

NBC News introduces new AR capabilities to enhance news content

NBC News is a global leader in journalism across all broadcast and digital platforms. The rapidly-growing NBC News Digital Group provides continuous content to consumers wherever they are, whenever they want it.

OPPORTUNITY

NBC News wanted to develop new, innovative visual-first video formats and capabilities for its brands. The NBC News digital team saw an opportunity to focus on one area of innovation: Augmented Reality (AR). They wanted to use AR to create graphics that would help explain and animate their content, and that were as fast and easy to produce as chyrons (the industry standard 'lower third' graphic overlays), both in the field and a studio setting.

APPROACH

To make AR more accessible, NBC News built out the technology, tested it in the field and the studio, started using it on a regular basis, and then improved it.

Looking for ways to use AR in news videos: NBC News saw the potential for AR to help its digital video teams create visually compelling, innovative formats that would draw the viewer into its programming. Yet, while AR technology was great fun to use for filters, lenses, and one-off stunts in the studio, it was hard to show any real storytelling value, especially with the high cost and technology requirements. So NBC News wanted to find a way to make AR accessible and valuable to its content producers and, more importantly, its audience.

Getting started with the technology: The streaming team spent a lot of time early on looking at ways to make AR more accessible — they wanted to create an AR setup that was easy to iterate upon, didn't require expensive 3D cameras in a studio, and didn't take a massive investment of time to learn how to use. After a lot of research, the team selected an AR platform to try. To get the most out of it, they pushed the limits of the technology and worked hard to keep abreast of new advances.

Encouraging teams to experiment: Many people across NBC News were excited about AR technology, but didn't have the time for testing. So, the team had to find people who were willing and able to experiment and learn as they went along. NBC News Now was one team who embraced the test-and-learn mentality and played around with AR a lot. For example, when they did a report about Tesla they had an AR Tesla driving across a coffee table.

Experimenting further: The team then started working with the NBC News Climate Unit, in the hope of using AR for things like in-depth analysis of climate change-related weather phenomena or 3D models of coastal erosion. The Climate Unit continues to test the technology and are heading towards integrating it into live broadcasts.

RESULTS

NBC News aimed to integrate AR technology into its digital content and increase the number of people and teams who were using the technology. Since the start of the project, the number of people experimenting with AR has been incrementally growing month over month, with more teams requesting training on how to implement AR into their own projects. **There are now several teams across the organization who have been trained on and used the technology.**

LEARNINGS

Challenge existing technologies: If the technology you are working with doesn't do exactly what you hoped, don't give up! Push boundaries or consider leveraging the technology in different ways. If you're still not achieving your ultimate goal, realign your expectations around short term objectives. Emerging technology is called that for a reason — just because it doesn't do exactly what you want it to right now, doesn't mean it never will. The solution might be available next week, next month, or next year.

Find your technology tribe: If you're looking for partners within your organization to try out new technologies with you, find small teams who genuinely want to use and invest in technology — this is especially true if you work in a large organization as not everyone will be as excited (or patient!) about technology experimentation as you. The reward of working with a smaller, technology-dedicated team will be much more long-lasting than a one-off implementation with a larger team who may not re-engage with you.

“ We saw this as a great opportunity to focus on one area of innovation — Augmented Reality — and see how we could really apply it properly to news videos, both editorially and from a production operations standpoint, rather than just 'tinker' with it on the side. ”