

The Role of Virtual Reality in Mediating the Vulnerability of Distant Suffering: Distance, Agency, and the Hierarchies of Human Life

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Abstract : Immersive virtual reality (VR) has gained momentum in humanitarian communication due to its utopian promises of co-presence, immediacy, and transcendence. These potential benefits have led the United Nations (UN) to tirelessly produce and distribute VR series to evoke global empathy and encourage policymakers, philanthropic business tycoons and citizens around the world to actually do something (i.e. give a donation). However, it is unclear whether or not VR can cultivate cosmopolitans with a sense of social responsibility towards the geographically, socially/culturally and morally mediated misfortune of faraway others. Drawing upon existing works on the mediation of distant suffering, this article constructs an analytical framework to articulate the issue. Applying this framework on a case study of five of the UN's VR pieces, the article identifies three paradoxes that exist between cyber-utopian and cyber-dystopian narratives. In the "paradox of distance", VR relies on the notions of "presence" and "storyliving" to implicitly link audiences spatially and temporally to distant suffering, creating global connectivity and reducing perceived distances between audiences and others; yet it also enables audiences to fully occupy the point of view of distant sufferers (creating too close/absolute proximity), which may cause them to feel naive self-righteousness or narcissism with their pleasures and desire, thereby destroying the "proper distance". In the "paradox of agency", VR simulates a superficially "real" encounter for visual intimacy, thereby establishing an "audiences-beneficiary" relationship in humanitarian communication; yet in this case the mediated hyperreality is not an authentic reality, and its simulation does not fill the gap between reality and the virtual world. In the "paradox of the hierarchies of human life", VR enables an audience to experience virtually fundamental "freedom", epitomizing an attitude of cultural relativism that informs a great deal of contemporary multiculturalism, providing vast possibilities for a more egalitarian representation of distant sufferers; yet it also takes the spectator's personally empathic feelings as the focus of intervention, rather than structural inequality and political exclusion (an economic and political power relations of viewing). Thus, the audience can potentially remain trapped within the minefield of hegemonic humanitarianism. This study is significant in two respects. First, it advances the turn of digitalization in studies of media and morality in the polymedia milieu; it is motivated by the necessary call for a move beyond traditional technological environments to arrive at a more novel understanding of the asymmetry of power between the safety of spectators and the vulnerability of mediated sufferers. Second, it not only reminds humanitarian journalists and NGOs that they should not rely entirely on the richer news experience or powerful response-ability enabled by VR to gain a "moral bond" with distant sufferers, but also argues that when fully-fledged VR technology is developed, it can serve as a kind of alchemy and should not be underestimated merely as a "bugaboo" of an alarmist philosophical and fictional dystopia.

Keywords : audience, cosmopolitan, distant suffering, virtual reality, humanitarian communication

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