“Choreographing Dissonance”

Open Society Fellowship

Portfolio Review Document

**Introduction**

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he Open Society Fellowship serves as a pipeline of learning and knowledge for the broader Open Society network. Organizations of all types can become insular or risk-averse in their decision-making. OSF is no exception, though these hazards are mitigated by its culture of critical reflection and tradition of advocacy on behalf of unpopular causes. Nevertheless, the program believes that effective action proceeds from principles that are periodically tested against countervailing beliefs and evidence. As argued in its 2013 program strategy, exposure to dissonant viewpoints is good for its own sake—as a moral hedge against orthodoxies—and as a way of improving practice.

In this portfolio document, the program examines one of the modes by which fellows—and the opportunities created by their presence—add value to the work of the foundations: the choreography of dissonance. “Dissonance” commonly refers to combinations of musical notes that sound jarring or discordant, but it can also connote a lack of harmonic resolution. Through its selection of fellows and by orchestrating gatherings and other occasions to highlight divergences of opinion, the program seeks to ensure that common practice at OSF never becomes settled law. In so doing, it aims to carve out a safe space for the free exchange of clashing ideas.

The portfolio review process offers an opportunity to reflect on the validity of these premises, the program’s success in acting on them, and whether major decisions taken along the way have in fact improved outcomes to a discernable degree.

**Original Ambition and Theory of Change**

From its inception in 2008, the fellowship has sought individuals who will bring knowledge to the Open Society network through creative and diverse means. Fellows tend to divide into three types: those who challenge what they regard as dogmatic, outmoded, or ineffectual thinking and provoke us to do better (“contrarians”); those skilled at drawing new and fruitful connections among OSF programs and colleagues (“connectors”); and those who illuminate areas of potential engagement for the foundations (“surveyors”). Though these are not rigid categories, they have proved useful in helping the program determine what sorts of applicants are likely to bring maximum value to the network. Please refer to Appendix 1 for a breakdown of all fellows by category.

Fellows seen as “contrarian” will naturally receive special attention in this document, since they arrive in our offices ready to challenge received wisdom. But fellows of all three types can and do become agents of dissonance. This document will highlight the various means by which this is accomplished. Though it is not the only goal of the fellowship program, the pursuit of dissonance informs all aspects of its work, from the recruitment of candidates to the awarding of fellowships and the integration of fellows into the Open Society network.

However similar they may be, contrarianism and dissonance are not interchangeable. Ideally, the presence of contrarians in our midst compels us to look critically at our own cherished convictions, and in so doing, improve the rigor of our thinking. We may not agree with their positions, but are inspired (or goaded) by them to reflect on the validity of our own. Dissonance, by contrast, implies a cacophony of different, and at times contradictory, opinions. The fellowship sees value in helping build tolerance for that cacophony. Put another way, contrarian fellows are among the raw materials by which a culture of dissonance is crafted.

But what sorts of views qualify as dissonant within OSF? Should voices that directly conflict with the Open Society “consensus” be sought out for inclusion? Or is there a line we should not cross? Are certain opinions or practices at OSF particularly deserving of critical scrutiny? How do we know which of them to focus on? Is dissonance an end in itself, or should the real goal be to find common ground to solve intractable problems? And how exactly do fellows, and the conversations they take part in, act as antidotes to dogmatism, insularity, or risk aversion?

These questions and others have arisen at various points during the life of the fellowship, but this portfolio review is the first time they have received focused consideration. While we do not presume to answer them definitively here, we are hopeful that in addressing them directly we will be better able to articulate and test a theory of change.

**Portfolio Definition**

The document is divided into five sections that correspond to the activities of the program: (1) **Outreach**, by which the program broadcasts its existence and solicits applications from candidates seen as likely to feed the culture of dissonance at OSF; (2) **Review and Selection**, during which program staff, colleagues, and ultimately the Advisory Board choose the strongest proposals to receive fellowships; (3) **Fellowship Projects**, the primary means through which fellows educate and challenge the OSF network; (4) “**Collisions,**” the multitude of interactions, large and small, arranged by the program in partnership with colleagues, and (5) **Afterlife**, the opportunities available to the program and former fellows to continue engagement with the network and preserve their critical thinking. In each section, we will identify those moments of decision when methods were reevaluated and actions were taken to correct perceived flaws in program methodology. In addition, by breaking the fellowship workflow into its constituent parts, we hope to show that “choreography” is more than merely the quotidian business of choosing the best fellows. It also entails active engagement with multiple players within and outside the network to ensure that the optimal conditions for a culture of dissonance are fostered.

Outreach

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wice a year, the program issues a call for proposals. Forthcoming deadlines are announced over social media and carried by the major web-based aggregators of grant opportunities. In addition, print and online ads are placed to draw attention to the fellowship and drive traffic to the program homepage. To supplement applications that arrive “over the transom,” fellowship staff directly recruit promising candidates—often at the suggestion of colleagues--including those whose views are known to be productively at odds with our own. For example, the program reached out directly to James Forman, Jr., a law professor who had written a powerful critique of *The New Jim Crow*, a book by former Soros Justice Fellow Michelle Alexander. Forman, whose fellowship project would look at the enduring popularity of punitive criminal justice policies in the majority black city of Washington, DC, argued that progressives are insufficiently attentive to the problem of violent crime in poor communities. French historian Gerard Prunier, who proposed a radical rethink of the international approach to Somalia, was also urged to apply for the fellowship, although his application was ultimately declined by the fellowship selection committee.

Over the years, we have learned that direct outreach is far more effective in attracting dissonant voices than broader appeals, including advertising. In fact, without individual approaches to promising candidates, the proportion of contrarians would quickly dwindle to nearly nothing. (Only 12 percent of contrarian fellows came to us over the transom, as against 29 percent of fellows in the two other categories. Caution should be observed due to the small sample size.) This makes intuitive sense; heterodox thinkers who know OSF by reputation may wonder if they have a realistic chance—or any at all—of receiving a fellowship. Nevertheless, our hopes that the fellowship’s “brand” would gradually be recognized in the marketplace of individual grantmaking for its distinctive qualities have not generally been borne out. This is potentially an area for more aggressive positioning in the coming years.

Colleagues within the network remain the primary source of recommendations of contrarian thinkers. For example, the Latin America Program recommended [Vanda Felbab-Brown](http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/people/vanda-felbab-brown), whose views on illicit economies are largely at odds with OSF’s drug policy approach. Felbab-Brown has become a sought-after participant at conferences on organized crime, drug policy, corruption, and illicit economies. Though her views may often be unpopular, colleagues continue to seek her insights, knowing that their own initiatives will be fortified as a result. Recently, she has begun serving on the review committee for the Elections shared framework.

Fellowship staff regularly meet with colleagues around the network to spread word of the program’s requirements and idiosyncrasies and to solicit recommendations for fellowship candidates. Colleagues are urged to reach outside their comfort zone for such recommendations; the ideal candidate is one whose ideas are worthy of respect but do not align perfectly with our own. Long experience has taught us, however, that colleagues generally endorse applicants they admire--such as a prized grantee eager to take a year off or a longtime mentor—rather than ones whose ideas they find truly challenging. Undeniably, there is significant value in having such individuals in our network; they contribute significantly to the fellowship categories of “connectors” and “surveyors.” But the choreography of dissonance demands that we press colleagues to dig deeper into their Rolodex. To the extent that there may still be colleagues in the network who do not grasp the centrality of this aspect of our work, the burden of improved internal outreach in the future falls entirely on fellowship staff.

There is another dynamic at work that has on occasion frustrated program efforts. OSF initiatives tend to be heterodox by design, and the pursuit of dissonance may seem redundant or even counterproductive. Thus, when we solicit recommendations from network colleagues, what we often receive are candidates who diverge from the mainstream, not from hegemonic beliefs within OSF. Future recruitment efforts undertaken by the program will need to account for these challenges and find new ways to communicate program requirements effectively.

Review and Selection

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n a typical application round, the fellowship receives between 400 and 450 proposals and devotes four months from the deadline for review and selection. This process occurs twice a year. From the total pool, a smaller group of semi-finalists—between 30 and 50—receive special attention. It is at this stage that fellowship staff actively canvass relevant colleagues for their appraisals of the applications. Interactions between colleagues and program staff are an important step in nurturing an institutional culture at OSF that is tolerant of dissonant viewpoints.

Fellows pursue projects of their own design and passion; they are not consultants and do not carry out research on behalf of OSF. For this reason, during the evaluation of applications, the program avoids imposing its priorities and views on candidates. Likewise, though the judgments of colleagues weigh heavily in the final disposition of fellowship applicants, they are not dispositive. Frequently, the vetting process brings to light deeply felt differences of opinion about a particular applicant. For example, fellow [Helen Epstein’s](http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/people/helen-epstein) proposal on the political roots of epidemics drew mixed reviews from colleagues in the Public Health Program, some of whom disagreed strongly with her argument. Balancing the priorities of colleagues with those of the choreography of dissonance is thus a major preoccupation of the fellowship.

In a similar vein, reviewing proposals has given staff the opportunity to begin to make generalizations about the kinds of applicants who will prove most effective at contributing to a culture of dissonance. For example, contrarians may be more likely than others to possess the sort of prickly and contentious personality type that is likely to frustrate integration into the OSF network. Program staff thus actively look for evidence that a critical mindset is balanced by eagerness to integrate with the OSF network.

The creation of new categories of fellowships in 2013, Impact Fellows (a diverse cohort of individuals working on a common theme) and Frontier Fellows (whose work leads OSF into new realms), has provided the fellowship program with additional apertures and thematic areas to integrate dissonant views throughout the network.

Lastly, the fellowship advisory board, which also acts as a selection committee, is tasked with holding fellowship staff to the stated goal of choreographing dissonance. The board generally receives 5 to 10 finalists, from which it chooses the next class of Open Society Fellows. If a finalist has drawn uniform praise from OSF referees, board members routinely question whether the applicant will in fact embody views that are sufficiently challenging. Spirited discussions over precisely this matter have enlivened selection meetings from the program’s earliest days. In recent meetings, however, board members have told us that they grasp the need to balance the two priorities; while the board retains a healthy skepticism of enthusiastically endorsed applications, the requirements of OSF colleagues are also given appropriate weight.

More perhaps than any other unit in the complex, the fellowship relies on the goodwill of colleagues, who serve as readers and help integrate fellows into the network. When candidates strongly recommended by other staff-members are not chosen to receive fellowships—as frequently happens—those colleagues can be understandably confused or distressed by the decision. Fellowship staff must hasten to explain the outcome and demonstrate that the appraisals of supportive readers were given due consideration. These efforts at diplomacy are not always successful; there are, no doubt, colleagues around the network who, after repeated frustrations, have more or less given up on offering recommendations. Maintaining trust and good faith with the colleagues on whom we rely remains perhaps the central challenge to the program as it looks ahead.

Fellowship Project

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ellows are selected in part because they or their proposed projects embody the constructive dissonance that the fellowship program seeks. By dint of their profiles and track record in their fields or their anticipated outputs, they challenge received wisdom within and outside OSF. OSF’s assumptions are thereby subjected to greater scrutiny, and colleagues have the chance to consider external criticisms of OSF policy positions.

For example, fellow [Vanda Felbab-Brown](http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/people/vanda-felbab-brown)’s argument that drug legalization is not a panacea for reducing violence and suppressing organized crime runs counter to OSF’s efforts to advocate for legalization. Through her fellowship field work on illicit economies and expertise in a number of geographic contexts, she offered evidence and compelling analysis to encourage more of a nuanced approach to this highly contested field, where OSF itself is seen as an unorthodox actor and thinker.

[Arun Kundnani](http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/about/programs/open-society-fellowship/grantees/arun-kundnani) examined the human rights implications of so-called counter-radicalization policies that emerged in the mid-to-late-2000s in the US and UK. Such policies included efforts to elevate “moderate” Muslim voices, social and economic measures to build support in predominantly Muslim communities, and direct interventions with “at risk” individuals. Many human rights activists preferred these approaches to more harmful counter-terrorism tactics and saw them as more effective than outright warfare. Kundnani homed in on the troubling potential of these policies to veer into racial profiling, violate rights to privacy, impose inappropriate restrictions on freedoms of religion, belief, association and expression, and ultimately risk alienating the groups towards whom they are directed.

[Noy Thrupkaew](http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/about/programs/open-society-fellowship/grantees/noy-thrupkaew)’s reporting investigated the “raid-and-rescue” paradigm, which treats sex work and human trafficking primarily as criminal justice matters. Such approaches often ignored the hidden costs of law enforcement interventions or the needs and vulnerabilities of sex workers and trafficking victims – not an uncontroversial position within the human rights world and even within OSF.

In seeking to project the lessons offered by fellows beyond our customary audience of human rights allies and supporters, the fellowship has faced a number of challenges. Fellows of all stripes are chosen with the hope that they will be persuasive communicators and expand available space for consideration of open society principles. In practice, however, much of their work has remained within circles already sympathetic to OSF’s point of view. Relatedly, a majority of fellows produce books as their primary deliverable. Over time, we’ve come to realize that whatever their virtues, books may need to be supplemented by other means of transmitting dissonant viewpoints. We continue to ponder alternate work products that may be better suited to the task of choreographing dissonance.

Collisions

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rom the outset, the fellowship viewed the fellows as the primary instrument for introducing dissonant ideas into the Open Society mix. The role of the program was thus limited to identifying promising candidates and, once chosen, integrating them into the network. Over time, however, we’ve come to appreciate that dissonance can also be choreographed in other ways. By means of hosting public events--with or without fellows--and by curating internal conversations designed to highlight disagreements and debates, the program has expanded its choreographic range. The multitude of opportunities, formal and informal, for fellows and colleagues to interact, which we call “collisions,” has altered how the program pursues dissonance and how we see our theory of change.

As soon as new Open Society Fellows are selected, they are introduced to their counterparts in our network through several means: they are given “cheat sheets” to identify the most promising interlocutors, and brown bags are arranged wherever they may reside or travel, to give colleagues a sense of where their own work might intersect with that of the fellow. In addition, new fellows often meet in small groups for informal discussions with relevant staff whenever they arrive at a major office.

Public and closed-door events are the most obvious mode of cultivating dissonant viewpoints. A select listing of events illustrates the varieties of dissonance the program seeks to bring about.

* [What Hurts: Does Investigative Reporting Really Deter Corruption](https://karl.soros.org/communities/osfellowship-public-community/files/what-hurts-long.docx/)? (Participating fellows: James Stewart, Ken Silverstein, Andrew Feinstein). Fellowship staff organized this closed-door roundtable in Brussels in collaboration with OSJI and OSI-Brussels, bringing together fellows, leading international prosecutors (including Carlos Castresana, Alan Bacarese, Terry Beitner, Ian Bulmer, Hannah Taylor, and others), investigative journalists and NGO activists for a frank discussion of barriers to, and opportunities for, collaboration between their respective professions to combat corruption.
* [Guns, Marriage, and the Constitution](http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/events/guns-marriage-and-constitution) ­ Fellow [David Cole](http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/people/david-cole) moderated this discussion between the former president of the National Rifle Association, David Keene, and the president of Freedom to Marry, Evan Wolfson, to explore the common challenges and strategies employed by these ideologically differing institutions to protect the respective rights to which they are committed. Though not a classic contrarian himself, Cole was the perfect convener for such a conversation, since he is viewed as a person of good faith by partisans of many stripes. (Please see Appendix 2 for a *Politico* article that describes the event. Appendix 3 is a *DemocracyNow!* clip from another event, on privacy and surveillance).
* [Revising Paul Kagame: Myth and Reality After the Genocide in Rwanda](http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/events/revising-paul-kagame-myth-and-reality-after-genocide-rwanda) (Participating fellow: Howard French). At this event, panelists debated the premature canonization of Rwanda’s President and addressed how a legacy as complex and contradictory as Kagame’s can be fairly depicted. Theogene Rudasingwa, former secretary general of the Rwandan Patriotic Front and Rwandan Ambassador to the United States (and frequent assassination target), took part. Fireworks were provided by Tim Gallimore, a spokesman for Rwanda’s Mission to the UN, who served as respondent.

In addition, at the 2013 Soros Justice Fellows Orientation, fellow [James Forman](http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/people/james-forman-jr) led a discussion on the need for a progressive response to violence and the fear of violence in marginalized communities, which included aggressive law-enforcement approaches, among an audience of incoming Soros Justice Fellows many of whom have spent their careers advocating against mass incarceration.

The program has learned a number of lessons about such gatherings over the years. For one thing, events that showcase deeply felt divergences of opinion are difficult to orchestrate. Left to their own devices, most panelists, it seems, will gravitate toward comfortable common ground. In the first few years of the program’s existence several promising events never came to pass, because of the participants’ reluctance to argue a contested position in a public setting. In addition, some that did take place ultimately degenerated into specious consensus. In recent years, the program has begun devising these events from the start to confront differences of opinion forthrightly, while remaining mindful of the need to avoid friction for its own sake. Today, the program will generally refrain from organizing an event altogether if it does not offer at least the potential for productive friction.

Since launching Impact Fellows in 2013, the program has devoted significant effort to finding those who will add dissonance to the shared framework on climate change and food security in Africa (and, we expect, to future shared frameworks). Impact Fellows will likely be the subject of a future portfolio review, and so they will not be dealt with here. In addition, through its Ideas Initiative, the primary goal of which is to explore new frontiers (such as India, China, Cuba, and Brazil), fellowship staff have also worked to make sure that diverse views and perspectives are taken into account as we contemplate engaging in these places.

Fellowship Afterlife

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s shown, alongside their own projects, fellows also engage in scripted and unscripted interactions with the network. Once the fellowship is over, however, the nature of their involvement changes. The fellowship “afterlife” often includes the integration of fellows and their views in a number of contexts that can include contributions to a culture of dissonance.

Fellows have served on advisory boards of various programs and review panels for shared frameworks to bring in differing perspectives. For example [Gregg Gonsalves](http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/about/programs/open-society-fellowship/grantees/gregg-gonsalves), whose project dealt with applying successful lessons from the HIV/AIDS global campaign to other global health challenges, is a member of the review panel for the proposed shared framework on drug policy reform. In his [contributions](https://karl.soros.org/communities/the-souk/blog/fostering-a-new-era-in-drug-policy-2013-a-shared-framework-concept/#comment-016) to the Souk discussion on Karl as well as in side meetings, he has challenged the OSF community to break out of its comfort zone, which generally entails supporting formal NGOs and academics. He exhorts us instead to consider funding grassroots advocacy and mobilization as a means of achieving our goals at the 2016 United Nations Special Session on drugs.

Fellowship staff are also considering other creative forms of alumni involvement. At a gathering in Hungary in 2011, for example, a series of panel discussions engaged areas of productive disagreement among current and former fellows. At one, four panelists with radically differing viewpoints on Wikileaks discussed the implications of a radical transparency agenda. Other panels looked at the meager returns for human rights from the election of Barack Obama, and the precise conditions under which deeply held ideological commitments can be caused to change. Debates of this nature, involving alumni from a variety of individual grantmaking programs, could serve as a means of prompting further introspection and deliberation on thorny issues of interest to the network.

Appendix 1

Contrarians

*Challenge outmoded*

*or ineffectual thinking.*

Dlamini

Epstein

Felbab-Brown

Forman

French

Gappah

Gonsalves

Horsey

Kundnani

MacKinnon

Morozov

O’Sullivan

Sfard

Soghoian

Thrupkaew

Wantchekon

Wise

Connectors

*Draw connections among*

*programs and colleagues.*

Achmat

Bach

Cole

Feffer

Gevisser

Hamilton

Jaffer

Li

Murombedzi

Schoofs

Silverstein

Spencer

Stover

Vandenberg

Westerling

Yi

Surveyors

*Demarcate new areas of*

*engagement for OSF.*

Aidi

Bayat

Camerino

Choudhury

Chuang

Cizik

Cooley

Exley

Feinstein

Gordon

Hansing

Hertsgaard

Izama

Johnson

Kim

Leon

MacKenzie Biedell

Al-Mahdi

Okonta

Peer

Rafiqui

Rawlence

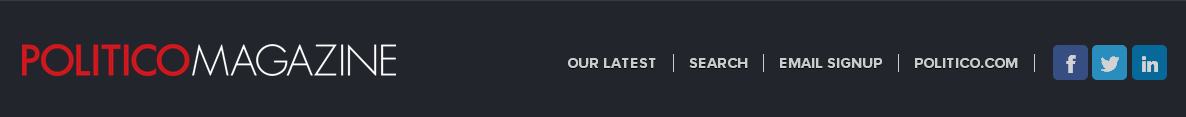
Al-Rasheed

Sharma

Steinberg

Stewart

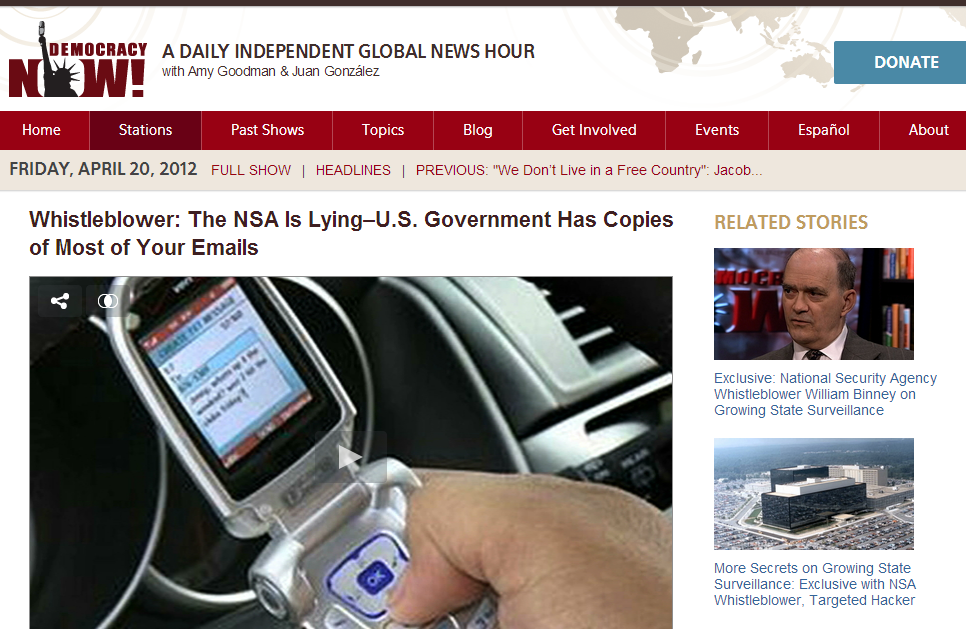
Appendix 2



Appendix 3

[List of selected events]

Appendix 3



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