Work-in-Progress—Immersive Media and War Reporting in Colombia: Uses, Potentialities and Challenges of 360° Video to Narrate Armed Conflicts

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Abstract. This work-in-progress article analyses the uses, potentials, and challenges of 360° video in narrating armed conflicts, using the Colombian armed conflict as a case study. The study employs a mixed-method approach of content analysis and in-depth interviews with experts, drawing upon relevant studies on immersive journalism and peace journalism. Results indicate that traditional media outlets in Colombia have scarcely employed 360° video. However, production companies have exploited the immersive storytelling format to recount peace-related events and post-conflict scenarios, utilizing the immersive capabilities of 360° video to portray the story from a peace-oriented viewpoint. This research addresses the potentials of immersive technologies, such as facilitating empathy and understanding, providing a comprehensive view of hard-to-access locations, and capturing spherical evidence, as well as challenges such as monetization, difficult adaptability to news events, and some ethical implications. The findings from this study can be used to create a set of guidelines that can be employed to educate journalists and media producers exploring immersive narratives globally.

Keywords: Immersive Journalism, Armed Conflict, Empathy Building, 360° video, Peace Journalism, Colombian conflict.

1 Introduction

Immersive media has opened up unprecedented possibilities for how we interact with content, offering audiences the opportunity to immerse themselves in *storyworlds* using emergent virtual reality technologies such as 360° video and VR glasses. This has given rise to new narrative styles and storytelling formats, as well as the chance to gain first-person insights into other people's experiences and viewpoints in ways that have transformed fields such as media and communication, education, conflict resolution, and public policymaking [1]. In recent years, media outlets and journalists have been experimenting with virtual reality to explore new ways of telling news stories, leading to the emergence of immersive journalism as a subgenre, with 360° video at its core [2].

While immersive journalism is still in its early stages of development, research on the use and impact of immersive journalism in war reporting is not only scarce but also lacks a thorough empirical analysis. Therefore, there is a need to delve deeper into this specific field, given that war reporting has been a central component of news since the advent of mass media [3, 4], and some studies have already linked immersive technologies with the ability to generate empathy and serve as a potentially innovative tool for peace-building [5, 6].

Against this backdrop, this article analyses how reportage with 360° video is currently being used to narrate armed conflict and to provide a holistic understanding of the potentials and challenges of implementing immersive technologies within journalistic war storytelling. The study focuses on the Colombian armed conflict, which is an ongoing internal armed conflict that has lasted for over five decades and has caused more than 220,000 deaths, the displacement of more than five million of individuals, widespread human right violations, and a pervasive culture of fear and mistrust [7]. This conflict has been under the international media spotlight, especially since the

signing of the peace agreement in 2016 between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) guerrillas, one of the oldest and largest guerilla groups in Latin America. Moreover, the unique characteristics of this conflict have led to its portrayal from different perspectives and journalistic formats [8, 9].

To achieve its objectives, the study draws on key studies on immersive journalism [2, 10, 11], war and peace journalism [8, 12–14] and uses a mixed-method approach that combines content analysis and in-depth interviews with experts as a combined mode of inquiry. The study will adopt Benítez [15] analysis system of 360° video and adapt its categories to tackle the specific thematic/narrative characteristics of our empirical sample.

The outcomes of the study are twofold. Firstly, the study aims to merge immersive journalism and peace journalism frameworks to develop a tool to analyze the use of 360° video and other immersive media productions related to the coverage of armed conflict. Secondly, by analyzing the potentials and challenges that immersive war journalism entails, the study endeavors to offer guidance and promote good practices to journalists and media producers who wish to navigate this complex and sensitive terrain with tact, nuance, and professionalism.

2   Theoretical Foundations of Immersive Journalism

Immersive media has emerged as a powerful technology that enables users to experience a digital or artificial environment, offering an interactive encounter with digital content beyond what traditional media formats can provide. This technology includes virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), mixed reality (MR), and other related technologies like 360° video.

Immersive journalism, which results from the use of immersive technologies to produce journalistic content, has rapidly proliferated in newsrooms worldwide. This has led to the need to conceptualize and theorize the intersection between immersive media and journalism, with the aim to explore the potentialities that result from journalistic experiences in virtual reality and their capacity to replicate real emotions, feelings, and memories in a new way of experiencing news [11, 16–18].

The theoretical framework of immersive journalism originates from the seminal work of Nonny de la Peña, who is widely acknowledged as a pioneering figure in the field. De la Peña defines immersive journalism as the "production of news in a form in which people can gain first experiences of the events or situations described in news stories" [2]. Thus, immersive journalism facilitates an embodied experience where users are transported into a virtual world, enabling them to interact with and explore news stories beyond the constraints of traditional media formats.

Furthermore, De la Peña et al. [2] advocates for the creation of increasingly immersive experiences within immersive journalism, a concept they refer to as "deep immersive journalism." This involves the production of immersive journalism experiences that offer users progressively higher levels of immersion and presence. Deep immersive journalism aims to foster a greater sense of bodily, spatial, and temporal involvement, thus enhancing the experiential quality of the news stories portrayed within the virtual environment.

According to Benítez and Herrera's [10] research, there exists an intrinsic correlation between the notions of immersion and presence. Specifically, a heightened sensation of immersion is required for an authentic feeling of presence to arise. Through the development of an analytical framework for immersive videos, Benítez and Herrera delve into the empirical investigation of the impact of narrative resources on the level of presence in immersive content. The current study utilizes eleven categories of journalistic features identified by these authors to further explore this phenomenon within the armed conflict context.

3   Peace and War Journalism Conceptual Frameworks through the Lens of Peace Journalism Theory

According to the Peace journalism theory, peace journalism and war journalism are two contrasting approaches to reporting on conflicts. Peace journalism emphasizes accuracy, fairness, and balance in reporting, with the objective of fostering understanding and dialogue between conflicting parties. In contrast, war journalism tends to prioritize sensational events and reinforces stereotypes, perpetuating violence, and aggression [19].

Peace journalism has been frequently utilized as a theoretical framework for media research [20, 21], founded on the framing theory. The relationship between framing and the theory of peace journalism has been evident since Galtung [12] - considered one of the central figures in the field of peace studies and the father of peace journalism - classified war and peace journalism based on four broad practice and linguistic orientations: peace/conflict, truth, people, and solutions. In contrast, war journalism is oriented towards phenomena such as war/violence, propaganda, elites, and victory. These fundamental concepts, akin to frames, have aid professionals

and scholars in distinguishing peace coverage from war coverage in news reporting. McGoldrick and Lynch [22] further theorized Galtung's fundamental propositions, describing peace journalism as a means of framing stories using "conflict analysis." Lee and Maslog [23] subsequently provided an empirical approach to these concepts by operationalizing the "peace journalism model" into a set of valuable criteria for content analysis of conflict coverage drawing from a study involving 10 Asian newspapers.

Lee and Maslog [23] argue that peace journalists can cultivate a comprehensive understanding of a conflict's historical and cultural origins, foster empathy and comprehension by amplifying the voices of all parties involved, and facilitate a greater understanding of the conflict's causes and consequences, thereby promoting peaceful resolutions and minimizing the likelihood of violence. Conversely, war journalism accentuates the conflict as a zero-sum game with starkly divided opposing sides, highlighting visible effects of war like casualties and damage to property.

With some exemptions, studies that have employed peace journalism as a theoretical framework to examine conflict reporting have consistently identified a preponderance of the war journalism frame in such coverage [23–26]. This tendency has been observed not only in regions with ongoing conflicts, but also in post-conflict settings such as peace processes in which media and journalist could exacerbate violence and show inability to contribute to peace building during periods of calm [27]. Therefore, there is a need to further explore the potential of peace journalism as a theoretical framework to understand how media in general, and emergent media in particular, could play a crucial role in the outcomes of a conflict or a peace process. In this sense, the Colombian armed conflict presents itself as an interesting case study in which media narratives can be analyzed in a complex post-conflict scenario.

3.1 Peace and War Journalism in the Colombian Context

In Latin America, there has been relatively little investigative and theoretical production on peace journalism compared to other regions like Africa, Middle East or Asia [28]. However, Colombia stands out in the region for its adoption of peace journalism as an active tool for reporting and as a theoretical framework for analyzing media coverage of the conflict [29]. Research on peace and war journalism in Colombia shows that media outlets have frequently portrayed the Colombian conflict from a war frame [8, 30, 31], even when the events in question are intended to be presented within a peace context, such as the peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP guerrillas [8]. Nonetheless, there is also evidence of Colombian journalists' interest in understanding their role in the conflict and in employing practices that can contribute to peacebuilding, such as contextualizing the conflict, offering solutions, and amplifying the voices of ordinary people [32].

To change the prevailing war reporting dynamics in Colombia that silence the voices of victims and heavily rely on official sources [33–35], some researchers have proposed the need to use innovative approaches such as immersive journalism that uses collaborative narratives to document the lives and experiences of ex-combatants, victims, and marginalized communities in Colombia [36]. Therefore, there is a need to understand and examine new media formats and narrative approaches to report on the conflict from a peace perspective. In this research, we respond to this need by analyzing the potential of 360° video, a relatively new immersive format, to narrate the armed conflict in Colombia.

4   Methodology

To comprehend the uses, potentials, and challenges of immersive journalism in covering armed conflict in Colombia, this study adopts a mixed-methods approach that combines content analysis and in-depth interviews. Specifically, the content analysis method proposed by Wimmer and Dominick [37] is employed using Benitez's [15] analytical system to analyze the journalistic features of a series of 360° videos, complemented by the operationalization of the peace and war frameworks based on Galtung's concepts [12] to analyze the coverage of the Colombian armed conflict through this emergent video format. Additionally, this study employs in-depth interviews with experts in the field of immersive journalism, including both researchers with theoretical knowledge and journalists with practical experience in utilizing immersive technology in the context of armed conflict.

To establish precise criteria for this analysis, we have operationalized the definition of 360° video reportages provided by Benítez and Herrera [38] and set forth four criteria for each piece, including that: (1) it must have been recorded in 360° video format, (2) it consists of real footage, (3) it represents reality, and (4) it describes events and situations related to the armed conflict in Colombia. Any 360° video related to the topic of analysis that does not fulfil these criteria has been excluded from the analysis.

Subsequently, we conducted a comprehensive search and mapping for 360° videos within our research focus and initially came across the nine most popular digital media outlets in Colombia (El Tiempo online, Noticias Caracol TV online, Las dos Orillas, El Espectador online, Pulzo, Semana Online, Noticias RCN TV online, Noticias Uno online, and La silla Vacía) namely on Reuters [39]. We used keywords such as "Colombian armed conflict 360°", "war in Colombia 360°", "peace process in Colombia 360°", both in English and Spanish. Given the limited outcome of the initial search, we expanded our immersive video collection efforts by exploring exclusive immersive video platforms such as YouTube VR and Facebook 360° by applying the exact same keywords. With this, we tried to expand our search and eventually include immersive media content that had not been published by popular Colombian digital media outlets yet qualified for our analysis. Our search resulted in the identification of a final sample of 23 360° videos related to the Colombian armed conflict.

4.1 Coding Procedures and Operationalizations

In the initial phase of our content analysis, we applied the methodology developed by Benitez [15] to analyze 360° video. We selected relevant categories that were appropriate for our context of the Colombian armed conflict and adjusted the variables to suit our sample. The following table presents the categories and variables used in our analysis:

Table 1. Selection of categories and variables from Benitez's [15] used in the study.

Categories	Variables
Media Outlet or Producer	Traditional media in digital form / Digital-only media / Production company
Publication Date	2016 / 2017 / 2018 / 2019/ 2020 / 2021 / 2022
Duration	< 5' / > 5:01' and < 10:00' / > 10:01' and < 15:00' / non-measurable
Distribution Mode	Youtube VR / Facebook 360 / Own media website
Type of App for Distribution	Own App of the medium / Platform for 360° video content / No App
Theme	Peace process / Personal testimony related to the conflict / Virtual tour of a place affected by the conflict / Remembering the assassination of a public figure
Purpose	Denounce a situation or event / Deepen a fact or event / Show an event in its context / Recreate a sensory-motor experience / Visit inaccessible or remote places / Participate in events of political or social importance / Describe a place / other

In our second phase of content analysis, we utilized the theoretical frameworks of war and peace journalism to examine the characteristics of the 360° video coverage of the armed conflict in Colombia. Specifically, we referred to the works of Galtung [12] to examine whether these videos predominantly adopted the war journalism frame, which highlights violence, conflict, and the portrayal of aggressors and victims, or the peace journalism frame, which strives to provide an impartial report and facilitate understanding and communication among the conflicting parties [19]. To operationalize these theories in our empirical analysis, we drew on a recent study that examined such frames used in news reports on the peace process in Colombia [8] and combined it with relevant categories from earlier studies [23], [40]. We developed two indices, one for the frame of peace journalism and the other for war journalism, each comprising ten indicators based on the practices that define a content within the respective frames and gathered in two themes: approach and language. The approach-based criteria included (1) type of approach, (2) focus on similarities or differences, (3) visibility of effects of war, (4) elite orientation, (5) party involvement, (6) good and bad dichotomy, (7) continuity of reports. The language-based criteria focused on language that was (8) demonizing, (9) victimizing, and (10) emotive. Immersive videos that satisfied five or more indicators were categorized under a specific approach, while those that met four or fewer indicators in both frames were not classified under either approach. By comparing the frequency of the indices ($\alpha = .82$), we determined whether the videos exhibited more elements of war or peace journalism.

Our last methodological step was to conduct in-depth interviews with experts to explore ideas, perspectives, and experiences from those with in-depth theoretical and empirical knowledge. Three of them (Dr. María José Benítez de Gracía, Dr. Pavel Sidorenko and Dr. Sara Pérez Seijo) are researchers in the immersive journalism field, from which we aimed to get a better understanding about the use of immersive media, its potentials, and challenges in journalism in general. The other two are an independent journalist (Dan Archer) and a video producer (Gustavo León) who have used immersive 360° video technology to produce content related to the armed conflict in Colombia, from which we aimed to know which potentialities and challenges they experienced when

using this technology to address the Colombian armed conflict. It is noteworthy that the journalists interviewed were also involved in the production of most (83%) of the content analyzed.

5 Preliminary Findings

Our findings suggest that the implementation of 360° video in Colombian journalism for this purpose is still limited, as demonstrated by the scarcity of available materials. Out of the 23 immersive videos related to the armed conflict that were analyzed, only three 360° videos were produced and published by the most popular Colombian digital media outlets. These observations indicate that these media outlets have made little use of 360° video to cover armed conflict, typically focusing on covering entertainment-related content such as concerts, sporting events, and virtual tourism tours [41].

The remaining 20 videos are part of immersive projects produced by Colombian and foreign production companies with the support of national and international organizations, universities, and government entities. This supports previous research hypotheses suggesting the greater implementation of 360° video in Colombian journalism may come from independent producers, national or international organizations, rather than from the most popular media outlets [41].

In the analysis using the operationalization of peace and war journalism theories [42], 20 out of 23 videos have been framed as peace journalism. These 20 correspond entirely to the projects "Pathways Colombia," "Peace in 360 degrees," and "Pueblos en el Olvido." The remaining three videos, which correspond to videos made by Caracol TV Online and El Tiempo media outlet, were classified as neutral, closer to the peace journalism framework, but did not meet the five minimum characteristics to enter this framework. No video was classified within the war journalism frame.

This result may be surprising at first glance, as previous empirical analyses of armed conflict coverage generally show the prevalence of the war journalism framework [23, 26]. Even in a recent study, it was found that online media outlets worldwide used war narratives more often than peace framework to cover the peace process in Colombia [8]. However, it should be noted that out of the analyzed material, only three immersive videos correspond to digital media publications. The rest of the material has been produced by national and international production companies, with the support of international organizations such as the United Nations and government institutions such as The National Center for Historical Memory (NCHM). These institutions are interested in the success of the peace process and its good national and international reputation, so it is understandable that a narrative that promotes dialogue and contributes to peacebuilding is used. This may explain why the 360° videos from the analyzed projects have characteristics that frame them in peace journalism.

5.1 Potentials and Challenges of the Immersive Journalism to Narrate Armed Conflict

The use of immersive 360° video within the framework of peace journalism theory proposed by Galtung [12] can generate a significant impact in promoting peace. Due to its novelty, possibility of heightened sense of immersion and presence, this technology can facilitate greater engagement with the experiences of conflict, affording viewers the opportunity to empathize with victims, perpetrators, allies, and adversaries alike. Dr. Benitez asserts that "360° video can be an incredibly powerful tool, capable of generating impact and vivid memories that foster emotional and empathic ties to realities and perspectives different from our own, thereby enabling us to understand and relate to those realities more closely." This potential has been harnessed by 360° video creators in Colombia to document the armed conflict. They aimed to showcase the war realities of rural areas to city dwellers or demonstrate the positive experiences of victims and ex-combatants after the Peace Agreement to those who oppose the agreement. The second potential of immersive journalism is its ability to allow the key players of the conflict to have freedom of movement in space, transforming them into "virtual guides" who can showcase and explicate different scenarios, places, and events. Such a feature can significantly enhance the audience's understanding of the context of the conflict and the dynamics at play. Journalist Dan Archer underscores this potential by stating that his primary objective was "to really try to cement the facts of the conflicts in a visual context, and to show where some of the terrific events took place to people who potentially either were desensitized to some of the violence or chose to overlook it." The third potential of immersive journalism is that it can provide a more comprehensive spatial understanding of places and populations that are challenging to access. In contexts marked by conflict, accessing locations where significant events occur for understanding the dynamics of the conflict can prove difficult. Immersive 360° video can overcome these limitations, allowing viewers to experience the situation more fully on the ground. The fourth potential of utilizing 360° video in the coverage of armed conflict is the ability to offer a more comprehensive depiction of events, locations, or circumstances that traditional framing may not capture. This can provide enhanced evidence and contextualization to aid in presenting a more accurate portrayal

of the situation on the ground. However, it should be acknowledged that immersive 360° video is a product of human creation and has the potential to manipulate perception by selecting what to film and what to exclude. Thus, it is imperative to uphold professional ethics at all times.

Immersive 360° video also poses several challenges for journalists and content producers. The first challenge is that the production cost of 360° videos is high, and the benefits in terms of viewership have not been enough to justify the investment. Furthermore, most media outlets did not have the necessary equipment or trained personnel for immersive reporting, which forced them to turn to external companies for content production. However, media outlets realized that the return on investment was not as expected, as the audience was not prepared for massive consumption of this format. The second challenge is that the inherent characteristics of the format pose difficulties in its adaptability for news reporting purposes. Working with 360° technology presents unique challenges, including the need for stable equipment and a strong understanding of immersive storytelling techniques. Additionally, the use of 360° technology requires a strategic approach to storytelling, where the journalist should not appear in the footage to maintain the sense of immersion. This characteristic presents other difficulties, as the risk of losing the camera is introduced due to accidents, weather conditions, or theft. The absence of the reporter also poses a challenge for the protagonists of the stories, who must be coached to speak directly to the camera. The third challenge pertains to viewer literacy regarding immersive narratives. The spatial dimension of these videos has the potential to distract viewers from the intended narrative and towards other elements within the environment, making it imperative for journalists to effectively direct the viewer's attention towards the focal points of the story. Furthermore, the viewer's attention span is not accustomed to immersive narratives, and an immersive report on the armed conflict that tackles it from multiple angles may be tedious for the viewer. Finally, the fourth challenge is the ethical implications of using immersive technologies in war reporting. The emotional impact generated by this format could be exploited to create feelings of hatred and rejection towards one of the parties involved in the conflict. Additionally, the potential harm that could be inflicted upon vulnerable audiences by showing explicit violence and suffering must also be considered. Thus, journalists must exercise caution when employing immersive technologies to cover armed conflict and ensure that the ethical dimensions of their work are considered alongside the potential benefits of the format.

6   Conclusion

In conclusion, immersive 360° video has great potential for covering armed conflict, allowing for increased impact and empathy, freedom of movement in space, a more complete spatial image, and enhanced evidence and context. However, there are also significant challenges that need to be addressed in order to make this format a viable option for news reporting, including the high production cost, difficulties in adaptability, viewer literacy regarding immersive narratives, and ethical implications of using immersive technologies in war reporting. Addressing these challenges will require media organizations, journalists, and content producers to invest in training and equipment, strategic storytelling, and responsible ethical practices. The potential benefits of immersive 360° video are significant, and as such, it is important that these challenges are acknowledged and addressed in order to allow this format to become a valuable tool for journalists and media producers seeking to tell stories related to armed conflict more effectively and with greater impact. Overall, the future of immersive 360° video in conflict journalism is promising, but success will require careful consideration of both the potential benefits and challenges associated with this innovative technology.

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