

Interview - Amandine Hostein

Written by E-International Relations

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other young scholars.

Amandine Hostein started her PhD in October 2016 at the University of Portsmouth. She is investigating how social media use by international NGOs can be understood as transnational public spheres. Her PhD is informed by her broader research interests in deliberative democracy, global ethics, transnational civil society, critical theory and pragmatic philosophy. Alongside her research, she previously served as the British International Studies Association Post-Graduate Network (BISA PGN) Vice-Chair from 2017-2018 and has since taken the lead as Chair. She plays an active role in overseeing its activities, supporting the membership's academic and professional development and enhancing the network's visibility. She has taught at a wide range of IR units and levels, from undergraduate to MA-level as a part-time lecturer at the University of Portsmouth. She is also an editorial assistant for the *Interdisciplinary Political Studies* Journal and a member of the BISA NGO working group.

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

I would say both, professional and research experience as well as the inspiring individuals who supported me throughout my undergrad and Mres. When I did my internship for an international development NGO, as part of my year abroad in Germany, I had the chance to gain insight into the challenges that NGOs face in the running of their projects and activities, which somehow hindered them to fully achieve the normative value attributed to NGOs as laid out in their mandate. I thus became interested in the role that they play as norm entrepreneurs, and how despite these organisational and structural challenges, they are able to exert influence in world politics, which became the focus of my undergraduate dissertation. Whilst doing my undergraduate dissertation, I realised how much I liked researching the roles and influence of international NGOs (INGOs) in world politics, by delving into theories trying to understand how a norm comes about. The more I explored the theoretical literature through my research, I discovered my creativity in approaching theoretical concepts and authors, namely Keck and Sikkink, Clark, and Risse, and deconstructing them in order to generate adapted conceptual frameworks to work with.

Throughout the research, I came across a book on the transnational public sphere from my supervisor Dr Angela Crack. This acted as an introductory glimpse into the Habermasian public sphere in informing the development of global civil society through information technology. I became fascinated by the concept of the public sphere and its potential application to social media and wanted to explore the contested notion of 'global civil society'. I successfully completed my degree and following encouragement from my supervisor, I felt like I could finally pursue these new avenues I had only touched upon during my undergrad. So, I decided to enrol in an Mres to investigate further how social media, and in particular an online social movement, Global Debout (the international commission of the major French social movement, Nuit Debout) could emerge as a virtual public sphere. I was really excited by the prospect of immersing myself again in books and research, as all the time I described this process of being intellectually challenged in perfecting my knowledge as my space for self-fulfilment. This was the main driver for me to undertake my current PhD research on the potential of INGOs' social media platforms in being understood as virtual public spheres.

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Has the use of social media significantly changed and improved the way NGOs operate?

Undoubtedly, social media has changed the way INGOs operate, but whether it has fully improved I am not so certain. Social media has allowed them to interact more with their members and publics, intensify fund-raising by galvanising public support for their causes and fostering press relations, all this in seeking to fuel public moral outrage towards the injustices they seek to highlight, and to rally them behind the cause. Social media has of course enhanced their visibility. However, more visibility can also come with its drawbacks.

As marketing and communications have become integral to the fundraising strategies of INGOs, social media has increasingly become a powerful tool to attract new supporters to generate more funding sources. However, the increased use of social media has also led to expanding their budgets in other areas, namely in paying to advertise and boosting posts on social media, as well as allocating more funding to resources and recruitment of staff specialised in specific communicative strategies. This has contributed to a growing corporatization of INGOs as a consequence of increasing professionalization by allocating more funding towards bringing in specific knowledge in a context where INGOs are already being criticised for prioritising donors' demands at the expense of the individuals they are meant to represent. The problem is that this quest for specified expertise has led INGOs to direct their expenses towards services or activities whose utility can be called into question by their supporter base. Adding to this, these professionally-trained individuals may not necessarily embody the normative value that underpins the vision and mission of INGOs, which may be reflected in the running of working tasks. Some of these new recruits may also not have had any experience in working in an environment founded on ethical values and altruism, in terms of having experienced what it's like to be at the grassroots level of INGOs and volunteering, and are thus more driven by career advancement. This can further contribute to projecting a corporate and self-interested image of INGOs, which widens a gulf between their overarching normative mission statement and their actual professionalised practices, which leaves us to wonder who is better suited to do the job at hand and how to reduce this discrepancy.

Nevertheless, I do see a glimmer of hope. Whereas international NGOs have been facing a 'credibility crisis' in recent times following high-profile media scandals, exemplified by revelations of abuses of power, malpractice and bullying, and calls for more accountability projects in laying out codes of conduct to prevent abuses and malpractice, a sense of urgency has been awakened in pushing us, whether academics or practitioners, to rethink the ways we understand INGOs and for which purpose they ought to serve. I do see the potential for INGOs to reconnect their practices to their normative value in the dialogues taking place on their social media pages, which I hope to gain a greater understanding of through my research.

To what extent do you believe that the deliberations on NGOs' social media can meet the conditions of virtual public spheres?

This is a very good question given that current world affairs depict a bleak picture of social media, which has been demonised for promoting fake news, manipulating and fabricating facts to proclaim 'truth', reinforcing 'echo chambers', providing a fertile ground for racist, sexist and homophobic trolling and hostile dialogue, which all contributes to a distortion of critical inquiry and 'dumbing down' of public dialogue in the process. The current grim political climate notwithstanding, the light at the end of the tunnel has not quite gone out yet.

I believe that INGOs' social media can meet the conditions of virtual public spheres when a holistic and revised approach to the concept of the Habermasian public sphere is conducted. Habermas conceived of the public sphere based on a historical enquiry of the bourgeois in the 18th and 19th centuries. The public sphere referred to the environment where bourgeois men would congregate in the coffee-house to discuss their private economic affairs in an open, critical-rational, argumentative manner aiming at reaching a consensus. Of course, I am not claiming to apply the Habermasian public sphere model on social media, as it is impractical due to its context-dependence.

Adopting a holistic and revised approach to the bourgeois public sphere means taking into consideration all kinds of mechanisms conducive to dialogue as well as the exclusionary traits and impracticalities of the bourgeois public sphere to devise a more inclusive and applicable concept for our 21st century, by shifting the way dynamics of conversation are understood as part of the bourgeois public sphere under the 'ethos' of full inclusion. To give you an

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example, despite the exclusionary discursive practices that, unfortunately, also take place on INGOs' social media, they still feature argumentative exchange, albeit heated, around campaigns, topical issues and testimonials, which pushes us to understand conversations on social media under a new light, from which INGOs' social media draw their potential.

How have you approached your research on NGOs' social media and the public sphere? What methodological challenges have you faced?

As mentioned before, I was really interested in the concept of the public sphere and, in particular, its use as a tool to investigate the quality of INGOs' conversations online, for embedding an inclusive benchmark of rules of communication. However, the concept of the public sphere has been widely criticised for its impracticality of being transposed in the 21st century, as the concept has largely remained wedded to the centrality of the nation-state as the sole addressee of public grievances. It has also been rightly criticised for embodying major exclusionary traits, in preventing women and non-propertied (and non-white) men from being part of the public sphere.

In light of this overarching paradox of a public sphere which does not seem truly public, the concept cannot simply be transposed as an analytical tool to apply on INGOs' social media conversations. So, I had to generate an alternative reconstruction of the concept, as mentioned before under the 'ethos' of full inclusion, which in turn required taking a holistic approach to reconstructing the public sphere. In doing so, I underestimated the time it would take me to undertake this 'building-work', which was one of my first methodological challenges. This revision of the public sphere took me down the path of identifying a wide-range of methods which would help me to fully conduct my analysis. However, as much as I would love to explore a wider range of methods, some were simply too ambitious within the limited time of the PhD but could still constitute the basis of further research nonetheless.

Another major challenge to anyone doing research on international NGOs is, of course, access. Semi-structured interviews with the media team of my target INGO were difficult to obtain as INGOs do not have the resources to engage with researchers and do not have any ulterior motives in doing so. Nonetheless, I remained patient and before too long I conducted my interviews with genuinely considerate and thoughtful individuals, who kindly spared 30-45 minutes of their time.

Another challenge that I faced was the practicality of analysing social media conversations given that some posts can generate more than 500 replies of varying lengths. I tried to search for software which would capture all of the posts without the structural design of Facebook and Twitter in order to make it more readable and workable for the analysis, however I did not find any appropriate software. Even when I did find an online tool to collect the data, I cross-referenced with my actual screenshots to see whether some posts were overlooked and indeed the online software did not capture all of the posts. So, my last remaining option was to copy the data manually, conduct my analysis either on Word, or with pen and paper, just like the old days.

You are currently Chair of the BISA Postgraduate network, following your position as Vice-Chair from 2017-2018. What have you learnt in these roles?

Going from Vice-Chair to Chair of the BISA PGN was a fantastic experience in which I met some truly amazing people and had the privilege to learn the inner workings of academia from a different perspective. I learned so much from my experience in developing my organizational and liaising skills with academics, editors and trustees. I gained a greater sense of responsibility in leading my committee, in setting out the direction of the BISA PGN and enhancing the postgraduate experience of our members. Beyond this, the experience really enabled me to develop myself on a personal level, which I consider the most rewarding learning experience. I became braver in throwing myself into new situations, working hard to mitigate any errors, issues or inconveniences which really consolidated my capacity to bounce back more easily and become more resilient.

What led me to consider this route was a need to search for a fulfilling opportunity outside of my PhD. While I do consider my PhD a rewarding experience where I am free to think and play around with ideas and, most importantly, the privilege of spending my days working on my research, reading as many books and articles as I want, I still felt

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that the frustration of it being a constant, and slow, work-in-progress, and the rewards and sense of accomplishment can seem like such a struggle to achieve. A PhD journey is a constant reflective and digestive process, where one has to remain patient to see satisfying outcomes, albeit small, in my case such as the writing of a chapter or the understanding of challenging literature. I needed to commit myself to something in which I was helping people and my work with the committee could have a positive impact on others' PhD journeys and embarking on their own academic careers. The opportunity to have a leading role within the BISA PGN really meant something special to me, to be part of the really imaginative, creative and diverse creation of knowledge that is fostered by the approachable and supportive atmosphere of the BISA's vibrant community. These regular interactions with people in the running of the BISA PGN really helped me to experience this sense of self-accomplishment more often and gives me the much-needed boost in order to advance my research. Overall, this is an experience that, as a PhD student, I really urge others who are about to start their journeys to consider.

What are you currently working on?

With a new BISA PGN Committee taking over, these are very exciting times for the organisation, not just in welcoming new faces but also in keeping up the good work we have started and putting the vibrancy of the organisation to good use in coming up with new ways to make the PGN more responsive to the demands and needs of our members, as well as enhancing its profile. I am preparing to hand over the reins of the PGN to our current Vice-Chair who will assume the Chairmanship. As I am now off teaching duties, I am continuing to collect and analyse my data, alongside starting to write up my thesis. I am also currently working on my first journal publication which presents my theoretical framework for transnationalising the concept of the public sphere in the 21st Century, emphasising the key role that NGOs could play in facilitating this transnationalisation. The article primarily focuses on making a theoretical contribution to the ongoing debates within the public sphere and transnational civil society literature.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars?

My main advice to any young scholar, whether they are embarking on postgraduate studies, or well-into their PhD journey, would be to embrace the social nature of conducting research. I always thought that the notion a PhD is about isolation and withdrawal from active life was a big misconception of what is actually expected of you. Indeed, it is actually much more social than many give it credit for as it is built and reinforced by any social encounters which punctuate the journey. Fundamentally, what is crucial is keeping an inquisitive sense of awareness of your surroundings (not only academic/university environment, but day-to-day places you pass through) and recognising how your overall environment feeds into your thinking process.

'Living and breathing your research' does not necessarily need to mean staying locked in a stuffy room, or office, but it is about more actively reflecting on your surroundings. We all have moments where we stay at home, trying to push through a deadline for hours, or even days, and I think that this is a constraining environment in which the research process is associated to a closed space. Instead, what helped me overcome challenges I experienced in my journey was 'expanding the space' from indoors to outside, not limiting the thought process to my desk, but stretching it out to my daily commute, or day-to-day conversations with friends/family which help stimulate the thought process and keep the intellectual momentum going. This helped me fortify my research; whenever I received criticism, constructive or otherwise, I all the time reflected on this constructively and while I did not always see the need to completely take everything on board, it generated new thinking and, crucially, got me thinking of new ways to make my research direction as clear and watertight as I could make it.

When I reached this sense of awareness, it pushed me to take much more initiative in not only staying on top of my PhD research, but also in applying for, and participating in, conferences and finding new environments, such as attending events from different research communities to take this stimulating thinking process even further. I also found that my experience with teaching a wide range of students, from first-year undergrad straight through to MA students, was such an eye-opening experience. For me, when you really consider the impact that your surrounding environment (from people you know, to the places you go regardless of how significant) has on the success of your PhD, it is such a humbling experience, and despite the difficulties that I faced throughout, this made this PhD journey

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a rewarding experience as opposed to the illusion of the PhD down to individual success.