Week 2 Writing Response

I chose to watch Sam Wolson and Trevor Snapp’s *We Who Remain*, an immersive VR journalism piece centered on daily life amidst an ongoing civil war in the Nuba region of Sudan.

The piece, distributed by NYT VR, is a powerful use of the medium and unique in several regards.

Scant few foreigners have been able to enter the region over the past several years, and Sudanese journalists are banned from documenting or writing about the conflict, facing the risk of death or life imprisonment for doing so. To have a glimpse into the horrors of everyday life for civilians caught in the conflict is a feat in its own; being able to do so in virtual space through the brilliant, 360 cinematography of Wolson and Snapp is a highly visceral, gut-wrenching experience.

Equivalent to the visceral power of being placed via VR in a real-time, real-life war zone is the demonstration of VR’s largely untapped ability and effectiveness as a vehicle for creating empathy when applied to videojournalism—particularly in remote, inaccessible, foreign parts of the world. The *Times’* decision to distribute the piece through its free-use, Cardboard-compatible VR app adds to its historical significance—through it, individuals are given the objectively low-cost opportunity of experiencing both the trauma of the region as well as (for many) the means to experience VR for the first time.

Shortly after post-production finished on *We Who Remain*, Wolson was commissioned to join the crew of National Geographic Studios’ first large-budget VR series—commensurate with many of NGS studios’ natural history broadcast programs—focusing on life in Botswana’s Okavango River Basin. Coinciding with the Okavango project’s release is the opening of Washington D.C.’s first-ever, established VR theater at the Society’s storied Grosvenor Auditorium.

As a colleague and friend of Wolson’s dating back to our time as undergraduates in Ann Arbor, *We Who Remain* is an encouraging affirmation of VR’s place in mass-appeal videojournalism. With Geographic’s greenlighting and financing of the Okavango series comes a cementation of faith from one of the news industry’s greatest and most storied powers.