

openDemocracy

free thinking for the world



ANNUAL REPORT

openDemocracy is an independent global media organisation.

Our goal is to challenge power and inspire change, by producing reliable, trustworthy journalism and through building skills, knowledge and capacity within the media and civil society across the world.

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Message from the editor-in-chief

As COVID-19 swept the globe, triggering unprecedented lockdowns, economic crises and repression, openDemocracy responded with agility, imagination – and dogged journalism.

Our stories exposed myriad abuses of power: from ‘COVID cronyism’ in the UK (p18) to dangerous misinformation targeted at vulnerable women and girls across four continents (p8). We also leveraged our journalism to push for critical change. We forced transparency from the British government over its secretive data deals with ‘spy tech’ firm Palantir (p12).

We amplified voices calling for justice and equity across the world – from our award-winning reporting deep in the Amazon rainforest (p14) to the front lines of the Black Lives Matter movement in the US (p28). And we trained and learned from an inspiring young cohort of journalism fellows, whose reporting forced US diplomats to cut funding for COVID misinformation, exposed hate groups operating on Amazon and Paypal, and got nominated for prestigious journalism prizes (p16).

It was my privilege to end 2020 in the US state of Georgia. When Raphael Warnock was born, both of Georgia’s two Senate seats were occupied by racial segregationists. Now he is Georgia’s first Black senator, delivered to Washington by a coalition of grassroots activists and visionary leaders that practise a radically different way of doing politics: long-term, bottom-up organising, led and run by people of and for the communities they serve. Accepting his victory just hours before the storming of the US Capitol, Warnock said this: “It’s dark right now, but morning comes. Let us rise up, greet the morning and meet the challenges of this moment. Together, we can do the necessary work and win the future for all of our children.”

Mary Fitzgerald



We exposed myriad abuses of power – from ‘COVID cronyism’ to dangerous misinformation – and we amplified voices calling for justice and equity across the world

Our strategy

Vision

We seek to make our world more transparent and equitable by

- challenging the global backlash against democracy and human rights
- making corporate and political power more accountable
- stimulating the growth of a more inclusive international media ecosystem

How?

To achieve this we

- publish high-quality reporting, analysis, multimedia and debate
- run long-term 'on the job' training and mentoring for groups under-represented in the media, particularly diverse women, LGBTIQ people and people of colour
- collaborate with, train, learn from and share intelligence with a wide network of media and civil society, from grassroots activists to journalists, lawyers, policymakers, educators and others
- invest in building a more sustainable business model, including via reader support

Strategic objectives

- Grow and deepen the impact of openDemocracy's journalism across the world
- Expose and challenge the global backlash against democracy and human rights
- Build skills and capacity among groups under-represented in the media
- Foster pluralism and experimentation
- Grow and diversify openDemocracy income streams, in order to increase organisational capacity and financial sustainability

If openDemocracy

reaches and engages more people with high-quality reporting, analysis, multimedia and debate

runs long-term training and mentoring for groups under-represented in the media

collaborates with, trains, exchanges learning and intelligence with a wide network of media and civil society

invests in building a more sustainable business model, including via reader support

this will then

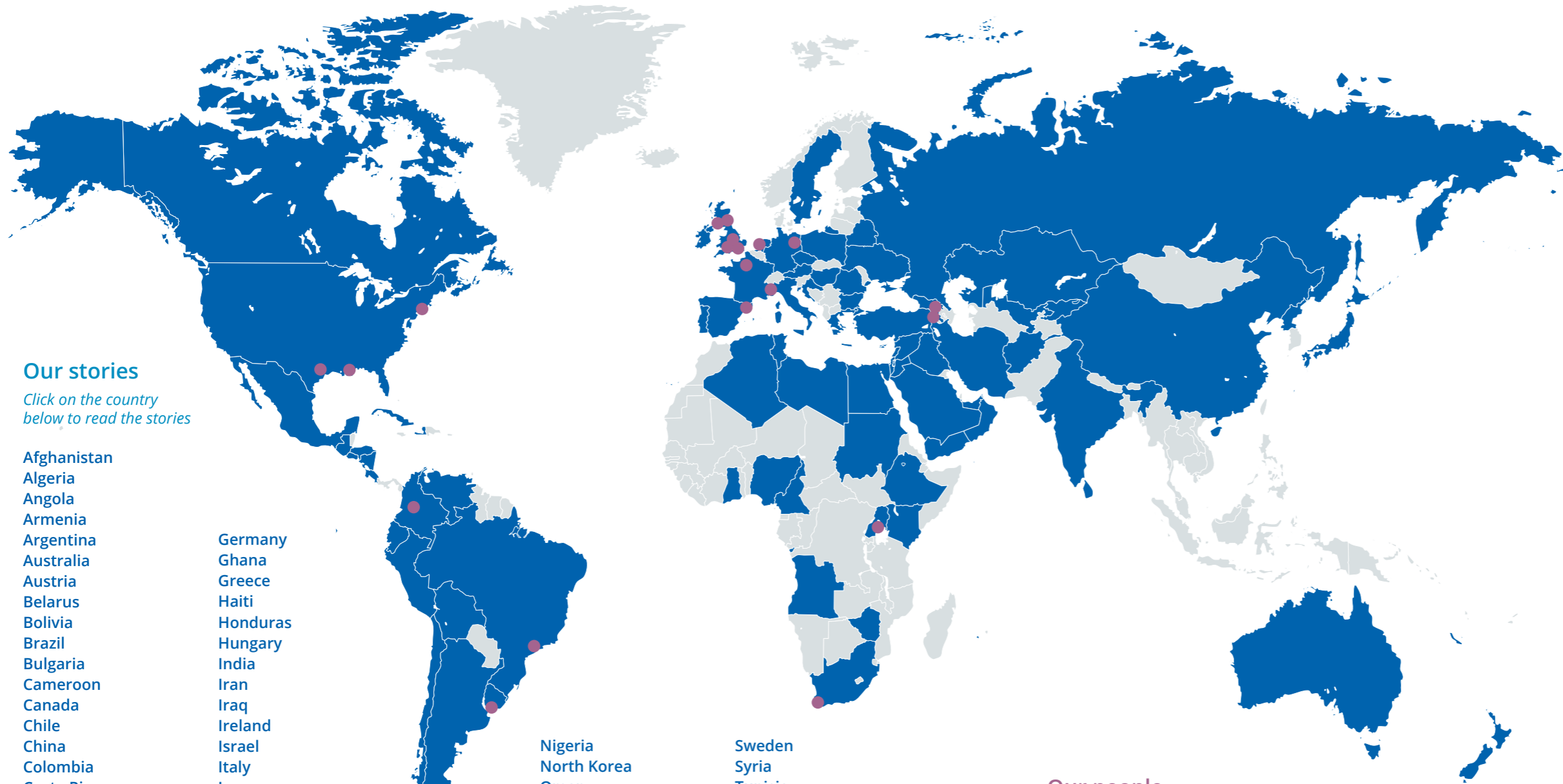
challenge the backlash against democracy and human rights

help make corporate and political power more accountable

The impact will be

a more transparent and equitable world

Where we work



Our stories

Click on the country below to read the stories

- Afghanistan
- Algeria
- Angola
- Armenia
- Argentina
- Australia
- Austria
- Belarus
- Bolivia
- Brazil
- Bulgaria
- Cameroon
- Canada
- Chile
- China
- Colombia
- Costa Rica
- Croatia
- Cuba
- Cyprus
- Czechia
- Ecuador
- Egypt
- El Salvador
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- Israel
- Italy
- Japan
- Jordan
- Kazakhstan
- Kenya
- Kyrgyzstan
- Lebanon
- Libya
- Malta
- Mexico
- Netherlands
- New Zealand
- Nicaragua

- Nigeria
- North Korea
- Oman
- Palestine
- Peru
- Poland
- Portugal
- Romania
- Russia
- Saudi Arabia
- South Africa
- Spain
- Sri Lanka
- Sudan
- Sweden
- Syria
- Tunisia
- Turkey
- Uganda
- Ukraine
- United Arab Emirates
- United Kingdom
- United States
- Uruguay
- Uzbekistan
- Venezuela
- Yemen
- Zimbabwe

Our people

- Amsterdam
- Barcelona
- Berlin
- Bogota
- Bristol
- Cape Town
- College Station, Texas
- Edinburgh
- Glasgow
- Kampala
- London
- Montevideo, Uruguay
- New Orleans
- New York
- Paris
- São Paulo
- Stroud, UK
- Tblisi
- Turin
- Yerevan

oD in numbers

2,920 stories published

15.8m page views

9.88m users

3min 25s average time on page

1.47m social media shares

367,457 social media followers

2.01m video views

178 times our work was followed up by major media outlets

9 languages published on our site

Exposing misinformation

Right before COVID-19 got everyone talking about health misinformation, we published the results of a nine-month, 18-country investigation into 'dangerous' health misinformation targeted at vulnerable women and girls. We believe this was the largest-ever international media investigation into sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Deploying data journalism, follow-the-money analysis and undercover work across several continents, we revealed how hundreds of unregulated, anti-abortion 'crisis pregnancy centres' – backed by powerful US religious conservatives – were giving vulnerable women false and misleading information about their

Belgian MEP Hilde Vautmans:
'We see that conservative powers want to turn the clock back'

Our undercover work revealed numerous examples of unregulated, anti-abortion 'crisis pregnancy centres' giving vulnerable women false and misleading information

reproductive choices. There are thousands of these centres in the US, but no one had mapped their global reach – until we did.

A 'crisis pregnancy centre' may sound like a good thing, but they are not always what they seem. Some in the US have been criticised for presenting themselves as neutral health facilities while hiding their real agenda: to prevent abortions and promote religious ideologies.

We found women being falsely told that abortion increases risks of cancer and mental illness, and that hospitals will refuse to treat medical complications from abortion. We found staff encouraging women to delay emergency contraception, and claiming that abortion increases women's risks of abusing their children. Some centres even presented themselves online as pro-choice support groups – or abortion providers. And staff at some centres offered ultrasounds without medical qualifications.

Our team zeroed in on one of the pioneers of these controversial US centres: the Christian conservative group Heartbeat International.

Vesna Pusić, one of the Croatian lawmakers who have called for an inquiry following openDemocracy's investigation



international media outlets
picked up our findings

(Heartbeat also had close links to Trump's White House). We analysed ten years of Heartbeat's financial filings. This allowed us to map all its international 'affiliates'. Then we deployed our own global network – of feminist investigative journalists.

We sent undercover reporters to centres in five countries, visiting in person or calling hotlines. Our reporters heard strikingly similar false or misleading claims about abortion's health impacts. We expanded our scope, working with undercover journalists in another 13 countries. Along the way, we trained more than a dozen women and LGBTIQ people in the skills of investigative journalism.

When we released our findings, dozens of lawmakers from across the political spectrum in Europe called for urgent action. Croatian MPs from nine parties demand an inquiry, a Ugandan health commissioner condemned the centres and officials in Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico and South Africa pledged to investigate. Our stories were picked up by 70 media outlets internationally, we were shortlisted for a 2020 British Journalism Award, and we were invited to give evidence to the European Parliament. We are now working with partners to scope out strategic litigation and other strategies to combat this harmful misinformation globally.

March for the decriminalisation
of abortion in Quito, Ecuador,
on 20 September 2019



FOCUS

Behind the news

Alongside our groundbreaking investigations, we've continued to produce fresh analysis of the crisis in democracy across the world. Editor Adam Ramsay spent February interviewing people across central Europe in order to better understand the sentiments driving voters to the far Right, with his resulting series of articles and videos read and watched hundreds of thousands of times. Meanwhile openDemocracy's founder Anthony Barnett produced a long read on globalisation and the pandemic, praised by experts across the world.

In the UK, 2019 ended with a landslide win for Boris Johnson's Conservatives, allowing Brexit to be pushed through. In 2020, drawing on our work

Supporters of left-wing party Dialogue at a demonstration in Budapest

over many years, we published unique analysis of British politics. Academic Jeremy Gilbert's series on Labour Party strategy, which made a comprehensive case for the party to support proportional representation (PR), was picked up in The Guardian and has been credited for playing an important role in delivering record support for PR within the party. Adam Ramsay's 'Why does England vote Tory?' was read 90,000 times.

Big tech vs openDemocracy



Health secretary Matt Hancock signed off the controversial NHS data deal with US tech firms in March

If you haven't heard of 'spy tech' firm Palantir, it is best known for powering the CIA's operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Its founder Peter Thiel, a Trump-backing Silicon Valley billionaire, once wrote: "I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible." Palantir's tech has been accused of creating racist feedback loops in US 'predictive policing' software. Its own staff criticised its role in Trump's brutal deportations of undocumented migrants.

So when we discovered that, in late March, the UK government had quietly given Palantir, along with other big tech firms, 'unprecedented' access to patient data collected by England's National Health Service (NHS), we started asking questions.

After it refused to comply with Freedom of Information requests, we sent the government a legal letter demanding that the government urgently publish details of the corporate deals sitting behind the so-called 'COVID-19 datastore'. We said that if it didn't, openDemocracy, supported by tech-justice startup Foxglove and represented by Leigh Day, would sue.

The government had released virtually no details of the deals – so we didn't know what access the firms had to patient data, what protections there were to keep our data anonymous, and if or when firms would be required to delete the data after the work was done.

We also raised serious concerns about whether the companies – Amazon, Microsoft, Google, Palantir and a small AI outfit called Faculty, which has strong links to the Boris Johnson administration – had earned the public trust necessary to be working with England's widely treasured NHS. Should they have access to details about millions of citizens' private lives?

While battling over the nuts and bolts of transparency and contracts, we also explained why they matter, in thoughtful articles



such as 'Will Big Tech save the NHS – or eat it alive?', 'We mustn't let Silicon Valley thinking infect our NHS' and 'We must be told what Cummings and Palantir are doing with NHS data'.

More than 14,000 people backed our call for transparency and the story was heavily covered across international media: Sky News, CNBC, Bloomberg, Vox and the New Statesman (twice). All that pressure forced a massive disclosure: hours before we were due to sue, the government caved and released all the contracts.

We immediately published them in full – and started poring over the details. It turned out that, far from the assurances we had been given, these deals were not 'short-term, emergency COVID measures'. The contracts also revealed that our pressure had forced the government to introduce new clauses to stop tech firms profiting from intellectual property generated from our health data.

In December, suspecting it was getting ready to strike new, long-term deals with Palantir and others, we wrote to the government again, warning that we would challenge any such move in court. Instead of giving the assurances we asked for, the government pushed a two-year, £23m deal with Palantir through, in an effort to avoid our legal challenge. We didn't leave it there, though. Visit our website to see how we won the ensuing case in 2021.

Palantir chairman Peter Thiel holds hands with US president Donald Trump at a meeting in 2016

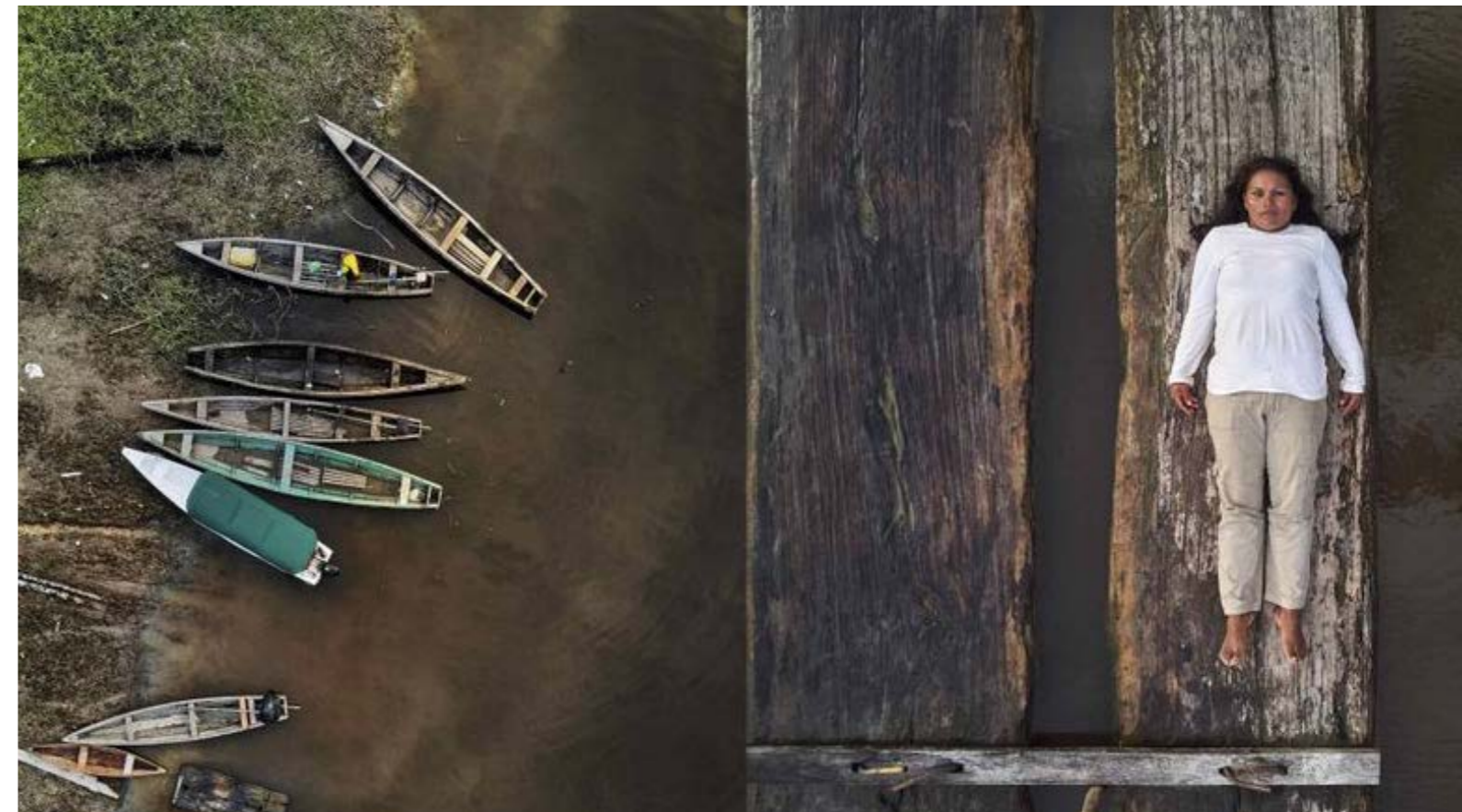
14,000

people backed our call for transparency

Heroes of the rainforest

We're best known for our words, but *democraciaAbierta*, our Latin America project, has helped to change that with its 'Rainforest Defenders' series. This combined stunning video and photography with reportage that centred the voices and perspectives of communities in the Amazon that are battling to defend their way of life. In 2020, it won two major awards. Pablo Albarenga won the international Sony Photographer of the Year Award, and the series as a whole won a Gabo prize – the most prestigious Latin American journalism award.

Photographs: Pablo Albarenga



Widening the pool

One of our core goals is to build skills and capacity in groups under-represented among journalists – because if we change the media, we change the debate. In 2020 our feminist 'Tracking the Backlash' project expanded its programme of six-month fellowships for young women and LGBTIQ journalists.

The team worked with a total of eight fellows (in Armenia, Georgia, Italy, the UK, the US, Uganda and Kenya). Not only were they involved in all of our most impactful Tracking the Backlash projects, but they also led other special investigations in 2020, supported by or working with senior editors to produce them while developing their own skills.

These included an investigation in Armenia by Tatev Hovhannisyan which exposed [US taxpayer funding](#) of a website pushing COVID-19 misinformation. The story was picked up by more than 70 other media outlets in Armenia, the US and across the world, including The Guardian, [Voice of America](#), [BBC Russia](#) and [AFP](#).

It also led to material impact: after we published our story, the US ambassador to Armenia was quizzed about it on television and announced that the embassy would no longer be funding the website in question. She also acknowledged that it would be 'tightening up' its grant-making procedures because of our investigation.

Another fellow, Lou Ferreira, discovered that dozens of US anti-LGBT groups were [using AmazonSmile](#), Amazon's US donations platform, to fundraise, despite its rules against promoting intolerance, hate or discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

This story was also widely picked up globally: cited more than 50 times by other media, including by several new outlets that hadn't previously picked up our work, such as NBC and The Hill in the US.

24

young journalism students completed their training



Meanwhile, our North Africa, West Asia project completed the training of 24 young journalism students from Yemen, Syria, Lebanon and Egypt. In partnership with Global Check Newsroom, they took part in a series of 11 webinar sessions, focused on equipping them with the best cybersecurity practices for journalists, improving their research and open-source intelligence skills, and building up their understanding of data and investigative journalism, as well as of misinformation and disinformation during the coronavirus pandemic.

Three of these students submitted and published articles in Arabic on openDemocracy, and produced two infographics and a short social media video. The project also recruited three young women from Yemen, Egypt and Lebanon, and a young man from Syria, who joined us as interns in mid-December and will be with us until April 2021.

Our 2020 fellows included (clockwise from top left): Claudia Torrisi, Inge Snip, Joni Hess, Lou Ferreira, Tatev Hovhannisyan and Khatondi Soita Wepukhulu

COVID cronyism



British journalists tend to avoid talking about corruption. During the 1990s government of John Major it was ‘sleaze’, now we have ‘cronyism’ – a term which has, thanks to our journalism, drawn international media attention, sparked questions in Parliament and dragged Boris Johnson’s government into court to defend its habit of handing out lucrative public contracts to donors and close personal associates of ministers and special advisers like Dominic Cummings. Our reporting set the agenda on this issue, exposing how cronyism has wasted taxpayer money, delivered often shoddy or failing services, and enabled gross abuses of power.

In May 2020 we published our first big story on these murky affairs. It went to the heart of the matter: the secretive mechanism that [Deloitte](#) ran to hand out huge contracts for personal protective equipment (PPE).

This had direct political impact. Rachel Reeves, the shadow Cabinet Office minister, wrote to her counterpart in government, [Michael Gove](#), demanding explanations.

Next: we went on to reveal how firms with close ties to the British government had received contracts without competition. In July we broke, alongside [The Guardian](#), our biggest contracts story of all: [Public First](#), a PR firm run by long-standing allies of Gove and Cummings, had landed a £840,000 contract to run focus groups, bypassing the normal procedures. Shadow Cabinet Office minister [Helen Hayes](#) raised the case in Parliament, and the story also prompted a successful legal challenge from the [Good Law Project](#).

By then it was clear that COVID Test and Trace was not working well. Less well known was that large parts of this NHS-branded service were in fact run by the private companies Serco and Sitel. [We broke the news](#) that both were to have their contracts renewed, despite having demonstrated their inability to do the work effectively.

In August another [Guardian collaboration](#) revealed a staggering £56m spent on consultancy firms during the pandemic, mostly without the work being put out to tender. Meg Hillier MP, chair of the parliamentary committee that scrutinises Whitehall spending, said she would write to the government about the contracts: she believed that the lack of transparency was “sloppy”.

Still in August, we broke one of our [biggest scoops of the year](#): the first public details of Operation Moonshot, the government’s mass-testing project. One senior source tasked with implementing the plan called it “crazy”, and the scheme was greeted with derision when health secretary [Matt Hancock](#) announced it in Parliament.

In November the National Audit Office itself followed up two of our scoops in a [highly critical report](#) into government procurement.

Throughout, we built partnerships to ensure that our findings reached big – and diverse – audiences. We worked closely with [The Guardian](#), but we also shaped the debate across the political spectrum: our stories were reported by the BBC, [The BMJ](#), the Daily Mail, the Daily Mirror, Metro, the i, [The Independent](#) and [The Times](#), among many others. Our work was also [shortlisted for Investigation of the Year](#) in the British Journalism Awards.



Favours for friends?

£56m

spent on consultancy firms during the pandemic



FOCUS

People, planet and power

If you think economics is just about dollars, pounds and percentages, the ourEconomy project takes a much broader view of the way we live together: putting people, planet and power at the centre of the debate about our economic future.

In its first full year, ourEconomy revealed how top law firms were preparing to cash in on the pandemic by helping corporations sue states, claiming compensation for measures introduced to protect people from COVID-19 and its economic fallout. The story was translated into five languages, reported in *The Guardian*, and sparked an open letter by more than 600 civil

society organisations, including Oxfam, Friends of the Earth and the International Trade Union Confederation.

We also scrutinised the economics of government support for businesses and citizens during the pandemic, demonstrating how the result would be – no surprises – more money for those who were already rich, less for those who were already poor.

A heated conversation flared across the global climate movement after we published an article criticising the idea of ‘Deep Adaptation’, which suggests that accelerating climate and ecological destruction has made societal collapse inevitable. Leading academics, environmentalists and journalists, shared the article widely on social media.

‘I made a fortune predicting the last crisis’ wrote a former trader who made millions from the 2008 financial crisis, warning how others will profit from the COVID pandemic – triggering follow-up discussions in *The Guardian*, *Daily Express*, *Huffington Post*, BBC Radio 4 and ITV’s flagship programme *Good Morning Britain*.

Other highlights include an op-ed which helped persuade the *Financial Times* editorial board to endorse the ideas of basic income and a wealth tax. We tackled geopolitics, too, in a long read that grappled with the pandemic-driven shift in power from West to East, leading to the rise of a more authoritarian variant of capitalism around the world. The essay was read more than 70,000 times and was the subject of an article in the *Scientific American* magazine and a follow-up article in *The Guardian*.



FOCUS

Going live

As the pandemic hit, we rapidly span up a programme of weekly live video discussions, in response to the cancellation of in-person live events. Thousands have tuned in to watch the Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz,

Tory peer Sayeeda Warsi, Labour MP Dawn Butler, human rights lawyer Helena Kennedy, feminist activist Mona Eltahawy, journalist Paul Mason, high-profile thinkers such as Achille Mbembe, Chantal Mouffe and Ann Pettifor, and many more.



Vulnerable in the pandemic

We haven't just exposed the failings and misbehaviour of governments and big business. We've also amplified the voices of ordinary people suffering during the pandemic.

Sometimes we get direct evidence that our reporting has been the catalyst for people in power to change things they control. When members of the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education viewed our video 'Sedated and abandoned: the struggle to care for my disabled daughter during lockdown', we were told: "One of them got quite emotional and actually said: 'What the hell are we going to do about these vulnerable children!'"

A health worker wears a face mask while checking a pregnant woman at Monica Pretelini Hospital, Toluca, Mexico

We've shown how individual stories like this are repeated around the world. We identified hundreds of cases of "traumatic" childbirth experiences during the pandemic across at least 45 countries – contravening World Health Organization guidance, and in many cases breaking national laws, too.

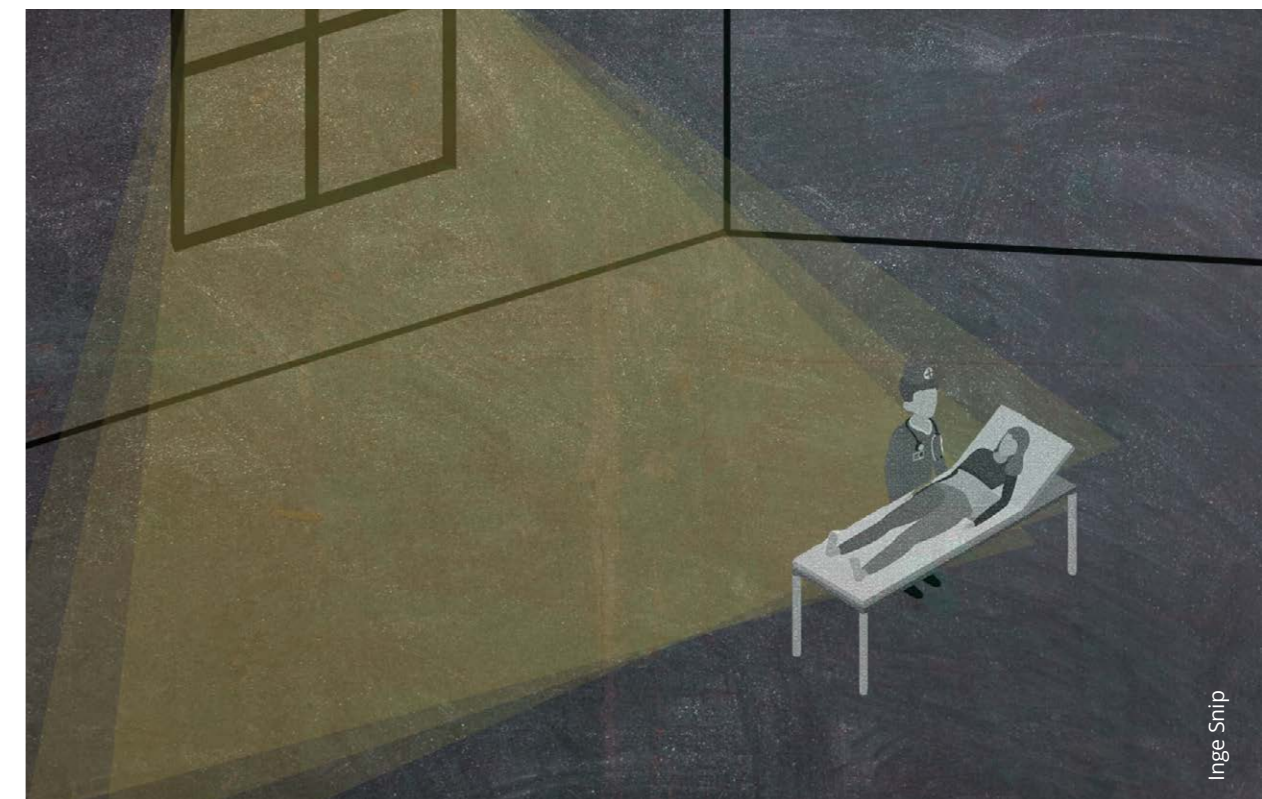
Dozens of women across Europe, Latin America and Africa told us their first-hand experiences of:

- forcible separation from newborns and bans on breastfeeding;
- pain medication withheld;
- procedures performed without their consent, including caesarean sections, induced labour and episiotomies;
- birth companions banned from hospitals – in some cases even after other lockdown restrictions were lifted.

In at least six countries, pregnant women died after COVID-19 restrictions reportedly prevented or delayed access to emergency services. And in many countries, procedures were performed against women's wishes and without the medical justification that the WHO guidelines and national laws require.

Top doctors and lawyers from around the world condemned the "shocking and disturbing" treatment we found.

Around the world women say they've had to give birth 'alone', without support from partners, friends and relatives, because of COVID-19 restrictions





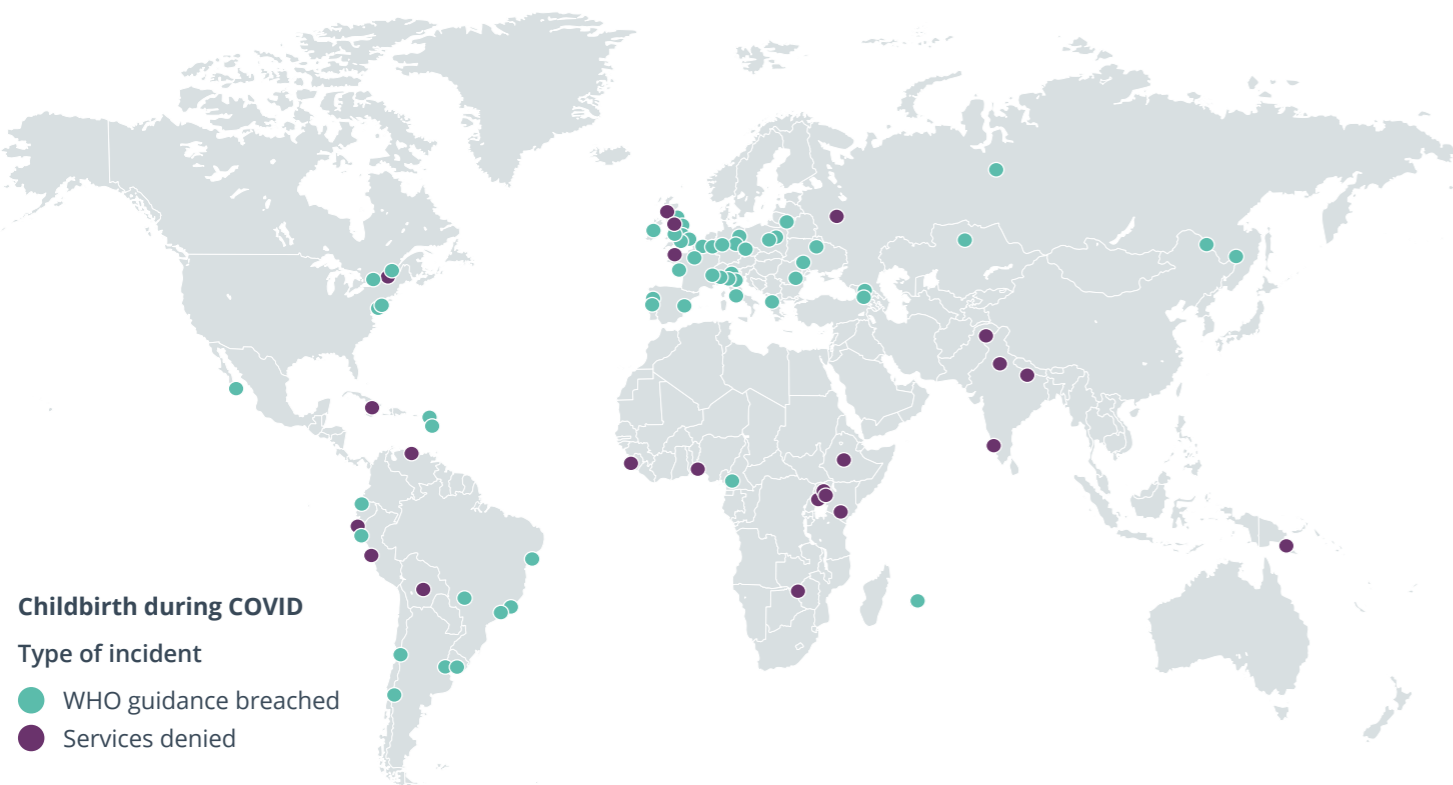
Commuters on the London Underground the morning after the British government announced lockdown

As well as following our own reporting agenda, we also asked for reports of abuse or mistreatment of women in childbirth, and built an interactive map to share these global stories. The project won another place on the shortlist for the British Journalism Awards.

We paid attention to the under-reported exploitation of key workers, too. During the pandemic workers such as nurses, care workers and delivery drivers have emerged as national heroes. But in many countries these workers are often low paid, from marginalised communities and struggle to receive fair and legal treatment at work.

We found this problem lurking right at the heart of British power, with cleaners forced to work in the empty Houses of Parliament during the first lockdown. Cross-party MPs including Clive Lewis shared the story on Twitter.

Indeed, we revealed that 'lockdown' was a fiction for countless workers, with their bosses legally permitted to force them to continue to go in to dangerous workplaces. We reported that thousands of low-paid call-centre staff were still being forced to work in "dangerous" jobs – even in centres where colleagues had already died or fallen ill with coronavirus. Layla Moran MP wrote to business secretary Alok Sharma raising concerns from this story.



FOCUS

And the winner is...

Our silverware collection in 2020 didn't end with the Sony Award and Gabo prize for 'Rainforest Defenders' (see pages 14–15). 'Democracy for Sale: Dark Money and Dirty Politics', written by our UK investigations editor Peter Geoghegan and drawing on openDemocracy's trailblazing 'dark money' work since 2017, has been a Sunday Times bestseller, an Observer Book of the Week, and widely lauded across the UK and Irish press. For many months, it has given Peter the chance to talk about our journalism across the airwaves, from the BBC to the influential Talking Politics podcast, as well as in the London Review of Books, Guardian, Irish Times and countless others.

We were shortlisted in three categories for the British Journalism Awards: our work on COVID cronyism for Investigation of the Year, our coverage of childbirth during the pandemic for the Health and Life Sciences Award, and our revelations about anti-abortion misinformation for the Foreign Story of the Year. And Peter Osborne was shortlisted for the Orwell Prize for Journalism for his work in openDemocracy (after larger UK outlets rejected him).

Beyond the UK, we were shortlisted for the prestigious independent Russian Redkollegia media award in the opinion section, for Ilya Budraitskis's piece on George Floyd.

We did more than report the problem, though – we came up with solutions. Caroline Molloy's 'How to fix the UK's safety net: a four-point plan' was cited in a Labour Party policy package and Frances O'Grady, head of the TUC, backed it. And we reached out directly to our readers with a petition calling on the chancellor to make an immediate liveable income guarantee, gaining 20,000 signatures.

We also were among the first to highlight the harm that the pandemic was causing to another vulnerable group: children. We reported how the 'stay at home' guidance in the UK could be linked to an increase in child deaths. Headteachers in two large Academy trusts in London cited our reporting in newsletters, warning parents of risks to ill children.

One of our very first articles about lockdown was a personal article from our UK Investigations Editor, Peter Geoghegan, about the stress that social distancing can place on mental health. Many people now recognise this, but it was a brave piece that prompted The Times to ask him for a follow-up.



US ultra-conservative dark money



Protest in support of LGBT rights in Italy, where same-sex marriage and adoption by same-sex couples are still illegal

Just before the US election we released a [major series](#) which revealed how US ultra-conservatives, many closely linked to the Trump administration, had spent at least \$280m of 'dark money' on aggressive anti-rights campaigning across the world.

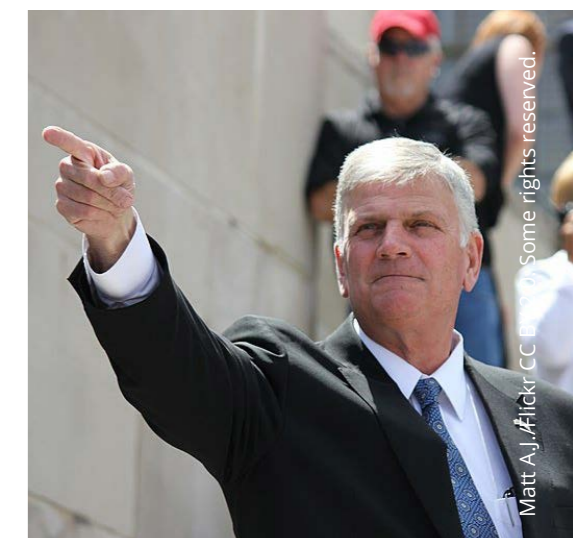
We were the first media organisation ever to release a [dataset](#) detailing the global scale of the links between US Christian Right groups and campaigns against the rights of women, LGBTIQ people and other groups across five continents. Our revelations showed how, for example, an organisation led by one of Trump's top lawyers backed the landmark legal case that ushered in Poland's draconian new anti-abortion laws, described by the Council of Europe as a "grave human rights violation".

We teamed up with Mother Jones to generate widespread coverage of our findings in the US, and our stories also travelled across the world, including in Time, Reuters, The Guardian, the Daily Mail, the EFE Spanish newswire, Al Jazeera, Euronews, Euractiv, Brussels Times, Deutsche Welle, Newsweek Poland, Clarin (Argentina's largest newspaper) UOL Notícias (Brazil) – and more than 120 outlets globally.

\$280m

of 'dark money' spent on aggressive anti-rights campaigning across the world

Franklin Graham, president of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, in 2016



Women's rights activists protest in Poland during the COVID-19 pandemic

Racial justice and the US elections

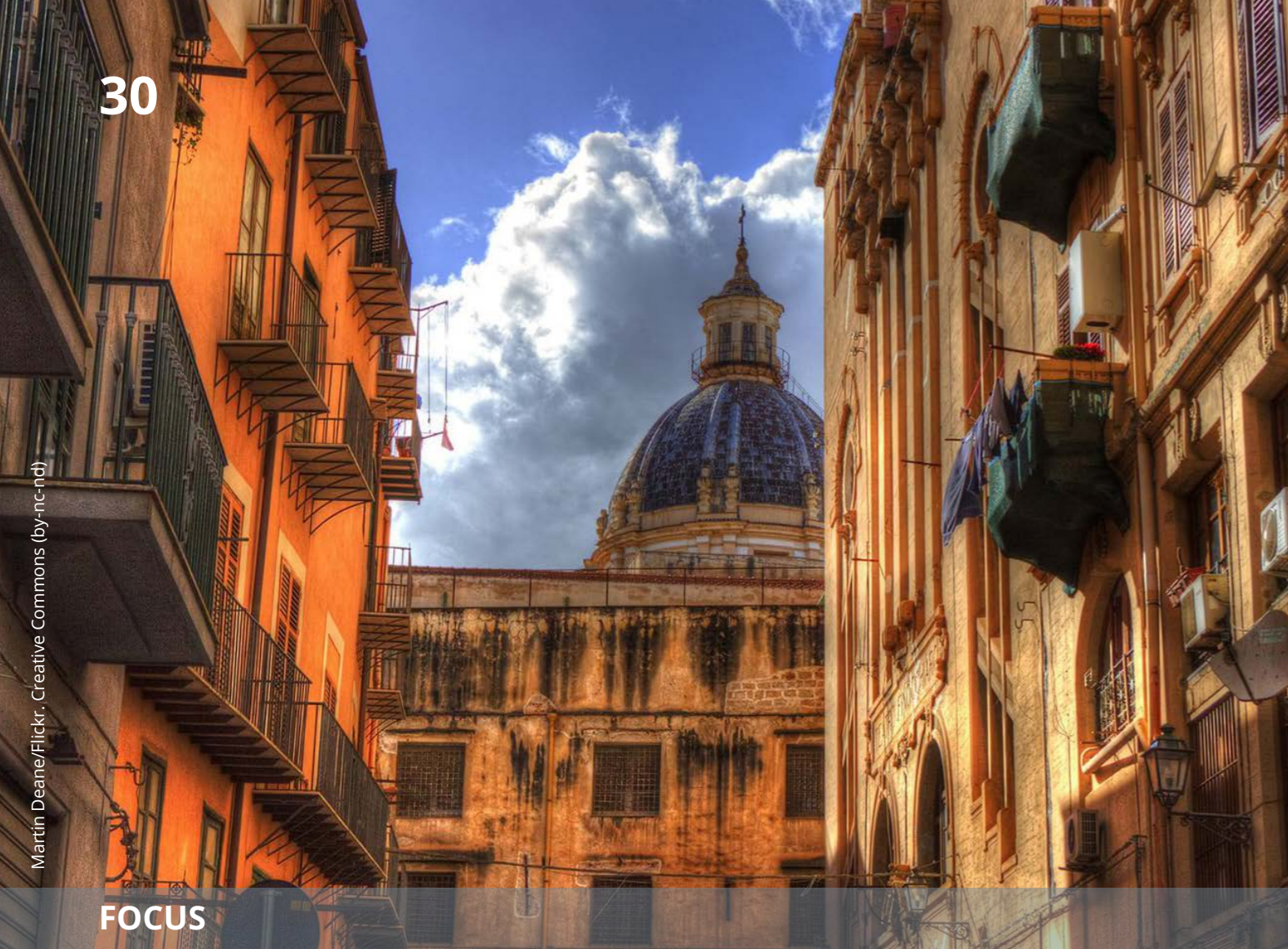
Throughout 2020, as Black Lives Matter swept across the US and the world, we kept focus on the grassroots movements at its vanguard. We interviewed the progressive activists, politicians and journalists who helped us explain the complexity of what was happening on the ground. And we showed how this groundswell was shaping both the US election campaign, and intersecting with wider political conversations on climate, health, poverty, gender equity and much more.

For the November US election itself, our editor-in-chief, Mary Fitzgerald, went back to her family origins in Louisville, Kentucky – where Breonna Taylor had been shot earlier in the year – and travelled through the contested states of Ohio and Pennsylvania. Together with our New York-based editor Aaron White and Louisiana-based journalism fellow Joni Hess, they produced vivid, multimedia reporting that lifted voices demanding racial and social justice, and probed Trump's increased support base. These themes all carried through our coverage of the critical Senate race in Georgia, too, which featured interviews with trailblazing leaders such as Nsé Ufot of the New Georgia Project – and podcasts profiling both the ongoing struggle over voting rights, and the reactionary backlash that fuelled the storming of the Capitol.

There were a lot of firsts for openDemocracy during these elections. We trialled a live blog, produced vivid multimedia from the ground, and published commentary from influencers in the US and across the world. Thanks to all that, we dramatically increased our US readership and social media engagement. In 2021, we'll be exploring and testing ways to further build our profile and readership through more focused and strategic coverage of the US.



A New Georgia Project volunteer handing out pasta, gloves and scarves at a polling station in Pittsburgh, Atlanta



FOCUS

What is exploitation, and what do we do about it?

The Beyond Trafficking and Slavery team continued to challenge conventional judgements about the abuse of workers and the movement of people across borders. In the collection 'The Fight to Decriminalise Sex Work', sex workers themselves got a rare chance to express their diverse views on how government policies affect them – and how, paradoxically, policies aimed at stopping human trafficking can also enhance policing and surveillance of sex workers as a means of rescuing them.

The team marked the 20th anniversary of the international anti-trafficking laws known as the Palermo Protocols with a thorough debate of two of the most fundamental questions: what is exploitation, and are the supposed cures for human trafficking worse than the disease itself?



FOCUS

The unwanted gold mine

For years our Eurasia project, oDR, has been following the story of a gold-mining project in Armenia that local residents oppose but some foreign governments support. This year two major scoops revealed the depth of foreign interference in the scheme.

We used Freedom of Information rights to obtain an internal European Union report asserting that the US and UK had put pressure on the Armenian government to listen to the arguments of Lydian International, the company hoping to exploit the gold mine, in the dispute with local people.

Freedom of Information also allowed us to read internal correspondence from the British Foreign Office that showed how it had closely monitored the public campaign against the mine – and indicated it had lobbied Armenia's old-regime government on Lydian's behalf during a previous gridlock in 2013. The story was widely covered in Armenian media and on the BBC's Russian-language service.

Lydian International's fortunes were on the turn, though: in August, we revealed in another scoop that European Bank for Reconstruction and Development was going to terminate its investment in the mining project.

The secrecy machine



We revealed that the Cabinet Office runs a secretive unit that screens Freedom of Information requests from journalists and researchers, often on matters of serious public interest

Normally journalists are criticised for making the story about themselves. When it came to our investigation into the British government's chilling approach to Freedom of Information, however, it proved a very effective strategy.

In November 2020, we revealed that the Cabinet Office runs a secretive unit that screens Freedom of Information (FOI) requests from journalists and researchers, often on matters of serious public interest. We discovered that this 'Clearing House' instructs Whitehall departments on how to respond to FOI requests and shares personal information across government in ways that experts believe could break the law.

Freedom of Information matters to anyone who wants to know what their government is doing. In itself, though, it can be an abstract, technical issue. But our revelation was based on a very human discovery by our FOI expert reporter, Jenna Corderoy: she found that she herself, and her role at openDemocracy, had been the subject of discussion in Clearing House emails. This threw into question the government's commitment to a basic principle of the FOI Act, which is that the response to an FOI request should be 'applicant-blind': it should not matter who is asking.

In subsequent follow-up stories, we revealed that the Clearing House had blocked the release of information to an infected-blood campaigner whose father had died after being given blood contaminated with HIV and hepatitis. We also reported on how local councils had been told by the housing ministry that it was "appropriate" to block the release of information about buildings that still have 'Grenfell'-style cladding, more than three years after



the tragic Grenfell Tower fire claimed 72 lives. Our FOI work sparked questions in Parliament and numerous calls for a full investigation, including from former members of the British government.

Our reporting was picked up by numerous media outlets across the political spectrum including the [BBC](#), [The Guardian](#) (twice), [The Observer](#), [The Times](#), the [Daily Mail](#), the [Daily Mirror](#) (twice), [The Independent](#), the [Press Gazette](#), [The Scotsman](#), Politico and others.

With our revelations about the Clearing House we sparked an editorial in [The Times](#) the day after publication: it accused the government of “cynically frustrating freedom of information requests.” The [Financial Times](#) ran an opinion piece heavily citing our work. Lord Clark, one of the key architects of the original FOI act, [called for a full inquiry](#), as did many other political figures. We are continuing to campaign on this issue in 2021, including through a legal case and tactical alliances across the media and politics.

Jacob Rees-Mogg was leader of the ERG when Jenna won the right to see some of its ‘research’

In 2021 we’ve achieved even more in putting Freedom of Information on the agenda: [visit our website](#) to find out.



FOCUS

People on the move

The pandemic was inevitably going to hit migrant people hard, as some countries scrambled to seal their borders and others had to cope with the unplanned return of citizens who had been working abroad. To bring these questions to the light, we formed a [partnership with Ryerson University](#) to bring the insights of their network of migration experts to a wider audience.

We reported from the Greek island of Samos, where [asylum seekers endured desperate conditions](#) with little hope for the future.

And another collection from our Beyond Trafficking and Slavery project, ‘[After the “migration crisis”](#)’: How Europe works to keep Africans in Africa’, again gave a say in their own affairs to those normally denied it. These articles brought together 17 voices from Europe and

Refugees warm themselves in a camp on Samos, Greece

Africa in a virtual conversation, with the aim of breaking through Western filter bubbles by exploring the question of migration from a more African perspective.

What anti-migration projects have been happening, and how have they affected African communities? How have African states balanced European demands with domestic pressures and priorities? And how can Europe and Africa reset the conversation on migration to the benefit of all? These were just a few of the many questions we asked our participants, and time and time again their answers surprised us and brought nuance to what is all too often a one-sided conversation.

Thanks to our supporters

We'd like to thank everyone who has donated to openDemocracy. You are helping to build a secure future for our journalism.

We hope this report shows that your generosity was well placed: that we've kept up our end of the bargain by challenging power and showing a way forward to a better world.

Inclusivity information

In 2020, openDemocracy had 56 team members, including eight 'fellows' – early- or mid-career journalists joining us for six months to develop their skills and careers

- 55% of our team were women, 43% were men and one was gender non-conforming
- 79% were white
- They lived in Armenia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, France, Georgia, Germany, Italy, Kenya, Lebanon, the Netherlands, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, Uganda, the UK, the US and Uruguay

The senior management team had four members

- Two were women, two were men
- 75% were white

We hired 21 people, including the 'fellows'

- 66% were women, 29% were men and one was gender non-conforming
- 71% were white

The openDemocracy board (excluding people already covered above) had 11 members

- Six were women, five were men
- 82% were white

We are committed to continuous learning and transparency about our performance on diversity, equity and inclusion.

Financial highlights

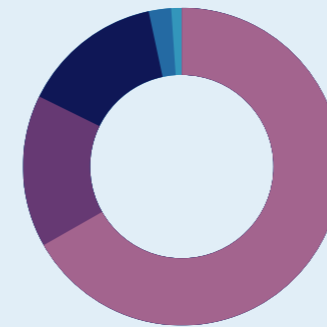
In 2020 we received

£2.27m

in income

And we spent

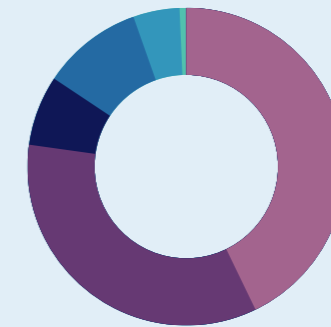
£2.21m



Revenue

1 January to 31 December 2020

Direct grants	67%
Reader donations	16%
Grants openTrust	14%
Partnerships	3%
Admin fees	1%



Expenditure

1 January to 31 December 2020

Staff costs	43%
Freelance	34%
Admin	7%
Commissioning	10%
Technical	5%
Marketing	1%

We publish a list of [every major donor that funds us each year](#) on our website.



How you can support openDemocracy

We rely on ordinary readers to give us a long-term future.
Please support us at opendemocracy.net/donate

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