3

CASE EURONEWS

A low-cost approach to immersive storytelling

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This chapter investigates the approaches of a particularly innovative immersive journalism actor, the pan-European news organization *Euronews*. Since early 2016, *Euronews* has systematically experimented with immersive storytelling using consumer-grade 360-degree cameras. The study identifies the tools, emerging work practices and content of experimental immersive journalism over a one-and-a-half-year period. Furthermore, the study analyzes the ways in which 360-degree videos are less editor-directed than their regular video equivalents, which is in itself an indication of a new form of selective consumer freedom on what to watch in the immersive video environment. The analysis is based on qualitative interview data with leaders and practitioners at *Euronews* and subsequent content analysis of 95 published 360-degree video productions. Based on the two empirical datasets, we critically discuss the advantages and disadvantages of low-cost approaches to 360-degree news production.

With the increasing availability and popularity of virtual reality (VR) technology, there has been a rapid rise in the use of 360-degree videos for journalistic purposes. Referred to as VR journalism, immersive storytelling and disputably immersive storyliving (Maschio 2017), the VR technology demonstrates journalistic potential in that it “promises to bring audiences closer to a story than any previous platform” (Aronson-Rath, Milward, Owen, & Pitt 2015). However, even if the increasingly available and lightweight 360-degree technology has caused a surge in video journalism in the last few years, creating immersive productions is a very challenging task for most newsrooms.

In the early literature on the potentials of immersive technologies in journalism, researchers frequently turn to the lack-of-time-and-tools argument to explain why immersive journalism so far is less widespread in the newsrooms than predicted by early adopters. The Knight Foundation’s 2016 report on VR journalism suggests that the use of 360-degree video is less prevalent in small and medium-sized news

organizations owing to the time and effort required to create VR stories (Doyle, Gelman, & Gill 2016). The report suggests that for VR to become more prevalent, tools that reduce the burden of production and post-production are required. In their state-of-the-art paper, Sirkkunen, Väättäjä, Uskali, and Rezaei (2016) concur that for smaller news organizations to be able to embrace this medium, “rapid work processes should be ideated, developed, and trialed” (6).

In another report on the use of VR technology in journalism, the Tow Center suggests that using simpler equipment would bring down costs and “[widen] the swath for the number of people who can produce VR” (Aronson-Rath et al. 2015, 7). In addition to making hardware available, however, the research so far has indicated the necessity of gaining more knowledge about production processes to fully understand the potential of VR technology. Aronson-Rath et al. (2015) further point out that “the industry desperately needs evidence of the platform’s benefits and information about the necessary skills, practices and equipment” (26).

In the few years since the first VR reports were published by the Knight Foundation and the Tow Center, however, technologies for capturing as well as distributing 360-degree content have become more readily available. Although the medium was previously explored almost exclusively through well-produced documentaries provided by professionals outside of the news organizations, larger newsrooms increasingly experiment with producing their own content using consumer products.

A report by Reuters Institute mentions *The New York Times*, CNN, *USA Today*, BBC, and *Euronews* as organizations adopting a model different from well-produced documentaries, instead using low-cost cameras with auto-stitching of the images (Watson 2017). This new approach to immersive storytelling with 360-degree video is attainable for a wider range of organizations and will therefore be important in exploring the new medium’s potential for conveying journalism. Moreover, rapid and affordable processes seem to be a prerequisite for the adoption and usage of VR technologies across the journalism field as a whole.

The aim of the case study in this chapter is to first investigate the ways in which easily accessible immersive journalism tools are actually applied in a large newsroom such as *Euronews*. Based on these empirical data, we reflect on and discuss the lessons learned from *Euronews*’ emerging immersive journalism content production that might be applicable to small-to-medium-sized news organizations. Only by critically discussing and possibly intervening in current practitioner experiments can ongoing research support the creative, constructive, and continued exploration of immersive journalism. Thus, detailed studies of ongoing productions are, in our opinion, a basic research challenge because the medium has distinctly unique features that must be explored in practice to reveal its potential.

In this chapter, we first present *Euronews* and its experimental approaches to immersive storytelling, detailing their organizational structure, workflows, and technologies used. Next, we present an analysis of 95 videos resulting from this practice, identifying issues such as coverage, production choices, video context, and the role of the journalist. Finally, based on the documented approach and analysis,

we discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the evolving 360-degree video production approach in *Euronews* and comment on potential future work.

Euronews

Euronews is a European multilingual news bureau with an operating base in Lyon, France. The agency is the most watched news channel in Europe (“About *Euronews*” n.d.). In addition to traditional broadcasting, the bureau hosts an online news site with a distinct focus on video reports. The main purpose of *Euronews* is to cover news events in Europe from a “pan-European” perspective, meaning that they attempt to disseminate news from Europe as a whole, rather than from the perspectives of the individual countries in Europe. *Euronews*’ first television broadcast was distributed in 1993 in English from Lyon. By the turn of the millennium, *Euronews* had extended its distribution to English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese. Since 2013, *Euronews* has provided news in 13 European languages. The majority (60%) of *Euronews* is owned by the Media Globe Networks (Dziadul 2015; “About *Euronews*” n.d.), while 25% is owned by Universal Studios Limited (NBC News) (Atkinson 2017; “About *Euronews*” n.d.). In total, *Euronews* employs more than 500 journalists of 30 different nationalities, and their television news reaches 430 million homes across 133 countries.

In early 2016, *Euronews* began publishing 360-degree videos. According to Editor-in-Chief of Digital Platforms, Duncan Hooper, the news organization envisioned that VR would empower the audience, which was stated as an explicit editorial goal: “we want to let them make their own decisions, not tell them what they should be watching, not tell them what they should be thinking” (Flueckiger 2016). The same argument lies latent in some of *Euronews*’ regular, flat video formats as well in the “No Comment” series (“flat” videos are defined as video in traditional formats such as 4:3 or 16:9 as opposed to spherical videos). The series, which is one of *Euronews*’ signature programs, disseminates video clips of events without presenting a certain view or comment on the footage. Ideally, it is up to the users to interpret the cases that are covered. On its website, the news bureau states that its “strong belief is to empower audiences to forge their own opinion” (“About *Euronews*” n.d.).

The immersive trend

Euronews is one of the many large organizations that experiment with producing journalism in 360 degrees, and a growing number of online newsrooms are fueling this process. They are also engaged in international experiments with immersive journalism. In 2016, *Euronews* partnered with Samsung to promote their cameras through use. This collaboration made it financially easier for *Euronews* to start experimenting with 360-degree video as part of their workflow. Moreover, Google News Lab—through its Digital News Initiative—has immersive storytelling as one of its focus areas; together with the Knight Foundation and Online News Association,

Google News Lab launched Journalism 360, “an initiative of thought leaders, practitioners, and journalists dedicated to accelerating immersive storytelling in news” (“Journalism 360” n.d.).

In 2017, Google News Lab delivered over US \$250,000 to projects investigating ideas within this domain. The aim was “to discover ideas that grow immersive storytelling to advance the field of journalism—that inform and encourage news organizations to innovate, experiment and learn” (“Journalism 360 Challenge” 2017). In their call for grant applications, the Knight Foundation wrote that they were “primarily looking for projects that will yield lessons and ‘how-tos’ for the field of journalism” (“Journalism 360 Challenge” 2017). Information about the required equipment, technology, and workflow is important for organizations to experiment.

In addition to grants, Journalism 360 encourages the sharing of experiences and practices of immersive storytelling. On its Medium collection (“Journalism 360” n.d.), dozens of articles and case studies on immersive storytelling are present that serve as a resource bank for emerging VR journalists. Some of the articles were written by *Euronews*’ journalists and editors who partake in this initiative. To further develop their editorial workflow, *Euronews* also received support from the Google Digital News Initiative Grant.

To experiment or not to experiment

Watson (2017) reports that the key issues of the news organizations heavily investing in VR, such as through the launching of apps, have been brand innovation and future market positioning. By contrast, organizations that hold back on VR investments might benefit from less risk-taking because technologies are quickly evolving and immersive journalism still is a highly experimental news approach. Watson (2017) reports, however, that most of the organizations from which she collected data endorsed the view that smaller news organizations ought to themselves experiment to understand the benefits of VR. With simple consumer cameras, this experimentation can be done without great risks, creating a middle ground between the full leap into the unknown and holding back on any experimentation. *Euronews* approached their experimentation with 360-degree video something akin to this middle ground. According to the Editor-in-Chief of Digital Platforms, Duncan Hooper, they were not going to build their app because it is a big gamble (Flueckiger 2016) and, if they were going to fail, they wanted to fail cheaply (Scott 2016). Moreover, they would not hire an external team of experts but were dependent on innovative, visual work practices that were possible to implement within the existing organizational resource frames.

Euronews’ immersive journalism practices

The identification of the emerging immersive journalism practices of *Euronews* is based on the direct and indirect qualitative interview data with diverse professionals

involved in the organization's 360-degree video productions. In addition to analyzing the comprehensive material of online interviews and articles in which *Euronews'* journalists have shared their experiences with 360-degree video production, we conducted three in-depth, virtual interviews with the VR editor of *Euronews* and two VR journalists. To obtain an overview of the work processes of a lightweight 360-degree camera production, we first identify the typical editorial steps, followed by a content analysis of the disseminated videos in the collected data material.

The 360-degree videos at *Euronews* are produced in various ways, depending on the journalist's experience and affiliation with the organization. In general, the decision to make a 360-degree production is prompted either by a news event that requires immediate visual action or by a journalist who approaches the VR editor with a pitch. When the idea is actualized, the VR editor will initiate a quick discussion with the reporter before a decision on producing a 360-degree video is made or hire a freelance reporter to make the video. During the subsequent idea exchange with the journalist, the following questions are raised: 1) How can the story be done in 360 degrees? 2) To what extent is the potential 360-degree video production realistic in terms of cost? 3) Have any similar stories been done before? 4) To what degree is the potential story newsworthy? As soon as the topic, angle, and journalist's time expenditure are decided, the journalist will undergo introductory technical training, unless he or she is already an experienced VR reporter. After one hour of technical instructions on how to use the equipment, the journalist is sent off with a checklist that contains practical tips for executing the production (Krogsgaard 2017). In short, the checklist explains several important aspects of the production, such as the following: 1) cleaning of lenses, 2) appropriate camera settings, 3) aligning of the camera, 4) optimal camera placement relative to motive (height and depth), 5) correct lighting for each camera lens, 6) microphone use under varying conditions, and 7) practices for backup and charging. The checklist can be viewed in its entirety online, where it is shared with other 360-degree enthusiasts (Hooper 2017). In addition to bringing the Samsung GEAR 360-degree cameras to the shoot, the journalist brings a light tripod, a zoom h2n recorder, an iRig mic lav and a Samsung S6 phone for controlling the camera from afar and previewing the shots. It goes without saying that the journalists selected for such a job do have some visual experience before heading off to a job with the checklist and the camera equipment, although they might not be specifically proficient in 360-degree video productions. According to the VR editor, using existing resources and workflows within the organization is a key factor when producing 360-degree videos.

When the shoot is done, the VR journalist is expected to hand over the footage to the online news desk. At *Euronews'* section for footage processing, the raw material is stitched in the Gear 360 Action Director (license included with camera purchase) and edited in Edius and After Effects, the software that *Euronews* uses for their traditional videos. The VR journalists are not supposed to directly engage in the editing process albeit serve as supervisors on the edit of the provided footage.

The journalists prepare the piece and meet with the editor to guide the process while writing the final script to the text article and/or the voiceover of the video. When the edit is done, the video is sent to the graphics department, where the names of the relevant people, places, etc., are added to the video report. If the video has a voiceover, this is recorded in up to 13 languages, in parallel with the video editing.

When *Euronews* stresses the necessity of integrating 360-degree videos with the existing production workflows, the production costs, even with lightweight cameras, appear to be a main challenge. The data collected in this study indicate that the quickest turnaround time for the shooting and editing process is three full days. The shooting and stitching are done on the first day; the second day involves the editing and writing of script; on the third day, the voiceover is recorded and the videos are exported and uploaded. Often, however, the process stretches over a week because time-sensitive material is not often covered in 360-degree and other productions have priority. A freelance video reporter doing jobs for *Euronews* explains, “360-degree video is one of the storytelling tools I use, I would like to do much more of it, but there is not yet as much demand for it”. He points to the fact that most newsrooms do not have budgets for full-time 360-degree video journalists. Moreover, he emphasizes that 360-degree videos should be “one solely for stories that are visual and/or places that are hard to access”. “For me, 360-degree video production is just one of my freelance gigs”, he says.

The editorial strategy for the 360-degree stories produced by *Euronews*’ web of freelance journalists is illustrated by the following example: A freelance web journalist in a European country was asked by *Euronews* to produce a 3–4 min 360-degree video on a natural phenomenon. The story was part of a European-wide project. When agreeing on the assignment, the journalist was instructed that *Euronews* wanted as little journalistic presence as possible, with no stand-ups and only one interview. The video was supposed to be as country-specific as possible and present no general statements on the news beat. Reflecting back on this particular job assignment, the journalist commented, “editorially, they let me free to build my own story”.

However, according to the journalist, the fee was quite low for the amount of work that went into the project, so he agreed that *Euronews* would take care of the post-production while he delivered the raw materials and a detailed script. In addition to putting the video together, the digital department at *Euronews* took care of translating the piece into 12 languages before dissemination.

When *Euronews*’ 360-degree videos are complete, they are generally uploaded to Facebook, YouTube, *Euronews*’ own websites and a platform called Veer.tv—one of the largest content communities for VR wherein *Euronews* has over 83,000 followers. *Euronews* uses the OmniVirt player, a subscription service, to distribute the videos on their websites and app.

In summary, the editorial quality of 360-degree videos at *Euronews* is thus taken care of mainly at the online news desk. That is, regardless of whether the raw material is produced by staffers or freelancers, the content production is centrally managed and appears to have specific characteristics. Having presented the tools

and workflow of 360-degree video productions at *Euronews*, we move on to the content analysis of the 360-degree videos produced by the news organization.

Video content

In this section, we will further discuss the immersive videos at *Euronews* through an analysis of some storytelling content grips of the bureau's 360-degree videos. The data material consists of 95 pieces of 360-degree videos in which we identified the topics of coverage, production choices, verbal contextualizations, and techno-narrative structures. To compare 360-degree videos and "flat" videos, the analysis is followed by a comparison to 20 selected flat videos on similar topics from the website www.euronews.com. Note that the 360-degree videos analyzed here represent the early stages of *Euronews*' experimentation with 360-degree videos and actually include the first 95 pieces of production. We chose the period from 16 February 2016 to 11 July 2017 because it best represents what we wanted to capture in this chapter: the transition and adoption of *Euronews* into 360-degree video production. *Euronews* has continued its production of 360-degree and as of August 2019 has published over 170 videos.

Topics

Based on content, *Euronews*' 360-degree videos span wide on topics comprising arts, politics, humanitarian issues, culture, and sports. "Culture", which includes cultural events, festivals, and concerts, was actually the most prominent topic in 25% of the videos. Political issues were highlighted in 19% of the videos—mainly owing to a 360-degree series that focused on the 2017 French presidential election. Humanitarian issues, such as refugee camps, natural disasters, and war zones, were featured in 12% of the videos. Apart from these more classical categories, there was a substantial group of videos comprising "curiosities": for instance, a tour of Hitler's car or a beer brewery in the Arctic. Such clips are very popular and constitute 21% of the videos. Moreover, 11% of the productions might be classified as "travel", which simply aimed to present a certain location to the user. Sports and arts constituted the least popular categories, holding 3% and 5% of the productions, respectively. Another striking feature that surfaced in the identified categories was the lack of time-sensitive content: the 360-degree cameras were simply not used as a news-gathering tool in the initial phase of the immersive productions at *Euronews*. It can be discussed whether this somewhat surprising tendency was attributable to turnaround constraints or editorial choices; nevertheless, none of the 95 videos featured any particularly time-sensitive content.

Verbal contextualizations

Doing a 360-degree production implies more than disseminating visuals, meaning imagery. Each video, just like any other journalistic clip, is contextualized within

reality by means of verbal text elements such as headlines and introductory information of time, place, and event. Such verbal contextualizing elements largely affect how the overall journalistic message is perceived (Gynnild 2014; Gynnild 2018). In terms of the accompanying texts, the 360-degree videos in this study contained only approximately half the number of words compared with flat videos. In other words, the 360-degree productions provided notably less textual information (164 words per video) than the flat videos (289 words per video). This tendency may indicate that 360-degree videos are considered by the online news desk to be a more stand-alone format than flat videos. It might also indicate that the aim of covering issues by 360-degree videos is to experiment with visual storytelling that requires less verbal contextualization.

The verbal decontextualizing aspect of the 360-degree approach is illustrated, for instance, by *Euronews'* coverage of Bocuse d'Or, the unofficial French world championship of culinary arts. Whereas *Euronews'* 360-degree report from the event contained 55 words, their flat video from the same event contained 148 words. Moreover, while the flat video comprised several interviews, clips of the chefs in action and a voiceover, the 360-degree video featured only shots from the celebration, providing glimpses of the atmosphere and audience surrounding the competition. In this way, the 360-degree video narrative appeared more simplistic than the in-detail interviews provided in the flat videos. This particular video serves as a clear example of a 360-degree production conducted "on top of" a normal TV production, as *Euronews* often tends to do. The approach may indicate that the 360-degree video as a medium did not have competitive advantages in terms of conducting interviews and presenting a consistent story from the championship event; it served more as a spectator approach to the Bocuse d'Or, a complementary story. The findings also indicate that employing the 360-degree video camera is a more inexpensive way to provide an online story that harvests views simply because of the novelty of the medium itself and not its actual production value. As the journalists were already on the scene, placing a 360-degree camera at the scene could be a simple way to get an additional story at a low cost.

Another interesting feature that surfaced during the textual analysis was the extent to which the articles mentioned the medium of capture as part of the news story. In total, 71% of the videos contained either explicit ("A 360-degree visit to...") or implicit mentions ("Take a look around...") to 360-degree video in the headlines or preamble. This is a way of referring to the story as interplay between the user and available content and leaning towards a greater user-oriented focus of video content. However, in terms of contextualization, it also means that the medium is itself a substantial part of the message or newsworthiness of the story, or at least that it is something that may fill sensation criteria in the early stages of immersive journalism. Although this can be relevant information for the user, one may also be critical towards such a presentation if the medium is not necessarily well fit for the content it should cover. One may argue that such types of sensational journalism do not add any value if the medium itself is the sensational element.

Narrative structures

The final aspect of the analysis focuses on the narrative structures of the videos: in what ways the online news desk chooses to portray the content. We isolated four different ways of narrative conveyance present in the 360-degree videos: 1) text in the article, 2) journalist or interview object addressing the camera/user, 3) graphical overlays on the video, and 4) voiceovers. These different narrative conveyances were often combined. Voiceover was used in a third of the videos, and the content of the voiceover was often the same as the accompanying text. Overlaying graphics were used in 45% of the videos to present the names of places and persons in the video.

In terms of the use of voiceovers and graphics for narration, such as name tags, locations, and other facts, the 360-degree reports were quite similar to the flat videos. However, the 360-degree videos do not appear to have clearly developed formats in terms of graphical representation such as intros and vignettes with logos. This feature may be attributable to the fact that the medium does not have any strong traditions within the organization and that the recurrent formats have not yet been developed. Very few of the 360-degree videos in the data material provide any specific format introduction to present the topic of the video. An exception was identified in *Euronews'* 360-degree reports on the French presidential election, which were created in cooperation with Google News Lab. In these nine episodes, *Euronews* and Google News Lab experimented with the same format throughout all the episodes. *Euronews'* VR editor explained, "we kept the format of the episodes the same throughout. You have an intro with journalists talking to the camera, then switch to the entrance of the place, introduce the subject, then dig in. The template gives us a sense of cohesiveness" (Redhohl 2017). Most of the 360-degree videos did not experiment with such a way of presenting the subject, which represents a definitive shift away from the ways that *Euronews* produces their flat videos.

Further, it should be noted that in our sample, the journalist was visible in 45% of the 360-degree videos and only in 33% of the flat videos. (These results are in alignment with those of Sirkkunen et al., see Chapter 6.) The surprisingly high degree of journalist presence in 360-degree videos compared with flat videos may be attributable to the differences of format between 360-degree and flat videos. In flat videos, it is easier to remove the clips of the journalist when editing, for example, by displaying only the answers to questions in interviews. In 360-degree videos, by contrast, journalist visibility cannot simply be removed from the scene. Therefore, the edits are more a question of either/or from beginning to end. The narrative style has to be decided before the shoot: should the story be told by focusing on an atmospheric scene without a journalist, perhaps with a voiceover? Or should the journalist be talking to the camera or an interview object? In 360-degree videos, it is not ideal to show a journalist in the background of the scene looking at the smartphone while controlling the shot. Such shots usually give the user a feeling of an item placed in the production set rather than that of getting immersed in an experience. There is thus less room for in-between levels of journalistic appearance

in 360-degree videos as the explicit mediator of the experience, although implicitly the journalist has already made a selective choice of shots and edits.

Editorial choices

The greatest difference between the 360-degree videos and their flat video equivalents at *Euronews* is found in the number of shots/clips per video. The 360-degree videos had an average of 7 shots, whereas the flat videos had an average of 19, even when the 360-degree videos were, on average, 1 minute longer. The 360-degree videos had an average clip duration of 23 seconds, whereas the flat videos' average was 6 seconds. The relatively longer duration of each shot in the 360-degree video appears to ensure the user the time to orient within the video-sphere and explore the environment it depicts. While the journalist can still select what the user will perceive by placing the camera accordingly, the 360-degree sphere cannot be perceived all at once. The agency of what this selection will be is distributed to the user; thus, the nature of the medium restricts the ability of the journalist to secure a given linear narrative. Using multiple shots of smaller duration, panning, zooming, and/or even having a moving camera, may feel disorienting to the users viewing the video through a head-mounted display. Such given technical restrictions on building up a narrative in 360-degree videos have been discussed widely in the field (Aronson-Rath et al. 2015; Doyle et al. 2016).

Concluding remarks

In this chapter, we have presented a qualitative analysis of *Euronews*' intent and practice in immersive journalism through producing 360-degree videos. The data material demonstrates how *Euronews* uses readily available consumer technology in their experimental approaches towards immersive journalism with 360-degree lightweight cameras. Moreover, the bureau has systematically integrated 360-degree video production into their already existing workflows and trained their journalists and video editors in the new necessary skills. Through an analysis of 95 360-degree videos, we have identified how the 360-degree videos are far less editorially directed than their flat video equivalents, which offers a room of opportunity for the consumer to choose what to watch in the virtual environment. The analysis took into consideration the role of the journalist, topics of coverage, and context in which the 360-degree video is presented. We critically discussed how the medium may be used to fulfill sensation criteria and how the 360-degree videos are less contextualized than their flat video equivalents. Based on the datasets investigated in this study, we conclude that the biggest obstacle to ubiquitous immersive journalism news dissemination is still the time-consuming aspects of the 360-degree productions. By integrating such productions with already existing workflows, time expenditure is minimized as far as possible. Issues of time and cost are, however, still a challenge in journalism as a whole and become more evident when adopting and experimenting with new media for news dissemination. Further, the added value

of such simplified, centrally edited 360-degree videos could still be questioned. Editors and journalists need time to develop formats and get a feel for the topics that are more suited for the medium than others. Such issues might partly explain why small and medium-sized news organizations tend to hesitate when it comes to investing heavily in the further development of immersive journalism.

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