

# The POLIS Media Dialogues: What Is Media For? The Answers (guest-blog)

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What is it for?

The [POLIS media dialogues](#) are our main public lecture series that runs every autumn. This year it featured a wide range of media and communications practitioners talking about their work and the big issues they face. They were all asked to answer one simple question: What Is Media For? Here is a summary of the speakers' answers compiled by POLIS intern Beth Lowell.

As is so often the case with good debates, we seem to be coming away from the autumn Polis Media Dialogues Series with more questions than answers. Here are just some of the many questions raised as we look back on this season's dialogues.

Is the Media for Networking?

How does our online existence mirror our offline lives? In the first dialogue of the season Dr. Aleks Krotoski addressed the internet as a space with the potential to simultaneously connect and isolate us. Dr. Krotoski recognized the many criticisms of the internet in her discussion but argued that, at its best, the internet can form more honest and uninhibited connections than many close relationships in the offline world. However, the question remains: how much do we really know about those we interact with online?

Can we treat the internet as a place to form substantial connections? Or does it just perpetuate superficial links to strangers?

Is the Media for Peace, Love and Understanding?

Both Amit Segal of Israel's Channel 2 news and journalist, blogger, and social commentator Faisal J. Abbas answered this question with a resounding "no" in their dialogue. However, over the course of their discussion a more divisive debate over the role of the audience emerged. Is the role of media to satisfy their audience? Segal in particular seemed to argue that in order to separate itself from the shuffle, content cannot just present facts but rather must have an edge to entice viewers. His claims beg the question: is media success defined by popularity and viewership? Should media content choices and presentations be guided by the opinions and beliefs of its core consumers?

Is the Media for the Culture Industry?

What opportunities does the internet present for emerging artists? What obstacles does it present for the fair distribution and usage of artistic content? Former lead vocalist of The Undertones and current chief executive of UK Music Feargal Sharkey maintained that the core aim of the music industry must be to nurture new talent, a commitment that is hindered by illegal file sharing. Will new legislation aimed at decreasing illegal file sharing work? Sharkey is optimistic that it will. But less illegal downloading does not ensure consumer purchasing of legal content. Can the music industry survive in this new digital age? Is the internet a space for new talent to gain visibility or an arena for their exploitation?

Is the Media for Mobility?

How have advancements in mobile technology changed the way we live and interact? Dr. Mike Short, Vice President of Research and Development at Telefonica O2 Europe, discussed the innovative industry and its global impact. Are all advancements in the field a good thing? Unsurprisingly, Dr. Short is an avid proponent of advancements in his field but audience members and respondent Dr. Damian Tambini were less convinced. During the question and answer session Dr. Short faced challenging questions like: What happened to our privacy when our phone knows and records every restaurant, theater, and landmark we've visited? Is mobile technology accentuating the gap between developed and developing nations? How does O2 confront issues where foreign legislative regulations may conflict with their commitment to their customers' privacy and freedom?

#### Is Media for Free Speech?

How can Information & Communications Technology companies protect their users' privacy and freedom of expression when these rights are threatened? Susan Morgan spoke to her audience about her attempts to help companies reconcile this conflict of loyalties as the Executive Director of The Global Network Initiative. As a young institution, The Global Network Initiative still has a lot of problems to unravel before achieving this goal. How can companies confront legislation that conflicts with their commitments to users while still operating legally within the foreign jurisdiction? What standards should be used to define an infringement on users' privacy and freedom of expression?

#### Is Media for Shrinking the World?

How can digital communications facilitate more active and participatory acts of charity? Elizabeth Ford, editor of the Guardian's Kantine website, explained her projects efforts to explore this new approach to philanthropy. Her website allowed donors to view how their money was being used, track progress in Kantine, and learn more about the region's inhabitants. As with many foreign charitable endeavors the issue of perspective was raised. As a group of Western outsiders, was the Guardian team qualified to tell the story of the people of Kantine and their development? Was success defined in the same way by the people of Kantine as by the Guardian? How do initiatives such as this provide aid without impressing an unwanted Western influence?

#### Is Media for Campaigning?

What are the potential benefits and pitfalls of political use of the internet? Labour MP Stella Creasy and former Labour pollster Deborah Mattinson used their dialogue to weigh in on new media's place in UK politics. Creasy emphasized the importance of quality content, privileging the absence of online communication over inadequate initiatives. However, used correctly she identifies new media as a platform for politicians to engage voters. Mattinson focused on the adaptive methods politicians need to incorporate in order to engage voters who are generally disinterested in the specifics of politics. Can new media help politicians inform and engage voters? Will politicians ever really master the medium or do they always seem to be pushing an agenda? Can true relationships between politicians and voters be cultivated online?

#### Is Media for Celebrating Celebrity?

What is the value of celebrity journalism? Heat magazine editor Sam Delaney categorized celebrity journalism readers into three categories: snobs who pretend to be above it, morons who believe it all to be true, and the broad majority who view it as a guilty pleasure. His overall message seemed to be that the medium can have value without having to be so serious. Is there value in simple pleasure? Or is celebrity media superficial and invasive? Does celebrity journalism perpetuate all that is wrong with the celebrity obsessed modern society? Or can we just throw these questions out the window and have fun with it?

Thank you to all of the Polis Media Dialogues speakers, respondents, and audience members for participating in the series and continuously raising such pertinent, challenging questions about what media is for.

This report by POLIS Intern Beth Lowell

