LOOK 07

Notes on:

THE DEMOCRATIC IMAGE
SYMPOSIUM

21-22 April 2007 - Manchester

The Gulf Wars, 9/11, the Madrid and London bombings, Abu Ghraib, and the Virginia Tech massacre mark explosive convulsions in the currency of both the political and visual economies of representation that are redefining democracy in ways that are not yet clear.

While democracy serves as the questionable banner under which the current world superpower goes to war in foreign lands, access to the media of visual representation has undergone a radical democratisation driven by the same digital technologies that are consolidating the ability of global capitalism to project its power across cultures by economic or bellicose means.

In this context, what is the meaning of democracy? How can unprecedented access to visual means of self-representation on a global scale translate into the democratic exercise of political power at a time when this is increasingly mediated by digital technologies? Is the basic condition of the new world order of digitised democracy necessarily a creative consent to capitalism? Can a democratic republic of photography be glimpsed on the horizon?

Photography's investment in the visual economy of globalisation is now more than ever ironically obliged to recognise the inequalities of access to technologies of digital representation in the year that *Time* magazine voted `You', the citizens of a virtual world brought together by Web 2.0, as `The Person of the Year' (http://tinyurl.com/3yvxo6).

Norway's Foreign Minister recently declared that `far away' is a concept that does not exist anymore. At the same time, Stuart Hall has reminded us that globalisation has `knitted together' grimly unequal parts of the world. This being so, he asks how people are to occupy the same global space. How much difference can the democratic image tolerate?

It is questions such as these that The Democratic Image raises and which participants at the Manchester symposium (21 and 22 April 2007), and the accompanying blog addressed, each in their own way.

KEYNOTE 1 - **Pedro Meyer**

In the global context of the symposium and its accompanying blog it was interesting to note that the polar extremes of optimism and scepticism with regard to the democratisation of image-making and distribution tended to be occupied, respectively, by contributors who in some way represented the majority world and the metropolitan centres of power. As will be seen from discussion below of his contribution to the blog of a leading article, the writer and critic David Levi Strauss represented the frequent scepticism of intellectuals in the metropolitan North. Meanwhile, in his keynote lecture, the Mexican photographer, digital pioneer, and founder of Zonezero.com, Pedro Meyer explored the positive change new technologies promised to photographers like him operating in Latin America and other developing regions, far from the metropolitan centres.

For the first time, photographers, aficionados, and students of photography around the world have access through the Internet to major museums, collections, archives, and the latest work. Equally importantly, image-makers in the majority world are able to show and publish e-books of their work through websites such as Zonezero.com, bringing their work to international attention. For Meyer, such a `redistribution of access' on a global scale is helping to counter the traditional absence of important photography from around the world in the major museums and institutions that have traditionally defined the photographic canon. He illustrated this point about the potential of digital technologies for raising the profile of work by outstanding contemporary photographers from areas virtually invisible to metropolitan institutions with the case of the Mexican photographer, Raúl Ortega. Ortega's series on traditional celebrations of Chiapas was published in Mexico as a book in 1996, under the title, *De fiesta*. Out of a print run of 4000 the book sold a total of 2000. Re-released by Zonezero.com as an e-book in 2003, 24,000 copies of the book were downloaded within 30 days.

With regard to his own work, Meyer continues to be an innovator after becoming, in 1991, the first photographer to distribute a book, *I Photograph to Remember*, as a CD-ROM that combined images and continuous sound. As the first major project of the newly inaugurated Pedro Meyer Foundation (Mexico City), Meyer is making openly available a digital archive of his entire output as a photographer, including supporting contextual material, at pedromeyer.com. A retrospective exhibition, Heresies, will open in 2008, in museums at multiple international locations. Images will be chosen by each museum from a pre-selected databank of 500 images and printed on demand to suit the requirements of each venue, with exhibitions being able to be produced for $1000. The exhibition's flexibility, international scope, and low production costs are only made possible by employing the full resources made available by digital technologies.[1]

1. See Meyer's response, below, to Dowling's openDemocracy.net blog entry.

Bill Thompson, the technology critic, blogger, and an external editor of openDemocracy, opened the first panel with a presentation entitled `How the Land Lies'.

Thompson observed that the digital revolution far exceeded the impact of the introduction of the Kodak Box Brownie in 1900 in bringing photography to the masses. In doing so, it is increasingly blurring, even redefining, the distinction between professional and amateur, as well as generic distinctions, such as those between art and the snapshot or journalism, literature, and the diary.

But he highlighted the difficulties of one of the major issues raised by the symposium and its accompanying blog by stating that `we should not confuse access with accountability, and we should not automatically claim that digital leads to democratisation'. The question of power and political representation is central to any meaningful discussion of democracy, while the digital revolution is more about plurality for Thompson, as it was for Esther Leslie, in her contribution to the openDemocracy.net blog that accompanied the symposium (see below). Thompson observed that the relationship between creator and consumer has been radically transformed, with the means of image or information production within reach of a far broader range of the population. However, he reminded the audience that such accessible production is still subject to the mediation processes of the corporations that control the hosting websites.

Bearing in mind such questions of power, Thompson suggested that the terminology deployed to describe `the transformative power of digital production' is confusing. According to him, what we are observing has more to do with `equality of opportunity and digital mobility' rather than a radical rewiring of political democracy. Yet, the playing field is showing the potential of becoming more just and that, he concluded, was a good thing.

Based in Bangladesh and India, one organisation that is seeking to represent non-metropolitan viewpoints is the alternative media organisation, DRIK, and its photo agency, MajorityWorld. com. These were represented at the symposium by the Kolkata based photographer, activist, and, with Shahidul Alam, co-founder of DRIK, **Suvendu Chatterjee**. Chatterjee described himself as a `photo-worker' who believed that `Democracy has to be practiced'. For Chatterjee, DRIK's photography-based educational and workshop programmes were a means of social change through information, communication, and self-representation, a process initiated by DRIK's key role in establishing the use of e-mail in Bangladesh, as well as the nation's first human rights portal. Meanwhile, MajorityWorld.com constituted an alternative to the Western media network by representing local photographers and distributing their work globally on the Internet.

In spite of financial constraints that have hitherto limited access to computers and the Internet in the region, Chatterjee stated that:

> Cameras are not bad. [...] But the question is: For whose knowledge and for whose power? [...] Democracy has to be seized. It has be achieved. We are utilising technology to enable democracy on our own terms. [...]It has enabled us to negotiate with the West, which controls, which has hegemonised the whole power of images,

power of media. [...] It's difficult to run the Internet as it's controlled by multinationals. But we felt we must have it to enable democratisation.

For Chatterjee, therefore, the digital media clear a space for a renegotiation of colonial relations in the Subcontinent, a working through of the `colonial hangover' in Indian photography and the mediating filters of class and caste, through images and information produced from a regional, postcolonial viewpoint. By way of a conclusion, Chatterjee observed that `there is [...] a very close connection between information and social obligation. Political understanding needs to pay attention to others,[and] depends greatly on knowledge'.

The session ended with **Celina Dunlop**, Picture Editor of *The Economist*, reflecting on, among other issues, the very future of photography in the digital age by asking the question `are still images on the way out?' at a time when new technologies are creating opportunities to use multiple media together, including video, and to distribute them on the Internet. A related question was whether print media, including photographic prints, had a place in a world where the virtual image might seem to be eclipsing its physical counterpart.

Dunlop set the context for her presentation by firstly reporting on research carried out by the World Editors Forum and Reuters, in which 435 senior news executives were interviewed about the future, respectively, of paper and online news media. 40% of the interviewees were of the opinion that, in ten years' time, the major platform for news would be online. Secondly, she cited the photojournalist Dirk Halstead's assertions (*BJP*, February 2007) that video capture will undoubtedly become the dominant form of image capture and that most of the major camera manufacturers associated with still photography will be out of business by 2016.

In the light of Halstead's assertions, Dunlop believed `that people who choose to spend their spare time in cyberspace continue to enjoy still images' and that predictions of the demise of still photography were premature. Nevertheless, she admitted that, as agencies such as Magnum were already beginning to do, `it may be wise for picture libraries currently specialising in still images to consider broadening their range to offer clients video as well'. Dunlop also asked why still photography and video should be seen as mutually exclusive media when each had their strengths and meet different requirements.

Dunlop welcomed new forms of licensing and developments in digital distribution that make available a greater range than ever before of high quality images. But she also identified several challenges for image makers and picture buyers. With the unprecedented volume and range of images now available online, accurate metadata is more than ever an essential factor in the saleability and meaning of an image. As a picture editor, Dunlop was wary of the `danger of broad spectrum keywording' often employed by photographers as a sales tool. This tendency was increasingly encouraging photographers `to dispose of captions in the mistaken belief that a long list of often barely connected keywords somehow preserves the context of the picture'. She was adamant that: `the caption is not a peripheral option. It is often what makes a picture saleable. It records what, where, and when for the short and long term. In addition, the caption also saves the picture buyer the task of [...] having to read through long lists of often contradictory words, trying to work out just what the photo is of'.

Though there is an unprecedented plethora of images now available online, Dunlop mentioned

restrictions limiting picture buyer's choice. For example, bulk deal contracting on the part of some media organisations wishing to cut unit costs of images to a minimum allows them to draw their images only from prescribed sources. Such practices also have an adverse effect on photographers' earnings. Secondly, she welcomed the emergence of a non-professional pool of high quality photography now available to the media. News events are now captured with a compelling immediacy by non-professional bystanders or participants in those events. But professional picture buyers must be able to verify that ethical and legal standards are being observed in the capture and publication of such images. As Dunlop knows first-hand, picture desks have to vouch for the legitimacy of the material they supply: `They are the ones held accountable if copyright or privacy, or any other laws, are [violated] by publication'. This is why, for her, it is desirable for buyers to source non-professional images through a professional intermediary, such as Scoopt.com.

For Dunlop, one of the most significant developments in the field of copyright and licensing was constituted by the Massachusetts-based Creative Commons organisation (www.creativecommons.org). CC is founded on the assumption that a significant proportion of creators only wish partially, or even not at all, to exercise copyright afforded to them by law. With respect to photographs, a Creative Commons licence clearly signals that an image may be used for certain purposes without having to ask the permission of the creator of the work. The creator chooses from a variety of Creative Common licences specifying permitted uses and relating to three areas on which Dunlop concentrated: 1) Derivative Works. (2) Third Party Rights. (3) Attribution.

Dunlop highlighted some difficulties relating to these aspects of Creative Commons licensing. In terms of derivative works, she pointed out that:

> All Creative Commons licences, excepting Canada, leave moral rights unaffected. This means that an original author may be able to take action against a derivative work that infringes the moral right that protects against derogatory treatment. Even where derivative works are permitted, under a Creative Commons licence the photographer retains the integrity right to object to derivative work. Anyone wanting to use the picture has no idea where that particular individual's boundaries lie between acceptable and unacceptable use, without contacting them.

With respect to third party rights, though no payment is required for many uses specified by a Creative Commons licence payment may still be due to relevant collecting societies. Such a licence gives no guarantees that uses of third party content have been cleared. The legal requirement to clear third party rights is highlighted in Creative Commons guidelines, but usually in discussing other topics and with the emphasis on payment. Perhaps, Dunlop suggested, third party rights needed to be dealt with in a separate section, `with everything relevant grouped in one place, clearly spelling out that permission must be obtained and contracts may need to be signed prior to use'. Dunlop pointed out that Creative Commons licences are primarily designed for use by those outside the picture buying profession who are probably unaware of third party rights issues and potential legal penalties. In this context, most infractions occurred `through error or ignorance' and `educating people enables them to avoid problems'.

Difficulties but also opportunities also occur in relation to attribution and the burgeoning area

of photo-sharing sites such as Flickr, where Creative Commons categories of licensing are offered to users. In this respect, Dunlop believes there is room for improvement. According to copyright law an author is obliged to state their paternity of a creative work. On the other hand, Creative Commons licensing requires that attribution be provided in the manner specified by the author. However, Flickr and other photo-sharing sites focus on the user who has posted the image. Dunlop insists that the photographer is not provided with a prominent enough space on their Flickr page where the desired form of attribution might be displayed. She believes that a small redesign would remedy this weakness, allowing Flickr to be in a position to educate its large number of users in the basics of copyright. In Dunlop's view, Flickr wisely advises anyone wishing to use an image to contact the photographer directly. No exception is made for Creative Commons licence holders. Drawing on her own professional experience, Dunlop concludes it is extremely difficult to use copyright correctly without such direct communication.[2]

Dunlop ended her presentation by eloquently outlining photography's newly found vigour at a time when there is a burgeoning array of digital media readily available. She reflected on the reasons why, in the aftermath of 9/11, sales of still images soared even though television coverage was exhaustive. For Dunlop, people needed `to hit the pause button, to take stock and reflect on what was happening'. She also understood why 60% of those interviewed in the World Editors Forum/Reuters survey were putting their money on print. For her, `print provides a change of pace as well as a change of format', and cited Jonathan Klein, CEO of Getty Images, who is categorical in his assertion that `print will never go away'. In this respect, the revalidation of print images perhaps parallels their revalidation in an art context, discussed below in the commentary on Marysa Dowling's blog entry. Whether in print or on screen, Dunlop reminded her audience of the continuing power of photographs to distill historical events into iconic documents for our reflection.

2. Dunlop recommended the Design and Artists Copyright Society (DACS) website for the comprehensive free advice it provides on UK copyright law. See: http://www.dacs.org.uk/

KEYNOTE 2 - **Mark Sealy**

In the second keynote presentation of the day, Mark Sealy, the director of Autograph/The Association of Black Photographers, returned to the central question of power and the global inequalities central to any discussion of the democratisation of image making and distribution. He spoke of photography's continuing history of `visual aggression' through its imposition of a Eurocentric viewpoint that tends to `negate cultural difference' and considered democracy a dangerous word to use in a historical moment when it serves the West as a pretext for going to war.

Following up Suvendu Chatterjee's point that, in India, `a modem still costs more than a cow in the countryside', Sealy observed that less than a sixth of the world's population have internet access and that `Africa will be the hardest place to digitise'. In this context, the majority world is still largely represented in images by Westerners and often coupled to aid programmes and the work of NGOs. In this sense, the global south is still largely the subject of representation rather than the agent of its self-representation. At the same time, it is dependent on benevolent charity from the US and Europe. According to Sealy, such a hierarchical relationship can often enable the welcome alleviation of physical suffering but further disempower those who are subject to such charity.

In a similar way, democracy may be bestowed on the majority world as a benevolent gift from the powerful nations; a gift that cannot be refused and which may be indifferent to the local needs and realities of those who are obliged to receive it

It is this difficult context that an international charity like the London based PhotoVoice, which was represented by their founder- directors, **Anna Blackman** and **Tiffany Fairey**, has to negotiate

Facilitating access to training and cameras, to some of the most disadvantaged groups around the world, including the UK, Photovoice faces the specific challenges, outlined by Sealy, of being a metropolitan development organisation that attempts to complement but not displace local initiatives exemplified by DRIK and MajorityWorld.com.

Blackman stated that Photovoice started from the belief `that everybody in an ideal world has the fundamental right to represent themselves and to be heard'. The projects Photovoice undertakes aim to provide the groups which do not currently enjoy that right `the means and tools, through photography, to represent themselves' as a first step to transforming their lives. It could be argued that working to create that possibility with groups previously unrepresented or subject to distorted representation by US and European media was a profoundly democratic act. An empowering process given a boost by digital capture which, by accelerating the training process, greatly facilitates Photovoice's nurturing of local photographers and subsequent image-making by them. So positive has been the impact of digital technology on the work of Photovoice that one of its photographer-facilitators, Jenny Matthews, has added TGFD to the acronym-riddled world of NGOs: Thank God for Digital.[3]

Fully aware of the potential `faultlines' of representation between benevolent US and European organisations and those who receive their aid in the majority world, Blackman responded with the general observation that `it's a question of different perspectives. [...] I suppose that through people documenting their own lives we get a more direct view of [those lives] rather than an outsider's view'. In a practical sense, such an approach translates into Photovoice's determination not to impose an overarching external agenda on their projects but to discover an appropriate ethos for each community, in collaboration with partner NGOs, and fully aware of the context in which they take place. Therefore, while striving to balance charitable,international development and community arts priorities, each project has to address specific questions such as:

  • How are participants to be recruited?
  • What is the most appropriate form of participation?
  • Whose story is being told?
  • When to use local facilitators, outside ones, or a combination of both?

3. In an e-mail to the author of this text (9/5/07), the photographer Julian Germain reflected on his own experiences of working with groups of children around the world:

> I personally don't go along with the `Thank God for Digital' notion in relation to my work with street kids in Brazil. For one thing, the cameras are still too expensive and would be dangerous for the kids to have and for another (and this is also true of work I do with British kids) I like the gap between image making and image seeing. It provides opportunities for them to remember and think about what they photographed. The ideas they have for pictures are often lovely and I sometimes ask them to describe what they photographed. I've got some great texts this way. The instant gratification of digital kind of gets in the way of this although of course you can still have the reflection about the images.

For Blackman and Fairey the importance of contextual information to accompany the photographs produced could not be overstated, with accurate captioning being essential, among other considerations.[4] In her live-blog entry of 22 April, openDemocracy.net's Jessica Reed, ably summarises an anecdote told by Pedro Meyer at the symposium to illustrate the importance of context when giving meaning to photographs:

The Nail and the Wall

> A couple of years ago in Peru a project was organized around young kids and literacy maybe photography could, after all, be a very good tool to teach young people various skills, and help them analyse their own world. The teachers decided to give them a camera, and told them to come back with a picture which could be an answer to this question: `Who is exploiting you?
>
> One of the kids came back with a picture of a nail sticking out of a wall. The teachers were all confused: `a nail on a wall?' they thought, `how could that possibly represent who is exploiting him?' He probably didn't understand the assignment, `let's talk to him'.
>
> But one of the teachers decided to show the pictures to his classmates. To their surprise, all the kids vigorously nodded in agreement, immediately understanding the picture and what it represented. It turned out the kids were walking to Lima, miles away from their hometown, to work as shoeshine boys everyday. They would rent a nail from a man in order to hang out their kits every night, and the man would in turn take their money and mistreat them.

The Magnum photographer, **Geert van Kesteren**, was equally aware of the `faultlines' of representation inherent in US and European coverage of the Middle East and expressed his reservations in a talk based on his experiences as a photographer embedded with US forces in Iraq. Knowing that in such a situation `independent journalism is impossible, Kesteren spoke of the challenge of reconciling a US news agenda and his duty as a mediator of other points of view:

> People are glad to see a camera because they want their voice to be heard around the world. But you see US TV stations playing images with a little American flag in the corner.

At the outset, Kesteren stated his belief that journalism is a crucial `index of democracy' and photography a powerful advocate of the same. In the light of these convictions, he perseveres

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4. The importance of local knowledge in globally circulated photographs was further illustrated at the symposium in a presentation by Joseph Mathenge, a senior photographer of Nairobi's largest circulation newspaper, *Daily Nation*. Showing a photograph of a large crowd seemingly paying their respects at the funeral of the notorious criminal, Simon Matheri Ikere, Mathenge pointed out that, in fact, the large turnout was due to the crowd's wish to confirm that the murderer was actually dead.

in his attempt to act as such a mediator: `I record, I make stories, I show what is happening. [...] I wanted to give the people I photographed a voice and tell what it's like for normal people'. However, Kesteren has had to face the limited horizons for both democracy and journalism in Iraq, with only an equally limited range of his own photographs being considered eligible for publication according to the criteria of the mainstream press, his preferred outlet due to its mass audience. Only by restricting himself to the inevitably smaller, and more exclusive, reading public with access to photography books, has he been able to give a more fully representative picture of the Iraq war, in his 2005 book *Why Mister Why?*. Kesteren gave the following reason for providing text to accompany the photographs in both Arabic and English: `People have a right to know what we write about them'.

Photo of Geert van Kesteren by Peter Walker

Kesteren spoke about how he is increasingly combining his work as a photojournalist with that of a mediator, even archivist, in his current project documenting Iraqis' self-representation of their experiences of recent history. Interested in the boom of blogging and citizen journalism by Iraqis, Kesteren has also been photographing Iraqi refugees in Syria and Jordan and the photographs of loved ones, as well as death threats, they carry on their mobile phones. In this way, Kesteren is attempting to go beyond a Western news agenda and to acknowledge the point of view of those directly affected by recent Iraqi history. Beyond the inherent value of self-representational points of view, their documentary importance is more important than ever in the Iraqi context. Current dangers there make the practice of independent professional photojournalism impossible on the part of not only Western but also Iraqi photographers, among whom casualties are the highest.

Like Photovoice and Kesteren, the British based photographers **Marysa Dowling** and **Irene Lumley** also focussed on their role as mediators and facilitators. They talked about their projects, respectively, on identity within the family as well as among schoolchildren, Londoners, and other groups, and on the experience of dealing with breast cancer, cystic fibrosis, surgery, and terminal illness in relation to body image.

© Irene Lumley - Julie Slater, Beyond the Obvious

Fundamentally collaborative, the approach of both photographers' work emerges from dialogue with co-creators considered artistic equals, who are consulted during the entire image-making, selection, and display process, as well as equipped with the skills to produce photographs of the highest standard. Lumley explained that the ethos underlying her participatory methodology was the belief that democracy is about collaboration and empowerment.

One issue arising from work, like Dowling's and Lumley's, that may be community-based but exhibited as art, is its mediation by galleries and museums. The criterion of quality may often be hostile by being unstated, arbitrary, or too narrowly defined according to institutional priorities lacking transparency. The social value of artists like Dowling and Lumley may partly lie in their operating as an interface between art institutions and groups of people normally excluded from them. In this way, as artist-facilitators they serve to democratise the space of art by making it more fully representative and accessible to the participation of the population it might serve. Being photographers at the additional interface between arts practice and the mass media,

Dowling and Lumley are also able to reach large audiences with their projects. Lumley gave the example of her collaboration with Julie Slater, as part of a project exploring breast cancer with a group of women. Together, Lumley and Slater decided to make a topless photograph in the Page 3 glamour genre of Slater, who had undergone a mastectomy as part of her treatment. Subsequently published in *The Sun* to promote a cancer awareness campaign, the image received 100,000 hits in the first hour of being posted on *The Sun's* website.

Lumley had been struck by Celina Dunlop's passionate assertion on the previous day of the renewed power of still images in the digital age. Lumley herself confessed that she was ever drawn to the intimacy afforded by the photograph which, as a medium, enabled her to reflect the tenderness of her collaborations.

The Funeral of Simon Matheri Ikere - Gachie, Kenya

What steps are national institutions in the UK taking to keep up with the current redefinition of photography and to promote the most positive evolution of the medium?
Francis Hodgson, Head of Photographs at Sotheby's, chaired a panel addressing this question and stated his belief that galleries, museums, and funding bodies were largely caught on the hop and not doing enough in this respect. For him, photographic institutions no longer had a clear idea of what their purpose might be and this problem was compounded by there being a policy vacuum at the governmental level with regard to the medium.

Rapidly moving developments and related technologies had, according to him, outpaced the institutions' stifling monopoly on deciding the worth of photographs and photographers according to criteria of validation that were introverted, incestuous, inadequate and lacked transparency. Hodgson, therefore, welcomed the bypassing of institutional mediation by photography on the Internet that challenged the institutional straitjacket of what might be valuable and what stories might be told.

Hodgson did praise some institutional initiatives undertaken. For example, PhotoLondon, the consortium of London museums, is making available 19th century photographs online, on a shared site. But much more needed to be done, according to him, to make collections paid for by taxpayers accessible to them. Symptomatic of photography's general state of neglect was the fact that, unlike in France, there was no national institution for the conservation of photographs.

Responding to some of the issues raised by Hodgson, **Sarah Fisher**, head of visual arts at Arts Council England, North West, outlined her organisation's promotion of the `permeable institution' based on a threefold view, which assumes that the arts best evolve according to the following democratic conditions :

   1. The right to participate in culture.
   2. The right to freedom of expression.
   3. The expression of human and public values through culture.

The permeable institution would aim to be more responsive to artists' and audiences' priorities, often by deploying online polls. Indeed, this model aims to encourage the distinction between the two groups to become more fluid by encouraging active participation not only in the consumption but also the production of art. To use a current buzzword in current Arts Council policy, the background to such a decision to pursue a more personalised approach that is more inclusive of the public's expressed interests and wishes was outlined by Fisher. In her opinion, Arts Council funding in the past had tended to be directed at projects that challenged public values rather than at arts that were the expression of those values by a broader public. The inherent danger of such a bias was that the arts that were funded weren't `necessarily representative of the diversity of the world that we live in'. Therefore, current Arts Council priorities are (1) to continue investing in excellence but also (2) to increase efforts to broaden the range of people who engage in the arts. By Fisher's own admission investment in the latter had been `a lot less thought through'. `The Great Arts Debate' taking place on the Arts Council's website in 2007 aims to elicit the views of the general public, as well as those of artists and arts professionals,

with regard to what they value in the arts. It is hoped that this will feed into the Arts Council's current reappraisal of its role. Early findings of not only the Arts Council's soundings but also those of the BBC, encouragingly expressed the respondents' hunger for `more quality programming' rather than easily digestible entertainment.

Fisher usefully identified three main forms of public participation currently taking place in British arts institutions, starting with (1) an increased choice of programming, followed by (2) collaborative, and (3) co-produced events; with the last being the most non-hierarchical form of participation. A question raised by Fisher about increasing participation was how best to licence work thus produced so that it can serve as a public good and encourage further creativity. She cited the BBC's Creative Archive licensing project as an example of best practice in this respect (http://creativearchive.bbc.co.uk). This makes available online free clips from the archives of the BBC, BFI, Channel 4, the Open University, the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), and Teachers' TV to the public for non-commercial use, under the web page heading of `Find It, Rip It, Mix It, Share It , Come and Get It'. Fisher is right to highlight copyright as a major issue to be resolved before the idea of a democratic culture can be envisioned. The writer of this report would argue that we can only do so when a balance is struck between the rights of an author of a work to benefit from the fruits of her creative labour and public access to the use of such work for the common good and the benefit of culture. At the moment, the leaders of the Creative Commons project, such as its chair, Lawrence Lessig, argue that over-regulation by monopolistic interests is stifling just the sort of access and participation in culture that the Arts Council wishes to promote.[5]

It will be interesting to follow how the democratising aims of the Arts Council continue to develop from policy intentions into meaningful initiatives that go beyond meeting government targets relating to the number and range of people attracted to arts venues and activities. Permeability and Personalisation are current policy buzzwords being put into practice by several Arts Council funded organisations, such as Watershed Media Centre's dShed project (www.dshed.net), the Blast Theory artists' group (www.blasttheory.co.uk), the education charity WebPlay UK (www.webplay.org), and Redeye, the photographers' network (www. redeye.org.uk)[6]. These organisations provide examples of best practice not only by responding to their constituencies' expressed needs but also by finding creative ways of involving their communities in co-production, often through digital technologies. However, hard times may loom for the Arts Council as increasing amounts of funding are channelled to the Olympic Games in 2012. One consequence of a subsequent budget squeeze on artists might be that they turn more to digital technologies to pursue projects that are less dependent on funding, and hence less bound by criteria imposed on artists by the conditions of such funding.

Clare Grafik, a curator from the Photographers' Gallery was sceptical about the `mass participation bandwagon', which did not appear to her to have yet progressed sufficiently in answering fundamental questions such as: `What does meaningful participation actually involve?'.

5. See Lawrence Lessig, *Free Culture: The Nature and Future of Creativity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2004)
6. For a discussion of the Arts Council's views on permeability and personalisation, see John Knell's *Whose art is it anyway* (2006): http://tinyurl.com/yvamcl

She questioned the effectiveness of the current vogue among art institutions of audience polls to drive programming and gauge the value of the art promoted by those institutions. In this respect, an implicit issue is what role can institutions continue to play in advocating new, often difficult, work, for which a broad audience may not yet exist, but which holds importance in the continuing evolution of culture? In short, Grafik seemed concerned with the question of how to avoid the perceived danger of following trends identified by polls that might drive democratisation towards populism? Such a preoccupation perhaps draws attention to the underlying cause of what Hodgson termed a `policy vacuum'. Namely, the lack of a serious practical debate about how to attach value to art at a time when the explosion of image making technologies, particularly relating to photography, has broadened the field of creative potential, throwing into question the traditional distinctions between producers and consumers, professional and amateur, high culture and popular art.

It is perhaps just such a lack of clarity in evaluating the unprecedented range of cultural production taking place inside and outside museum walls that formed the backdrop to Grafik's concerns. She had serious doubts about institutions' ability to implement an adequate technological infrastructure and knowledge base to promote democratisation in the face of severe financial constraints resulting from expenditure on the 2012 Olympics. In this regard, she regarded the pooling together of resources between Redeye, Look 07, openDemocracy.net, and the Photographers' Gallery in setting up and running *The Democratic Image* blog as an example to follow in the future.

Greg Hobson, Curator of Photographs at the National Media Museum, also took a detached, perhaps elitist, view of democratisation by arguing for the collection and display of work, particularly art photography, that distinguished itself, often self-consciously, from the ubiquity of photography readily available, much of which, according to him, is visually uninteresting. It is probably such selectiveness and a demand for what might be termed excellence by such institutions that is playing a significant role in dramatically driving up the value of photography on the art market. So much might this be the case that, as Hobson admitted, British institutions of national importance such as his own are unable to compete in the international art market when attempting to purchase collectible photographs.

With regard to similar distinctions being made in film-making, Nick James, the editor of *Sight & Sound*, underlines a crucial debate in our time around the issue of `aesthetics versus democracy' (Nick James, *Sight & Sound*, 16.2: 3). In an editorial for the February 2006 issue of the magazine, he writes (ibid.):

> We still haven't seen the home-made video of genius once predicted by Francis Ford Coppola – though Jonathan Caouette's *Tarnation* came close. But the quantity of such material is bound to mushroom with the coming of HD cameras and the further spread of cheap home-computer editing packages. The issue for this magazine *[Sight & Sound]* will be which is more important: the enabling of the many or the championing of outstanding work?

Is a false dichotomy being set up here and by the defensive and probably self-defeating attitude of some curators towards work produced by non-professionals? Or, will the production of high-quality work in the future intensify by being able to draw from a bigger pool of image-makers?

The issue of `aesthetics versus democracy' would seem to present a crisis or an opportunity depending on one's point of view. But, we might argue that the word `versus' is misplaced here and should be replaced. Should we not view the terms on either side of it together? Aesthetics *and* Democracy might be the rallying cry for image-makers, curators, funding bodies, sponsors and, more importantly than ever, educators. For such a rallying cry to be made and heard constructively we return again to the need to re-examine our assumptions about aesthetic quality, who might aspire to it, where it might be located, and which institutions might promote it.

Hobson discussed other challenges faced by institutions such as his with regards to digitisation. Firstly, for an institution such as the National Media Museum, which prides itself on supporting in-depth collections of specific genres and photographers' work with supporting contextual materials establishing provenance is made more difficult as a result of the continuous editing process that takes place with a process of digital capture that does not produce contact sheets and negatives. One might respond that these will simply have to be replaced by the conscientious archiving process undertaken, for example, by Pedro Meyer, in making his work available online and making available supporting material that illuminates the process of its production.

Secondly, in reflecting on his own institution's transformation from being The National Museum of Photography, Film & Television to becoming The National Media Museum, Hobson sensed apprehension on the part of many art photographers, who perhaps are suspicious of a cross media approach that may not fully appreciate their specific contribution to photographic history. On the other hand, one might agree with the Director of the Museum, Colin Philpott, that it increasingly becomes difficult to treat photography as an entirely discrete entity when it shares the same technologies and platforms as other forms of ever converging communication and creativity.[7]

Paul Herrmann, Director of Redeye (www.redeye.org.uk), acknowledged that photography was now incorporated as part of the artist's palette. Perhaps as a consequence of photography's adoption as part of art practice, the range of genres shown by institutions was still severely limited, even though Herrmann pointed to evidence showing that the general public was interested in many types of photographs.

It is in this context that Redeye serves as a network of photographers in the broadest sense of the word, whether professional or not, and `turns no one away'. Aiming to serve the broadest constituency possible Redeye strives to identify its `needs, wants, issues, difficulties' and provide `good information' and examples of best practice relating to the full range of photographic genres and at all levels.

While, according to Herrmann, some institutions are limited in the types of photography they offer, new technologies are enabling the public to turn elsewhere for the satisfaction of their eclectic tastes by providing informal spaces, often online, for them to share their own work and others' with their families and friends, as well as with those of similar interests. Beyond

7. Richard West, 2007. `Interview with Colin Philpott', *Source*, 50 (Spring): 20-23, p. 20

the elitist confines of gallery walls, photography now serves as a global lingua franca. Herrmann informed the audience that, according to his research, in 2007 it was projected that more people will own and use cameras than speak English.[8] Not everything expressed in a language so widely used is of equal sophistication, but Herrmann believed that, through this wide diversity of practice, photography is, among other things, expressing `the important things: lives, loves, fears, pleasures, and pain', and that such heated exchange may well forge new forms of photographic expression that may be of significance.

At such a key point of divergence between institutional agenda, art practice, and the global digital boom in the medium, Herrmann ended his talk by identifying the need to reconcile the respective interests of institutions, practitioners, and the general public through continuing debate. He, therefore, proposed the setting up of a national photographic forum that would convene at regular dates and maintain an online presence, as an accessible platform for the exchange of information and ideas.

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8. In an e-mail (23 May 2007), Herrmann informed the author of these notes that: `I found projected figures for mobile camera phone sales this year, regular cameras over the last couple of years, added them up, and compared that to the number of people speaking English as a first or second language'.

The symposium ended with a session where panellists made closing statements followed by comments and questions from the floor. First to speak was Francis Hodgson, who made the assertion that we cannot overestimate the socio-cultural importance of photography. For him, `photography is the medium, the art, that has most changed the way we communicate. Moreover, `a lot of contemporary democratic thinking comes from photography'. He continued by observing that `the way we react to information, and the public way we react to information, has been profoundly altered by photography itself' with the medium also being at the core not only of artistic change in the last fifty years but also much societal change in the same period. So much so does Hodgson believe this to be the case that he asked the following question: `Will democracy be the same once the next generation of changes have happened in photography?'

According to Hodgson, technological revolution has always been a key feature of photography since its invention and the digital boom is but the latest chapter of `the history of photography as one continuous boom'. However, he felt that analytical engagement with the medium, particularly on the part of institutions, was currently lagging well behind the transformations photography was undergoing and effecting in society. This problem was further compounded by fear of the digital on the part of photographic institutions and, in terms of policy-making, `fear is not a good motor for decisions'. Such a state of affairs was consequently obstructing serious engagement with key questions relating to photography, such as: `Who owns it? Who benefits from it? Who controls it?'. These questions were pertinent to democracy since we can clearly observe `new technologies opening up new possibilities of expression for new groups of people'.

For Pedro Meyer, `democracy rhymes with hypocrisy' if equated simplistically to photography and without a sense of priorities. Access to photography will never equal democracy as long as access to basic needs continues to be so wanting in most of the world. The demand there for, among other things, electricity, healthcare, and water needs to be satisfied before unequal access to the Internet and digital technologies is made more democratic. Nevertheless, digital technology has enabled a `redistribution of access to information on a wordwide scale'. And information is power in the digital age, as proven by the Spanish elections of 2004. On that occasion, the majority enjoyed by Popular Party (PP) was overturned almost overnight by Spanish citizens' spontaneous deployment of internet, e-mail, and mobile phone networks to organise themselves, in alliance with opposition parties, as a mass democratic movement against the government, which was defeated by the Socialist Party (PSOE).

With regard to photography itself, Meyer expressed the view that `photography is doing exceedingly well. It's alive and full of possibilities. Its potential is enormous'. For him, the health of the medium was largely due to digital technology, which was presenting photographers with myriad possibilities for new forms of communication and expression. Meyer viewed exciting new horizons now that, in his view, we are poised at a technological threshold, where the computer is no longer the only platform for digital media. For example, he felt the iPods presented one of the most `intimate' new ways of viewing photographs and telling stories with images and sound. The validity of these new platforms as vehicles for significant work was supported by the inclusion of iPod-based work in Tate Britain's first photography exhibition, How We Are: Photographing Britain (22 May – 2 September, 2007). The serious critical

consideration of such developments by the curators, Val Williams and Susan Bright, is all the more striking against Meyer's assertion, in agreement with Francis Hodgson, that `the museum world is a conservative environment' that is not making full use of the multiple possibilities presented by digital technologies.

Paul Herrmann returned to the central questions of whether democracy might be a useful term for discussing contemporary photography and how exactly might the Internet be an empowering technology. Responding to the negative view expressed by David Levi Strauss, in his keynote essay for *The Democratic Image* blog, of the Internet's instant gratification of the alienated desire of isolated consumers, Herrmann stated that it was still unclear in what ways, if at all, the mass of individuals who use the Internet collectivise to bring about change. From the discussion which emerged between the panellists and audience at this point visual literacy emerged as a key factor with the implication that, for both photographers and viewers, increased levels of education of photography as a global language will promote a shared culture and hence the potential for collective thought and action.

Suvendu Chatterjee believed that the forging of an empowering collective consciousness through verbal and visual literacy was a priority in the majority world. DRIK's own photography projects in Bangladesh and India often promoted both forms of literacy to enable participants to represent their lives as an integral part of transforming them.

In terms of the technological innovations discussed over the two days of the symposium, it was interesting to note again the contrast between a non-metropolitan viewpoint and the scepticism of intellectual elites in the global North. Chatterjee had no doubt at all that, in spite of the reservations expressed at this UK-based symposium, `The Internet has alleviated our position [in the Indian sub-continent] to [enable us] to negotiate with the powerful holders who control democracy inside our country [India] and outside our country'. He was equally convinced that the Internet and digital technologies had enabled the survival of DRIK in some of the most poverty-stricken regions of the world.

Chatterjee's closing intervention, at the end of two days' intense discussion and reflection on continuing inequalities and the distance between access and political representation, leads the author of these notes to concur with a comment made by **Mark Haworth-Booth**. He observed that `access is not democracy. On the other hand, it is very much connected to democracy'. Therefore, it might now be possible to feel more confident talking about democratisation in terms of who is now a photographer and where one can be a photographer; about who is now eligible and able to tell stories about the world. We might also be able to observe a process of democratisation with regard to who is now in a position to communicate with or influence others in the world and address those in power.

In collaboration with The Photographers' Gallery and hosted at openDemocracy.net (http://thedemocraticimage.opendemocracy.net), *The Democratic Image* blog launched on 11 April and posed the following question:

> *Time* magazine has voted you `The Person of the Year' for `seizing the reins of the global media, for founding and framing the new digital democracy, for working for nothing and beating the pros at their own game'. As a `pro', what is your take on the democratisation of art and media in the digital age?

First to respond was **Christian Payne**, the blogger and podcaster behind OurManInside.com, who thanked Time `for the recognition' and the `corporate media [...] for making me switch off, for making me sick at heart, for making me angry'. Thanks to them, he turned to his computer `to get a bearing on some kind of meaningful truth'.

For Payne, the Internet revolution counters the mediation of Big Media, allowing `diversity' and `a deeper, wider, discourse' that has enabled him, in his words, to `make up my own mind'. Switched on again, Payne became a blogger, primarily of images. More than that, the medium inspired him to self-finance a journey to Northern Iraq in 2006, video-podcasting a photo-documentary about the Kurdish Peshmerger warriors under the title of `*Those Who Face Death*'.[9]

Payne is very clear of the political importance for image makers like him of increasingly accessible new media, which in his view `are reviving our dwindling hopes for genuine freedoms'. But he is equally clear that the only alternative to corporate mediation for the new `pros' striving for these freedoms is an alliance with other bloggers, podcasters, and other internet users, in which new work can be mutually financed and supportively criticised online. This raises the issues of the blurring between image makers and audiences, and of how cooperative might the Internet be. What structures might enable real collaboration beyond the much celebrated interactivity touted by the corporations behind the Internet? And to what extent are corporate interests foreclosing the emergence and maintenance of truly democratic internet use that might conflict with their values?

In the following entry, on April 12th, the photographic artist and artist educator, **Marysa Dowling**, recognises the unprecedented accessibility of the new communication media as facilitators of self-representation and alternative points of view. However, she is sceptical of the process of telling stories and representing history large or small, through digital images. According to her, the constant deletion implicit in their construction means that:

> There won't be any mistakes. We won't be able to go to a car boot sale and find piles of slides or negatives of someone else's family history. Although, as we know, official histories and family albums are carefully constructed and chosen to fit in with our own contemporary motivations.

9. http://tinyurl.com/2l9vyy

One might counter Dowling's concerns by observing that, due to the increased ease with which images can be produced, uploaded, archived, and distributed, the useful detritus whose survival she doubts in the digital age might be more readily available than ever before. This is a point the photographer and digital pioneer, **Pedro Meyer**, makes in a comment (12 April) to Dowling's entry. Returning to the question of accessibility, he celebrates the potential of the Internet to contest the `severe control' of traditional archives and collections by making available archives `with no editing at all'. As an example, he cites his own archive at pedromeyer.com, where his entire output as a photographer is openly available. This comprises some 300,000 images and, eventually, another 100,000 supporting documents when the archive is completed in 2008.

Perhaps implicit in Dowling's self-confessed `irrational fear' of the disappearance of ubiquitous digital images, which are increasingly `not being reproduced and printed' in material forms is an artist's question of what happens to the tactile and the concrete in the digital age. Consequently, what might the value of the art object be? Might such concerns also underlie the current nostalgia for photographic ephemera, Polaroid photography or analogue forms of photography from another era, as well as the revalidation of vernacular photography in academic, critical, and gallery spaces? Might they also underlie the rocketing prices of vintage and fine art photography prints at auction, discussed by Greg Hobson at the symposium and which, in an ironic twist of commodification, the Benjaminian aura of the object returns it to the marketplace as a fetish?

On 13 April, **Bill Thompson** further reflected on the question of accessibility and repeated Christian Payne's assertion that it is dissatisfaction with mainstream media that is fuelling `enthusiasm for "user-generated content" and "democratised media" as a means not of replacing but, perhaps, reforming the mainstream. But Thompson warns that we should not confuse plural access to alternative media with real political representation that builds new forms of governance as a challenge to existing power structures. According to Thompson, the growth of self-publishing on the Internet is good in itself and allows `the gathering of the populace in the marketplace' but we should not assume that such networking will deliver political change of itself, without the deployment of the Internet to effect broader political action in society.

The distance between mass access and `political enfranchisement' is a theme also reflected on by **Esther Leslie**, Professor of Political Aesthetics at Birkbeck University, London, in her entry of 15 April. There, she too holds up the possibility of `visual representation without political representation' and draws disturbing parallels with Fascism by citing Walter Benjamin's observation that:

> Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves. The masses have a right to change property relations; fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property.

Leslie discusses an `ornamentalising of the masses'; a process in which everyone has access to mass media of self-representation, with the fact of access itself serving to advertise `the virtues of the corporations who make it possible'. Adopting Benjamin's Marxian viewpoint Leslie is thus able to distinguish between a visually empowering process of representation that ultimately, however, leaves property relations in society intact. Indeed, seen in these terms access, in fact, reinforces prevailing power structures.

Leslie is ultimately sceptical about a genuine process of democratisation through the new technologies of the digital age. These certainly boast a capacity for individualised self-expression which is infinite. But their potential to generate `a real public space' uniting a broad range of groups beyond special interests and providing a platform for politically transformative democratic action in `physical real space' is, according to her, unproven.

Continuing in a sceptical vein, a leading article by the writer and critic, **David Levi Strauss**, appeared on the same day under the title, *`Click Here to Disappear: Thoughts on Images and Democracy'*.

Engulfed in what he terms `an enormous dust cloud of blind optimism', Levi Strauss also considers the relation between the unprecedented privatisation of image-making and its mediation by state and corporate interests that compromise agency and freedom for the purposes of influencing public opinion and stimulating consumption. Along the way, he also reminds us that while image-making may have been democratised distribution of public images is largely controlled by a handful of corporations and harnessed as stimulus to encourage consumption. From this viewpoint, `Universal access means universal complicity'. In any case, Levi Strauss asserts that, on closer inspection, access is in reality restricted to `the small percentage of the world's population with broadband internet access'.

For Levi Strauss, that digital access is not necessarily liberating is due to an accelerated flow of images that makes them more ephemeral and leaves less time for the maker or viewer to look consciously and reflect critically. Faced with the speed of such an image onslaught the numbed viewer tends to become an isolated consumer and docile organiser of ephemeral, decontextualised images rather than someone able to exercise a `critical sense' in a truly public space. Levi Strauss suggests that `to regain our liberty (and our distance), we must slow the images down'. One might qualify Levi Strauss's assertion by observing that it is the relative stillness of photographs that imbues them with such a special power on the Internet to arrest our surfing and to slow down our thought. A point also made by Celina Dunlop in her symposium presentation when she observed that still images allow a change of pace in the information flow enabling the viewer to `hit the pause button'. In this respect it would certainly be illuminating for research to be carried out on how Flickr and other photo sharing sites are actually used. In his podcast interview broadcast by openDemocracy.net on 20 April Pedro Meyer goes further than qualification to reject Levi Strauss's argument about the velocity of images on the Internet. For Meyer, the fact of an abundance of images is irrelevant in relation to their unprecedented availability through search engines that selectively channel information according to criteria we impose. In this sense, the sourcing and organisation of information literally serves the development of our interests. Hardly an unconscious process, according to Meyer.

To counter the utopian language often used to address recent changes in image making and image use, Levi Strauss ends the article by inviting his readers `to find a word other than "democracy" to describe what's happening in our communications environment'.

Eivind H. Natvig, a photojournalist stationed in South Asia, contributed to the blog on 18 April, posting an entry under the title of `The Good, the Bad and Photojournalism'. There, he returns to the issue of access by celebrating the potential for a broad range of people in the West who are now able to contribute to the documentation of contemporary history. However, joining

several of the speakers at the symposium, Natvig sounds a note of warning by reminding us of the global inequalities of access to new technologies and equipment we increasingly take for granted in our metropolitan enclaves.

Natvig then moves on to ethics, his stated `main concern' as a professional photojournalist, and questions the ethical accountability and storytelling expertise of his amateur counterparts and, increasingly, rivals, when `the greater events and catastrophes need compassionate, caring and professional individuals with a spine to tell stories without submitting to the propaganda and directives of playing parts – and not forgetting the human beings while doing so'.

It may well be impossible, or irrelevant, to gauge the respective storytelling value or veracity of contemporary professional and non-professional photography, especially in the light of the statement made by Pedro Meyer during a round table discussion at the symposium that `in essence, photography is manipulation'. For Meyer, a photograph allowed the often conflictive convergence of `a whole array of veracities' dependant on factors external to the photograph itself, so that `truth is a kaleidoscopic condition' in photography, according to Mark Sealy's intervention in the same discussion. In this sense, photographs are only ever representations of the truth, whose value and meaning is continuously chosen from a shifting range of supplementary information and contextual references independent of the photographer's intentions. Moreover, the distinction between the two types of photographers Natvig identifies might also not be useful with respect to his ethical concerns. A possible response to these would be to observe that ethics, of themselves, have little to do with photography itself but more with how the individual chooses to act in their sociocultural context. Therefore, the issues Natvig raises relate perhaps to broader self-reflection by individuals and their societies, especially those with access to advanced technologies. Which is not to say that photography is not one of many visual media and cultural practices that might draw our focus, whether consciously or inadvertently, to the broader ethical dilemmas of our globalised world.

In her entry of 19 April, the contemporary fine artist, **Mary Fitzpatrick**, highlights gender inequalities in access to funding for female artists using photography with, according to her, over 90% of annual Arts Council funding in North West England going to white male applicants. Fitzpatrick discovered similar inequalities with respect to the proportion of space afforded, respectively, to male and female exhibitors in major group exhibitions.

Faced with the relative invisibility of work by female artists, Fitzpatrick celebrates the international visibility her website enables (www.maryfitzpatrick.co.uk): `The website assures more visibility, which equals having a voice'. And it does so by obviating institutional mediation whose gender bias is particularly acute in England according to Fitzpatrick, who exhibits extensively outside the country.

In his posting of 20th April, the journalist and podcaster, **Mark Fonseca Rendeiro**, returns to the thorny issue of corporate mediation already addressed by David Levi Strauss, Pedro Meyer, Christian Payne, and Bill Thompson. He argues that it is on just such mediation which alternative media, such as blogs rely for the legitimation, possible advertising revenue, and syndication bestowed on a select minority in the, perhaps, condescending manner of *Time* magazine's `The Person of the Year' award.

Following on from Bill Thompson's 13th April blog, entitled `The Meaning of "You" vs "Us"', Fonseca Rendeiro also underlines the possible re-entrenchment, implicit in the distance between the two pronouns, between the mainstream media and alternative positions within what *Time* describes as `the new digital democracy'.

Fonseca Rendeiro's reference to his own financial difficulties as an independent journalist/ podcaster (`I can barely pay my rent next month') invites his readers to level the accusation of parasitism at media corporations, which increasingly rely on free content supplied by independent bloggers, photographers, and vloggers, the recent Virginia Tech massacre being an example still vivid in our memories.

For Fonseca Rendeiro, corporate mediation blog content and other internet media exerts a pernicious effect by simulating a climate of representative choice while, in reality, reinforcing corporate agenda. The latter filter out the urgent stories of very real inequality and injustice reported on independently by citizen journalists around the world.

But Fonseca Rendeiro's conclusion is not a pessimistic one. Echoing Pedro Meyer's faith in the democratic power of search engines (openDemocracy.net podcast, 20th April, and above), he looks to the `youngest internet users' in the belief that they are more critical in actively seeking out sources of information.

Meyer's podcast interview on the same day with openDemocracy.net's Siobhan O'Connell echoed Fonseca Rendeiro's cautious note of optimism in a discussion that gravitated towards the themes of power, access, and censorship. Using a powerful metaphor, Meyer was convinced that, even faced with the introduction of increasingly repressive legislation in the United States and United Kingdom post 9/11, everyday it was becoming harder to close down the channels of democratic communication, whose flow of information he likened to a mighty river flowing to the sea of people around it. According to Meyer, whatever obstacles were placed in its way, the river water would flow around them in an unstoppable tide that each user would be able harness to his interests through empowering technologies such as search engines.

Meyer was still worried, in the short term, by the double standards of the US superpower's exportation of an ideology of ill-defined democracy abroad, when at home there is `censorship across the board, with everyone participating in it'. Meyer sees the increasing imposition of censorship and surveillance as the result of Western citizens' complicity, through apathy or misinformation, in these processes. This is a point also made by Levi Strauss in his leading article when he reminds us that `in the United States the internet president turned out not to be Al Gore but George Bush'.

In spite of such reservations, Meyer was of the belief that the currently unprecedented access to information and images and the means to distribute them was empowering in itself, especially to those far from the metropolitan centres. In that sense, the Internet means that the distinction between far and near is increasingly blurred in the digital world.

The last posting to this date (25/4/07), by the artist/photographer **Giuseppe di Bella**, giving an account of his Abu Ghraib Series project, offered a barometric measurement of the climate of censorship discussed by Meyer, under the title `Art and Myself vs. The British Anti-Terrorist

Branch and the FBI'. It also provided a concrete response to concerns previously expressed, respectively, by David Levi Strauss and Eivind H. Natvig about the ubiquity of digital images and ethics.

© Giuseppe di Bella - Abu Ghraib Series

Driven by what he felt was his `moral obligation' as an artist, Giuseppe di Bella decided to respond both to the events at Abu Ghraib and to his concerns about the mass circulation and consumption of the resulting images of atrocity. His response took the form of a series of faux British and US postage stamps of the Abu Ghraib images, which he put into circulation by using them alongside official stamps on mail he arranged to have sent from the UK and US to contacts around the world. The stamps and the franked mail on which they circulated where subsequently exhibited as part of *Make it a Better Place*, a group show curated by the artist Dinu Li at Manchester Metropolitan University's Holden Gallery, as part of the LOOK 07 programme (www.look07.com).

For the artist, the postage stamp was the ideal format for a project that engaged with the issues of democracy, nationalism, power, consumption, and depersonalisation in a globalised world:

> The reasons I chose the postage stamp format as a vehicle for my ideas was because of its consumable, desirable and collectable characteristics. It is also a very democratic way to diffuse images and information. Traditionally, the postage stamp function is to pay tribute or commemorate the traditions and culture of a country. It is also a powerful form of communication as it travels around the globe advertising the proudest aspects of a nation, in contrast to the Abu Ghraib photographs. I was interested in how the mechanical act of licking and stamping a postage stamp could be linked to a notion of humiliation and abuse/torture as revealed in the photographs. I was conscious that this process could turn the viewer into an active consumer and make the user aware of the consumption and treatment of public images in circulation.

This could also lead the user to become an active accomplice - in some sense - to the abuse and violence. The repetitions of images on the stamp sheets are also a reflection of the depersonalisation that happens to victims of such abuse. The intimate and personal details of each account, and the consequences for the abused/tortured [are] hidden and forgotten as the images are multiplied, repeated and 'consumed' by society.

Viewed as `offensive' by British and US authorities, a parcel containing envelopes and postcards bearing the faux stamps which the artist had couriered to his US collaborator, was temporarily impounded without charge and subjected to investigation. Meanwhile, the artist's friend was questioned by FBI agents dressed in black suits and dark glasses. The incident raises the question not only of the effects of anti-terrorism measures on freedom of expression but also the pernicious repercussions of a surveillance society. The artist reflects on these: `The saddest thing […] about this story […] was that I was beginning [to behave] as if I were doing something wrong., something illegal. I felt my e-mails and my phone calls were being monitored. Somehow I felt watched. Whether this was pure paranoia or not I don't know'[10]. He also implies a new crisis of the post-9/11 metropolitan multicultural space against whose inhospitality and resulting paranoia one might only feel protected through self-censorship:

> Sometimes I wonder how much trouble I would have got into if I were a Muslim artist, or worse, if I was living in America? […] The idea of being investigated by the Anti-Terrorist Branch was somehow concerning and, although I am an Italian citizen, I could easily be mistaken for a person of Middle Eastern origin, therefore a potential threat to the authorities – or am I wrong?

In an essay on the Abu Ghraib images, David Levi Strauss reports on another, extreme, dimension of this uncanny turn towards fear and insecurity on the part of others, apart from Muslims, who might previously have sought refuge in the metropolis. Reflecting on the effect of the Abu Ghraib images on survivors of torture who have sought asylum in the US, he writes[11]:

> When they saw the Abu Ghraib images, it was like flipping a switch. It awoke all the old traumas and also ignited a new fear for their own safety in the US. These are people who came to the US for refuge from torture, so to see the American government engaged in torture shook them to the core.

Giuseppe di Bella and David Levi Strauss both identify a climate of oppressive, perhaps justified, paranoia, compounded by increasing state and corporate surveillance on both sides of the Atlantic. It is against the restrictions of such a background of democratic crisis that the potential for freedom promised by access to digital means of self-representation will also have to be gauged.

10. As a result of the conference Christian Payne and the author of this text are collaborating on a project named *Surveillance Mirror*. This explores the interface between increased access to the means of mass image-making afforded by digital technologies and the restriction through, also digitally enabled, surveillance of citizens' rights to make images in public spaces. See:
 http://www.Flickr.com/groups/surveillancemirror/ and http://www.reflectionism.com/

11. David Levi Strauss 2004. 'Breakdown in the Grey Room: Recent Turns in the Image War', in *Abu Ghraib: The Politics of Torture*, with essays by Meron Benvenisti, Mark Danner, et al. (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic), pp 87-101 (p.89)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Democratic Image debate continues at www.redeye.org.uk

ORGANISATIONS AND WEB RESOURCES

Arts Council England
http://www.artscouncil.org.uk

Autograph/The Association of Black Photographers
http://www.autograph.abp.co.uk

BBC Creative Archive
http://creativearchive.bbc.co.uk

Creative Commons
http://creativecommons.org

Daily Nation Online (Kenya)
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PhotoLondon – A portal showcasing London photography held within public collections
http://www.photolondon.org.uk

Photovoice
http://www.photovoice.org

The Prince Claus Fund
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