



Tony Bennett

Opening up democracy

The importance of the media in society is reflected in the range of websites which tackle issues of concern to social scientists. Professor of Sociology, Tony Bennett talks to Anthony Barnett, Editor-in-Chief of *openDemocracy.net*, about its purpose and impact and finds connections between it and the Open University



Anthony Barnett

Tony: Could you say a few words first about what *openDemocracy* does and what it aspires to be? It clearly aims to fill a gap in the relationships between contemporary media and democratic political processes. Could you say what you think that gap is?

Anthony: There is nothing quite like us. In part we are a global magazine published on the web with lively, international copy, debating key issues of our time, with open forums attached. The corporate media are part of the problem for democracy today, with their sensationalist, manipulated populism. The good news is that this seems to be leading to declining circulation. Let's hope that their dumbing really is going down!

At *openDemocracy* we are for raising quality and bringing in voices from across the world and engaging people with a variety of opinions, like when we got Iraqis themselves to debate the war and then again its aftermath.

We are for democracy, obviously – and for opening it up. At its core are such key achievements as free and fair elections, freedom of expression, human rights, accountable power. There are three great causes for democrats today: to help expand democracy to the many countries that do not enjoy its core achievements; second, to work out how best to apply the principles of democracy to global institutions, so that globalisation itself can be governed in a way that is just and fair; and, thirdly, especially in countries like our own, to open up traditional democracy to participation so that it engages with life and politics stops being such a turn-off.

Tony: In what ways does *openDemocracy* aim to help this?

Anthony: We want to cover the issues, report on the many relevant stories including cultural and economic ones from around the world, encourage the imagination and educate everyone on what is really going on – and what is possible.

Knowledge, information, dialogue and exchange are essential for democracy to come alive. Imparting knowledge of other people's experiences, providing information about the dynamics of power, opening dialogue between people, countries, interests and ideas underpins the most important aspects of free speech. Democracy is also about understanding people you disagree with. We aim to offer this to the world in ways that are great to read and really engage.

Tony: Can you say a little about how *openDemocracy* got started? Who were the key initiators – and what prompted their involvement in the project? What was your role in its establishment?

Anthony: It is fair to say I initiated it and I'm sometimes called the founder. But I was one of a group of four, along with David Hayes, Paul Hilder and Susan Richards, who developed the idea for a year. We also benefited from an experienced Board who helped to guide us from the start: Jeremy Hardie, Charles Chadwyck-Healey, Laura Sandys and John Jackson. Many others have helped hugely since.

We began *openDemocracy* because we all felt that the distribution of power in the world is very unequal

and is not sustainable. We launched in May 2001. Our first progress report released ten days before the twin towers fell in New York began by saying, 'We believe that the world faces deep problems of governance and livelihood which traditional institutions and media are failing to address'. After 9/11 we tried to live up to our own words and opened a worldwide forum. Our registered readership grew from 2,400 to nearly 10,000 and for a period we published daily in a way that was unplanned. We have developed a lot since then. One weakness was that we were not journalistic enough – in the best senses of the term meaning speed, range and accessibility. We are very fortunate that Isabel Hilton has just joined us as our new Editor and is doing a tremendous job resolving this.

Tony: I know *openDemocracy* has received support from trusts like Rowtree and the Ford Foundation and that they have set some targets for you to meet. How close are you to meeting these? Can you say how many subscribers you have, how many visits you get to your website, and what you know about the international distribution of both subscribers and more occasional participants?

Anthony: Our aim is to be independent and self-sustaining. To achieve our readers need to support us. The first way we went about this was a subscription model; now we ask for supporters. Over 3,000 people currently support us financially with modest annual payments of £25 (US \$40). Our target, which we worked on with funders, is to get 40,000 supporters. Our current free membership now totals over 45,000, and all receive our content emails. We get between 100,000 and 200,000 unique visits a month. Internationally we are read in over 150 countries. We reckon that around 30 per cent of our readership and support comes from the United States, about 20 per cent from the UK, perhaps as much again from continental Europe and Ireland, about 15 per cent from Canada and Australia, and the rest from all across the rest of the world, including China.

Tony: What about contributors? Are they mainly from Britain? Or have you a broadly based network of contributors?

Anthony: A minority of both our readers and contributors are from Britain. We have a very broad spread of people who write for us, from all over the world. More than a quarter are from countries where English is not the first language. Not good enough but a promising start and the spread is growing.

Tony: I'd like to ask next about some of the key debates and campaigns that *openDemocracy* has organised. I know that my Open University colleagues Grahame Thompson and – before he moved to LSE – David Held were involved in a major debate you organised about globalisation. Why did you choose this topic? And what do you think the *openDemocracy* debate contributed to the wider dialogue?

Anthony: We launched this debate for two reasons. First, David challenged the whole 'Washington consensus' on how the world should be run. He then developed and advocates what he calls a 'Social Democratic consensus'. So his argument was exceptionally wide. It addressed one of the three great issues about the future of democracy, and it brought in politics and security as well as global development and economics. Also, it was a call to action, not just an analysis. We could use this to get responses from a wider range of people, of whom Grahame was one, across the spectrum. Now the whole argument, including David's response, is being published as a book.

Secondly, we were able to link the debate directly to the reform of the UN and the process started by Kofi Annan when he set up a High Panel to report to him. No one else has hosted so wide a debate that is both radical and practical.

Tony: And are there other key debates that come to mind where you think *openDemocracy* has played a particularly productive role? Or any where you thought you fell short of what you were aiming for?

Anthony: With more than 2,400 articles now in our archive, we have lots in both categories! Currently we have a great debate on the politics of climate change and how regular citizens might make a difference, opened by Ian McEwan, and also a shaping debate amongst Iranians on how best to bring democracy to that country – an issue which I believe needs to be part of a global discussion or there risks being a wider war in the Middle East.

Amongst our frustrations we carried a huge amount about America in its election year. While it was read widely in the US we were not able to achieve our aim of becoming a focal point of discussion about the dangers of narrow American nationalism. It may simply have been too ambitious.

Tony: I'd like to broaden the discussion. A lot is written about the role of the Internet in creating international public spheres. Does your experience validate these expectations? Or are there real limits to what can be accomplished politically by these means?

Anthony: The Internet has greatly internationalised debate within existing specialist areas. Whatever the topic, there is much greater, faster exchange of information and influence. There is not just one international public sphere, and now, thanks to the Internet, there are many more of all kinds: neither the World Social Forum meeting in Brazil, nor the American invasion of Iraq, would have succeeded in the same way without the Internet.

In some ways the net is a dissolving medium as well as a connecting one. The Internet can seem magical but it is not magic! It can't be a substitute for an international politics or create it. One of the things that it has brought home to me is that there is nothing like meeting people face-to-face. The net can help you find out who you would like to meet and helps greatly to sustain far-flung relationships, but on its own it can be inhuman. Politics, like all relationships, gets better with talking – best of all over a meal and a drink, but we have yet to publish our global good food guide!

At the same time the development of open source software is making new kinds of what I call co-creativity possible and ways of sharing ideas, which could have a tremendous impact on the development of a democratic culture.

Tony: It occurs to me that *openDemocracy* and the Open University might share many similar values and aspirations in terms of a shared commitment to access and participation. Do you see any convergences between them?

Anthony: Yes indeed, in addition to access and participation there is the desire to educate ourselves and connect across differences. It seems to me that the special quality of your university is a commitment to reason, humanity, justice and imagination and these are our values too. You have pioneered learning at a distance in ways we want to learn from and share.

Tony: And finally, if readers of *Society Matters* want to get involved with *openDemocracy*, how should they go about it?

Anthony: Go to www.openDemocracy.net, sign up for our email service and support us with a modest £3 or \$5 a month (it is optional). Join in our forums, or send me an email with suggestions, including criticisms and proposals, especially for ways in which we can link with other sites and debates – and take a look through our open archive to read and use what we have published.

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openDemocracy
free thinking for
the world

Why politicians make mistakes

Research by the Sleep Council has consistently revealed that lack of sleep affects our ability to think clearly and rationally. The Council's latest research into the sleep patterns of eight professional groups found the most sleep deprived of them all to be politicians. The research, conducted before the May General Election, found the average politician slept for only five hours per night. Only hospital doctors on call sleep less, just 4.5 hours a night, which may be more disturbing. Solicitors topped the sleep charts with an invigorating eight hours sleep each night. Sleep Council spokesperson Jessica Alexander said: 'the results of this study are of concern in that they demonstrate that our politicians, the people responsible for making decisions that affect all of our lives, may not be in the best mental or physical shape to do so.' The Council point out that the five hours is an average and conceals a wide variation in sleep patterns. They also report that not only did politicians sleep less but they tended to be in bed longer before they fell asleep. Seven out of ten of those surveyed reported regular intermittent sleep patterns, 28 per cent reported problems falling to sleep, 24 per cent said they woke up far too early, and 20 per cent said they woke up between three and six times each night.

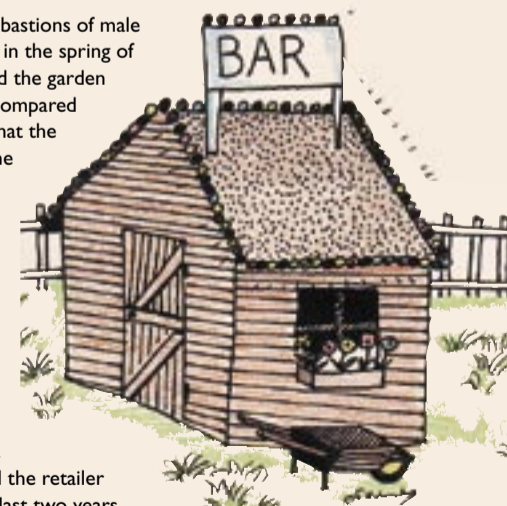


Casual Parliamentary sexism exposed

The rise of Blair's babes over the past decade has coincided with a significant increase in bullying and harassment according to research conducted by Birkbeck College. The research reveals women MPs are regularly exposed to crude sexism, patronising hostility, constant barracking and heckling, and mistreatment by male MPs and journalists. One MP remarked: 'I remember some Conservatives – whenever a Labour woman got up to speak they would take their breasts – their imaginary breasts – in their hands and wiggle them and say "melons" as we spoke.' A member of the Cabinet was asked when she was promoted: 'Oh, you've had a very fast rise, who have you been sleeping with?' The study concluded that the traditional male dominant culture of the Commons, which is gradually being eroded by changes in hours and a reduction in the male drinking culture, resembled not so much an old boys' club but a teenage public school full of boys making cheap sexist jokes and undermining the achievements of women MPs in raising the profile of women and family issues in public policy.

Women 'shedites' turf men out

Significant changes are taking place in one of the last bastions of male supremacy: the garden shed. A survey of 1,000 adults in the spring of 2005 revealed that 40 per cent of women now regard the garden shed as a place where they can 'do their own thing' compared to a mere 38 per cent of men. Researchers suggest that the gender switch reflects the growing popularity of home improvement, DIY and the impact of television make-over programmes. The researchers, Future Laboratory, believe that 'shedites' are using their sheds for more exotic pursuits such as meditation retreats, even, readers note, for the purposes of study. Sheds are increasingly being seen as extensions to property that can be transformed into 'ideas pits' without the use of planning permission, converting them to alternative entertainment centres, studios with PC facilities, and even bars. More than one and a half million sheds are erected in Britain each year and the retailer B & Q report a 40 per cent rise on shed sales in the last two years with women acting as the major catalysts. Devotees may be interested in accessing www.readerssheds.co.uk, which features garden sheds from members of the public. Who knows, you may find something where you can prepare for your next TMA in peace.



A nation of addicts

An estimated 1 million children in the UK have parents who are alcoholics; a further 350,000 children have parents who are problem drug users (ONS, 2005).

