

An extraordinary media decade for you, me and the LSE

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Polis, LSE – a place where we can all talk about media and society

I am currently Head of the [Department of Media and Communications](#) at the LSE that celebrates its tenth anniversary on June 16th with a conference on “[New Trajectories In Media and Communications Research](#)”. These are my thoughts on those remarkable ten media years when I myself have changed my career from being a traditional journalist editing a TV news programme to a Twitter-driven professor running a media think-tank in a university.

Is the world really changing rapidly or does it just appear that way? There’s been a dizzying transformation in media and communications over the last ten years and one its biggest effects is to make everything else seem to be spinning fast, too.

When a meteorite crashed into Russia injuring 1200 people it was captured on dashboard video cameras that drivers keep rolling to avoid being blamed in an accident. The astounding images they recorded were then instantly spread around the world by ordinary citizens using social networks like Twitter or Facebook. Yet, those companies and the technology they use didn’t even exist ten years ago.

When the Syrian rebels first picked up their AK47s and RPGs to oppose President Assad they also reached for their smartphones. The footage of the innocent victims of the conflict were beamed direct to the world through YouTube and were picked up by mainstream western media. The rebels also uploaded footage of their own military efforts to encourage funding from supporters elsewhere in the Middle East. And when Israel and Hesbollah clashed in the same region, both forces took to Twitter to argue their cases in front of the world.

Look At Your Media Life

It is not just on the global stage that media has been transformed. Have a look at your own life. When did you last call anyone on a home landline? Does your five year old neice try to swipe the TV screen? Did you get in the car or on to the iPad for your last shop? And if you did get in the car recently, did you find the route on an App?

The key shift in this decade has been from an Internet that had lots of websites but not much interactivity between them. In the last ten years we have moved from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 and beyond. Put simply, hyperlinks allow us all to connect through the Internet in collaborative, connected ways. The Internet has become social.

A University like the LSE is not immune to the decade of media change. We now have a Department of Media and Communications, created in 2003 and a news media think-tank, Polis set up in 2006. Both were responses to the growing importance of media in the world.

Media Teaching Tools

New media has also been a fantastic tool for the LSE’s teaching with lectures recorded online, seminar debates extended through online forums and a world of information just a click away. The LSE is now itself a media company with people downloading hundreds of thousands of its podcasts, reading its expert blogs and following both staff and students on Twitter or through Facebook. At the same time the development of new learning platforms such as

MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) in the USA, which provide very cheap distance learning, might herald a threat to existing educational institutions.

Of course, it's not just about the Internet. We consume as much TV, radio and movies as before, it's just that we often do it with a second screen running at the same time. Increasingly we will watch and listen on mobiles – both phones and 'tablets' like the iPad. And in this last decade thanks to 'time-shifting' devices like the iPlayer or Tivo we will do it when we want.

In some regions 'Old Media' is still growing with global newspapers sales actually on the rise last year. Television viewing is still soaring as developing economies switch on. But even in poorer parts of the world, it has still been the digital decade.

African Revolutions

Take Africa. Look at how SMS is revolutionising banking with villagers using mobile phones to trade. Go to an African slum and you can see people wearing English football shirts because they can watch Premier League games featuring African footballers via satellite links. They can use the same mobile text systems to bet on the game or to decide how to vote in an election and where to get medicine.

The digital decade has not been all good news. Do you trust Mark Zuckerberg with your Facebook photos from your wild teenage years? Why are governments spending so much tracking our lives? Will a hacker bring down the banks or a terrorist bring down a fly-by-wire aircraft? More generally, is the Internet making us stupid? Have we forgotten how to read and to research? Have your Facebook friends replaced your real community?

The next decade promises even more change. New companies and gadgets will emerge. I have no idea what they will be. In the last ten years Facebook went from a garage to a \$100 billion business. Who would have guessed that a microblog that limits your posts to 140 characters would become a platform for Presidents and Popes?

Understanding Not Predication

For those of us who think that media matters the real task is not prediction but understanding. We need to distinguish between all the hype around the flashy product launches and the reality of how people use and abuse the technology in their lives. Media matters because it is a big business and a pervasive part of people's home and working lives. It also matters because it is how we know about the world. This was the decade in which media was at the heart of democracy, war, economics, sport and culture. Digital has become the catalyst for many of the forces for change.

We don't know what the next ten years will bring, but if it's anything like the last decade it is going to be fascinating finding out.

I am Head of the Department of Media and Communications which celebrates its tenth anniversary on June 16th with [a conference on "New Trajectories In Media and Communications Research"](#).

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