

# New Media, Old News: Journalism & Democracy in the Digital Age

## Liberal Dreams and the Internet

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[p. 102 ↓ ]

# Chapter Six: Liberal Dreams and the Internet

James Curran and Tamara Witschge

## Introduction

The international public sphere is now regularly referred to as something that actually exists (for example, Volkmer, 2003; Bohman, 2004; Calhoun, 2004).<sup>1</sup> It is invested with almost the same sense of reality as the World Trade Organization and the International Criminal Court. All are supposedly integral parts of the new global polity.

By 'international public sphere', most critical theorists intend more than just a synonym for international civil society in which organized groups seek to exert public influence on a transnational basis (something that dates back to at least the late eighteenth century when campaigns were mounted in Britain, France and America against the slave trade). What leading critical analysts like Nancy Fraser (2007) have in mind when they refer to the international public sphere (though they do not all agree)<sup>2</sup> is something more recent, and also less concerted: the bringing together of individual citizens and informal networks through interconnected global webs of public communication and dialogue. This is giving rise, they argue, to the creation of a new popular force in the form of *international public opinion* which is influencing both public and private structures of power.

The international public sphere has supposedly come into being as a consequence of multiple globalizing influences, including the growth of international social movements, the expansion of global markets, the increase of migration and foreign tourism, the development of global governance, and the communications revolution. This last development tends to be emphasized in particular because it is thought to be

bringing the world closer together, and enhancing international communication and understanding. Satellite transmission, global telecommunications networks and cheap air travel, it is argued, reduce both distance and time; international news agencies wholesale the same news across continents; [p. 103 ↓ ] the global integration of media markets is promoting the consumption of the same media; and the rise of the internet is fostering interactive dialogue between nations.

All these different developments are allegedly forging a new cultural geography. Circuits of communication, patterns of public discourse, and the lineaments of imaginary life are all bursting out of the 'container' of the nation, and providing the basis for generating new global solidarities, shared concerns and common positions. These underpin, we are told, the emergence of international public opinion and 'global norms'.

In brief, the international public sphere is widely proclaimed to exist. It is said to be the product of globalizing tendencies, especially in the realm of communication. And it is bringing into being a powerful constituency of world citizenry.

## Wistful Projection

Despite its mandarin eloquence, this critical theorizing has little connection to empirically grounded reality. The international public sphere does not exist, save in an embryonic - or at best, nascent - form.

This is partly because communication about public affairs has not been properly 'globalized'. The most important source of news in much of the developed world is still television. Thus, in Britain, 65 per cent said in 2006 that television was their main source of news, compared with just 6 per cent who cited the internet (Office of Communications (Ofcom) 2007a: 17; see also Freedman, this volume). Yet, television is oriented primarily towards national and local affairs, even if it also reports events from faraway places. Even in internationalist Finland and Denmark, domestic news accounts for around 70 per cent of their principal TV channels' main news programme content, while in the United States it accounts for 80 per cent (Curran et al., 2009). The same study found that foreign TV news tends to focus on parts of the world where the home nation has a connection. This is part of a broader process of 'domestication', in which

foreign news tends to be interpreted selectively in accordance with the political culture, national interest and collective memory of the country where the news is shown (Hafez, 2007; Lee et al., 2005). Understanding of the world is still filtered through a national prism.

It is sometimes claimed that the internet is overturning this because it transcends place, and makes available a vast, shared storehouse of public information. However, the internet is used primarily for entertainment, correspondence and practical aid rather than for news and political information (Ofcom 2007b: 90; Hill and Hughes, 1998). The [p. 104 ↓ ] most visited *news* websites, as in Britain and the USA, are the websites of the dominant national news organizations (Ofcom 2007a; McChesney, 2008), which tend to have national news priorities. Nationalist cultures can also influence online interactions, as in Trinidad (Miller and Slater, 2000). Above all, the great majority of the world's population do not have access to the internet (Van Dijk, 2005).

While global consumption of the same media content is increasing, this trend is very much more pronounced in relation to screen drama and music than it is to news. Transnational satellite news channels like CNN have tiny audiences in most countries, indeed often so small as to be difficult to measure (Hafez, 2007). The trend towards global media convergence is also very uneven. The two most populous countries in the world - China and India - are in media terms still largely 'self-sufficient' (something that they have in common with the USA, which also has low media imports) (Tunstall, 2008). In addition, people in different parts of the world also tend to make sense of the same media content in different ways, as a consequence of the different national cultural and sub-cultural discourses that they draw upon (Tomlinson, 1999).

More generally, the world is divided and fragmented in ways that impede the development of global norms and public opinion. While EFL (English as a foreign language) is emerging as the shared language of elites, it is incomprehensible to most people. Chinese, not English, is in fact the language understood by the largest number of people in the world. The development of global consensus is impeded also by divergent cultures, values, economic interests, and affiliations. Indeed, empirical research tends to affirm the geographically confined rather than international nature of most people's primary orientation (for example, Couldry et al., 2007).

Yet if the global public sphere does not yet exist, it is much to be desired. Elected national governments have diminished control over their economies (Panitch and Leys, 1999). Yet, global financial markets, transnational corporations and the evolving system of global governance remain insufficiently accountable to the public (Sklair, 2002; Stiglitz, 2002). A number of responses to this democratic deficit are available.<sup>3</sup> One of these is to develop a communicative space between nations in which international civil society and international opinion become a growing political force, facilitating the reassertion of public influence in a globalized world.

This is why the subject of this chapter - an e-zine (website magazine) called *openDemocracy* - has an interest extending beyond its seeming significance. It is one of a number of new ventures that are using the web as the means of publishing international journalism. In the process, they are contributing to the creation of an international public sphere.

[p. 105 ↓ ]

This study thus differs from the preceding two chapters which are concerned with the internet's influence on news-making within dominant news organizations in the UK. Here the focus of enquiry is on the internet's potential to support a different kind of journalism that crosses national frontiers.

## Tufnell Park Phoenix

*openDemocracy* was originally conceived as a networking facility for British activists campaigning for constitutional reform. It then dawned on public intellectual and activist, Anthony Barnett, that the internet made possible something more ambitious - the launch of a virtual magazine of politics and culture - with only a limited outlay. He established a launch team of four (only one of whom was paid initially) in his garage in north London's Tufnell Park, created a wider network of volunteers<sup>4</sup> and, with some difficulty, secured small grants from charities and gifts from well-wishers, totalling almost £100,000.

When *openDemocracy* was launched in May 2001 as a 'pilot' project, it got off to a slow start. While it was free, and hosted some good writing, the e-zine remained virtually

unknown. It had no promotional budget, and gained almost no media attention during its launch. Average weekly visits to its website in May-June, 2001 averaged a mere 1,750.5 The new venture seemed destined to be yet another rags-to-bankruptcy failure that as feature prominently in the history of alternative media (Fountain, 1988; Downing, 2001; Coyer et al., 2007).

An unmistakable watermark of Britishness also permeated *openDemocracy's* early content. The magazine's office was in London; all its paid employees were British; and their contacts tended to be home-based. However, the magazine aimed from the outset to be international, and to cover globalization issues. It was geared, therefore, to respond to an international event.

The September 11 attack saved the magazine, and altered its editorial trajectory. Todd Gitlin, the volunteer 'North America editor', posted on September 12 an impassioned article in *openDemocracy* urging his country to respond in a restrained way, with 'a focused military response - a precise one, not a revenge spasm'. Citing Hannah Arendt's dictum that 'violence happens when politics fails', he emphasized that the United States should not become involved in an indiscriminate jihad (Gitlin, 2001). Gitlin's article was accompanied by other instant responses, including contributions from Muslim Pakistan, commissioned by the home team working on an emergency basis in London.

[p. 106 ↓ ]

*Table 6.1 Average monthly visits to openDemocracy*

2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
30,000	60,000	196,000	105,000	441,000	233,000	179,000	224,000

Sources: The magazine's archives were dispersed, and largely discarded, when it moved offices several times during a period of growing financial difficulty. Consequently, figures for monthly visits relate to different months of the year, rather than strictly comparable periods, as follow: Sept–October, 2001 and 2002 (openDemocracy Board Meeting Statistics Report, 2002); November–December 2003 (openDemocracy Site Statistics since 2001), October–December 2004 and 2005 (openDemocracy 2005–06: Progress Report); July–December 2006, January–December 2007, Jan–May 2008 (Google Analytics).

This orchestration of an immediate, international debate about the implications of September 11 caused the magazine's audience to grow. Weekly visits to its website of around 2,000 before September 11 rose to over 8,000 in September–October, and to over 12,000 in November 2001.<sup>6</sup> Many of the magazine's new readers lived outside

Britain. Indeed, by April 2002, the magazine's largest national contingent of visitors was American (44 per cent), while continental Europe (excluding the UK) accounted for a further 20 per cent.<sup>7</sup>

In effect, a growing international audience discovered the website. This raised the magazine's status and made sizeable grants, especially from American charitable trusts, much easier to obtain. This in turn increased the magazine's resources, enabling it to attract still more visitors. *openDemocracy* was re-launched, with increased staff and a broader range of content, in November 2002. Its post-launch audience was double that in the aftermath of September 11. Website visits increased still more in 2004, and soared to 441,000 a month in 2005. *openDemocracy's* audience contracted subsequently as it entered a period of economic crisis. Even so, it was still receiving a respectable 224,000 visits a month in 2008 (see [Table 6.1](#)).

A number of influences - which we will consider shortly - shaped the magazine. But it is worth stressing here that a global event, and a global technology, proved to be the making of *openDemocracy*. The magazine won a new audience, because its web-based accessibility enabled people from around the world to connect to a global debate about key issues in the aftermath of September 11.

## Global Conversations

In line with the increasingly international nature of its audience, the magazine's editorial agenda also became more international. By 2002, its three most prominent debates were about the impact of globalization, the use and abuse of American power around the world, and the character of **[p. 107 ↓ ]** Islam (a discussion that tended to emphasize its pluralism). As the magazine developed, the topics it covered extended across a widening spectrum of international themes from the politics of climate change and the regulation of global markets (long before the crash) to the future of multiculturalism and the impact of migration. The countries featured in the magazine also widened. In January-July 2008, for example, 69 articles published on three themes - globalization, democracy and power, and conflicts - covered 26 nations.



The magazine also recruited more contributors from outside Britain. In a sample of 134 articles, published in January-July 2008, authors came from 33 countries spanning five continents. Even well before then, authors were drawn, seemingly, from different backgrounds, persuasions and social networks (including different sectors of civil society). Foreign ministers and Third World activists, famous authors (like John Le Carré) and unknown journalists, business leaders and trade union organizers, public officials and poets, accountants and artists mingled, clashed and conciliated on its pages. Contributors also wrote from conservative, liberal, socialist, green and feminist positions. These manifold contributors reached a far-flung audience. In mid-2006 to 2008, visitors to the *openDemocracy* website came from 229 countries and territories, ranging from Albania to Ecuador (this last country generating 1,262 visits during this period).<sup>8</sup>

The e-zine also sought to further mutual understanding by the way in which it developed discussion through commissioned articles. In its early years, *openDemocracy* gave extensive space to set-piece debates from opposed positions on a major issue. These duels (for example, Hirst versus Held over the nature of globalization (Hirst and Held, 2002)) were usually evidence-based and deliberative, and were followed by discussion that generally became less polarized after ‘seconds’ had packed away their duelling pistols, and others joined in the debate. This format gave way increasingly over time to a less confrontational one in which authors offered different interpretations and responses to a common theme, such as the struggle for effective democracy in different parts of the world (for example, McGurk, 2006; Alavi, 2007).

This approach was overlaid in turn by a more event-driven rather than issue-driven format in which authoritatively voiced, ‘balanced’ contributions were published in relation to topics and places in the news. This placed the reader in the more subaltern position of being briefed, rather than, as before, being tacitly invited to arbitrate between opposed positions. But sometimes, the views of external experts on specific countries were challenged or supplemented by contributions from people in these countries (as in the case of China, Iraq, Kenya, Peru, Turkey, Russia and India) who offered different perspectives and sources of knowledge (such as in the case of the Tibet protests in 2008).<sup>9</sup>

[p. 108 ↓ ]

The magazine's topical journalism also tended to be interpretive, and framed in terms of a wider context, rather than a record of discrete events in the tradition of conventional reporting. Alongside these threads of analytical debate and interpretation were also articles that invited a sense of solidarity, for example with women working in Asian 'sweatshops' (Khan, 2004) or migrants on an epic journey from Burundi destined for a cold reception in the west (Moorehead, 2003). These appeals to solidarity based on empathy were supplemented by those based on affinity, typified by two, early evocative articles celebrating a similar love of neighbourhood in Britain and the Czech Republic respectively (Baird, 2001; Pospisil, 2001).

In short, the e-zine appeared to be assisting people of different nations, backgrounds and opinions to come together to discuss issues of common concern, and to understand these better through informed debate, while at the same fostering, at an emotional level, mutual understanding and a sense of togetherness. It thus seemed - at least at first glance - to be in the vanguard of building a better, more enlightened world through the use of the internet. In the eloquent words of the magazine itself: 'We aim to ensure that marginalized views and voices are heard. We believe facilitating argument and understanding across geographical boundaries is vital to preventing injustice'.<sup>10</sup>

But while this self-conception is partly true, it contains also an element of delusion. In reality, the debate staged by *openDemocracy* was distorted by the external context in which it operated.

## Global Inequality

In the late 1990s, the richest fifth of the world's population had 86 per cent of the world's GDP, while the poorest fifth had just 1 per cent (United Nations Development Programme, 2003: 425) - an enormous disparity that has broadly persisted (United Nations, 2006). This disparity is reproduced as a structure of access to the internet, with the world's poor being largely excluded. Their voice is muted, and their participation limited, by poverty. This is illustrated by the fact that the entire continent of Africa hosted fewer websites than London in 2000 (Castells, 2001: 264). Economic inequality

is associated with other forms of inequality, in terms of access to education, the acquisition of knowledge, language and communication skills, and links to global social networks. Poverty is associated, in other words, with diminished cultural and social capital. This puts the poor at a disadvantage compared with the affluent, who have greater resources and cultural competences at their disposal. The world's poor tend to be disadvantaged also by linguistic inequality. The population of Marathi-speaking India, for example, greatly exceeds that [p. 109 ↓] of Britain: yet an article in Marathi, however eloquent, will be understood by many fewer people in the world than one written in English.

So when *openDemocracy* sought to 'ensure that marginalized views and voices are heard', it set itself an enormously difficult task, especially for a magazine based in London, with limited resources, publishing only in English. How, then, did it respond to this challenge?

Its first strategic decision was to invest minimal resources in translation. Unlike an interesting offshoot, *China Dialogue*, the e-zine translated only a tiny number of articles into English. It thus excluded, in terms of contributions, most of the non English-speaking world.

The magazine also raised a further barrier against the 'marginalized' by insisting on a high level of 'quality', usually defined in terms of clarity and eloquence of expression, insight and intelligence, and the appropriate marshalling of evidence. The threshold level of quality was high, with novelists like Salman Rushdie (for example, 2005) turning an elegant phrase, and the American philosopher, Richard Rorty (2004) offering intellectual firepower, and a legion of more frequent contributors from the sharply perceptive academic, Paul Rogers (for example, 2006), to the eloquent journalist, Caroline Moorehead (for example, 2003) setting a consistently high standard. Judged by these standards, the marginalized tended to be found wanting. As one senior *openDemocracy* journalist put it,<sup>11</sup> 'It is hard to find those people - you know, southern voices - without sounding too bad, writing well'.

Finding globally marginalized voices takes time, the cultivation of an extended network of contacts, and sensitive support for inexperienced writers. This did happen, to some extent, especially during *open Democracy's* most affluent years (2003–4),

when clumsily written articles, in general, were heavily edited and when, on occasion, contributions were ghostwritten on the basis of interviews. However, the e-zine adopted a more topical editorial agenda, and accelerated the cycle of production, in 2005. Severe budget cuts were also made in 2005, and in subsequent years. This had the cumulative effect of speeding up the editorial process, increasing the volume of editorial output, and reducing the time and people available. Staff responded by relying on a coping mechanism: turning to predictable sources of good copy that tended not to include 'southern voices'.

This conjunction of global inequality, knowledge-based and stylistic definitions of editorial quality, and limited resources/time, had an entirely predictable result: a dialogue about the world in which one part of the world did most of the talking as well as most of the listening (see [Table 6.2](#)).

In the first half of 2008, 71 per cent of contributors came from Europe and the Americas. The poverty-stricken continent of Africa contributed a mere 5 per cent, and distant Oceania only 1 per cent, of authors. While *openDemocracy* did host, as it claimed, a dialogue across national frontiers, [p. 110 ↓] this primarily took the form of people in the affluent north-western hemisphere talking about the rest of the world. Those whose first language was English also dominated. Americans and Canadians accounted for 90 per cent of article writers from the Americas, while the British constituted 62 per cent of writers from Europe.

*Table 6.2 Geographical distribution of openDemocracy authors and audience*

Continent	Europe	Americas	Asia	Oceania	Africa	Unidentified
Percentage of total						
Authors <sup>1</sup>	61	10	16	1	5	6
Visitors <sup>2</sup>	46	40	9	4	2	-

(1) Analysis of authors (N:102) is based on a sample of 25 articles on the three main themes 'globalization', 'democracy and power' and 'conflicts', and all articles on the other themes published in *openDemocracy* between 1 January and 10 July 2008 (a total of 134 articles). Biographical details about the authors were derived from the *openDemocracy* website, and the World Wide Web.

(2) Analysis of visitors is derived from Google analytics, and relates to the period June 2006-June 2008 (total number of visits during this time was 4,777,919, with a total of 3,093,096 unique visitors).

Note: all percentages have been rounded off to the nearest whole figure.

The geographical distribution of contributors was broadly similar to that of visitors. The e-zine had an international audience, with the United Kingdom generating only 24 per cent of total visits to the website. However, most of the remainder were concentrated

in the affluent, English or EFL-speaking part of the northern hemisphere, with North America and Europe accounting for 83 per cent of website visits in 2006–8.

## Social Inequality

If the external context influenced which national citizens wrote for *openDemocracy*, it also affected who *within* nations were invited to write. The disposition of knowledge, communication skills and time is unequal. This encouraged the e-zine to turn to the accredited rather than the marginalized, the expert rather than the ordinary citizen.

The first port of call was academics because they possessed specialist knowledge, flexible working hours and, as public salaried workers, would write for free. To use them was to take advantage of a hidden public subsidy. However, they also posed a problem because many academics have become accustomed to writing for specialist knowledge communities with a shared vocabulary and referential (a typical academic word) understanding, and are consequently unused to communicating with a public audience. The e-zine got round this problem in two [p. 111 ↓] ways: by investing considerable resources in sub-editing clunking academic prose (sometimes in a broken EFL form), and by developing a repertory of academics who were adept at public writing, and who were invited to write frequently. The second group the e-zine turned to were journalists and professional writers, usually with a special area of knowledge. Their attraction was that they tended to write well, and fast: their disadvantage was that they generally expected to be paid. The third group were people from the world of politics, especially public and NGO officials and civil society activists. However, *openDemocracy* staff—especially more senior ones—tended to be sharply critical of this last group's efforts, complaining that they were inclined to get 'bogged down in detail', to 'fight micro turf wars', to 'fail to see the big picture', and to offer a 'poor journalistic product'.<sup>12</sup> Rival e-zines were also criticized for being ready to publish 'NGO public relation stories'.

Table 6.3 Occupation of *openDemocracy* Authors<sup>1</sup>

Occupation	Academic	Journalist	Writer	Civil Society/ Activist	Politician/ Lawyer	Unknown
Percentage of total	48	20	10	14	3	4

(1) Sample 134 articles published by 103 contributors from 1 January to 10 July 2008.

This congruence of influences had, again, predictable results. In the first half of 2008, eight out of ten openDemocracy authors were academics, journalists, or writers. Activists and those employed by civil society organizations generated only 14 per cent of contributors (see [Table 6.3](#)).

There is another significant way in which the external context influenced the editorial content of *openDemocracy*. While gender inequality has lessened, it is still manifested in multiple forms, from the distribution of life chances to pensions (for example, Strauss, 2006). The norms of traditional gender differentiation, ordaining that women should take the primary role in the home and the man the primary role in the economy and public life, have left a residual cultural legacy even though the economic division of labour on which this differentiation was based has been transformed. In Britain, for example, this contributes to a situation where women have long paid less attention to ‘public affairs’ in newspapers than men (Curran and Seaton, 2009), and where women still constitute only 20 per cent of MPs in the UK (Fawcett Society, 2005).

This gendered inheritance left a strong imprint on *openDemocracy*. Women writers were well represented in sections devoted to ‘women and power’, and ‘arts and culture’, but under-represented in the political sections (see [Table 6.4](#)). Feminist pressure within the office led to the establishment of the 50:50 section, ‘a series of editorial projects designed to make *openDemocracy* a current affairs forum which is written, read [p. 112 ↓ ] and used equally by women and men’. But in 2008, 72 per cent of the e-zine’s contributions were still written by men.

*Table 6.4 Relative gender distribution of openDemocracy articles (as percentage of total per theme (1 January-10 July 2008)1*

Theme	Women/ Power	Arts/ Culture	Globaliz- ation	Democracy/ Power	Conflicts	Faith/ Ideas	Other	TOTAL
Men	32	42	64	84	92	80	75	72
Women	68	58	36	16	8	20	25	28

(1) Sample 134 articles.

The geographical, class and gender imbalance of article authors might have been redressed through the interactive dynamics of the e-zine. However, discussion forums were developed as a separate space within the website, and had a semi-detached relationship to its editorial content. One senior editorial executive confessed to ‘rarely’

looking at these forums during the period 2005–6. When users' comments were published below articles from 2007 onwards, there were relatively few of them. Even the most discussed article on the site in the first half of 2008 attracted just 36 responses.

In brief, the e-zine aimed to bring into play different perspectives, including marginalized ones, in order to foster international understanding. But in reality, it orchestrated predominantly elite, male contributions from the richest part of the world. Even so, the quality and intelligence of its articles, and its departure from a narrowly national perspective, makes this e-zine especially significant in the field of online journalism (see also Redden and Witschge, this volume).

## Cultures of Production

If the external context strongly influenced the content of the e-zine, other factors also played a part. Thus, charitable funding exerted an influence, not directly on editorial policy but indirectly on strategy and personnel (with some changes linked to new pitches for grants). Stormy office politics also had an effect, contributing to the introduction of new topics and the exodus of some staff. The social and cultural networks that fed into the e-zine left an imprint: for example, a seminar series on 'Town and Country' at Birkbeck, University of London was a key recruiting ground of *openDemocracy* writers, including two out of its three editors. To focus on the alleged determining influence of new communications technology, as some studies do (for example, Stratton, 1997), is to overlook the range of influences that shape the use to which new technology is put.

[p. 113 ↓ ]

Due to the limited space available, attention will be focused mainly on one of these influences here - the evolving 'culture of production'. Three distinct cultural regimes can be identified, though in reality each new regime incorporated elements from the past, and also had a continued 'life' after it had ended.

The first culture that shaped *openDemocracy* was primarily that of a political magazine but it changed over time by absorbing other inputs. The founding editor, Anthony

Barnett (2001–5), was a charismatic man of letters and politics, who had been on the editorial board of the leading radical journal, *New Left Review*, written a number of books (including *Iron Britannia*), directed an influential constitutional reform group, Charter 88, and been a freelance journalist. The people he recruited to establish the e-zine were the founder of an experimental theatre group, a film-maker and a former college lecturer. The enlarged team at *openDemocracy* recruited people from still more diverse backgrounds, including international civil society activism and corporate business.

This heterogeneity bred innovation, something that was fostered also by the horizontal management structure of the organization, and the early ceding of considerable autonomy to different sections ('themes') which were allowed to develop in divergent ways. In 2001, *openDemocracy* was a print magazine in virtual drag: a cross between the *New Statesman* and *Encounter* (a political and literary belles-lettres magazine that had died in 1990). It even had numbered issues like a conventional print publication. Over the next four years, *openDemocracy* evolved into something that was original and different. Articles broke free from a common template, and came to vary enormously in length (some running to 5000 words or more). Parts of the e-zine were like entering a university symposium, with academics sparring with each other. One part was like entering an art exhibition with images rendered luminous by the light of the computer screen (for example, Robins, 2003). Still another resembled the 'comment' section of a broadsheet paper. Yet another was like entering a rowdy political meeting, especially in the run-up to the Iraq war, when an *openDemocracy* discussion forum took off. Other parts of the website synthesized diverse influences, as in the case of a remarkable series of articles on the different significations of hair as a source of beauty and fear, fetish and protest, universalism and localism, accompanied by a collage of visual images and quotations (the latter derived from poems, pop songs, sacred texts, novels and plays) (for example, Ossman, 2002; Dikötter, 2002). In a quiet corner, there was a quirky series of short articles on untranslatable words, illuminating the interior life of different languages and cultures, from Albanian to Japanese (for example, Kushova, 2004; Kamouchi, 2004). And all the time, the e-zine was evolving into a more cosmopolitan form, with more inputs from non-British writers. By the end of 2004, *openDemocracy* had ceased to be a replica political weekly, and had come [p. 114 ↓ ] to resemble only itself. It was a hybrid, drawing on different cultural forms - print



journalism, photo-journalism, art installation, book, academic seminar and political meeting. It was like a caravanserai, laden with goods from different origins, travelling to an unknown destination.

The new editorial regime of Isabel Hilton (2005–7) imposed a culture of broadsheet newspaper journalism. Hilton was an assured, successful and clever journalist who had been a distinguished foreign correspondent, book author and BBC radio presenter. The talkative, decentralized, experimental and sometimes disorganized nature of the e-zine, in its first manifestation, was utterly different from the routine-driven, streamlined structures of professional journalism. She immediately set about embedding the disciplines, and conventions, of Fleet Street. A centralized structure of control was established, based on daily morning editorial conferences (as in a newspaper office). Staff members were instructed to listen to the radio news and read newspapers before these conferences so that they had something ‘useful’ to contribute. The editorial agenda of the website shifted from being issue-driven to being news-driven, and became more oriented towards the pre-scheduled events and cycles of the political calendar. Articles were published at a shorter, more consistent length, with few being allowed to exceed 1,200 words in line with British newspaper convention. Article output rose, shifting from a weekly to daily cycle of production. The composition of contributors also changed, with more professional journalists being used.

What emerged from this reincarnation was something much closer to the traditional linotype culture of print. The re-invented e-zine had greater quality control (with fewer weak articles). It was better written, more topical, and less eclectic. It was less cerebral, making fewer demands on the user. It was also less different from the mainstream media, less quirky and less original. In part, this was a consequence of the steep decline of the arts and culture section where budget cuts fell with disproportionate severity. But the website also innovated during this period, with the development of podcasts, and with the recruitment of good contributors from China and Latin America. Isabel Hilton had a difficult task in taking over a project with a greatly reduced budget. She re-stabilized the magazine, at a time of crisis, and reversed a precipitous decline of site visits.

The third reinvention of *openDemocracy* occurred under the editorship of Tony Curzon Price (2007-). He was constrained by still further budget cuts, and a skeletal (and

shrinking) staff. But he brought with him a Californian, communitarian culture that offered potentially a new lease of life for the e-zine. Curzon Price had been a pilgrim to Silicon Valley, where he had worked as an internet entrepreneur during 2001–4. He took charge of an e-zine with a relatively low level of user interaction and [p. 115 ↓ ] one of his first steps was to symbolically relocate readers' comments beside the relevant article rather than in a separate space. A desire to forge an *openDemocracy* user-generating community not unlike that of *Slashdot*, though of a more diverse kind, led to the imaginative decision to establish an 'Ideas Forum' in 2008. A hundred people were invited - on the basis of their past significant contributions to the magazine - to participate online in proposing and discussing ideas for articles, and the selection of suitable authors. This went far beyond the very small group of mostly British external editors that Anthony Barnett recruited in the pilot phase of the magazine. It also went beyond the building up of a team of interns and volunteers (some operating from abroad) who had come to play a significant role in the administration, sub-editing and publishing of the e-zine. In effect, Curzon Price was seeking to use net technology to facilitate editorial commissioning as a collaborative process (while retaining final control to ensure quality). He was thus attempting to harness the network energy to be found in other web-based projects by 'wikifying' a central aspect of *openDemocracy*. Whether this will succeed or not, it is too early to say. But it represents a departure shaped by a communitarian culture different from the more hierarchical ethos of the previous editorial regime.

Yet even though all three editors drew upon divergent cultures to take the magazine in different directions, they have also in certain respects been similar. All three have elite educational backgrounds (with degrees respectively from Cambridge, Edinburgh and Oxford Universities, and, in the case of Tony Curzon Price, a doctorate from London University). The people they recruited tended to come from similar backgrounds (the small staff of *openDemocracy*, in mid 2008 for example, included people with degrees from Yale and McGill Universities). This shared educational background predisposed the e-zine, under all three regimes, to look for certain kinds of article - critically independent (whether on the right or left), evidence-based, and analytical.

Above all, at the very heart of the magazine, there has been a shared commitment to some version of internationalist humanism. All the central figures in the magazine, in its different phases - including the long-serving, influential deputy editor, David

Hayes - have believed in the importance of being respectful to other cultures; of getting people in different countries to speak for themselves rather than be spoken for; and of developing a reciprocal exchange based on a relationship of equality. The investment made in improving foreign writers' copy through subediting was partly borne out of a desire to foster discursive equality between nations. Facilitating international dialogue as a way of promoting greater understanding has been the central *telos* of the magazine in all its incarnations (whatever its limitations in practice).

[p. 116 ↓ ]

## Technology and Money

The economics of *openDemocracy* has also been central to its development. Indeed, its history underlines the point that web-publishing - beyond the modest blog - is far from 'free'.

The internet lowers costs by transferring print and reproduction costs to the user. It opens up market access by bypassing wholesalers and retailers (the last a major obstacle to minority magazines unless their distribution is protected in law, as in France and Greece). The global reach of the internet also makes new kinds of ventures possible through the aggregation of minority audiences in different countries (producing a situation that is analogous to art house film production). *openDemocracy* benefited from all of these advantages - lower costs, enhanced market access, and global aggregation.

But the e-zine still had to spend money. Its largest outlays were on the salaries of staff to commission, subedit, and publish (i.e. code, lay-out and present) content, and to administer its business; payments to contributors; and office overheads. In addition, it had miscellaneous calls on its budget, for example £120,000 on website design and redesign in its first three years (and on the commissioning of a less labour-intensive website, in the subsequent period). The e-zine in fact cut a number of corners. It spent little money on promotion and translation; paid its editorial staff low salaries, and developed a network of volunteer and intern labour. Even so, it spent around £4.35 million in 2001–8.14 Part of this outlay was admittedly misspent, since it was

directed towards generating income that failed to materialize. But a significant part of *openDemocracy's* expenditure was unavoidable, given what it set out to do.

The real obstacle to net publishing lies on the revenue side. The world wide web was given as a free gift to the world in order to foster interconnection and the open accessing of knowledge (Berners-Lee, 2000). This legacy was supported by workers within the computer industry (Weber, 2004), and reluctantly embraced by large media corporations, nearly all of whom now provide free access to their online news sites (partly in a bid to protect their offline business). Users have thus become accustomed to *not* paying for web-based press content.

This made it impossible for *openDemocracy* to charge a website entry fee. Its audience, though substantial, was too small in relative terms to generate substantial advertising. The e-zine's lofty humanism was not like an urgent humanitarian cause or a passionate partisan commitment propelling sympathisers to reach for their credit cards. Yet, the e-zine made an undertaking to the Ford Foundation that it would seek to become self-funding when it received a \$1.6 million dollar loan. *openDemocracy* took on staff to syndicate articles, market archived articles as e-books, sell institutional [p. 117 ↓] subscriptions, solicit donations, and sell advertising. The new business personnel were expensive, and failed to raise significant revenue.

This plunged the magazine, at its peak with 24 employees, into a crisis that almost destroyed it. It received emergency charitable funding that enabled a soft landing in 2005–6. It then lurched into a near terminal crisis in 2007, after two major funders - Ford and Rockefeller - declined to help further. The magazine even moved for a time, in 2007, into the waiting room of a friendly NGO, after finding itself without an office, before eventually securing better accommodation. Its core staff dwindled to three people in 2008, with others employed in linked projects that contributed to overall overheads.

These projects included one devoted to cultivating an informed and critical dialogue about Russia funded by George Soros's Open Society Institute, and another devoted to British politics (and constitutional reform) financed by Rowntree. In effect, this development has come to represent a new funding model: the parcelling out of *openDemocracy's* website into discrete projects that appeal to different charitable trusts.

It also represents a move towards the partial Balkanization of the website into nation-centred enclaves that sits unhappily with the internationalism of the project.

Indeed, perhaps the most significant implication of this study is that the international space between commercial and state-linked media - between CNN and BBC World News, *The Economist* and Al Jazeera - is not sustained by an online revenue stream that will enable new ventures to grow and flourish. There is not a ready-made business model that will support worldwide online journalism of a kind pioneered by *openDemocracy*.

Partly for this reason, the building of an international public sphere is going to be a lot more difficult in practice than its magical realization has been in critical social theory. And, to judge from this case study, global inequalities of power and resources are likely to distort the international public sphere that will eventually emerge.

## Endnotes

1. Other synonyms for the international public sphere are the 'transnational public sphere' and 'global public sphere'.
2. For divergent socialist, radical democratic and liberal interpretations, see respectively Ugarteche (2007), Fraser (2007) and Volkmer (2003).
3. For an especially illuminating discussion, see Held et al. (1999) and Held (2004) who argue that a more democratically accountable, multi-layered system of governance is the best way to reassert public power.

[p. 118 ↓ ]

4. Both authors declare a personal interest: James Curran as an early volunteer, external 'media' co-editor with David Elstein and Todd Gitlin; and Tamara Witschge who is currently involved in the e-zine's strategic discussions. Both authors have sought to maintain, however, academic detachment in writing this essay.

5. openDemocracy Board Meeting Statistical Report, July 2001.

6. openDemocracy Board Meeting Statistical Reports, August, 2001; November 2001; December 2001.

7. openDemocracy Board Meeting Statistical Report, May 2002.

8. Source: Google analytics.

9. [http://www.opendemocracy.net/editorial\\_tags/tibet\\_2008](http://www.opendemocracy.net/editorial_tags/tibet_2008)

10. <http://www.opendemocracy.net/about>

11. Interviews were conducted with nine *openDemocracy* editorial employees, past and present. These included the e-zine's three editors, and its long-serving deputy editor, as well as junior staff. Past and present staff have not been differentiated in order to preserve anonymity.

12. These quotations are derived from interviews with senior *openDemocracy* staff.

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