



OPEN RIGHTS GROUP

MEET THE ORGWELLIANS

Mayank Sharma embeds with the elite force that's guarding the UK's digital fence.

Like most good things that start with a question, it was a panel called "Where's the British EFF?" at the Open Tech Conference in 2005 that led to the creation of the Open Rights Group. The panel was hosted by Danny O'Brien, then the EFF's activist coordinator, and featured noted digital rights activists Cory Doctorow (representing the EFF), Ian Brown from European Digital Rights and Rufus Pollock of the Open Knowledge Foundation Network. An encouraging response from the attendees led O'Brien to set up a crowdfunding campaign on Pledgebank to secure enough funding to pay for a couple of members of staff. Around 600 people signed up, and ORG was born before the year was out.

The primary mandate of ORG is to preserve and promote your rights in this digital era. According to its website the group does "whatever it takes to build and support a movement for freedom in the digital age."

Wendy Grossman, who has been writing on computers and privacy issues since the early 90s, has been on ORG's advisory council since the beginning. She contacted O'Brien to get involved and he put her in touch with ORG's founding executive director, Suw Charman, when she began bootstrapping the organisation.

"ORG engages with many interests that in my case were fostered by attending the Computers, Freedom,

and Privacy conference in the US every year from 1994 onwards. ORG engages with those same sorts of topics," explains Grossman in an email exchange. "It is much easier to shape the future of a medium at the beginning than it ever will be later on when interests (and sometimes bad laws) have become entrenched. The internet is the one new medium of my lifetime, and how we shape it will set the tone for generations to come. Bad policy decisions now will weigh on our great-grandchildren."

An ORGan for change

In an email exchange with LV, Pam Cowburn, ORG's communications director, notes that it campaigns for both free speech and privacy online: "We focus on the intersection between technology and human rights. ORG believes people have the right to control their technology, and oppose the use of technology to control people." She reasons that given how much technology has transformed the way we communicate, work and live, this is a massive remit, so the group has to be selective in its approach. The group focuses on the most important issues that they can influence before deciding the most effective way to bring about change. ORG also works in partnership with other organisations, as it helps them be more effective with their limited resources.

Cowburn explains that a lot of their work involves reacting to external developments: "Our supporters rely on us to respond to the behaviour of governments, corporations and others. Following the Snowden revelations, we have inevitably focussed on surveillance by the British and other governments.

The Open Rights Group focuses on the intersection between technology and human rights

This campaign has involved challenging government legislation such as the Data Retention and Investigatory Powers Act (DRIPA) and working with other organisations to call for more transparency, accountability and better oversight. With other partners, we're challenging the UK Government at the European Court of Human Rights." ORG also intervened in a case brought by MPs Tom Watson and David Davis, which saw the High Court rule that parts of the Data Retention and Investigatory Powers Act were unlawful.

Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?

The group has produced in-depth papers on a wide variety of subjects. There's a report detailing GCHQ's mass surveillance programs, the intrusion and integration with the NSA, and the threats and risks it creates. Another one highlights the group's digital rights concerns with the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). You can also read its correspondences with the government and public functionaries on issues such as the exchanges with London's Police Commander Steve Head on the Police Intellectual Property Crime Unit (PIPCU).

Outlining the group's upcoming tasks, Cowburn shares ORG's concerns over the new surveillance bill on the horizon: "We are concerned that the government will attempt to extend its powers and bring back elements of the draft Communications Data Bill, which ORG and our supporters helped to defeat previously."

Commenting on their course of action in case this happens, she says the group will mobilise its supporters and ask them to persuade their MPs that human rights do matter: "Our supporters are key to this campaign. We know that MPs listen to their constituents, especially when they care enough about an issue to visit them in person. We've already held a lobby day in parliament to help people set up meetings with their MPs. Once the new draft bill is published, we'll no doubt be asking supporters to raise concerns with their MPs whether through emails or face-to-face meetings."

The ORGANISERS

The Open Rights Group has a handful of paid staff members, headed by executive director Jim Killock. Before joining ORG in 2009, Killock worked as the external communications co-ordinator of the Green Party. A grassroots man himself, Killock had led campaigns against the 'three strikes' and the Digital Economy Act, the company Phorm and its plans to snoop on UK users, and against pervasive government internet surveillance.

Another member of staff is project manager Richard King, who oversees technical projects. While ORG might appear to be a campaigning organisation, King reasons that because ORG campaigns at the intersection of human rights and technology, "it's natural for us to use technology in our campaigns."



Credit: Jim Killock



Credit: Sheila Thomson



Credit: Ed Lander

Top: Project Manager Richard King with ORG supporters at an ORG hack day at Mozilla's offices.
Middle: Glyn Wintle, an ORG supporter from the very beginning, mans the group's stall at LUG Radio Live.
Above: Cory Doctorow interacting with attendees at an event organised by ORG Bristol.



Top: Supporters of the Open Rights Group protest against the Digital Economy Bill back in 2010.
Above: A section of the crowd at ORGCon 2012.

King coordinates the work of ORG's community of technical volunteers, which is made up of ORG supporters who like to work on digital-rights projects they think are interesting. "We're not just a community of coders," he explains. "We encourage people with any kind of interest in technology to join in. We especially love it when people suggest new projects – and it's my job to support these in whatever way I can. I also organise occasional hack-days for the community." King points to <https://www.blocked.org.uk> as example of a project built by the tech-volunteers. The website makes the web filters of home and mobile ISPs transparent for the first time. The system is Free Software and the group is now working to deploy it in other countries as well.

ORG also taps the collective knowledge of its advisory council for guidance and expertise. Cowburn points out that the advisory council is made up of tech experts, MPs, academics and activists. "They have vast amounts of knowledge, expertise and experience and we call on them regularly to ask their advice about our strategy and campaigns, to comment on

our reports or to help us to give expert responses to media requests." It has over 40 members, including John Buckman (founder of Magnatune), Alan Cox (noted kernel hacker), Graham Linehan (writer and director of *The IT Crowd*), Cory Doctorow, Wendy Grossman and others.

Cowburn also points out that ORG also has a group of lawyers to whom they look for advice and guidance when required. She believes "legal interventions are a very effective way of campaigning for change" and highlights the work of David Allen Green, a lawyer at Preiskel & Co LLP, who acted for ORG *pro bono* in a trademark infringement case.

Circle of friends

An important proponent of ORG's outreach to individuals are the different local groups all over the UK. "Our local groups are really vital to ORG's success," says Cowburn. "They are a place where supporters can meet and get together to discuss digital rights issues. Like many organisations, we are based in London and it's easy for organisations to become very London-centric. Our local groups help us to reach out to people across the country and are invaluable in putting pressure on their local MPs."

Each local group is managed by local representatives or organisers, and ORG provides information and support to help anyone new to campaigning. The group organisers are assisted by the Local Groups Co-ordinator and ORG staffer Lydia Snodin, who helps the organisers with planning, administrative and perhaps even some financial support. The group organisers are invited to join the Supporter Council, where they can share ideas to build their groups, brainstorm event ideas and help plan future campaigns.

Art O Cathain is a software developer and local organiser of the Bristol group and has planned and hosted several ORG events in Bristol. "Organising events locally is a case of coordinating a speaker, venue, and audience. It's useful to have the Open Rights Group name because they are a well-known organisation within the tech community. For example, we recently held a talk by Cory Doctorow during the Bristol Festival of Ideas. ORG's campaigns coordinator helps out with suggesting speakers and event themes, and publicising events."

The local organiser of the Manchester group, Tom Chiverton, narrates a similar tale. "The campaigns team at HQ always seems to be available for last-minute thoughts and sharing of ideas." In addition to finding speakers, Chiverton says that ORG also helps fund larger events, as well as travel costs for the more far flung speakers.

Get involved

If ORG's activities resonate with you, the group presents several opportunities for contributions. While one of the best ways to contribute is to find and join a local group, there are other avenues. King invites all

If we allow the internet to be taken over by those who don't understand its importance, the impact would be huge



Credit: Open Rights Group

those who are technically inclined to contribute to ORG's tech efforts by joining its mailing list at <https://lists.openrightsgroup.org/mailman/listinfo/tech-volunteers>. Those with an editorial bent of mind can contribute to the internal research projects about projects that interest ORG.

ORG keeps track of developments in the UK parliament that may have an impact on digital rights issues such as copyright, privacy, and open data. When it finds something that needs to be addressed, the ORG seeks opinions and inputs for drafting consultations for the Government. A consultation is a government request for opinions on various issues, be they proposed internal guidelines, draft legislation, or simply the route the government wants to take in a particular area.

One sub-section on ORG's wiki is the Adopt an MP scheme. This page hosts a list of the Members of Parliament along with their contact details. You can read the views of the individual members on the various digital rights issues. Volunteers can update the page on the MP to include their public statements on issues that are of interest to ORG. This list helps when the groups needs to lobby MPs.

If you can earmark specific periods of time for helping out ORG, you can join the group as a volunteer working on the things mentioned on the volunteer page (<https://www.openrightsgroup.org/volunteer>). The group also offers some internship positions for students during their summer break. If this interests you, check out open positions at the internships page on the wiki (https://wiki.openrightsgroup.org/wiki/ORG_Wiki:Internships).


The Open Rights Group is funded by small grants and donations from individual supporters. You can become a member by giving as little as £2.50 a month by Direct Debit, although the usual amount

varies between £5–10 a month. Members who pay £60 a year or more can opt to receive a welcome pack and gift, which currently is a copy of Becky Hogge's *A Guide to the Internet for Human Rights Defenders*. You can also make a one-time donation via PayPal and the group even accepts Bitcoins.

Defend the future!

The issue of digital rights has never been more relevant in the UK than it is now. As companies and the government come up with more shrewd technology and laws that will invariably intrude upon our privacy, we need someone who can look after the interests of individuals. Navigating the digital minefield requires knowledge of technology, policy and law and most of us are ill-equipped to grasp the implications.

Cathain says he is a passionate believer in freedom and liberty, which is why he thinks the Open Rights Group is so important. "Because computers and technology are generally not well understood, only a small fraction of the population appreciates the significance of digital rights issues. The same problem applies to our elected MPs. Laws haven't kept up with changes in technology and it's vital that they can debate new laws such as the proposed Snoopers' Charter with the necessary understanding of the issues."

Chiverton holds a similar view: "The online world is no longer an optional part of modern life, and a functioning democracy requires a free flow of ideas and information. If we allow the internet to be taken over by those who don't seem to understand its essential character and importance, and would seek to turn it into a series of silos and blocks of bunkers, the impact would be huge." 

Above: ORG is using £1,000 donated by Linux Voice to campaign about surveillance in the run up to the publication of the draft Investigatory Powers Bill this autumn.