPATHY¹

Going beyond the empathy machine in immersive journalism

Sarah Jones

In November 2015, *The New York Times* released its Virtual Reality (VR) app and distributed cardboard headsets to its 1.2 million subscribers. The app contained an experience called *The Displaced* (dir.: Chris Milk 2015), which told the story of three children who had lost their homes due to war and conflict. The mobile app had more downloads in its first few days than any other *New York Times* app has had at launch; the average time spent within the app was 14.7 minutes; some 92 percent of videos were viewed; and concurrently the videos began trending on social networks (Jaekel 2015). The success of the launch led *Wired* magazine to lead with the headline, “Google Cardboard’s *New York Times* Experiment Just Hooked a Generation on VR” (Wohlsen 2015). However, the biggest impact was in the consumer response that *The Displaced* was a transformative experience, something that Milk refers to as an “empathy machine” (Milk 2015). Among the responses online, readers of *The New York Times* said:

Before today, I never suspected VR would interest me, much less bring tears to my eyes. Incredible. #NYTVR @jennykutnow

Never have I been emotionally moved by a new technology. Until just now with my first taste of #NYTVR. Speechless. @google @nytimes @AmiNahshon

“Whoaaa, bra! I think I need to sit down.” – 10-year-old kid’s mind blown by #NYTVR. “Why do we even have wars? We should not have wars.” @lizweil

Thanks @nytimes, it’s been awhile since I’ve sobbed into a cardboard box. #NYTVR @tophrrrr

The emphasis and repeated use of the words “sob”, “emotion”, and “tears” in the users’ descriptions of their experience gives weight to Milk’s argument that the technology is a machine that makes people more compassionate, more connected, and more empathetic. This chapter will seek to look beyond this and challenge the argument that VR is an empathy machine. It will argue the proposition that VR as an empathy machine has been a strategic move by the technology industry as a way to humanize the technology. Instead, the technology can effectively be used to enhance emotions through the depiction of a place in a story. This in turn can evoke empathy, but it should not be the driving factor for VR in immersive journalism, as there are limitations that can change the nature of journalism.

Why are we here?

Discussions around media being able to generate empathy are not new. Film critic Roger Ebert, in a speech to accept a star on the *Hollywood Walk of Fame*, stated,

Movies are the most powerful empathy machine in all the arts. When I go to a great movie, I can live somebody else’s life for a while. I can walk in somebody else’s shoes. I can see what it feels like to be a member of a different gender, a different race, a different economic class, to live in a different time, to have a different belief.

Ebert 2005, np.

The discourse around empathy has been resurrected in discussion around the purpose of VR content, most prominently developed in the work of de la Peña et al. (2010) and Milk’s TED talk, “How virtual reality can create the ultimate empathy machine” (Milk 2015). In an analysis of the work of immersive journalism, Sánchez Laws (2017) identified de la Peña’s two key notions that give way to immersion and, as a result, empathy:

The first idea was that being placed in a situation that felt as real as the original news event would heighten engagement. The second idea was that adopting a first-person point of view would lead to a deeper emotional response.

Sánchez Laws 2017, 2

Empathy became the gateway for immersive journalism, a reason to bring a new and emerging technology into a new genre.

The drivers for the technology and the emergence of technology companies within the news industry have been covered at length throughout this book. It is important to reiterate that the VR market has largely been dominated by the games industry. To generate the scale of growth and adoption that the technology industry wanted, it needed to reach and secure new audiences. This could only be

done by tapping into new markets. Adoption is still a concern, with a survey of developers in 2019 finding that 40 percent of them found this to be the biggest challenge (Fogel 2019). The aim then is to infiltrate a range of industries to ensure wider adoption. Since 2014, a number of industries such as retail, advertising, film, and travel have been experimenting with the technology. Certainly education, healthcare, and training have been using the technology since the second wave in the 1990s.

There is also the realization that games are not enough and for the industry to thrive there needs to be a range of good content. The lessons have been learned from the early days of the internet. Tim Wu's *The Attention Merchants* talks about the notion of "content is king" in discussions with Bill Gates as far back as 1996, where the internet would only succeed if there was good content: "If people are to be expected to put up with turning on a computer to read a screen, they must be rewarded with deep and extremely up-to-date information that they can explore at will" (Wu 2016).

As a result, to generate content and to encourage adoption, technology companies have partnered with news organizations to reach mass audiences, and in particular audiences that weren't traditionally associated with the games industry. Samsung partnered with the *NYTimes* to produce The Daily 360 stories. The project lasted a year and the experiences gained 94 million views on Facebook and 2 million views on YouTube (Willens 2017). This was not the first time the *NYTimes* had partnered with a technology company, as noted in the opening of this chapter and the launch of the cardboard headsets with Google.

Google has also supported a number of organizations to generate VR content: for example, funding to support *Euronews* to integrate 360-degree experiences into their production workflows (Google DNI).

Oculus has been running a Creators Lab with their VR for Good program, and HTC Vive has supported a similar program with VR for Impact. These programs have bought together creators, storytellers, and technologists to produce new content that reaches new and diverse audiences.

It can also be argued that the trend for these VR for Good campaigns has been used to humanize the technology. This is not in the traditional sense of the term, where artificial intelligence is "humanized" to personalize responses, but instead through an accessibility lens. The idea of putting on a VR headset to enter a virtual world could be prohibitive to a wide audience not used to those spaces or technologies. Yet, disguised as a medium to explore a new journalistic narrative or a deeper understanding of a news story, it becomes humanized and is suddenly more accessible. It is this that has driven the use of immersive journalism, as noted at the start through *The New York Times'* VR app and the 1.2 million subscribers holding a cardboard headset to step into another world.

With buy-in from technology companies and the emergence of immersive journalism in a VR form, why then should we stand against empathy as the driver for content?

The limitations of empathy

Zillah Watson has been at the heart of the emerging immersive journalism scene, leading the work for the BBC and developing research and development within this area. She authored one of the most extensive studies on VR in journalism for the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism's report *VR for News: The New Reality?* (Watson 2017) where the claim of empathy held little purchase with the creators who were interviewed. One area of concern highlighted in the report was raised by Jason Farkas, VP for Premium Content Video at CNN, where he stressed that, although empathy is an important component of some VR, it isn't the only one. The concern was that in the early days of VR (in this wave), the over-emphasis on empathy may have limited the range of content explored (Watson 2017, 21), something that will be developed later in this chapter.

An in-depth interview with Watson that took place in 2020 has allowed for these topics to be explored further to understand why we should be going beyond the empathy machine when discussing immersive journalism, with the starting point trying to understand how VR came to be almost synonymous with empathy;

People got so excited by it that this was a unique way to put you in someone else's shoes so you would understand things. People just liked that... It was about the simplicity. All ideas spread when they're ultimately quite simple and it just had a simplicity and beauty to it. Everybody loved the idea that this was going to make us all better people and the world a better place... For some new technology that's actually quite scary, strapping a box on your head, to then believe that it could have this unique superpower to help you deeply understand other people's lives was an incredibly positive thing that I think really helped drive forward interest in it.

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With Ebert (2005) likening film to an empathy machine because you could understand things better, it is interesting to understand whether virtual reality is any different to established media forms, or whether the technology itself could drive us to a greater empathetic reaction. For Watson, any chance of empathy lies in the story;

I see it is all on a continuum from early TV documentaries that showed you very different people's lives and news reports, through to actually being there and seeing it for yourself. But I think ultimately, what was ignored about that early understanding of empathy was just putting it on wasn't enough. Whether it's a novel or whether it's a TV doc or if it's VR, the strength will come from a really beautifully told story, which it will help invoke the empathy.

I've never been that clear that just putting you in a situation to see it necessarily invokes empathy. I mean do we feel empathetic just walking down the

street and seeing a homeless person? Not always. We often walk past them. Putting on a VR headset isn't any different from that and therefore I've always questioned it. Whereas a good story, told beautifully, certainly can do that.

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Clouds Over Sidra (2015), can be used to illustrate this point. It is a piece that is referred to as being one of the leading examples of immersive journalism that creates a sense of empathy, but as Watson identifies, the piece is crafted with a clear narrative and cinematic techniques. In *Clouds Over Sidra*, a 12-year-old girl invites you to experience her life in the Za'atari Refugee Camp in Jordan. The experience allows you to view her school, her makeshift tent, and the football pitch in the camp. Watson refers to the cinematic techniques used, for example the music and a script to evoke "tears and empathy". She suggests it is this combination that is used to evoke emotions. Although you feel as though you are invited into her world by her, through a combination of camera positioning and eye contact (Jones 2017), there is no option to interact with her or take a different journey through her life in the camp.

The limitations of empathy are reflected in the argument put forward by Chun, which proposes that even if you could recreate a perfect sensory match for another's reality, you cannot truly know their experience. As she argues, "if you're walking in someone else's shoes, then you've stolen their shoes" (Chun 2016). The argument is that, when drawing on an empathetic response the other is replaced with the self, so it can only ever be your understanding of what that experience would be like. So, although it can be an invaluable medium to generate reflection and new perspectives, the argument that the experience is of the same value and has the same effect as the contextualized lived experience of the subject is reductive.

Three challenges for empathy in journalism

It is established that a good story and purposeful filming techniques can be used to evoke empathy or enhance an emotional response, but there are three initial concerns for using empathy as a guiding principle for immersive journalism; the first is whether empathy can create long-lasting change, the second is focused around impartiality, and the third is the limitation this has on the development of content.

The discussions around whether VR can create long-lasting change have become more widely discussed in the past few years (Lisetti et al. 2013, Herrera et al. 2018). At Stanford's Human Interaction Lab, "Becoming homeless" gives participants the perspective of being homeless, showing what it would be like to lose their job or their home. This research was developed to understand whether experiences could drive human behavioral change. Two studies took place over a two-month period with more than 560 participants between the ages of 15 and 88, representing eight different ethnicities. One group undertook the experience through virtual reality, the other being shown traditional materials. Researchers found that people who experienced the perspectives in VR developed longer-lasting compassion than

those who saw it via other platforms. They were also more likely to sign a petition to support plans for affordable housing. Broken down, 82 percent of participants experiencing being homeless through VR signed the petition, versus 67 percent of the people who read a narrative that asked them to imagine becoming homeless. A lot of criticism for VR as an empathy machine is focused around the idea that you can feel an immediate emotional reaction but that it soon fades; however, in this study, the results were found to be longer-lasting. After four weeks, participants were asked about supporting affordable housing initiatives. Those having had a VR experience still supported the idea, whereas the effect had diminished for those who had experienced it through other means.

A similar impact was demonstrated in a different study (Aitamurto et al. 2018), exploring gender equality in the workplace, which used a technique to split the 360-degree image so that each 180-degree angle would represent a different gender. This study showed an increase in the viewers' feeling of personal responsibility for advancing gender equality in the workplace when they identified themselves with the female perspective.

It was something that Watson found in a study on *We Wait* (2016), a VR experience where you travel across the sea with a Syrian family. This is based on interviews with migrants but was made as an animation. Research analyzed the impact and effect that characters had on the participants and this was assessed based on their sense of presence in the experience (Steed et al. 2018). Further analysis focused on whether participants were sufficiently "moved" to follow up on the story and to seek more information. It was a small study of 32 participants, but the research showed a strong enabler to feeling presence was attributed to whether a character looked directly at you. Twenty-five percent of the participants followed up the experience with a visit to the website, which although seems a low proportion, it was quoted as being significant as only a small number are generally expected to follow up after watching a programme on television. In conclusion to the study, "fostering the sense in the participant that they were 'there' and what was happening was 'real' might be helpful in engendering follow-up and further interest in the news story". (Steed et al. 2018, np). As Watson reflects;

It was the power of a direct connection with somebody who was explaining their story. However again, it was a beautifully scripted story albeit based entirely on news accounts and interviews and with Matthew Price, a BBC reporter, overseeing the story to make sure it really felt right.

Watson 2020

The second criticism relates to impartiality in news, something that Watson has been concerned with when the focus has been on empathy. A story that is focused on generating empathy will be developed to help the audience understand and share feelings in a particular situation. The question is whether this can also be defined as one that is impartial, where both sides of the story need to be presented, to provide information for the audience to make up their own mind;

News [in VR] is used as far more than empathy and there are plenty of stories that we report and need to report where I don't want to have empathy with the person who's being discussed. It seemed to me to come from a particular view of news, that was kind of a documentary festival view of news, which is "we use these stories to highlight issues about the world", and of course we do that in news but also we have to report about court trials for child murderers. I mean do you want to feel empathy for a murderer? Not particularly but it still is news. It is far more than just feeling empathy.

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The changing nature of journalism is often associated with stories of this type, often defined as "advocacy journalism", where objectivity and impartiality are seen as outdated terminology for a media form. In writing for the Independent Media Center in 2004, Berman stated, "If we are ever to create meaningful change, advocacy journalism will be the single most crucial element to enable the necessary organizing" (Berman 2004, in Salas 2018, 34). The approach of advocacy journalism is familiar with supporters using empathy within immersive journalism to call for change, as seen in the early work of RYOT. Established in 2012 with the goal to be "the first news site linking news to action" (Zanger 2017), the first VR/360 projects captured active war zones in Syria and disaster zones in Nepal, often partnering with mainstream organizations such as *The New York Times*, *Huffington Post* and *The Associated Press*. There is a focus on stories that can help raise funds to transform communities and lives. When RYOT released a 360-experience documenting the after-effects of the earthquake in Nepal, the plan was to take users to witness the devastation and to drive donations. Co-founder Bryan Mooser said the technology "is the ultimate fundraising tool" (Streep 2016). This leaves the debate open for what the purpose of journalism is. As a tool for empathy, conditions can be met to achieve longer lasting behavioral change, but this can change the nature and purpose of journalism, where impartiality is no longer a pre-requisite.

Thus, follows the final criticism, that focusing on empathy limits the content production of immersive journalism. The concern was that in the early days of VR (in this wave, post 2010), the over-emphasis on empathy may have limited the range of content explored (Watson 2017, 21). In an early study of content in immersive journalism (Jones and Dawkins 2018), the majority of stories covered were those deemed to be empathy-generating, for example, imagining walking in someone else's shoes in a refugee camp or through a city flattened by bombing, as someone who has been displaced. Developing this further in interview, Watson noted how focusing on empathy limits content production and consequently it can limit the audience;

It may have prevented audiences developing for early news VR because every story was so miserable and actually one of the things that you want from VR is sometimes a joyful and pleasant experience. Because so many news stories were about bombings and refugees, it was all very bleak content. Particularly if

you look at content strategies geared towards bringing in younger audiences to news... just bringing misery is not going to work. So I think it led to a distortion, in terms of the sorts of content that might have helped build future audiences, where you want some of it but it needed to be balanced out with some other things that gave slightly more enjoyable experiences as well as being interesting and how people learn about the world.

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With the rise in content production of immersive journalism in news organizations, limiting stories to empathy wasn't possible as more content was needed. The *NYTimes* The Daily 360 series produced a range of stories to experiment with understanding what worked for its audience. Watson used the example of *Fukushima, 6 Years On: Empty and Eerie* (2017) as an example where the place was the focus of the experience and it demonstrated a commitment to tackling difficult subjects, without the driving factor being empathy.

Focus on place

The arguments above note that defining immersive journalism by empathy itself is problematic, from the reductive nature through to whether it can effect long-lasting change. There is then the limiting factor it has on the development of immersive journalism if stories are all focused on generating empathy. Earlier in this chapter, it was noted that a diverse range of content was needed in order for the industry to grow, and this is of particular concern in growing audiences for immersive journalism specifically.

One way of diversifying this is creating experiences that focus on place, rather than generating empathy for a specific person. The transportive nature of the technology has long been cited as key to experiences, with the idea that VR allows you to go to another time and place, experiencing that for yourself. This is evident across industries including education (Pantelidis 1993) and travel (Schroeder 2008). The sense of "being there" is something that has dominated research in presence within virtual reality with the idea that as a participant, you would begin to feel that sense of being in the virtual environment that was depicted on the display of the headset (Sanchez-Vives and Slater 2005, Sheridan 1992). Slater (2009) has produced extensive research on "place illusion". By this, it is meant the type of presence that occurs when you feel that you have been transported to another place and are existing, for a time, in that location. As Slater affirms, "It is the strong illusion of being in a place in spite of the sure knowledge that you are not there" (Slater 2009, np). Place illusion is often measured by analyzing the behavior within the environments to assess whether the responses are realistic. Although much immersive journalism content has been developed through 360-degree film, rather than the interactivity of CGI where presence, place, or illusion can be measured and analyzed more easily, the focus on place and how this enables presence in an environment can be developed within the news industry.

Through creating a focus on place, immersive journalism has been able to develop without being underpinned by the empathy epithet. Watson found this in one of the BBC VR experiences, *Damming the Nile* (BBC 2018) where the place became the experience's central character;

You were showing people places and they could see the scale of something, like the dam being built, and you could visit places you wouldn't be able to go. So, you do get a stronger sense looking around and I think they stay in your memory longer than it would through a television.

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This was further demonstrated in another piece produced by the BBC called *Two Sisters, a Mountain Trek and a Wobbly Wire Bridge* (2017). This was a 360-degree experience that took you to a remote village in the Himalayas. As a viewer, you follow the journey of sisters Radhika and Yashoda, who travel up to six hours a day to school and back where they cross rivers and rope bridges. Although it is an experience focused on connecting the audience with the two sisters, for Watson, it is much more about the place, the environment, and the journey than it is about getting into their heads and understanding their plight;

Does VR get you in someone's head better? I'm not sure but it certainly can take you to a place to see it for yourself and make that sense of geography that helps you understand what's going on somewhere better. That's probably one of its strongest things for news.

Watson 2020

With a shift in focus from empathy-generating to understanding a place and the environment, it opens up new content and opportunities to develop immersive journalism. It allows you to hand the role of the reporter to the audience to let them see and understand a place, rather than the emotions of the people in that environment. This is evident from the BBC audience research, a study in 2019 that ran in 160 libraries in the UK. Out of more than 1,700 responses, 96 percent found the content enjoyable and 91 percent found it immersive (BBC 2019, 28). More than half of the users were experiencing VR for the first time. What was important within this audience study was the type of stories that had the most impact, and it was place that drove that engagement, not the stories that were perceived to be popular, like *Doctor Who*. One response in the study said, "I never thought I'd end up in the Congo when visiting the library" (BBC 2019, 29). As Watson said, they were "totally unprepared" for the response to the Congo piece. The Congo experience also evidences how experiences focused on place can encourage deeper engagement with the subject, with 83 percent of participants who watched the experience saying that they would then go on to watch a full-length documentary about the country (BBC 2019, 28).

This shift in focus to place changes the role of the journalist, rather than the role of journalism. The arguments for immersive journalism still hold true – that

it offers new perspectives to a story. By taking the journalist out of the frame and allowing the user to enter into the world, it means that the viewer feels as though the event they are witnessing is real and they are a real participant in it (Kool 2016). This remains true whether the experience is designed to evoke an emotional state or is, more critically, unbiased reportage of a current news event. It is for the audience to experience the location and develop an understanding of the place that will determine any response they have, rather than that being the intention of the journalist. Research has found how the perception of the story can take on different meanings when the audience becomes the “actor” in the environment, through managing the information in a different way, whether that be through a filmed 360-degree environment or a recreated reality in CGI (Seijo 2017).

There are much greater opportunities when attention is turned to the concept of storyliving, as opposed to empathy. Since 2017, industry publications have been defining some forms of immersive storytelling as “storyliving”. Aside from the practice of immersive media, it is growing as terminology within cultural and commercial circles, with *The Drum* stating: “brands need to do more than just tell a story. They need to live them”, and that people “demand experiences that truly matter” (*The Drum* 2017).

Camille Cellucci, head of production at immersive studio The Void, said:

What we're really moving into in this new world is “story-living”. We're creating spaces and worlds where people have a chance to live out their own stories within a framework that we design.

Rolling Stone 2018

Maschio and Baumann (2017) argued that the distinctive nature of journalism within virtual reality was that an audience lives the story, as opposed to being told it. Through an approach of storyliving, it would expand perspectives and the audience would be left with a powerful emotional experience. Critical to the understanding of storyliving and a non-directed narrative where audiences can take away different experiences is Walser's idea of the “spacemaker” (Walser 1991). The “spacemaker” is represented as a “magician” that creates a cyberspace where different realities can emerge.

If we begin to explore these ideas for immersive journalism, new narratives can be formed and new experiences realized. Emotionally charged experiences will remain and there will always be experiences that evoke or form pro-social behaviors, but this should not be the only way that immersive journalism is defined.

Conclusion

There is no denying that the promotion of empathy-driven immersive experiences has enabled new audiences to experience virtual reality and increased adoption rates, away from a gaming audience. However, the argument that is put across is that the dominance of the “empathy machine” epithet limits the opportunities that

the technology brings and challenges the traditional notions of what journalism should be. Empathy may have been the gateway to opening up news organizations to creating immersive journalism experiences, but it is also what has limited the development of content.

Virtual reality pioneer Jaron Lanier has written extensively about the need to use VR as a way to transform new thoughts and ideas, with cyberdelics, improvising reality, and shared lucid dreaming (Lanier 2017). However, he notes that “Virtual reality is the ultimate lack of class or race distinctions or any other forms of pretense since all form is variable” (Lanier 1988, np). The consequence of this is that it can be an extraordinary tool for increasing empathy. The critical argument, though, remains the same:

VR is certainly capable of facilitating new experiences of subjectivity, perception, and sociality, but to call all these phenomenon [sic] “empathy” limits the potential of the medium.

Sutherland, nd

What this chapter does is to present the critiques to the argument that VR is an empathy machine. It acknowledges the arguments that are made against empathy and the concerns of using this as an umbrella term for all immersive journalism content. What it hasn’t done is address the ethical concerns of using VR as an empathy term, an area that needs further research, especially in relation to donations to causes and how experiences could distort the mind and one’s viewpoint.

It is evident that, through using the empathy line, more content has been formed. It has allowed those who may not have been engaged in VR previously to watch experiences and be transported to places to understand stories better. This has great impact for immersive journalism as a concept and a tool for deepening perspectives. However, immersive journalism can, and needs to, be much more than that. It needs to focus on storyliving, allowing people to develop their own understanding themselves, being free to form a narrative to live an experience, rather than being told it through a journalistic lens. This is a challenge to traditional journalistic narratives, but it offers something new and a potentially new area for the news industry to thrive.

Interview

With thanks to Zillah Watson for an in-depth interview on empathy in immersive journalism, conducted in July 2020. Zillah was the Commissioning Editor for Virtual Reality at the BBC, leading the BBCVR Hub. She is executive producer of a number of VR experiences for the BBC including *Damming the Nile*, *Make Noise*, and *Nothing to be Written*.

Note

1 This chapter was revised in July 2020.

Immersive experiences and organizations

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