

openDemocracy: a farewell salute

By Isabel Hilton,
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The other evening, a friend and colleague announced, with the certainty of a man whose mind was made up, that "There is nothing worth reading on the internet". Were he a man given over to football, or another trivial pursuit, I might have shrugged and let him be. But this was a journalist of distinction, a man who had seen the world, who had covered important stories and who knew a thing or two about politics, revolutions and the broad sweep of human affairs. His books are well researched and favourably reviewed, his opinions worth engaging with. How was it possible that he had failed to read, for instance **openDemocracy**, let alone the less demanding if far better resourced sites of the *New York Times* [1] or the *BBC* [2]?

My only conclusion was that he represented a generation of journalists and public intellectuals for whom no words have weight unless they are delivered in a familiar shape and held in the hand. No other media - not television, radio or the *internet* [3] carries the same value. I felt a faint stirring of memory.

When I arrived as **openDemocracy's** editor in March 2005, after a career largely spent in print and broadcasting, that view was common amongst my former colleagues. It was not that none of them read online, more that they were faintly embarrassed to admit it, as though real men did not learn anything on the net.

At **openDemocracy** we kept a tally of distinguished print journalists whose latest articles were thinly reprocessed versions of something that we, or other sites, had published - material that had been plundered unacknowledged, in a manner that would have been unconscionable for the same guilty parties had the source been in print. Anything on the internet, they seemed to feel, was not only free to read, it was also free to *plagiarise* [5]. Polite emails would go out, requesting that they acknowledge the source of their inspiration.

This process was not without its ironies: the conventional view of the relationship of new media to old is that new media are parasitic on old, that without the newsgathering and professionalism of the old media, there would be nothing for the bloggers to blog about and that all the noise on the net is but a confusing echo of the real sounds made by print.

Our experience at **openDemocracy** was rather different. Since in almost all cases we published material that *had not appeared* [5] elsewhere, since we commissioned original articles on

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Isabel Hilton has been *contributing* [4] to **openDemocracy** since June 2001, a month after we went live. Among her twenty-seven articles, interviews, introductions and profiles are:

"*Semper Fidel* [4]"
(25 September 2001)

"*Torture: who gives the orders?* [4]"
(13 May 2004)

subjects of public interest [5], since we found writers whom old media had not discovered [5], and since we encouraged writers from the global south [5], we soon found ourselves a source of ideas for radio and television discussion programmes: researchers and producers had us bookmarked and the cast of characters in an on-air discussion would often bear a startling resemblance to the authors we had published on a theme [5]. Could they, as *Private Eye* would say, be related? Cross-fertilisation is a good and healthy thing in a culture and we were and are of course glad of this evidence of influence. My point is that the traffic between old and new media is two-way.

In my time at **openDemocracy**, old media - faced with static or declining in sales - have scrambled to catch up with the possibilities of the web. Newspapers' websites now rank equally in importance with the print version and attract more readers, therefore more advertising. Few publications now imagine they can survive without a web presence [6]. For **openDemocracy**, the challenge has always been to find a place through innovation - editorially and organisationally.

Now I am leaving **openDemocracy**, after two and a half years, to concentrate on the growing demands of www.chinadialogue.net [7] - a very different, but to me, equally valuable and urgent challenge - that of establishing a constructive dialogue between China and the rest of the world on climate change and the environment. It has been an extraordinary and exciting period for me to be (successively) editor and editor-in-chief of **openDemocracy**, a chance to be part of one of the best networks and communities in the world: those who have written for us, those who have read us and those many people who have contributed advice, attention and comments. The staff I have worked with - both on the editorial and the technical side - have been remarkable for their dedication and professionalism. The freedom to choose how we would approach an issue and how we would try to understand our world has been a constant stimulus. **openDemocracy** is a work of many, many hands. It has been a privilege to be one of them. As to my friend, perhaps he will never know what he has missed.

Source URL:

http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/opendemocracy_salute_farewell

Links:

[1] <http://www.nytimes.com/>

[2] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/>

[3] <http://www.nicholasbrealey.com/uk/pc/viewPrd.asp?idproduct=205>

[4] <http://www.chinadialogue.net/>

[5] <http://www.randomhouse.com/pantheon/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780375424755>

[6] <http://www.economist.com/index.html>

[7] <http://www.chinadialogue.net/>



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