

## Open source nation

Geoff Mulgan & Becky Hogge

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*Geoff Mulgan sees two ways in which organisational principles borrowed from the world of open source can make the political process more accountable. One is in turning democracy back into a conversation, the other in allowing the people to scrutinise public services. But, he warns, there still needs to be a recognisable place where the buck stops. Becky Hogge spoke to him.*

Earlier this year, Geoff Mulgan and Tom Steinberg, with Omar Salem, published a paper for the UK think tank Demos which is widely becoming seen as the seminal work on open source methodology.

The paper, *Wide Open*, described the methods developed in the production of the open source operating system Linux and the free, collaborative encyclopedia Wikipedia as embodying:

“a new way of creating knowledge that combines an open and democratic ethos with the extraordinary ability to produce work of high quality and on a huge scale”

*Wide Open* investigated possible applications of these methods in fields as diverse as bioscience, politics and journalism. openDemocracy’s Becky Hogge went along to Geoff Mulgan’s offices at the Young Foundation in east London to find out what open source methods can do for 21st century politics, and where this leaves traditional ideas of accountability.

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**Becky Hogge:** Can open source methodology, or, as the paper preferred to call them, open methods, really be called democratic?

**Geoff Mulgan:** When we wrote that, we meant democratic in spirit. With open methods, anyone can take part without prior qualifications or having been asked to do so or being part of an established hierarchy.

Democracy is conversation and there are deep roots for ideas about a society being able to talk about itself, going back to the Buddhists and the ancient Greeks.

Every civilisation has traditions of people arguing – this is not a western idea at all. Of course when democracy came into being in the late 18th and 19th centuries, because of the scale of the organisation of the state, because of the lack of technology, those conversations had to essentially take place within parliament – speaking parliaments with speakers overseeing them and so on. The rest of the conversation was somewhat of a monologue either by parties or newspapers.

In a 21st century democracy, many more people should be involved in the conversation that precedes a decision. It’s really only in the last twenty or thirty years that technology has made it possible to rethink how to organise much wider conversations that involve sixty million people in a country like the UK or several hundred million in a country like the United States.

But for those conversations to be meaningful there have to be organising principles, there can't just be a free-for-all cacophony because not everyone can be heard in the permitted bandwidth.

**Becky Hogge:** And that's where open methods come in?

**Geoff Mulgan:** Yes. Essentially, where the object is producing the best and the most usable thing, which may be a Wikipedia or a software programme, the argument is that most existing organisational principles we have don't work very well. Therefore, organisational principles which reward or give most weight to the best, the most respected, very much like the vetting procedures of Linus Torvalds and his deputies or the collective scrutiny of Wikipedians, should be superior.

Tom and I spent a lot of time trying to find the appropriate word for this kind of organisational structure, going through our ancient Greek dictionaries. The irony is that "aristocracy" technically means rewarding the best input but, of course, every aristocracy that we've ever come across is full of the worst rather than the best so the word has completely lost that meaning.

**Becky Hogge:** So reputational systems, like the ones used in creating Wikipedia or Linux, can help structure wider conversations that lead to better democracy?

**Geoff Mulgan:** That's right. At the moment reputational systems look like the best ones to run with. My expectation is that within the next twenty or thirty years you will see lots of experimentation with direct participative models. Deliberative polls, citizens' juries and reputational systems – and each of these uses a different principle of how to involve a much larger number of people and the ultimate test will be which delivers more legitimate, better decisions in the long run.

**Becky Hogge:** But this sounds an awful lot like "consultation" – isn't that a dirty word in politics?

**Geoff Mulgan:** Sure, sometimes. Take, for example, the British Labour party's "Big Conversation" of a year and a half ago, which I was heavily involved in trying to design. That was attempting to get a more genuinely reciprocal conversation between the ruling party and the public, holding hundreds of meetings in constituencies with MPs, stakeholder groups, NGOs and so on, in a fairly public way.

One of the very predictable problems that exercise ran into was that it went alongside some classic internal decision-making, strategy-making processes which in some ways were superior to an open conversation. If you are trying to plan exactly what the National Health Service should do in the next five or ten years you get involved in huge complexities of money, organisation and so on which you can't really get to in a general discussion. But you can have regular discussions on something like smoking bans, about what to do with alcohol, or chronic disease management.

Secondly, a lot of the bits of the party really had no training in how to do open conversation, including MPs. Some MPs were brilliant at it, but some were simply not culturally at ease with a genuinely open conversation about politics and policy. They were used to being a transmission belt from the centre and I think to a degree the media and the public didn't know what to think. They weren't sure whether it was a completely manipulative ruse to give the appearance of openness or if there was anything serious in there. In a way this was probably a transitional example.

But my guess is that in the future all parties will feel the need to have some kind of conversation with an electorate ahead of their manifestos and policies and it will always be somewhat ambiguous. In some ways what comes out will not reflect what happened in those conversations but instead will reflect the beliefs of the leaders and the core party.

If it doesn't then, to some extent, what's the point of having them there to make sometimes difficult judgements which may go against what the public wants? But I think the era of simply top-down monologue organisation is over and I think the Labour party should at least be commended for having made the attempt to do things in a different way.

**Becky Hogge:** So open methods aren't there for the difficult decisions?

**Geoff Mulgan:** For institutions spending large sums of money, going to war, things like that, I would be pretty worried about any organisation or innovations which made it less clear where the buck stops. There are lots of other activities ranging from the organisation of science to culture where you can have much more efficient ways of doing things without very strict hierarchies. But, crudely, you need the most accountability the closer you get to the core power

*You need the most accountability the closer you get to the core power activities of the state.*

activities of the state which are essentially spending money and using force.

**Becky Hogge:** So, if open source isn't for decision making, what is it for? And does it always compromise accountability?

**Geoff Mulgan:** Not at all. Right now, the UK is spending several billion on auditors and inspectors for its public services – often on people who should be actually teaching in schools and working in hospitals. In my ideal future, much more of that work is performed by the public using open methods supplemented with templates to make sense of what they should be looking for in their local schools, their hospitals and their police force.

These volunteer scrutineers would use open methods to aggregate deliberation and to get the messages to the right managers, as it were, in close to real time. It will still be up to each of those agencies whether they take any notice of it or not – that's the pinch, the weakness of open methods. But once you have that in place it would greatly change the operating climate for public services.

So if you were a police chief and you had hundreds of thousands of people in your area commenting on whether you were making the right decisions on – it could be stop-and-search policy for example – then that's one of the things the media would look to, that's one of the things elected politicians would look to and the whole climate of behaviour would shift. That's where I think these open methods are most appropriate.

**Becky Hogge:** But with so much disenchantment surrounding the political process and public services, in Britain and elsewhere, is that scenario really plausible?

**Geoff Mulgan:** A huge amount of our society works on this kind of gift economy. The National Health Service has at least half a million volunteers without whom it would collapse tomorrow. The schooling system has, I think its four hundred thousand governors at the

moment, none of whom is paid a penny to help their local schools to operate. Despite what is happening to democracy in terms of disenchantment, we still have twenty thousand councillors and hundreds of thousands of political activists working on a voluntary basis.

Most people aren't doing it for any particular reward. You could also say that much of art and culture is essentially a gift model. People are motivated by the quality of what they do and what they are involved in, and not always by monetary reward. I don't see any sign of that diminishing.

I think the challenge for any of the new ideas in the open methods field is whether people in practice will be motivated enough to get involved. This will hinge on whether they see a direct enough link between what they have put in and something happening. Precisely the appeal of something like Wikipedia is that you can see a relationship between what you put in and what you get out. I would like to see many other domains in which there was a clearer link between input and output.

**Becky Hogge:** To sum up, do you think open methods offer significant innovation to accountability practice?

**Geoff Mulgan:** There's a tradition of how you make people accountable to you before they act, *ex ante*, for example by giving them a mandate. Then there's a whole tradition of being accountable after the act, *post hoc*, like general elections to decide if the government is any good, or AGMs where a company is judged on the totality of what it's done.

I think what's very interesting about open methods is that they are introducing something more like real time accountability and feedback. Even if that won't have quite the same sort of constitutional strength as the *ex ante* or *post hoc* accountabilities, open methods will probably do more to change the spirit, the climate of decision-making than almost anything which can be done from either end.

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