

# Immersive journalism in a post-truth world

June 29 2017

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In a recent *Frontiers in Digital Humanities* article, Eva Dominguez, a senior digital communication consultant and multimedia journalist, analyzes the rise of immersive journalism and its particular set of challenges.

In a climate of post-truth, characterized by increased individualism and decreased objectivity, immersive journalism seems to reinforce both. Immersive journalism literally puts you - the participant - center stage through aural and visual cues, allowing you to directly interact with the story. It could soon include ways of altering the narrative itself, which should presumably remain unalterably objective.

Immersive journalism doesn't keep you on the other side of events like traditional journalism does, but places you at the heart of the action through techniques like Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR). You - the outsider - get to step in and become an insider.

It is poised at the threshold of a media crisis where personal feelings fuel ratings and shape reality. Immersion threatens to be a point-of-no-return in the liberal's post-truth nightmare. Fact turned into fiction, forever.

But while the medium is the message, the message is an open question and not a verdict. Immersion is a timely, if thorny, innovation and could either go very wrong or very right.

Yes, immersion centers on a highly personal experience, but this experience is not under your control. There is always a little distance

involved. The event - factual - happens to you, without being yours to fabricate. It is shareable and belongs to everyone.

The key, then, is in the degree of immersion. Too much of it and the truth could get lost in imagination where you're happy to make your own reality because you can.

With immersion, your ego is soothed and defused in equal measure.

This only works if the technology enhances the experience of the narrative.

Dominguez notes that "immersive technology does not guarantee narrative immersion, and this is why we need more experiments which throw light on which of the elements of narrative construction in VR settings favor it."

Images and motion seem to favor immersion, and can acquire realistic heights through techniques such as photogrammetry and videogrammetry.

But for Dominguez, [immersion](#)'s trump card is its use of sound. Real recordings create a powerful emotional impact.

One example of this is Nonny de la Peña's Hunger in Los Angeles. The viewer is in a food bank line in Los Angeles when an individual suddenly falls into a diabetic coma. The 7 minutes of sound, recorded from the actual event, "contribute to creating an atmosphere."

Unchecked collective emotion - the province of fascism and other totalitarian regimes - must be watered down with facts and reason. Undergoing an [immersive experience](#) like the one above has great collective potential- so long as the viewer is able to keep a critical

distance.

But there is also the possibility - gamers know it well - for viewers to interact with the virtual context.

This can affirm either critical distance or a post-truth predilection for alternative facts.

A measure of participation would counteract an overly passive, emotional experience. On the other hand, the risk of relativism is also apparent. How can we involve the uninvolved in an ethically sound way, which is to say without changing the inside facts?

Immersive journalism can isolate us, or it can bring us together. It can reaffirm the principles of objectivity, or it can encourage further relativism. All this will depend on what stories we choose to tell, how aptly we use immersive technology and how discerning we are in the degree of choice we allow immersed participants.

In short, immersive journalism can either strengthen the post-truth narrative, or counter it. It is faced with the challenge of upholding traditional journalistic values while negotiating the convolutions of an age of post-truth, for better or for worse.

**More information:** Eva Domínguez, Going Beyond the Classic News Narrative Convention: The Background to and Challenges of Immersion in Journalism, *Frontiers in Digital Humanities* (2017). [DOI: 10.3389/fdigh.2017.00010](https://doi.org/10.3389/fdigh.2017.00010)

Provided by Frontiers

Citation: Immersive journalism in a post-truth world (2017, June 29) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-06-immersive-journalism-post-truth-world.html>

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