

The paradoxes of global news: Polis in Athens

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When the [riots](#) kicked off here in Athens a couple of months ago, I learned a lot from the newspaper and TV coverage available from the international media like BBC and Aljazeera and a bit more from the newspapers. But it was the Internet and [YouTube](#) in particular which showed videos [critiquing](#) the official and mainstream media versions. Despite the language barrier, I ended up with a rich, [Networked Journalism](#) version of some complex events at the other end of Europe from me.

It is raining in Athens and there is a demo outside the hotel. Tonight I join various figures from the BBC, AlJazeera, and Greece's leading paper, [Kathimerini](#), to talk about the state of international news. With all the technology available, how good a job to we do of communicating the world across boundaries?

Former BBC executive Phil Harding recently wrote a report on this for Polis in respect of UK Public Sector Broadcasting, called [The Great Global SwitchOff](#) and he's with us for this event organised by the LSE Hellenic Association.

Here's the full text of my speech.

I spent 20 years as a journalist trying to connect the world. I worked in television news at the BBC and ITN's Channel 4 News. There was a strong desire in those organisations to cover international affairs well. But it was expensive and difficult to do.

I remember driving around rural Uganda with a 20 tonne truck loaded with satellite dishes and cameras when we decided to broadcast the programme live from Africa in the run-up to the 2005 G8 summit. It was an obscenely expensive and clumsy process. I particularly remember handing out pizzas to our large technical crew in front of very curious and hungry looking children in a malaria-infested village by the Nile. It was a surreal image of how difficult it is to take mainstream traditional news media to the real world. And so the consequence of that was that we would often ignore or miss foreign stories.

The mobile phone, cheap air travel and the new digital news gathering and communications technologies changed all that. I can now broadcast live from the heart of a jungle with a piece of kit not much bigger than this mobile phone. In addition, in every country in the world there are people who can send pictures and words to me for just a few dollars or cents. And you can communicate with a group of people in different places all at the same time. A few weeks ago I held an online seminar with journalists in Gaza, Darfur, New York and London. So suddenly I find myself in a world where we have moved from scarcity of information to a global glut of data and opinion.

Our research and debating work at Polis and the book based on that work is all about what happens to society and the media when that transformation takes place.

But there is a paradox at the heart of our discussions today. We now have the technology to witness everything that happens around the world, pretty much as it happens. The only thing that prevents us from knowing is indifference

or inattention. If the media chooses not to report something or we choose not to attend to those reports, then it remains a local, unknown fact. But the paradox is that while we have this global capacity we all know that is not the same as a cosmopolitan reality. The same technologies that offer us the world have also provided us with endless distractions that may stop us from thinking about the rest of the planet. We may have friends on *Facebook* but are we talking to anyone new – are we listening to different, more distant voices? Has the technology cut us off from people who are not so technologically connected? It is still too early to tell. Some research seems to show that we are making more diverse connections and discovering new sources of information. Other research shows how online communication can be both more fragmented and homogenous – we go off into more specialised groups and the general conversation tends towards the most common denominators.

Here is another paradox about the new media technologies: as the news media becomes more powerful through new technology it also becomes less powerful because the citizen can create their own news media. There has been a revolution in mainstream news markets. Look at the growth of international news channels such as Aljazeera. Look at the boom in newspaper readership in developing countries while sales plunge in countries like the UK and America. New technologies and other social and economic forces bring this about. But I believe that the most profound change is in the production of journalism itself. The citizen now has the ability to create their own media version of the world for themselves. They can create their own news and control what information they receive in ways that were impossible before. But here's yet another paradox. While the public can now communicate about their lives more easily and more widely than ever before, they still need journalism to make sense of it all. This is what I call in my book *SuperMedia*, Networked Journalism.

Networked Journalism is a bridge between the citizen and the traditional journalist. It is a combination of citizen journalism and mainstream media. It is not a dream or a hope, it is already happening. Networked Journalism is where the public can participate in every part of the journalism production process. It might be that they send in pictures. It may be that they blog and journalists link to them. It could be a contribution to a discussion forums, or perhaps they make their own videos and put them up on a site like CNN's iReport. The common element is that the work of the professional and the citizen are combined.

Media organisations no longer have a monopoly over news. The citizen can increasingly choose where they get their information and often they will get it direct. It becomes disintermediated. Which is a clever way of saying that the journalist loses their job. But the public values the functions of journalism even more. They want this tidal wave of information to be edited and filtered in a way that sorts out the good stuff from the bad. They want the information to be packaged and presented in a way that helps them work out what is useful, interesting or relevant to their lives.

But Networked Journalism is always a partnership. The journalist can't do it without the contribution from the citizen and vice versa. I believe this creates a more connected, trust-worthy journalism.

And it can cross all sorts of boundaries. Take the reporting of the Athens riots. I don't want to go into too much detail – mainly because I don't speak Greek so my information is either from English-language websites or second-hand. But it is a good example of the new ways of reporting and new ways of consuming news.

Mainstream media in the UK certainly reported the riots. Mainstream media always likes to report riots – especially in scenic locations like Athens. The better newspapers gave me some pretty good coverage – about 800 words with a couple of pictures – while the TV news showed a few minutes of picture on the main bulletins for a few days.

When I went online the picture became much more detailed, much more complex with a much greater diversity of voices and viewpoints. Now I could watch videos on YouTube which carefully analysed eyewitness accounts and showed how they differed from the police version of the events. They critiqued mainstream media coverage and gave a running commentary on micro-blogging sites like Twitter from within the centre of the disturbances. I could read passionate blogs from students at the heart of the troubles as well as the official view from international media.

The BBC and other websites linked to this diversity of coverage giving a much richer picture of what was going on. It was sometimes difficult to sort out the truth but I trust certain media brands such as the BBC and between them and the blogosphere I got a sense of the complexity behind the simple headlines about anarchists and police brutality. I think that this shows that we currently have the 'best' journalism in human history. But how long will this last?

The current economic crisis is exacerbating the structural problems that were impacting on revenues for journalism in mainstream media. At the same time, revenue from online sources was not growing fast enough to replace it. The result, made much worse by the credit crunch, has been mass redundancies and even some closures of newspapers and certainly of certain public service journalism.

The danger is that we will lose too much of our conventional journalism before we have built a networked journalism. Commercial pressures combined with short-sighted and short-term management means that we are reducing investment in journalism at exactly the moment when it needs more resource to make the transition into the online world. Both the BBC and Aljazeera have unique funding structures which mean that they are less vulnerable to these pressures. But no media organisation is immune. In the end a healthy news media is one that has strong local, national as well as international structures.

Now we can either lament this or we can be realistic. Journalism is not going to get a bail-out like General Motors. It would be wrong and a waste of money – just like the money going to General Motors.

There is too much old fashioned journalism still that simply duplicates information, that recycles news. There is too much formulaic boring journalism that repeats tired clichés and fails to get out of the newsroom. There is still too much journalism that fails to connect with the public.

And this is where you the people that we used to call the audience come in again. Not only can you contribute to the creation of journalism but I believe that in future you will be part of organisations that help sustain journalism.

Organisations such as universities, trades unions, local authorities, governments, NGOs, and above all businesses

are turning into media organisations. They are gathering and distributing news information. We are all part of those organisations, too. We are all becoming journalists whether we like it or not.

Journalists need to get out of their newsrooms and into offices, factories and homes where people live and work. They need to connect with these civil society organisations and create new business models that will create a Network of journalism.

International media organisations like the BBC are already embarking on that path. They have opened up their news production to a more networked approach to the citizen. Now they are also opening up their organisational structure to partnerships with other media groups. Former rivals are now going to share BBC resources. The BBC has also indicated that it wants to partner with society organisations to tap into their information networks. With its international reach, there is no reason why it should not connect with media and social organisations here in Greece.

This will take time and investment but it will be the networked news media that survives and that offers the best hope of greater global interaction and insight through journalism.

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