

## Do-it-yourself media

*Judy Kirby reports on a recent event in Newcastle*

When George Fox asked his famous question – ‘what canst thou say’ – I wonder if he was foreseeing the internet, for there has never been a development so perfectly moulded to that early vision.

Although many Quaker activists long for a corporate voice on pressing social matters, personal, inner experience has always been the signature spirituality of Quakerism. So, what better than a tool offering every Friend the opportunity to delve, investigate and pursue the concerns that speak most to their individual conditions? It’s not a corporate voice, but it is a Quaker voice.

Fifty years ago one of the most influential documents of the twentieth century produced by British Quakers – *Towards a Quaker View of Sex* – was published with no official backing from the Religious Society of Friends. It was the work of a handful of Friends and was favourably received by the British press. It was not a corporate voice, but it was Quaker, showing that challenging, visionary work invariably happens in the margins. With all the acknowledged problems the internet can create, it is still a channel for Quakers who want to tackle controversial matters on which the centre could not possibly comment!

Patricia Gosling, writing in *the Friend* (18 July) nervously suggested that Quakers might use social media to more advantage. Could some younger folk responsibly manage the likes of Facebook and Twitter on our behalf, she asked.

We’re taking this idea seriously in Northumbria. The Area Meeting is supporting me in a project to train Friends in the new art of citizen journalism. There are probably Meetings and members across the UK who are experimenting with social media but I think we may be the only Area Meeting that is getting involved with this work.

This weekend we tested the water with a pilot

training session in Newcastle. We feared no-one would come – it was the day Yearly Meeting Gathering began, schools had broken up, the Northern Young Friends Summer Shindig was only just drawing to a close. Not promising. But, to our delight, seventeen Friends and Friend-sympathisers arrived with their smartphones, laptops and microphones, eager to discover more about this potential conduit between Quakers and the world.

Patrick Chalmers, a journalist who is working with me on the project, was able to show them exactly how it can help them be heard as Quakers. With a smartphone camera and microphone two people can interview someone and have the video ready for loading onto an internet site in a short space of time. A lot of time-consuming editing is waived – the interview is seen in its rawness. In an all-too-brief practice session we broke into teams of three – interviewer with mike, interviewed and camera operator. The question was: ‘How will citizen journalism have an impact on your Quakerism?’ There was overall agreement: we can work with this. This can be our voice.

Of course, technology is only part of the story. How to train Quakers to investigate in a professional manner – to act as trained reporters?

‘They can do it, it is much easier than they realise,’ says Patrick. ‘All these things can be learned.’

Our plans in Northumbria take in both the training and a home website on which to place the stories we have worked on. These will not be stories about Quaker work but rather the Quaker perspective on events in the world in which we live. If we can do trustworthy reporting on matters of real importance, the press, so often absent from our concerns, will come looking for us.

*Judy is a member of Northumbria Area Meeting.*