

Hostile training uses virtual reality for journalists to prepare them better for conflict zones

Two American journalists were killed within days of each other this week in Ukraine, a reminder of just how dangerous it is for correspondents covering war.

Award-winning Arkansas filmmaker [Brent Renoud](#) and Fox News cameraman [Pierre Zakrzewski](#) both died on the urban battlefield in Ukraine. Ukrainian journalist Oleksandra “Sasha” Kuvshynova, also reporting for Fox, was killed alongside Zakrzewski.

But while their deaths grabbed headlines and highlighted the particular risks for war correspondents, journalists who report on civil unrest in the United States also encounter dangers.



(Photo courtesy of Eric Huybrechts via Flickr)

To address that, a new company created by former conflict reporters is training journalists using VR technology to help

better prepare them for risky assignments at home or abroad.

[Head Set](#) was formed by Aela Callan and Kate Parkinson, journalists who worked for a combined three decades covering wars, natural disasters and high risk assignments all over the world.

The London-based company uses VR instead of the more common conflict training called HEFA, or Hostile Environment and Emergency First Aid courses, which many conflict reporters take before heading into war zones. HEFA also relies on simulations but does them in real time, with actors.

“You’re reliant on the quality of the actors who do that and you always know it’s a simulation,” Callan said. “With VR, it tricks the mind and ignites the physiology of what you’re feeling.”

Callan added that there still is a place for traditional HEFAT courses, but the technology used by Head Set could be a game changer.

U.S.-based journalists also rely on HEFAT for domestic dangers while reporting. The [International Women’s Media Foundation](#), for example, works with reporters on first aid training during protests.

“We’re not saying there’s not a place for that anymore. We’re saying journalism has moved on. The threats are different, the way we approach it is different and now we have the technology to do something that really changes the game,” Callan said.

The company plans to add modules for conflict, particularly given what is happening right now in Ukraine.” As you can imagine, VR would be extremely effective at simulating live weapons fire, etc. ” The creation of these will be driven, of course, by funding and demand from clients. One scenario that is being explored is several organizations co-funding this.”

Head Set is developing a scenario right now with the international nonprofit [Internews](#), “which directly applies to online threats reporters who are covering the war in Ukraine are facing,” Callan said.

Along with five other journalists, this reporter took part in a recent Head Set training at no cost over Zoom (with the VR headset sent in advance) that was sponsored by the James W. Foley Legacy Foundation. And while the VR experience was the most unique aspect of it, it only lasted about 20 minutes of the four-hour session. The rest of the time was focused on discussion of what took place, the experiences of the attendees, and perhaps most importantly, how to recognize and deal with levels of stress.

As for the VR itself, the civil unrest module (the company also has an extreme weather course) put the participant in the middle of a London protest that turned violent. The “people” in the VR are composed of vector lines, which while they do not look “real” – because of the sound effects and conversations heard, still give one the feeling of actually being there.

“When I first looked at the graphics I thought, ‘I’m not going to feel like I’m in that space,’ but a minute or so in, I had the same feelings I would have in those real situations,” said Angus Mordant, a New York City-based freelance photographer who has covered civil unrest related to the murder of George Floyd and Covid-19 mask protests. “I started to sweat a little bit and my adrenaline started to shoot up, so it definitely worked.”

For Philadelphia-based photographer Kriston Jae Bethel, it was comforting to be able to make a mistake without it costing anything.

“I think being able to experience that in a safe space where a mistake won’t cost you a trip to the hospital or worse is very

valuable,” Bethel said.

Callan said there is a reason why the VR characters do not appear very lifelike.

“There’s this thing in computer game development called the uncanny valley which is the more realistic you try to make computer animation, the less our brains trusts it. So, we let their mind find in the blanks with the visual style that we created using motion capture and it tricks us into thinking we’re surrounded by people when actually we’re surrounded by vector lines,” she said.

Add to that realistic sound effects, and it is not hard for participants to believe they are actually in a dangerous situation.

“I was kind of blindsided by how realistic the sound and emotional undertones of the situation we were put into,” said Jonathan Cherry, a Louisville-based freelance photographer. “It’s less about how good everything looks rather than the context of the situation and the amount of details.”

Along with the James W. Foley Legacy Foundation, Head Set is currently working with Vice Media, Thomson Reuters, Associated Press, BBC and Internews, Callan said.

“They are a women-owned company so that was appealing,” said Foley Foundation Education Program Director Thomas Durkin. “We also liked that they were people who worked in hostile environments. And for the cost of covering HEFAT training for between five and nine journalists a year, we can now cover 30,” Durkin said.

Head Set provides the VR headsets and a trainer for each organization it works with, tailoring the experience for each one depending on its needs, Callan said. An additional positive is that participants can attend the course from their home – saving money on traveling and reducing any COVID-19

concerns they have while the pandemic continues on. The company is also working on new features that will allow the user to see his heart rate and stress level in real time.

She added that the motivation remains the same – to try and keep journalists as safe as possible and to try and ensure people want to keep working.

“Right now journalism is under threat from all angles,” Callan said. “We wanted something to empower journalists to feel like they want to stay in the job. We want journalism to survive, especially freelance journalism and that’s what drives us to do this.”

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