




For decades, the mass media based their power on providing information to their audience – initially newspapers, and later radio and television, had the resources to be the only ones able to convey facts. When the rules of the game changed with the advent of the internet and widespread access to it, traditional media shifted their focus from information to opinion and journalism. Since information is available almost instantly and there is no need to wait for tomorrow’s newspaper or the next news broadcast, it has become more important to convince readers and audience members of a particular interpretation of the facts. Traditional media are currently facing a multitude of problems, including how to engage young audiences. Perhaps immersive media offer an effective remedy for these ills, and journalism based on them, offering in-depth information, will be the next stage in media development.

 Tomasz Płosa

# IMMERSIVE MEDIA: THE HOPE FOR JOURNALISM



Wojciech Welskop, PhD, DLitt, Assoc. Prof.  
Institute of Journalism and Media Communication  
Faculty of Social Sciences  
University of Silesia in Katowice  
wojciech.welskop@us.edu.pl

Efforts are already underway to increase engagement with journalistic content through the use of advanced digital technologies such as 360° interfaces, virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and mixed reality (MR), which combines all of these formats. The United States is the global leader in this type of innovation, while Spain is at the forefront in Europe. In Poland, these solutions are still a thing of the future.

'360° interfaces are the simplest and cheapest in terms of technology. The potential of VR has not yet been sufficiently recognised in journalism, even though it is already used in education, e.g. during medical studies to simulate operations. AR, or augmented reality, is another level of advancement, because it involves digital information in the form of text, graphics, or three-dimensional models being superimposed on real physical objects without separating the user from them, as is the case with VR', says Wojciech Welskop, PhD, DLitt, Associate Professor at the Institute of Journalism and Media Communication at the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Silesia, whose research focuses on, among other things, augmented reality and immersive journalism.

The scientist analysed 31 experiments using AR (to present astronomical, historical, sporting, artistic, and social issues) in terms of the sophistication of the AR used and the level of interactivity (the projects were described in the New York Times between 2020 and 2022). Wojciech Welskop has no doubt that journalism would gain a wealth of new opportunities through the use of augmented reality, especially in terms of creating narratively engaging and interactive content, enhancing authenticity and personalising the message. The media expert emphasises that it is important to bear

in mind both the considerable costs associated with the use of AR and the emerging ethical concerns (including how to avoid manipulation in content prepared using this technology), but nevertheless sees immersive media as an opportunity to return to valuable, committed, and reliable journalism.

'I absolutely do not wish for "augmented" journalism to completely replace the traditional journalism we know today, but we must find a way to interest young audiences in content that is slightly more advanced than what they currently consume', emphasises Wojciech Welskop. 'Since nearly everyone has a smartphone, why not use it in an effective and positive way by enriching the material with visual and gamification elements that allow audiences to decide what to do and which direction to take? Information conveyed in a traditional format, textually and linearly, e.g. in a report, often proves to be simply uninteresting to Gen Z audiences, not because it is inferior, but because it loses out to formats that engage the other senses, draw attention, and provide a sense of agency'.

So instead of presenting the world in a linear fashion from the first paragraph to the last, it can be designed as an experience, in which case the story ceases to be information to be absorbed and becomes an experience and will remain in the audience's memory longer than any headline. What's more, a well-designed immersive narrative deepens the message, and suddenly the smartphone – a modern-day distraction – can become a tool that guides the audience step by step towards something meaningful, instead of just bombarding them with more and more stimuli. So it's not about adding fireworks to the content, but about giving it a form that really makes you want to stay longer. And when the audience stays, they don't just watch, they begin to understand.

The widespread recognition of social media as the only source of information among young people and the resulting superficiality of content are not the only problems facing contemporary journalism, which has not been spared by the phenomena of globalisation and McDonaldisation. Today, media outlets try to attract the attention of their audience (of all ages, not just young people) as quickly and as often as possible, unfortunately often at any cost – even well-established media outlets with a solid reputation and position do not shy away from clickbait headlines. Even if we do not take the bait and try to filter the content we consume more carefully, ubiquitous algorithms will calculate what material we need and deliver it to us, which will most likely result in us being trapped in an information bubble that will only grow larger unless we consciously counteract it.

'If those walls are further reinforced by shallow content mass-generated by AI, we are going to wake up in the world of hyper-reality – composed of elements that are simply untrue or, at best, distorted', warns Wojciech Welskop.

And although it is difficult to change the current conditions, the scientist suggests that we should at least try to be conscious consumers: develop critical thinking in ourselves and others, use many different sources of information and opinions, go beyond our own bubble, and meticulously verify the products of artificial intelligence. In short: switch from information that is heavily processed – or McNuggets-like – to more nutritious news offered by slow journalism. May it one day become widespread and effective thanks to the use of immersive media, because the future of information is quality, not noise.