

KNOWLEDGE AND AWARENESS OF IMMERSIVE JOURNALISM AMONG JOURNALISM LECTURERS IN SELECT PUBLIC AND PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN ENUGU STATE

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Abstract

This study delves into the realm of immersive journalism by exploring the knowledge and awareness levels among journalism lecturers in select public and private universities in Enugu, Nigeria. The research seeks to determine the extent of their knowledge and perception of immersive journalism, its adoption into the curriculum, and the challenges faced in its integration. As immersive technologies and content consumption continue to rise, this study was motivated by the evolving media landscape. To contextualize the research, a comprehensive review of relevant literature, including Immersive Journalism Practice, Immersive Media (VR & AR), New Media, were used. Empirical studies were examined to provide insights into the present study. The study leverages the use of Diffusion of Innovation Theory, to underpin its findings. Given the substantial population of 87 journalism lecturers in Enugu, a census survey was employed as the research method, with 63 respondents participating through a questionnaire. The findings reveal a noteworthy level of awareness of immersive journalism among lecturers, albeit with a majority at the novice level. Surprisingly, immersive journalism is conspicuously absent from the curricula of Enugu state universities. Despite this, lecturers exhibit a keen interest in advancing their immersive journalism knowledge through training. The study also underscores the formidable challenges faced by journalism educators, encompassing technological infrastructure, curriculum design, and resource constraints, when endeavoring to integrate immersive journalism into their teaching. In a swiftly evolving media landscape, this research contributes to the understanding of immersive journalism's status and the hurdles to its effective adoption, offering valuable insights for educators, institutions, and policymakers.

Keywords: Knowledge and Awareness, Immersive Journalism, Lecturers, Universities

INTRODUCTION

Virtual reality (VR) as a part of 21st-century technology has revolutionized the broadcast industry as to the way and manner news is perceived, received, and experienced. This technology now doesn't just make it possible for one to watch and listen to news but to also feel and interact with

what we are seeing. Other than the traditional “Audio Visual” components of broadcast, virtual reality has introduced a third concept which is “Sensory feeling and Interaction”.

Virtual reality immerses one into a new virtual world where one sees, interact with, and experiences the news event as if it was happening live and they are present watching or actively participating in it. When something is described as “immersive” in the digital landscape, it often has something to do with the realm of extended reality. Immersive media, available in many different forms, allows people to interact with content on another level. Rather than just viewing a video, immersive media can create an environment which allows you to stop into that video and interact with the things within it (Carter, 2022).

Virtual reality in journalism allows news organizations to create immersive experiences for their audience. It can transport viewers to a different location and give them a sense of being there, which can be especially powerful for news stories, feature stories, and documentaries. However, it is worth noting that it can be also expensive to produce, and not everyone has access to VR technology. (Herrera & Benítez, 2023).

The birth of a form of journalism that is characterized by the representation of events on a spherical stage generated from real images and which the viewer accesses from a first-person perspective that he or she controls at will, giving the sensation of being present in the place where the events have taken place. (Herrera & Benítez, 2023).

Despite interest and eagerness in the potential of VR, IJ became visible as an interest of academics only from the year 2016 onward, after both an increase in the production of 360-videos and NYT’s initiative which helped popularize VR and the content. Further development and better affordability and accessibility of both the technology and content is heightening interest in related themes, both in public and academia. The domain seems to still be only in its inception considering its breadth and the different possible types of content (360-video, interactive, digital reproduction, filmed, etc.) and technologies (screen size, mobile VR, immersive (embodied) VR with all its variations). (Bujic & Hamari, 2020).

Immersive journalism became more popular with the advent of New York Times (NYT) introducing their 360-degree video. NYT had sent out over a million of Google’s Cardboard VR goggles in 2016, introducing their readers to the medium. However, the idea of merging new technologies and journalism was introduced already in 2010. (De la Pen et al., 2010, as cited in Bujic & Hamari, 2020) with the aim of creating engaging experiences through placing the user in another’s shoes and bridging the gap between you and them or there. (Bujic & Hamari, 2020).

Although the allure of virtual reality (VR) had piqued curiosity, the academic community began to actively engage with immersive journalism (IJ) only from 2016 onwards. This shift coincided with a surge in 360-video production and was catalyzed by The New York Times' efforts, which significantly contributed to the popularization of VR content. The continuous advancement, improved affordability, and increased accessibility of both VR technology and immersive content have further intensified the interest in related themes, captivating the attention of both the general public and scholars alike.

Researchers believe that immersive journalism is the future of storytelling and expose in journalism, serving its functions of development, educating, changing strongly held values and attitudes, cultural transmission, entertainment, and most importantly information dissemination.

As virtual reality (VR) and mixed reality (MR) goggles are becoming more popular and are being used especially among younger people of today's world. Ever since its production, its patronage have continued to grow bigger and bigger, which shows that in the near future, VR goggles will be found in every home just like cell phones. This study will look at the knowledge level and perception of communication lecturers in Enugu, Nigeria on the use of immersive journalism in the field of broadcasting, because its only when they know and teach, will journalists both present and future have the knowledge and skill to practice immersive journalism.

Statement of Problem

The emergence of immersive media technologies, such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR), has revolutionized the field of journalism, offering new possibilities for storytelling and audience engagement. However, the effective integration of immersive media into journalism practice requires a solid foundation of knowledge and awareness among educators. This study aims to investigate the knowledge and awareness of immersive media among journalism lecturers in select public and private universities in Enugu State.

The lack of awareness and knowledge of immersive media technologies among journalism lecturers could hinder the adoption and integration of these tools into journalism curricula. This may lead to a disconnect between industry demands and the skills possessed by journalism graduates, ultimately affecting their employability and ability to contribute effectively to the media industry.

Furthermore, the scarcity of research specifically targeting journalism lecturers in Enugu State presents a gap in understanding the unique contextual factors that influence the adoption and utilization of immersive media technologies. By examining the knowledge and awareness levels of lecturers in both public and private universities, this study will provide insights into potential disparities and identify specific areas for intervention and support.

Therefore, it is crucial to explore the level of knowledge and awareness of immersive media among journalism lecturers in select public and private universities in Enugu State, with the aim of identifying challenges, opportunities, and strategies to bridge the gap between current practices and the evolving media landscape. This research will contribute to the enhancement of journalism education in Enugu State, Nigeria ensuring that graduates are equipped with the skills necessary to navigate and excel in the increasingly immersive journalism (IJ) environment.

Aim of Study

This research aims to examine the knowledge, awareness and perception of immersive journalism study and practice among journalism lecturers in Enugu state, Nigeria.

Research Questions

1. What is the current knowledge level of journalism lecturers in Enugu, Nigeria regarding immersive journalism?
2. How frequently is immersive journalism taught by journalism lecturers in Enugu, Nigeria?
3. How do journalism lecturers in Enugu, Nigeria perceive the importance of teaching immersive journalism in today's media landscape?
4. Are there limitations or constraints, such as lack of resources or training that hinder the effective teaching of immersive journalism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

De La Peà et al. (2010) saw immersive journalism as the production of news in a form in which people can gain first-person experiences of the events or situation described in news stories. The fundamental idea of immersive journalism is to allow the participant, typically represented as a digital avatar, to actually enter a virtually recreated scenario representing the news story (De La Peà et al., 2010). This means experiencing and or re-living the news event in the comfort of your home or a VR studio nearby.

Immersive journalism practice is the process of incorporating immersive media tools and gadgets in producing 360-degree immersive footage of a news event. This process entails using immersive techniques in storytelling to create the feeling of “being there and experiencing the news event” as it occurs in the mind of the audience.

Gradually, some of the most prestigious media outlets joined this way of reporting events and, from April 2015, several began to adopt it, especially during the period between 2015 and 2018. The first to do so was The New York Times, in April 2015, with the report ‘Walking New York’. It was followed by Discovery, USA Today, Associated Press, The Washington Post, ABC News, Frontline, CNET, The Wall Street Journal, and Vice News as well as European media such as Euronews, the BBC, RTVE or RT and production companies specialising in this format such as RYOT, Vrse or Jaunt (Laws, 2023).

This was the birth of a form of journalism that is characterised by the representation of events on a spherical stage generated from real images and which the viewer accesses from a first-person perspective that he or she controls at will, giving the sensation of being present in the place where the events have taken place (Laws, 2023).

Immersive Media (VR & AR) as a Fast-Rising Medium for Content Consumption

Immersive media often encompasses both Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR). They refer to innovative digital technologies that transport users into immersive, interactive environments or enhance their perception of the real world. In the realm of VR, users are entirely immersed in a simulated environment, often through headsets or goggles, where they can explore, interact, and engage with a computer-generated world that can be entirely fictional or based on reality. On the other hand, AR augments the real-world environment by overlaying digital information, such as graphics, videos, or data, onto the user's view of the physical world, typically through a device like a smartphone or smart glasses. Both VR and AR create multisensory experiences, offering unprecedented opportunities for storytelling, education, entertainment, and practical applications that blur the lines between the digital and physical realms.

The increasing rise of immersive media, marked by Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR), is about to usher in a profound transformation within the world of journalism. As traditional news outlets grapple with declining readership and evolving consumer preferences, immersive technologies have emerged as a promising medium to captivate and engage audiences. VR, in particular, offers the potential to transport viewers directly into the heart of a news story, immersing them in the sights and sounds of distant events. This not only enhances the visceral impact of the news but also deepens the audience's understanding of complex issues by placing them within the context of the story. AR, on the other hand, can overlay additional information or

context onto the physical world, enriching the way consumers interact with their surroundings and the news. This rise of immersive media coincides with a growing appetite for immersive experiences, particularly among younger generations, offering journalism an innovative avenue for revitalization.

Moreover, the prospect of people consuming news content through immersive technologies is increasingly becoming a reality. VR and AR headsets are becoming more accessible and affordable, while smartphone apps are making AR experiences mainstream. These technologies can transport news consumers to the frontlines of global events, enabling them to witness news stories in ways that traditional media formats simply cannot replicate. For instance, VR can offer immersive documentaries where users can "walk through" a refugee camp or stand amid the aftermath of a natural disaster, fostering greater empathy and understanding. However, while the potential is promising, it's important to address challenges like content creation, ethical considerations, and the digital divide to ensure that immersive journalism remains an inclusive and impactful medium for news consumption.

New Media and Immersive Media

In October 2021, Mark Zuckerberg launched the Metaverse, a cyberspace where people interact with each other, buy and sell, educate and learn, etc. in a virtual world just by putting on an immersive headset that allows you access. Just like when you go into the dream state and carry out activities as if it were the real world.

The internet from the late 90s till date experienced massive growth and expansion, especially with the birth and growth of social media. These both made into what my lecturer, Prof. Udeze called "villagerization of the world", which is making the globe have the same qualities as a typical African village setting where every household knows each other and what happens in each other's lives. The new media has reduced vast regions of the world to one small village where information is received instantaneously (Udeze, 2021).

From the growth of the new media, immersive media sprung up. Just like the case of Metaverse formerly known as Facebook, and other social media platforms like YouTube had a section of their services host 360-degree immersive video content where people connect their phones to their VR goggles and are able to view life-like 360-degree immersive video.

This intersection of new and immersive media has far-reaching implications for journalism and storytelling. It challenges traditional news formats by enabling immersive journalism experiences where audiences can "be there" as events unfold. These technologies have an impact in entertainment, as immersive media is increasingly used in gaming, cinematic experiences, and interactive narratives, blurring the lines between media consumption and active participation.

Design of Study

The design for this study was Mixed-Methods Research; combining both survey research and In-depth interviews can offer a comprehensive understanding of the topic. Quantitative data from surveys can be complemented by qualitative insights from interviews, providing a holistic view of lecturers' knowledge and awareness of immersive journalism.

Johnson, R. B., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. have written scholarly works on the effectiveness of mixed method. Their research and writings focus on the power of combining quantitative and qualitative methods to gain a deeper understanding of research questions. They emphasize that mixed-methods research provides a more complete and robust perspective.

The instrument that was used for the data collection will be questionnaire and interview guide.

Area of the Study

The area of study in this research topic is "immersive journalism." It represents the specific field or subject matter that the research is concerned with. Immersive journalism involves the use of immersive technologies, such as virtual reality (VR) or augmented reality (AR), to enhance the storytelling and engagement in journalism. The research will explore the knowledge and awareness of immersive journalism among journalism educators within the context of journalism education.

Population of Study

The population of the study are all the journalism lecturers in Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT), University of Nigeria (UNN), Caritas University, Renaissance University, Coal City University, and Godfrey Okoye University, in Enugu State which are 87 staff all together.

Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

There will be no sample size for this work, due to the fact that the population is too small to have a sample size

Discussion of Findings

The demographic characteristics of the survey respondents reveal important insights into the sample population. The gender distribution shows a significant male majority, suggesting a gender imbalance among journalism lecturers in Enugu, Nigeria. This gender disparity can be a factor to consider when addressing issues related to immersive journalism education and its potential impact. The age distribution of the respondents is varied, with a notable proportion aged 51 and above. This diverse age range may influence the perspectives and approaches toward teaching immersive journalism, with younger educators possibly being more open to technological innovations. Regarding educational qualifications, a substantial 71.43% of the participants hold a Ph.D. or equivalent qualification, signifying a highly educated cohort of journalism lecturers. Their educational background could potentially impact their ability to engage with emerging technologies and their readiness to adapt to new pedagogical approaches. Years of teaching experience exhibit an even distribution, with the majority having 17 years or more of experience. This balance in teaching experience suggests that both senior and junior educators were represented, and their varying levels of experience might influence their openness to incorporating immersive journalism into their teaching methodologies.

In response to Research Question One, it is evident that a majority of respondents consider themselves novices in immersive journalism, with a limited number claiming intermediate

knowledge. This result underscores the need for further training and professional development in the field. The fact that only 6.35% of respondents have attended workshops, training, or conferences on immersive journalism in the last seven years indicates that there is a significant gap in training opportunities for journalism lecturers in Enugu. This gap suggests a need for educational institutions and industry stakeholders to provide more training and knowledge-sharing platforms to enhance educators' expertise in immersive journalism. Moreover, the confidence levels reported by respondents in their ability to teach immersive journalism are relatively low. This finding indicates that many lecturers may not feel adequately prepared to teach this emerging field. Enhancing lecturers' confidence through training and resources is essential to improve the quality of immersive journalism education.

The data in response to Research Question Two shows that none of the respondents reported that immersive journalism is explicitly included in their journalism program's curriculum. This result implies that immersive journalism may be overlooked or underemphasized in the existing curriculum, despite its growing significance in the media landscape. Furthermore, of those respondents who indicated that immersive journalism is included in the curriculum, an overwhelming 85.71% believe that it is inadequately covered. This points to the need for a review and revision of curriculum content to better incorporate the essential aspects of immersive journalism.

The responses to Research Question Three indicate a high level of interest and belief in the importance of immersive journalism. A majority of respondents actively seek updates and advancements in immersive journalism technologies and consider it as the next significant dimension in journalism and storytelling. This enthusiasm suggests that journalism lecturers recognize the potential of immersive journalism in shaping the future of media and storytelling.

The data pertaining to Research Question Four highlight several challenges and limitations faced by journalism lecturers in Enugu, Nigeria. Limited access to relevant resources and technological barriers emerge as the most prominent challenges. These challenges may hinder lecturers from improving their knowledge and integrating immersive journalism effectively. Additionally, the data shows that all respondents face challenges in integrating immersive journalism into their curriculum, with technological infrastructure being the most significant obstacle. Faculty training, resource constraints, and curriculum design also present notable challenges. These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of the challenges that educators face in adopting immersive journalism into their teaching methods. Addressing these challenges is vital to fostering effective integration and ensuring that students receive a comprehensive education in this emerging field.

Summary of the Study

The study was conducted to investigate the knowledge and awareness of immersive journalism among journalism lecturers in select public and private universities in Enugu state. Specifically, the study sought to determine the knowledge level of immersive journalism practice among journalism lecturers, their perception, and adoption into their curriculum, and if at all they have any challenges or hindrances in effectively adopting immersive journalism into their curriculum and practice. This study was spurred by the high rise in the usage of immersive technologies and consumption of immersive content.

Relevant related literature within the reach of the researcher were reviewed under concept of Immersive Journalism Practice, Immersive Media (VR & AR) as a Fast-Rising Medium for Content Consumption, New Media and Immersive Media, Storytelling in Journalism, Future Trends in Immersive Media Content Consumption. The related empirical studies were reviewed along with how it was related to the present study. Three theories were employed to support this study; Diffusion of Innovation Theory, Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Media Richness Theory.

Census survey was adopted for this study due to the nature and size of the population of study. The population is 87 journalism lecturers in Enugu state and all were to be studied but only 63 lecturers responded and returned the measuring instrument sent out. A questionnaire was used as the instrument of data collection.

Data that was collected were subjected to analysis and interpretation. Research questions were answered from the interpretation of the results of the survey.

The following findings were established from this study;

» More than half of Journalism lecturers in Enugu are aware of immersive journalism but majority are at a novice level.

» Immersive journalism is not included in the journalism curriculum of any of the universities in Enugu state.

» Journalism lecturers recognize the potential of immersive journalism and are willing to undergo or partake in training that will advance their knowledge in the field.

» Technological infrastructure, curriculum design, and resource constraints are the major challenges faced by journalism lectures in integrating immersive journalism into their teaching.

Conclusion

This research project provides a foundational understanding of the current state of immersive journalism education among journalism lecturers in Enugu State. The findings underscore the importance of further training, curriculum enhancements, and resource provisions to better prepare educators for the evolving field of journalism. It is imperative that educational institutions, policymakers, and industry stakeholders take these findings into account when planning for the future of journalism education in Enugu State, ensuring that lecturers are well-equipped to train the next generation of journalists in the age of immersive journalism. This study potentially will inform policy changes, curriculum revisions, and professional development initiatives aimed at fostering an enriched and technologically adept journalism education landscape in Enugu State.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made in line with the findings of this study;

1. Immersive journalism should be adopted by curriculum designers and lecturers so as not to lag behind in the emerging trends in journalism studies.
2. The government should create programs, workshops, seminars, and conferences for journalism lecturers to update their knowledge and skill constantly, to meet up with industry demands, and equip students with the right knowledge and skill set to adapt and grow in the evolving media landscape. This will help to improve the quality of students produced each year.
3. The Government, policymakers, and industry stakeholders should constantly fund and equip journalism departments, ensuring that technological infrastructure and gadgets are constantly updated to enable lecturers to carry out practicals properly, which will improve the skill set of students in this department.

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