

Interview - Stephen McGlinchey

Written by E-International Relations

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Dr Stephen McGlinchey is the Editor-in-Chief of E-International Relations, and Senior Lecturer of International Relations at the University of the West of England, Bristol. In this interview, conducted by ISN Partner Pulse at ETH Zurich, he gives an insiders perspective on the operations of E-International Relations, discusses the impact of social media and blogging in academia, and addresses the importance of open access.

Can you tell us more about E-IR's mission? What distinguishes it from similar web platforms?

E-IR aims to be much more than a website – we're trying to create a major open access resource for students and scholars. When you visit the website, you are presented with a range of content that includes scholarly articles; book reviews; interviews with academics and practitioners; blogs from like-minded communities; and edited collections. In my view, there is no other place on the Internet where you can find such a vibrant collection of well edited, expertly written, free to view content.

But I think what really makes us different is that we're also an active community. The editorial team – which is truly global – volunteer hundreds of hours of their time each month, and the hundreds of academics and students around the world who support us kindly contribute their latest and best work for publication each year. Thanks to the generosity of this community, we can be really focused on what's best for our readership. This even extends to giving away a cash scholarship for master's degree students.

This open access spirit goes back to the founding of E-IR in 2007, when we felt that academia had largely misfired in the digital age. We wanted to create a middle ground between the deluge of unedited personal blogs and websites that soon appeared and the academic journals that had migrated online but were locked behind pay walls. So, E-IR created a new space that we now occupy proudly.

It has taken us a while to get our approach right over the years, but essentially you could call it 'scholarship with a sense of brevity', presented in a modern way without unnecessary barriers such as excessive jargon. International relations affect everyone. So, everyone should be able to understand and access the debates that surround it. That simple message, and our ability to deliver it, makes E-IR (we hope) the best forum of its kind.

Finally, I'd like to point out that E-IR is an independent publisher. We set ourselves up as a UK registered non-profit company a few years back and we sustain ourselves by selling advertising, which we keep relevant by restricting it to universities and academic publishers. So far, the model is working well.

How can students get involved in E-IR?

Our editorial team is an all-volunteer one, and the bulk of them are students. Most of them are working towards a master's or PhD degree and spend a bit of their time doing various editorial tasks with us, primarily to broaden their skill sets and meet new people. We have an open recruitment process for anyone who would like to volunteer.

Volunteering with E-IR, however, is not your typical 'work experience'. First, we have no office – everything is decentralized and we use a range of virtual tools to organize and coordinate our activities (including Slack, Google

Interview - Stephen McGlinchey

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Docs, Skype and the odd email). Second, beyond the basic tasks necessary to keep the website running, editors are empowered to set their own agendas and develop their own projects. This ranges from pursuing personal interests – and building on personal expertise – when commissioning content for the website, to having an idea for a new section and then working with the team to plan, test and build it. The result, I think, is that the more E-IR volunteers give of themselves, the more they take away from the experience. It's a place where people with a bit of initiative and drive really thrive.

In addition to volunteering, students can get involved by publishing their work on E-IR. We have a section of the website where we publish excellent examples of student essays and dissertations – all of which are considered for a monthly prize of £100 in book tokens. Although the majority of the space on E-IR is reserved for expert writers, the students section is a way for E-IR to put into practice the professor's adage 'this essay is good enough to publish', which is rarely acted on.

In 2016, E-IR will launch a new book for students of international relations. What does the book aim to accomplish and who are its contributors?

We're very excited about this! It's something we've been thinking and talking about within the team for a while.

We wanted to create a 'Day 0' text that presents the scholarly field of international relations to a beginner in such a way that it draws on the experiences we've had in running E-IR, including presenting expert academic content in uniquely accessible ways. Rather than being envisioned as a standard textbook, this will be a *transitional text*. That is to say, our audience will be fresh (or prospective) undergraduates, students on foundational years, and 16-18 year olds who wish to preview the discipline. It will also suit any general interest reader.

Last year we spoke to a number of major academic publishers about partnering with us on this project, but we ultimately decided to produce the book ourselves so we don't have to compromise on any aspect of our vision. Perhaps we're mad – it will certainly be a steep learning curve and we'll make mistakes along the way – but I think it's the right time for us to do this. We have a great bank of talent on the E-IR team – many of whom are now academics – and we've set aside a budget to do a professional job. It will be edited by me and my E-IR colleague, Robert L. Oprisko, with the assistance of a student review panel drawn from the E-IR team.

To help us prepare properly, we have been experimenting with print runs of our edited collections for the past couple of months. With most of the major hurdles now overcome and the skills and know-how built up in the team, we are developing a model that we will use for the textbook. Basically, the book will be available as a free eBook download on the E-IR website, although it will also be on sale in shops for those who want/are able to buy it. So, this will be the world's first truly open access IR textbook. We're also going to invest a lot of time and energy into thinking through how a textbook can be really powerfully presented online.

We have just recently launched a call for contributors and we will commission the authors by mid-July. The book will have 20 chapters, each written by an established or emerging expert. Linking the various chapters together, however, will be two recurring themes – 1) IR is a discipline that incorporates perspectives from the individual up to the international level, and 2) it's important in IR studies to place the reader *inside* the process of international relations, and thereby see how it works and where she or he fits in its myriad processes. Each chapter will echo these basic themes and apply them, by using clear language and examples, to the subject at hand. Our biggest job as editors will be to make sure that there is consistency on this through each chapter – and we look forward to working on this with the authors.

We will also be releasing a companion book that serves as a concise primer to international relations theory via the same model. Both texts should appear at some point in mid-late 2016.

What role does blogging and social media have in academia? How has it influenced your own work?

I'm certainly not an expert on this topic, but my sense is that social media should be seen as a force multiplier. If

Interview - Stephen McGlinchey

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harnessed correctly, it can get a lot of people reading your work and spread the word. But, if done poorly, it just becomes annoying and will turn people off. We built social media integration into the heart of E-IR, not only in the technical sense that there are sharing buttons on each page, but in how we actively use it to promote our publications and direct our readers to new content in a tasteful way. This generates a lot of traffic for us and proves that academics and publishers who don't understand (or avoid) social media are really holding themselves back.

On a more personal level, social media has helped me measure the basic impact of my work or let people know of a recent output. It is sometimes not as meaningful as other forms of feedback, but it does have a place.

On blogging – the thing with blogs is that anyone can have one. So, what I look for in a blog is three things:

- An interesting and relevant voice;
- Regular content;
- And a well-designed interface.

Unfortunately, it is rare to find a blog that has all of those boxes ticked. This is usually because one person alone may not have all the skills needed to cover all three bases: they may have the expertise and the content, but not the technical know-how to do their ambitions justice. That's what we aim to address in the blogs we host on E-IR. We want to give people a range of well-maintained blogs that are worth visiting and to allow bloggers to post content without having to worry about technical or hosting issues (which we handle for them). We think we're doing pretty well, though we see a lot of room for growth in that section of the website.

I recently started curating the Ivory Tower blog on E-IR after its original owner departed. This has been an interesting challenge for me, mainly in thinking of something worthwhile to say each week or two. However, so far so good. I see blogging as a way to test out ideas, engage an audience, and improve as a writer, all of which are good things for an aspiring academic.

What lies ahead for E-IR?

We spent most of 2013 and 2014 redesigning the website and adding new features to keep it fresh and relevant. With that now behind us, our major focus is developing our publications arm. We have published 3 paperback collections already this year, and there are 3 more scheduled. If you would have told me a year ago that E-IR would publish 6 print books in 2015 I would not have believed you! But this momentum is typical of E-IR and of the energy that we place behind new initiatives. Our *Pop Culture and World Politics* book even crept into the top 20 bestseller list for IR titles on Amazon in late April (albeit briefly!). That was a pleasant surprise and a great reward to the editors and authors of the volume.

Going into 2016, we'll continue to focus on our books with the arrival of the E-IR textbook, its companion volume on IR Theory, and another range of scholarly edited collections. This is expensive stuff to produce to the standards our readers expect, and putting a free eBook of each publication online is not good capitalism! But, our open access, non-profit principles are more important to us than money and hopefully the financials will work out in the end, if we sell enough books to recoup the bulk of our costs. Fingers crossed!

Finally, we're not taking our eye off E-IR.info! We'll continue developing the website and publishing great content every day.

This interview was originally published here.