



openDemocracy

free thinking for the world



Annual report

2019

We are an independent global media organisation.

Through reporting and analysis of social and political issues, we seek to educate citizens to challenge power and encourage democratic debate across the world.

Our readers

We are read by people who influence and change the world.

- Nearly 40% consider themselves activists
- 21% work in drafting policies or influencing policymaking
- 21% are writers or journalists

We influence those who read us

- 65% said openDemocracy helps shape their opinions
- 70% had recommended openDemocracy to friends and colleagues

We are an independent voice filling gaps not covered by others

- Nearly 90% of readers surveyed said they had come across facts or perspectives on openDemocracy they had not seen in other media
- 71% said they read openDemocracy because it is independent (not controlled by vested interests)

Global media amplifies our voice

Leading media outlets who have picked up our stories in 2019 include the BBC, Bloomberg, Channel 4 News, CNN, the Daily Mail, the Daily Mirror, Deutsche Welle, El País, the Financial Times, Huffington Post, The Guardian, ITV, The New York Times, Sky News and The Washington Post.

Our funding

We depend on support from those who appreciate the importance of our work, both individuals and organisations.

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Introduction

Mary Fitzgerald | Chief Executive and Editor-in-Chief



We now have just twelve years to act to avert climate catastrophe, according to a landmark report by leading scientists. In September, openDemocracy joined schoolchildren from around the world on a global climate strike – closing down our site for the day and amplifying the voices of young people from Nigeria to the Philippines, Thailand to Sudan.

It was a small gesture, but underlined that there are two parts to our mission: we aim not only to challenge power, but to inspire change.

Since openDemocracy launched in 2001, we have done that through our widely respected political and social analysis. Now we are also a powerful force in investigative journalism. This year, we exposed how ultra-conservative forces are trying to roll back the rights of women and LGBTQI people across the globe. Ahead of Europe's elections, we revealed how far-right groups were cooperating to influence the vote – and how US religious fundamentalists linked to Donald Trump and Steve Bannon have spent millions in Europe. We also went undercover inside US-led anti-women and anti-LGBTQI hate movements in Italy, Ghana and Kenya.

This was a year marked by mass protests and revolutions. Our **North Africa, West Asia** project published first-hand accounts of the uprisings in Iraq and Lebanon, while **democraciaAbierta** covered the demonstrations that swept through Chile and Ecuador – and the ousting of Bolivia's president Evo Morales. Meanwhile **Can Europe Make It?** closely analysed France's *gilets jaunes* movement and the turmoil over Catalan independence.

“How have misinformation, foreign interference and falsehoods undermined democracy?”

While the UK's general election settled one question about the country's future, our work has raised many more. If, as Boris Johnson says, the NHS is not for sale, then why are US companies lining up to take it over? What political influence have the millions pumped into the Tory party bought wealthy donors? How have misinformation, foreign interference and falsehoods undermined democracy?

Change doesn't only happen through the ballot box or on the streets. This year **Transformation** probed the role civil society should play and whether mindfulness and ritual are truly empowering.

We have not shied away from difficult and complex debates. **Beyond Trafficking and Slavery** has hosted searching and illuminating conversations on both sex work and universal basic income. While **oDR**, our Eurasia section, offered a rare space for Central Asian academics to discuss the myriad inequalities that impact their research.

openDemocracy is more global than ever, but our projects remain deeply embedded in the places and communities they cover. We've published brave undercover reports of workplace negligence on Ukraine's deadly construction sites. In the UK, we've partnered with local media to report on grassroots political campaigns and issues that most national media ignores.

Faced with falling revenues, media outlets have drastically cut back on costly investigative work and court reporting. That makes **Shine A Light's** forensic reporting of inquests into deaths in police custody and shocking investigations into child prisons all the more vital.

This year we also launched a new project on openDemocracy: **ourEconomy**. After a decade of austerity, there is a clear need for fresh economic thinking. OurEconomy has both challenged the prevailing narratives, and led a thorough debate on the radical economic ideas jostling to replace them.

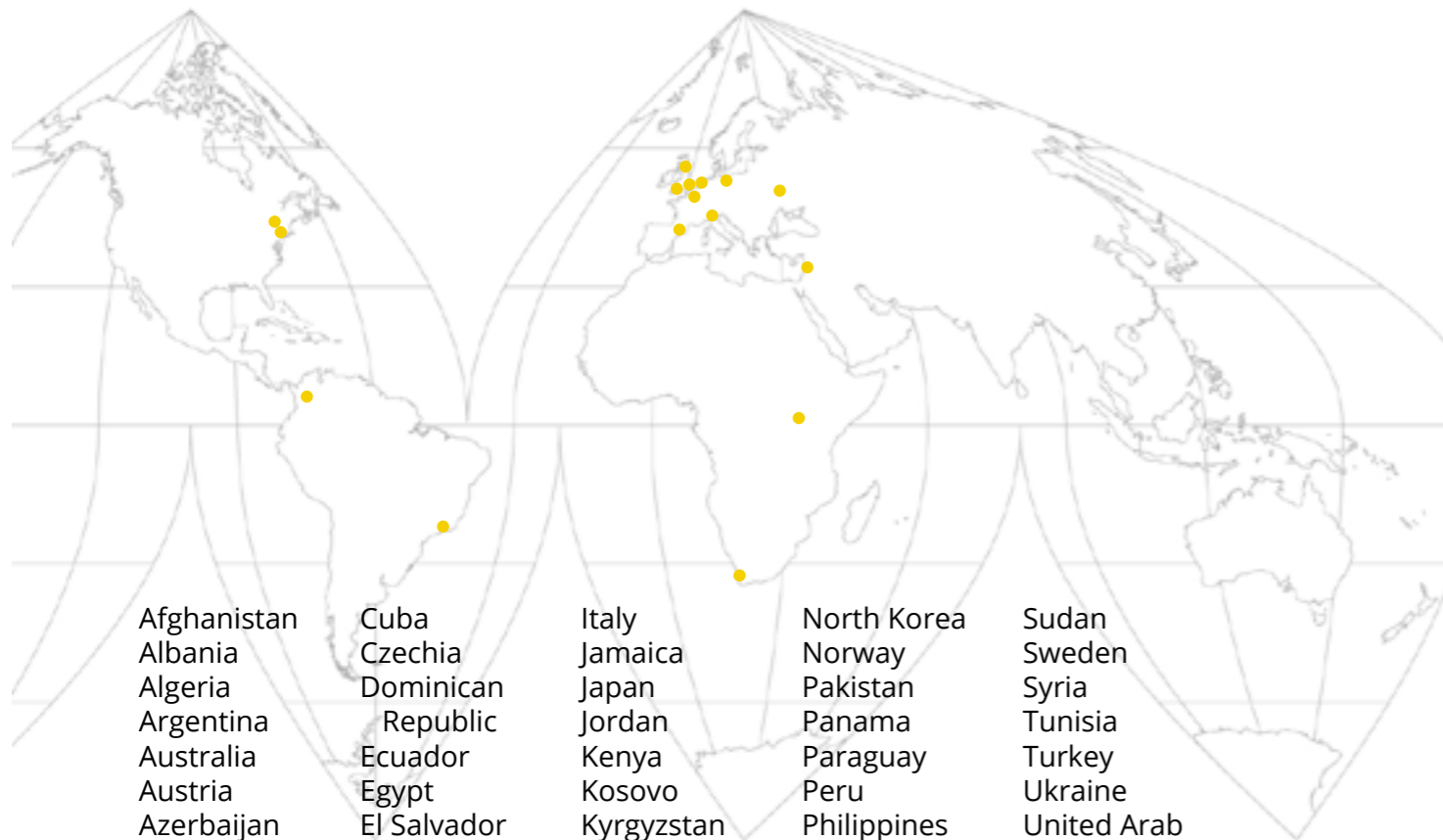
All this work has had tremendous impact. We've prompted action from hundreds of lawmakers, won legal battles over transparency and landed in media across the world – from The New York Times to the Yorkshire Post to the front page of El País Brazil.

We've been equally ambitious in our approach to funding, committing ourselves to raising an ever-higher proportion of our income directly from readers. We began 2019 with just 340 people making regular donations and ended it with more than 1,320 regular givers, and nearly 6,000 one-off contributors: a testament to the value people all over the world place in our work. We have set ourselves even more bold targets for the years to come.



WHERE WE WORK

In 2019 team members on five continents covered 99 countries



- | | | | | |
|-------------|--------------------|-------------|--------------|----------------------|
| Afghanistan | Cuba | Italy | North Korea | Sudan |
| Albania | Czechia | Jamaica | Norway | Sweden |
| Algeria | Dominican Republic | Japan | Pakistan | Syria |
| Argentina | Ecuador | Jordan | Panama | Tunisia |
| Australia | Egypt | Kenya | Paraguay | Turkey |
| Austria | El Salvador | Kosovo | Peru | Ukraine |
| Azerbaijan | Ethiopia | Kyrgyzstan | Philippines | United Arab Emirates |
| Bangladesh | France | Latvia | Poland | United Kingdom |
| Belarus | Germany | Lebanon | Portugal | United States |
| Belgium | Greece | Liberia | Puerto Rico | Uruguay |
| Belize | Guatemala | Libya | Qatar | Uzbekistan |
| Bolivia | Guinea | Mali | Russia | Venezuela |
| Brazil | Haiti | Malta | Saudi Arabia | Vietnam |
| Bulgaria | Honduras | Mexico | Sierra Leone | Yemen |
| Canada | Hungary | Montenegro | Slovakia | Zambia |
| Chad | India | Morocco | Somalia | Zimbabwe |
| Chile | Iran | Netherlands | South Africa | |
| China | Iraq | New Zealand | South Korea | |
| Colombia | Ireland | Nicaragua | Spain | |
| Costa Rica | Israel | Nigeria | Sri Lanka | |

2019 IN NUMBERS

- 2,617 stories published
- 12.1 m page views
- 7.38 m users
- 1.50 m social media shares
- 339,516 social media followers
- 7.7 k hours of video watched
- 60+ citations by lawmakers
- 100+ times our work was followed up by major media outlets
- 7 languages published on our site
- 20+ languages our work was cited in



Tracking the Backlash

Global networks are pushing back against sexual and reproductive rights – we are investigating them.



Dark money from the US and Russia finances many of the strongest anti-women and anti-LGBTIQ ‘backlash’ advocates around the world. In late 2017, we launched a pioneering project, Tracking the Backlash, to bring to bear the best of investigative journalism and storytelling techniques on these movements’ transnational networks, strategies and finances while supporting more women and LGBTIQ people to do this investigative work.

In March we reported from inside the World Congress of Families summit in Verona, Italy, and in October we reported from this ultra-conservative network’s African regional gathering in Accra, Ghana. We

also reported on a ‘failed’ anti-abortion summit in Nairobi, Kenya, in November, tracked ultra-conservative attacks against the inter-American human rights system, worked with a young, gender non-conforming journalist in Mexico to document the range and impact of anti-LGBTIQ ‘conversion therapy’ practices in their country, and documented how ‘conscientious objectors’ threaten newly won abortion rights in Latin America.

At the same time, we’ve documented resistance to the backlash, including in Sudan where women have been leading an uprising against religious fundamentalism; in Nigeria and the diaspora where young trans women are fighting for their rights; and in Italy amidst historic protests against the WCF gathering in Verona, interviewing young feminist activists who traveled from Belarus, Croatia, Poland and elsewhere to be there.

We have also revealed:

- How US Christian right groups spent at least \$50 million in Europe over the last decade – producing the first major analysis of their spending. The article prompted over 100 European lawmakers to write to the presidents of the European Commission, Council and Parliament demanding an urgent investigation.
- The growing list of far-right politicians and aristocrats connected to the World Congress of Families.
- How Pope Francis became a hate figure for the far right, charting the transatlantic assault against the pontiff and Steve Bannon’s deep roots in Italy (in collaboration with Source Material).
- Leaked proposals from a senior Irish MEP, backed by powerful Christian lobbyists, to boost the power of religious groups in Brussels
- How a leading prosecco company and cheese business sponsored the World Congress of Families in Verona, reporting on calls for boycotts from LGBTIQ rights activists and a food critic

Outlets covering these stories included The Guardian, The Observer, The Independent Mail Online, the BBC’s flagship Today programme and The Economist among UK-based media; CNN and New York Post in the US; Deutsche Welle and the daily newspaper Taz in Germany; La Stampa, Internazionale, Rai documentary and La Repubblica in Italy; and the Irish Times.

We published a number of op-eds contextualising our work, including a feature article with the British lifestyle/fashion magazine The Face, from inside the World Congress of Families in Verona.

Meanwhile in Latin America, our investigation revealing an unprecedented surge of religious and conservative candidates in national elections in Uruguay and Argentina in late 2019 was co-produced and co-published by Economía Feminista, a popular independent data journalism platform focused on gender issues in Argentina. It was also republished by the La Diaria newspaper in Uruguay and was also cited by media in Argentina. One of the authors, Diana Cariboni, wrote a follow-up story for the Revista Noticias magazine and was interviewed about the investigation by the mainstream Del Sol and Radiomundo stations, and on Televisión Nacional de Uruguay.

In Africa, our reporting ahead of the World Congress of Families regional gathering in Accra, Ghana – revealing the extent of this network’s connections to white supremacist and Islamophobic movements, and anti-migrant, far-right politicians in Europe – was widely shared online, on social media and on large WhatsApp groups including by Ghanaian rights activists who we’d consulted from the start of this reporting. They told us our reporting was crucial to their own local activism to counter the World Congress of Families’ narratives and influence, and helped draw in allies from beyond the women’s and LGBTIQ rights community.

As many of these backlash actors collaborate across borders, so must we. We know that these attacks against our rights are not short-term, temporary phenomena – nor are they unique to specific countries or regions. That’s why our project goes beyond reactive, short-term, and region-specific work to lay the groundwork for the co-ordinated global response needed to overcome these movements longer-term.



FOCUS: THE BATTLE FOR THE AMAZON



Pixabay

Francesc Badia, director of our Latin America project, *democraciaAbierta*, was working in the Amazon when a source sent him some leaked cellphone images. They had been taken in a meeting between members of the administration of Brazil’s president Jair Bolsonaro and local politicians in the Brazilian Amazon state of Pará – and showed that the Bolsonaro government intended to use hate speech to isolate minorities of the Amazon.

The *democraciaAbierta* team spent a month going over the slides and verifying the information – then waited for the right moment to publish the leak. That moment arrived in the week when the fires that were ravaging parts of the Amazon, and Bolsonaro’s response to them, made international headlines.

Since going live on 21 August, the article has been viewed more than 400,000 times in *democraciaAbierta*’s three working languages of English, Portuguese and Spanish. It was the basis of a longer piece by *The Intercept*, and several Brazilian media organisations picked the story up.

The article itself has been shared more than 2.9 million times in its three languages. In addition, the article went viral on Twitter: one tweets had over 9,000 retweets.

Francesc’s own work in the Brazilian Amazon has brought this vital struggle to life in the ‘Rainforest Defenders’ series, five powerful portraits in text and video of local community leaders and activists. It was produced in collaboration with Pulitzer Center, has been published in *El País* and has consistently featured on the front page of *El País* Brazil. The next phase of the project will introduce activists in Ecuador.

Europe's elections: probing the far right

We knew that secretive, unaccountable networks rooted in the US and Russia were fuelling ultra-conservative, far-right and anti-democratic forces in Europe, and in particular were seeking to influence the outcome of the May 2019 European parliamentary elections.

And we had the right journalists, networks and groundwork in place to investigate this further. Our Dark Money Investigations team had spent two years tracing the secret funding and networks that backed the Brexit campaign, and which continue to influence British politics. At the same time, our Tracking the Backlash team had been following the movements that seek to roll back women's and LGBTIQ rights globally. Unsurprisingly, we had spotted that many of these networks and interests overlap. And we had gathered a trove of leads – including leaked documents, data analysis and intelligence gathered from our networks on the ground – which gave us a head start.

Kick-off

We set both openDemocracy teams, plus other core editorial staff, to work full-time on the European elections. We also quickly built out a continent-wide network of freelance journalists, hiring reporters based in Spain, Italy and Germany, and collaborating with journalists at Source Material, L'Espresso, Internazionale, Taz (Germany) and Vanity Fair, as well as with researchers at UnHackDemocracy Europe and Investigate Europe.

The intelligence we had gathered at the World Congress of Families in Verona, Italy, led us straight to Spain for an undercover investigation into the Madrid-based campaign group CitizenGo – which we revealed, on the eve of the Spanish elections, to be working as a de-facto 'Super PAC' to boost Vox and other far-right parties across Europe.

It was another story covered across the global media, including in two pieces in The Washington Post, Deutsche Welle, Taz and Focus in Germany;

Internazionale in Italy, Polish Newsweek and in Spain by the national newspaper El Periodico.

Former US senator Russ Feingold (who sponsored campaign finance efforts with John McCain) called our investigations "frightening" and warned: "Europe has an opportunity to get ahead of this and not make the same mistakes that were made in the US."

He also noted: "There is a great irony in this. [Far-right parties] are trying to appeal to ultra nationalist sentiments but they are using tactics that are completely contrary to the sovereignty of those countries. These are international actors, oligarchs and others who are trying to control the political processes of these countries. Even if you are a nationalist, one would think you would be a little bit concerned about that."

Migration twist

We decided to pivot from our planned story pipeline, investing resources in a big cross-border data project, which revealed how hundreds of European citizens (farmers, priests, firefighters and elderly women, not only activists) have been 'criminalised' for helping migrants, particularly in places where the far-right holds national or local power. The resulting story, published the weekend before Europeans voted, had wide pickup globally – not only in the UK, Germany, Spain, Italy, Belgium, Romania, Slovakia and the



DT/Rocks/Wikimedia Commons



Insidefoto/SIPA USA/PA Images

Czech Republic, but across the world, including Turkey, Lebanon, Cameroon, Morocco, Egypt and the US. Journalists, researchers and NGOs from several countries also asked us to share the underlying dataset to facilitate further follow-up work on this theme.

This story, as well as collaborations with Source Material on attacks against the Pope and on the Brexit Party, enabled us to significantly build out our networks, reach a diverse range of audiences and to build a wider range of alliances.

Unhacking Hungarian democracy

Also in the final days before the European elections, we broke a major story which went to the heart of Europe's far-right electoral surge. Working with UnHackDemocracy Europe, we published a detailed report of hundreds of allegations of electoral fraud which appear to have helped Viktor Orbán's landslide 'supermajority' victory in Hungary last year – and which outlined how Hungary's European elections were vulnerable to even wider electoral fraud.

UnHackDemocracy Europe is a new, volunteer-run NGO which had approached us with large amounts of raw data, but very resource to turn this wealth of information into a publishable, legally-sound piece of journalism. Working closely with them over a number of weeks, we were able to turn their research into a highly impactful story which was reported by BBC Radio 4's 'Today', the BBC World Service and RFI as well as outlets in Hungary itself, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Cameroon, Canada, Germany, Ghana, Indonesia, Luxembourg, Malaysia, New Zealand, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Portugal, South Africa, Spain and the US.

More stories

- A candidate for Nigel Farage's Brexit Party had spread propaganda for a Balkan warlord and was tracked by MI6 (reported in the right-leaning Times of London)
- How a former Brexit minister breached ministerial rules by meeting the controversial Spanish far-right Vox party, shared widely across social media and described by the editor of BuzzFeed UK as "a really important story".
- How Facebook and Google pressured EU experts to soften fake news regulations (in collaboration with Investigate Europe, and co-published with BuzzFeed Germany); picked up by La Repubblica, The Register, EU Reporter, the Columbia Journalism Review and multiple outlets in Italy and the Czech Republic.
- We also discovered a surprising number of Brexiteer politicians cosying up to an Armenian oligarch

Reach

In all, our stories running up to the European elections were picked up by media outlets in fifty different countries globally, between them publishing in twenty different languages. On opendemocracy.net, the articles in this project attracted over 80,000 page views. Across Facebook and Twitter, the four films we made promoting our European elections work had over 20,000 views, and the infographics we produced (see below, on the migration story and on the \$51m dark money from the US) together attracted over 23,000 hits.



FOCUS: UNDERCOVER IN EUROPE

It was in Italy and Spain that we found the most concerning evidence that US-style political tricks have crossed the Atlantic. Our reporter, posing as a potential funder, spoke to a Trump fundraiser and technologist who built the Republican Party's website in 2010. He revealed how he was using new phone-tracking technology to extract data from everyone who goes into certain spaces, or attends certain events – telling us that he's able to find out, among other things, what Netflix shows they like.

This data, he said, can be used to target messages, and drive turnout up among the 'right' people. He didn't elaborate on whether it was ever used to discourage the 'wrong' people from voting, though openDemocracy separately revealed secret recordings of Cambridge Analytica's chief executive saying that this is exactly what they do – and Trump's strategist Steve Bannon is known to have close connections to both groups.

As well as campaigning for Trump, the man we met was also acting as an advisor to the European network CitizenGo, an ultra-conservative online campaign group whose director, separately, told our reporter that he co-ordinates with far-right parties across Europe, running attack ads and smear campaigns against their opponents.

Transparency in UK politics



This year our Dark Money Investigations team was nominated for two prestigious awards and had their work reported in every major outlet across the UK, from The Guardian to the Daily Mail, the BBC to Sky and Channel 4 News. Lawmakers from across the political spectrum have cited our stories in multiple parliamentary debates and public inquiries, and we won two court challenges to force transparency from the government.

Our work has powerfully exposed the private lobbying, secret funding, disinformation and electoral rule-breaking that undermines British democracy. We scrutinised what one prominent lobbyist called “the Brexit-influencing game” and laid bare the misinformation and secretive lobbying that marked the December general election campaign.

During the campaign itself we did this by publishing forensic investigative journalism and vivid, on-the-ground reporting from key constituencies across the UK. Politicians, civil society and experts frequently cited our work, particularly to highlight the need for legislative and cultural change around election laws and practices.

Working with almost a dozen journalists across Great Britain and Northern Ireland, our reporting was cited at least 47 times in media outlets across the political spectrum – from The Guardian and the Daily Mirror to the Daily Mail, Financial Times and Sky. Our CEO was interviewed on BBC Newsnight and Channel 4 News about our findings. We had impact globally, including coverage in the The New York Times, The Washington Post and CNN, and we also collaborated with local outlets such as the Bristol Cable and The Yorkshire Post to ‘land’ our findings in key marginal constituencies.

On our own site, we produced 44 stories which together had more than 828,000 page views, and social media users have shared them more than 322,000 times.

Highlights of our general election coverage

Misinformation

- ‘Revealed: Former Vote Leave data chief accused of pro-Tory “disinformation”’. Key story exposing the deceptive use of third-party campaigners. Cited by Financial Times, followed up by BBC and ITV
- ‘Online falsehoods and dark money targeting Bristol voters’. Journalist Carole Cadwalladr tweeted: “We need so much more of this. Brilliant reporting...”
- ‘Britain’s Dirty Election’. Overview of misinformation in the campaign, commissioned by The New York Times

Corporate capture of policy

- ‘The President, the US private health giant, and top NHS officials’. Covered by the Daily Mirror; over 57,000 page views and 54,000 social shares

Foreign interference

- ‘Revealed: Russian donors have stepped up Tory funding’.
 - Business Insider’s version (citing us) was the most viral British political story in the opening weeks of the campaign, according to BuzzFeed
 - Over 70,000 page views (estimated) and 65,000 social shares
 - The Times followed up the story; The Washington Post and Guardian cited it
- ‘Concerns over ‘foreign interference’ as India-linked Hindu nationalist group targets Labour candidates’
 - Covered by Sky News, Channel 4 News, BBC; CNN; The Wire (India); NDTV (India); and The Independent carried a follow-up by our author
 - Over 34,000 page views on openDemocracy

Political donations and ‘cash for honours’

- ‘Revealed: The elite dining club behind £130m+ donations to the Tories’
 - Covered by the Daily Mirror and The Independent; The Guardian carried a follow-up by our author; Double Down News made a video featuring him

Transparency

- ‘Why are Britain’s ‘watchdogs’ protecting politicians, not us?’
 - Generated more than 5,100 signatures and 1,950 new contacts in our database
 - Our Investigations Editor cited this story in a piece for The Guardian.

We worked to strengthen UK electoral regulation

In addition to wide readership and pickup of our stories, lawmakers and influencers cited our work as evidence of the need for stronger electoral regulation, and we engaged hundreds of thousands of citizens on the issue, too. For example:

- We influenced Labour Party thinking and strategy, with two post-election pieces that we were told influenced both Rebecca Long-Bailey's team and Clive Lewis's team in their pitches for the Labour leadership.
- Our campaign to deter electoral cheating now has over 155,000 signatures – including over 6200 new contacts for us – and backing from key figures in all opposition parties.
- Our petition calling for the release of watchdog reports into the Conservatives, Labour and the Lib Dems has drawn over 5100 signatures.
- Lisa Nandy, another candidate for leadership of the Labour Party – drew on our article on Indian interference in the election.
- Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi MP organised a meeting in Parliament in February to discuss our reporting on the manipulation of South Asian groups before the election. He asked our reporter Sunny Hundal to invite other journalists and community representatives to the meeting.
- Caroline Lucas MP drew on our coverage of the criminal investigation into Vote Leave, saying: "It's hard to imagine a more serious matter for our democracy."



FOCUS: ENFORCING TRANSPARENCY

For the past two years, we have been investigating the activities of the European Research Group – an influential group of Conservative backbenchers that has pushed for a hard Brexit. We've found this political group has received hundreds of thousands of pounds in taxpayers' money to provide a 'research service' to its members. But what kind of research? Surely the public had the right to see this information?

You cannot send a Freedom of Information request to the ERG because it is a political group, but we knew that the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) had a sample of its research. So back in January 2018, openDemocracy sent a request to IPSA for these materials. The parliamentary watchdog refused our request. We appealed to the Information Commissioner's Office, but it also rejected us. So we went to an information tribunal to argue that the public had a right to access the research sample. Representing ourselves throughout the appeal, we were successful and IPSA was ordered to release the documents. The tribunal ruling stated how releasing the materials would "further transparency, accountability and public trust with respect to the working of Parliament".

The documents showed how ERG members were spoon-fed questions intended to undermine their own government, encouraging its members to wrong-foot the prime minister and senior ministers on everything from control of migration to trade deals and EU laws.

The ERG's research is paid for as MPs' pooled resources and should not be for party political purposes. Trade experts who reviewed the material dismissed it as "superficial and selective" and "highly partisan".



We built a case for stronger political transparency regulation

As a result of our reporting on political donations and 'cash for honours':

- Shadow Cabinet Office minister Jon Trickett wrote to Conservative chairman James Cleverly calling for the party to publish full details of the Leader's Group of leading Tory donors.
- After we revealed that one in five elite Tory donors had received top honours, the Scottish National Party called for the Cabinet Office to open an investigation.
- Responding to our report on Russian Tory donors, David Lammy MP tweeted: "Our democracy is being bought. Plain and simple." And Ben Bradshaw MP tweeted: "Here is one of the reasons Johnson's Tories don't want the #russiareport published. Up to their eyes in Russian money."
- When we reported on lobbyists among new Tory MPs, Labour Party General Secretary Jennie Formby tweeted the article, and Labour frontbencher John Trickett commented: "For too long, too many MPs have come from markedly different backgrounds to most of the people they represent. This is one of the reasons why there is such a gulf between politics and the wider public."

We exposed abuse of power and threats to press freedom

After we reported on the Liberal Democrats' potential misuse of voters' personal data, the party threatened us with a barrage of legal threats and attempted to rely on a forged email in order to discredit and suppress our reporting. Their use of expensive lawyers in particular underlined the wider issue of threats to press freedom by vested interests. We stood firm and made the facts of this attack public. The resulting story got over 88,000 page views; Channel 4 News interviewed our CEO and reporter, and The Guardian, Sky News, the BBC, ITV, MailPlus, the Daily Mail, The Daily Telegraph, the Daily Express and Private Eye were only the most prominent outlets to follow up the story. We are still awaiting an apology from the Lib Dems.

We strengthened local journalism and exposed targeting of minorities

We worked with key local journalist partners and devoted resources to reporting on the grassroots campaigns in important constituencies: St Andrews, Bristol North West, Cardiff North, the Teeside region, Filton and Bradley Stoke, Belfast and North East Fife. This led to fresh stories and insights which larger media organisations hadn't picked up, for example:

- How Tory candidates had singled out Gypsies, Roma and Travellers for electoral benefit across the country.
- Our coverage of Indian interference in the election led to two further stories on how efforts to politicise religious and ethnic identities were dividing the UK's South Asian communities. The author reflected on this in the New Statesman.
- Our work showed how dark money and the influence industry has sewn distrust in our political system – encouraging people, for example, to vote Conservative to get politics out of their lives and 'get Brexit done'. To rebuild trust in democracy, we need deep political reform in the UK, and that will be a core focus of our work going forward.

FOCUS: THE RIGHT TO INFORMATION

The UK's Freedom of Information regime and other rights to access information are not working as they should. Journalists' FOI requests are circulated around Whitehall, informing civil servants of who is requesting information. Disclosure rates are worsening. The lowest response rates are often among the most important departments, including the Cabinet Office and the Home Office. Public bodies often apply the law incorrectly to refuse to release information. The average turnaround time for FOI complaints has increased from 164 days in 2016 to 214 days in 2018. Taking complaints to the Information Tribunal takes even longer.

We have devised an ambitious two-year project to strengthen citizens' fundamental rights to access information through a combination of policy engagement, education and training. The Legal Education Foundation has agreed to fund this work, and we will work with a number of organisations including Transparency International, MySociety, English PEN and Index on Censorship. The project involves research, public submissions, round tables, quantitative data analysis, engaging policymakers, media and the public, nationwide workshops, policy recommendations, and a report at the end of each year.



More highlights

Politics



Our Latin America project, *democraciaAbierta*, continued to expand its audiences with its successful 'Unboxing' video series. It also launched the 'Confluencers' project, a series of selfie videos that showcase provocative perspectives from across the continent.

Our openDemocracyUK project published two explosive articles by the leading right-wing commentator Peter Osborne. In April came 'I was a strong Brexiteer. Now we must swallow our pride and think again', picked up by BBC Radio 4's Today programme, The Guardian, BBC News, Channel 4 News, The Irish Times and many other outlets. It has received over 640,000 page views.

In October 'British journalists have become part of Johnson's fake news machine' was shared widely by prominent influencers, and led to Osborne being interviewed on Channel 4 News on the topic. The article has been viewed over 278,000 times.

Three shadow ministers, four other MPs, three peers and an MEP also wrote for us.

Economics

In March we launched the ourEconomy project with an exclusive interview with activist and author Naomi Klein to kickstart the global climate strike week.

We launched a new series on 'Advancing gender just economies' in collaboration with ActionAid, FEMNET, Womankind Worldwide and Fight Inequality Alliance.

Activism and personal change

Our Transformation project continued to bridge the personal and political with popular articles such as 'Toxic masculinity and its threat to a caring society' and a series on mindfulness and social change that inspired useful debate on both sides of the Atlantic.



Bellah Zulu

Work

Our Beyond Trafficking and Slavery project published a book on the future of work with essays by workers' representatives and experts from around the world. Then the team travelled to Hyderabad to do interviews for a major project on Universal Basic Income.

Migration

Shine A Light's podcast series 'It Can Be Done', in collaboration with the Migrants' Law Project, launched in October. It elicits the stories of young refugees trapped in informal camps in Calais and reveals the work to reunite children with their families in the UK.

Dark money

An oDR series on the huge Tashkent City development in Uzbekistan was picked up by The Guardian – and provoked Tashkent's mayor to rebut our findings in a press conference.



Tashkent City

Transparency

An oDR article on Foreign Office support for a gold mine in Armenia took a year of FOI work, but led to questions in Parliament, pick-up in Armenia and engagement by Armenian MPs.

Human rights

Activist Viktor Filinkov's powerful account of how Russian security services tortured him, published in translation by oDR was cited in Human Rights Watch's submission to the UN Committee on Torture.

A major investigation into the UK's involvement in an extrajudicial killing in Belize was accompanied by a letter-writing campaign that prompted one of Belize's top reporters, Jules Vasquez from Channel 7, to challenge the British High Commissioner on TV.

Health

An in-depth response to Boris Johnson's NHS plans was described by the Financial Times's David Allen Green as "a great piece of critical policy journalism". It was circulated by campaign groups including WeOwnIt and Change.Org, and it informed the Labour front bench response to the Queen's Speech.

Training and mentoring

Our North Africa, West Asia project has concluded the latest phase of the Middle East Forum, its training programme for young writers across the region.

One of our Tracking the Backlash fellows went undercover inside an anti-abortion camp in Colombia and [wrote a powerful report](#) about what she discovered.

What they say

“We need publications like openDemocracy. The way it extends serious, broad-based discussion and analysis of what is happening across the world, and makes this accessible, is simply vital.”

Mary Robinson, chair of The Elders

“Thank you for what you are doing, as a feminist journalist who often finds journalistic spaces...dominated by patriarchal ideas and masculinity. It’s such a breath of fresh air to even hear about the idea of feminist investigative journalism.”

2018 journalism fellow

“Today it is not difficult to know what is happening but in order to know why it is happening you need openDemocracy.”

Ivan Krastev, political scientist, permanent fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences

“I really appreciate being given the opportunity to hold space for my voice :)”

First time (activist) writer

“openDemocracy remains one of the few places where moral and political commitment combine with reasoned analysis to offer us new ways of understanding what is happening in turbulent times.”

Mary Kaldor, professor of Global Governance at the London School of Economics

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