

# CHANGING PERSPECTIVES

**R.B. Brenner serves as Director of the School of Journalism, Moody College of Communication, at The University of Texas at Austin. He also serves as an ex-officio member of the Board of Governors for the Headliners Foundation of Texas.**

*This article first appeared at [www.innovate.utexas.edu](http://www.innovate.utexas.edu).*



**R.B. Brenner**  
Director, School of Journalism

“You have to break the mindset that the journalist is up on the mountain handing down information. It’s now an interactive relationship. The audience has many more choices and much more control.”

—R.B. Brenner

**V**irtual reality (VR) isn’t new, but it’s more accessible than ever to the average person. The technology to make and view VR content is getting faster, better and cheaper. Media outlets are increasingly incorporating it into storytelling practices.

The New York Times, The Washington Post, Gannett and many others have begun to offer VR content to their audiences. Much of this is in the form of 360-degree videos, which enable the viewer to change perspective by looking around within the scene. The videos can be watched using headsets like the Oculus Rift or cheaper options like Google Cardboard. YouTube also has a native player that allows viewers to mouse through stories.

R.B. Brenner, director of the School of Journalism at the Moody College of Communication, believes this is the beginning of a movement toward immersive journalism.

Brenner, a journalist for nearly 30 years, including eight years as an editor at The Washington Post, is leading a new collaboration involving The Post, the School of Journalism, the UT3D film program and the Texas Advanced Computing Center’s visualization lab. Brenner’s team has produced a VR tour of Mars and a couple 360 videos, including a story on Pope Francis’s recent visit to Ciudad Juárez in Mexico.

We talked with Brenner about the role of journalists and the importance of viewpoint in immersive storytelling.



UT3D graduate and lecturer [Deepak Chetty](#) and MFA film student Juan Pablo González in Juarez to shoot 360 video of Pope Francis's recent visit.



Mexico's patron saint, La Virgen de Guadalupe, watches over the 360 camera mounted on the team's car hood.

### **What do you think is the role of innovation in journalism?**

I graduated from college in 1983, and we were the generation that flooded into journalism because two really exciting things happened when we were young. One was Watergate and the reporting of Woodward and Bernstein. It was the rise of a whole

culture of investigative reporting, journalist as hero. And then you had the literary journalists, gifted writers bringing the techniques of fiction to nonfiction.

My generation launched into journalism with a spirit of creativity, but we also encountered some hardened traditions. A newspaper in the 1980s did what it had been doing for many decades, delivering journalism in print. There wasn't a lot of experimental technology involved.

Today's generation is, in a sense, about the reinvention of journalism. So innovation has to be much more front and center, and it must be much more tied to technology than the way my generation worked.

### **With all the technology to choose from, why virtual reality and 360 video?**

If journalism is about finding out and conveying important information to the public, journalists are best served by having as many storytelling techniques and tools as possible. VR is another option for us to tell a story.

You shouldn't just be doing it, though, because it's a fancy new tool, and it's buzzy and cool. You always want to ask yourself, why is this going to make the journalism better? And I think where VR helps is when you are telling a story that transports people to a place where they can't normally go.

### **How did the collaboration with The Washington Post come about?**

It began in March 2015 when The Post's managing editor for digital, my old colleague, approached me and asked, "Would UT like to do VR stories with us?"

I said yes and started looking at what it would take for UT to be an effective collaborator. I realized I needed to tap resources that were beyond my own walls. I looked across the street and said, "Wait, we have a film school. And at our film school there is a 3D program that has talented people like [Deepak Chetty](#) and classes in how to do 3D and immersive storytelling."

Then we decided to team up with TACC, the Texas Advanced Computing Center and its visualization lab. Now we are working with computer scientists and engineering students. They learn from us, we learn from them. All of a sudden we had this powerful collection of talents. That is what has elevated our project.

### **Is that kind of collaboration essential to keeping the field of journalism alive?**

Absolutely. It is almost hard to find a good journalism school now that doesn't have classes in coding, mobile app development, building data tools. You are having a whole generation of students coming out of schools like ours, and programs elsewhere, that are this breed of technologist-journalist that didn't exist before. And they are infusing newsrooms.

## **Is there a different approach with this technology than traditional broadcast journalism?**

The first thing you have to realize is the principles of journalistic ethics need to keep adapting to technology. So just as you wouldn't in traditional photojournalism recreate something, or tell someone, "Bring that over here because it is better in my shot," you wouldn't bend the ethical rules for this medium. At the same time you want to evaluate what are the possibilities and limits of the technology.



## **How do these new digital tools change the role of the journalist?**

If you want to experiment with what digital media is all about, you have to break the mindset that you as the journalist are up on the mountain handing down the information. It's now an interactive relationship. The audience has many more choices and much more control. It has democratized how journalists interact with their sources and their audience.

## **How do you maintain quality and communicate a direct message when the viewer is choosing what they see?**

Journalists are number one about truth and accuracy. Even though you have more choices, we as journalists are still choosing what you are going to know and see. I don't think we have relinquished control — we have given you freedom.

Our latest project with the Washington Post [Mars: An Interactive Journey](#) excites me because, unlike the 360 videos we did to cover the Iowa Caucus and the Pope's visit to Juarez, it is true virtual reality. By that I mean the user can navigate on the surface of Mars and discover for themselves the various audio and visual experiences we've created. The journalist offers cues as to where to look and go, but the user explores and discovers on his or her own.



This is a screen capture from *Mars: An Interactive Journey*, published by the Washington Post. This project was created in partnership with the Moody College of Communication. Researchers and students in the Visualization Laboratory of the Texas Advanced Computing Center provided programming and scripting support.

### **What else should be on our radar about the future of journalism?**

Augmented reality. Certainly everything mobile. Wearables, even sensors. There is going to be a lot of interesting stuff with the role of bots: Where does robotics fit, and how do bots and humans work together in journalism? How can messaging apps be used in the delivery of journalism? All that stuff is coming fast. I should add here, though, this isn't going to be replacing an analytical 2,000-word story that helps you understand an issue. Or a beautifully written long-form narrative.