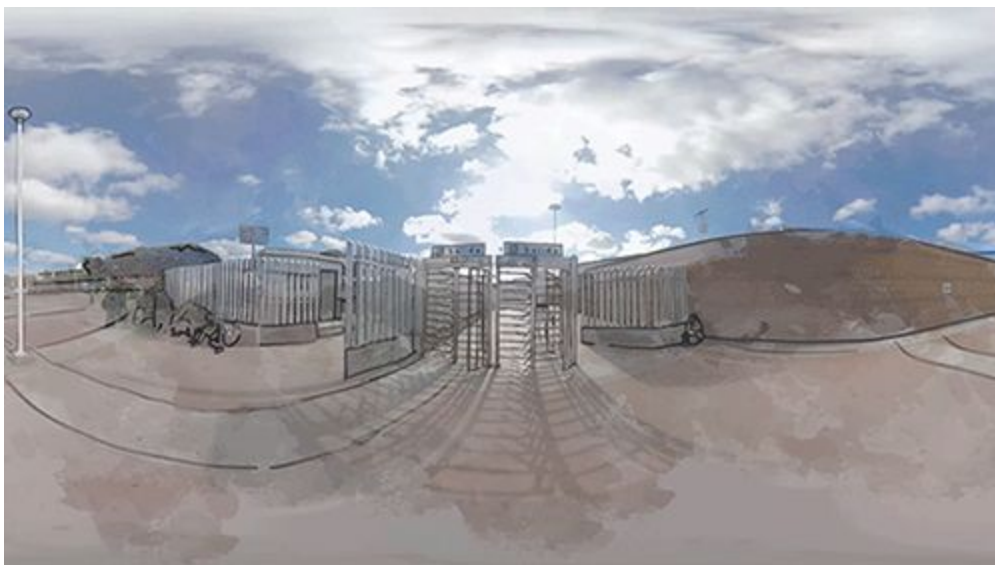


[JOVRNALISM](#) is a virtual reality (VR) journalism project based at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. Students from various disciplines and backgrounds use VR tools such as [Tour Creator](#) while reporting groundbreaking video news stories.

Robert Hernandez, Associate Professor of Professional Practice at USC's Annenberg School, began teaching a course called JOVRNALISM in 2015. (Pronounced "jo-ver-nalism," it embeds "VR" in journalism.) Students come from many disciplines, backgrounds, and nations, and from both graduate and undergraduate programs. "They're diverse, curious misfits with a strong work ethic to make innovative experiences" Hernandez says. "These are fantastic students who merge three disciplines: storytelling, arts, and engineering." JOVRNALISM is a hackathon-style journalism course in which the students pitch ideas for in-depth projects. The class then chooses one complex project with multiple angles to work on per semester.

JOVRNALISM relies heavily on VR as a reporting tool. [Turning Tides: The Story of the Salton Sea](#), for instance, used 360-degree video, drones, and computer graphics for a seven-part immersive series that explored the stories and communities around the inland sea. [The Deported: Life Beyond the Border](#) used 360-degree video and illustrations in a similar five-part immersive series, now available on iOS and Android apps and on Oculus Go. "Each person the students listened to made an impact on them," Hernandez said in a USC Annenberg [blogpost](#) about *The Deported*. "They gained a newfound understanding of their citizenship, their freedom and the opportunities they have as journalists to tell these types of stories."



JOVRNALISM students play in the big leagues, having collaborated with numerous media partners. These have included the *New York Times*, NBC, National Public Radio, ProPublica, *USA Today*, *The Desert Sun*, and KCRW. *Turning Tides* won a prestigious Online Journalism Award from the Online News Association in 2017. *The Deported* was an Online Journalism Award finalist in 2018.



JOVRNALISM VR projects

Students develop new VR techniques

Hernandez includes Google tools among the technologies in the JOVRNALISM toolkit. “I’ve incorporated Tour Creator as part of my Intro to 360/VR production workshops, to offer a set of accessible—a.k.a. free—tools to those interested in creating immersive content,” he says. “After we published *The Deported*, we converted our video into a [tour](#) via screenshots.” The VR tour offers six evocative, 360-degree views of places that are important to the story, with embedded information describing various objects, histories, and people. Hernandez has published the tour for others to explore in [Poly](#), Google’s 3D object library. Tour Creator, he adds, is “an incredible tool because it offers a free option to allow people to test immersive storytelling. And it’s done by Google, which give this much more weight and validity.”

Learning to embrace VR technologies

“What we’re trying to do is learn and embrace new technology,” Hernandez says. “And here’s the thing: It depends on the story. What’s the best way we can use technologies to genuinely tell the story, and not use them as gimmicks?”

Most of the JOVRNALISM students arrive with no previous experience in journalism. Yet what they produce is “incredibly powerful, beautiful, and innovative,” Hernandez says. The VR technologies evolve just as the students do. Tour Creator, for example, has “a ton of potential,” he adds. “It’s an incredible tool because it offers a free option for people to test immersive storytelling. Google’s innovation in this space has a pivotal role in developing and growing community and industry.”

Organization Profile

The Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism is part of the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. With an enrollment of more than 2,200 students, it's a national leader in education and scholarship in the fields of communication, journalism, public diplomacy, and public relations.

Products Used



[Tour Creator](#)



[Google Poly](#)

Project Title	JOVRNALISM
Project Description	Hackathon-style course that uses emerging technologies for journalism/ non-fiction stories.

Project Development

What problem was your project designed to solve?	My class is aimed to be the R&D for the journalism industry exploring, testing, prototyping new forms of journalism with emerging technologies.
How did you secure funding for your project? How did you go about it and who did you work with?	I have gotten grants over the years tackling different aspects. One from the Knight Foundation and another from the Online News Association.

Logistics & Operations

What processes did you implement to manage the project?	<p>For the class and the project, there are a variety of different processes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We selected Deportation as the focus, which meant we went to Tijuana, MX to report and produce those stories. • We aligned with the non-profit, Al Otro Lado, to help us better understand and find diverse voices for the project. • We used a variety of hardware and, for the first time in class, relied on SGO's Mistika VR.
Tell us about the team it took to make this project happen.	This is an all-student, diverse team bringing in grads and undergrads from across the university from different majors (Film, Media Arts, Journalism, etc). It was a mix of domestic and international students, gender and ethnic backgrounds. Keep in mind that the vast majority of these students have never produced immersive content prior to taking the course... many had never produced journalism/non-fiction stories.

Measuring Success

<p>How did you define success and when?</p>	<p>There are several goals for this class/project:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bringing diverse students together to create meaningful, immersive content that helps advance the immersive medium. I think we did that on a few fronts (storytelling, innovation in illustration, etc)• A traditional metric is user and industry responses. Watching the impact – which included tears – let us know we told the story correctly. And being nominated for awards is another marker.• One goal we have is trying to make these stories more accessible... democratizing access to consumption (and creation), and this story was a solid step. This semester we are doing more.
<p>Other thoughts?</p>	<p>In this type of journalism, we don't measure success in clicks or views because it is still an emerging medium. We try to gauge genuine reaction to content by general users and the industry.</p>

Learnings

<p>What is the one thing about this project that made it such a success?</p>	<p>True diversity and collaboration elevated this project, with students that took on the responsibility to tell these human stories in a meaningful way through this new medium. Remember, they had never done this before... and what they produced is incredibly powerful, beautiful and innovative.</p>
<p>What is the one thing you would change when doing this program again?</p>	<p>I wish I had more fast-writing SD cards! The Insta360 Pro caused a tech hiccup that required us to scramble. But in all honesty, I am shocked we pulled this off... there were SO MANY OBSTACLES, yet we did it. Not only did we publish something, but it was meaningful and effective storytelling.</p>