

Listen to the voices

If we don't understand how the media go about their daily business, we are less and less likely to understand and respect each other. The School is launching a new teaching, research and debate initiative called POLIS. **Roger Silverstone** explains more.

S ometime in the middle of the war in Afghanistan, during a period of intense airborne propaganda by the US forces, and not a little bombing, a blacksmith was interviewed on the BBC's Radio 4 lunchtime news programme, *World at One*. Why, he was asked, did he think all this was happening around his village? It was, he suggested, because Al Qaeda had killed many Americans and their donkeys and had destroyed some of their castles. He was not, of course, entirely wrong.

What was so significant about this man's momentary appearance on the British airwaves? We are accustomed to learning about the world from our media. Indeed the world beyond our immediate experience reaches us almost entirely on screens and speakers and in the screaming headlines of the nation's news. Yet the voices and the images that tell us how it is, how to make sense of the otherwise invisible and unintelligible, are, almost entirely, *our* voices, and the world which is reported emerges through the taken for granted

lenses of *our* regular newscasts or online reports. The blacksmith in Afghanistan, the fishermen of Sri Lanka, the dispossessed and starving in Dhafour, not only make their most significant if not their only appearance in times of great suffering and distress, but even when they do, they appear as silent. Rarely do we get to hear others interpreting *our* world, nor indeed *our* suffering.

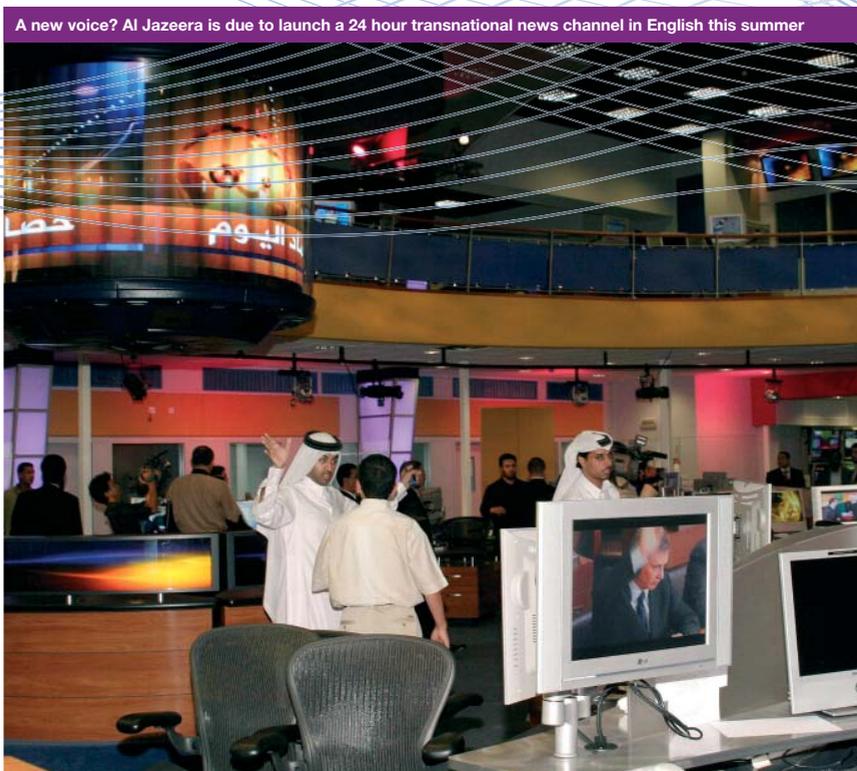
The relationships that the global media offer their readers, audiences and users, are fundamental to the way in which the world is understood and the way in which everyday life is conducted. In providing us with sequences and stories, in news and documentary, but also in drama and reality shows, the media create a blanketing culture for those who use them and, at least in the developed world, that's most of us. This is a visible and audible culture, of course, full of human beings – those like us, or claimed to be like us, as well as those who are different. And in this 24/7 mediated world, the invitation is to acknowledge and engage with all those whom we see, minute by minute. This is what news, perhaps above all, is for, after all. If

much of this passes by, mere flickering on the screen of more immediate experience, yet its presence is a constant reminder that we are not alone in the world.

It matters, then, how that world is represented. It matters if we, in our different places around the globe, are to seek ways of living with each other and of respecting each other. Another way of putting this is to suggest that the media, particularly the news media, carry a moral force. They offer the resources that human beings need both for positioning themselves and for understanding and respecting the other. And in times of significant discord and polarisation – our times – the role and significance of the news media assumes even greater moral and ethical proportions.

So how do we actually get to see, how can we really listen to, those so different from us on the other side of the planet, or even on the other side of the city?

The mediated 21st century has begun badly. The attack on the World Trade Centre, the massacre at Beslan, the torture at Abu Ghraib, the cartoons in the *Jyllands-Posten*, are events of great moment



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and impoverished humanity which, for those of us not directly involved, exist almost entirely through the media's reporting of them. Both the live and the dramatic, as well as the belated and the satiric, have opened up the great sore of the present, but have also had dramatic consequences way beyond the media's own representation of them. On the basis of what has been seen and heard on the screen – and then not always actually heard and seen, but sometimes only heard about – positions have been taken, judgements made both by those in power as well as by the rest of us, the men and the women in the street. And lives have been lost. Offence has been taken. Evil has been identified. Responsibility has been acknowledged or, just as often, denied.

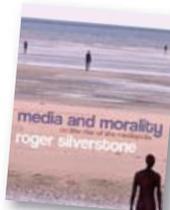
The mediated 21st century is also, nevertheless, seeing a sea change in the ways in which news and current affairs appear and make their presence felt. These changes are prompted by technology. The digital revolution is beginning to take hold and news is no longer a property of the transnational media corporation or the national broadcaster. News is everywhere. Online. On-mobile. On-PDA. And it is no longer singular. It is increasingly becoming a shareable product, with alternative sources and interactive content. While its status as a moral force remains, for news by definition involves judgements about the world, it is far from clear whether its increasingly diversified future will reinforce or challenge its centrality to the human condition, and whether that condition as a consequence will become less or more tolerant and hospitable to the strange, the difficult and the threatening.

There is, however, one new initiative that might, or perhaps should, make a difference. The Qatari based television station Al Jazeera launches its 24 hour transnational news channel in English this summer. For the first time, western audiences will have a systematic opportunity to see and listen to the non-western interpretation of our world as well as their own. This is the voice of the Afghan blacksmith writ large, very large. And it is reasonable to suppose that even if not many of us actually watch it on a regular basis, or even at all, its very presence will shift the economy and culture of western media in significant ways and, I would hope, for the better. ■



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A cyber café in Bangalore

PAUL SMITH/PANOS PICTURES

POLIS



MEDIA@LSE
Department of Media and Communications

POLIS is a new journalism initiative, launched in 2006, between LSE's Department of Media and Communications and the University of the Arts London/London College of Communication (LCC).



The then Home Secretary, the Rt Hon Charles Clarke MP, officially opened POLIS with a lecture on 'The News We Deserve'.

Charlie Beckett has been appointed as POLIS director, beginning on 1 June. He was most recently programme editor for Jon Snow's Channel 4 News at ITN in London. Before that he spent ten years working across a range of BBC news and current affairs programmes.

He began his career as a local journalist in south London before joining London Weekend Television (LWT). He was a Reuters Fellow at Green College Oxford, researching digitalisation and the developing world, and has won various awards for film-making and programme editing.

POLIS core activities are:

- public lectures, 'Chatham House' style seminars, and open debates on the changing role of news media and the challenges that they face, leading to a series of publications reporting on the debates and making specific policy interventions
- postgraduate teaching and short courses based at LCC, including a jointly taught master's programme geared towards mid-career UK and international journalists
- media research, with POLIS researchers based at LSE, and working with LCC faculty and practising journalists in London and worldwide

The POLIS advisory board comprises chair Will Wyatt, ex BBC, president of the Royal Television Society; Bronwyn Curtis, Bloomberg; Philip Gould (Baron Gould of Brookwood); Clive Jones, ITV News; Anne Lapping, Brook Lapping; Sir Peter Stothard, formerly editor of *The Times* and now of the *Times Literary Supplement*; and Michael Oreskes, editor in chief, *International Herald Tribune*.

To apply for short courses beginning in autumn 2006, see www.lse.ac.uk/collections/media@lse/Polis.htm