



INDYMEDIA: BUILDING AN INTERNATIONAL ACTIVIST INTERNET NETWORK

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In a space of less than three years, a grass roots media network has sprung up that has connected literally tens of thousands of media makers, created web sites visited by millions, projected videos in hundreds of venues, published newspapers in print runs of tens of thousands and transmitted web and micro radio programs that have found avid and loyal audiences. The first "Independent Media Center" was created to provide a convenient physical work area and a corresponding website from which media makers could cover the scheduled demonstrations against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle in the fall of 1999. Although the Seattle police were caught by surprise with the size and vehemence of the demonstration, organizers of the counter-WTO events early on had a sense that this would be a large gathering. Just as the corporate world has used the term "free trade" to cover many corporation-friendly policies, activists from many areas have used meetings of free trade proponents as a way to focus attention on the problems of these neo-liberal monetary and trade policies. People in India, Brazil, Ecuador and many other countries had protested these policies for years, but Seattle was the "coming out" party for U.S. anti-corporate demonstrations.

Realizing that this was to be the first big resistance to the global policies in the United States, a group of Seattle independent journalists, videomakers and radio people started looking around for a space that would be convenient for on-going coverage of what they correctly assumed would be an historic gathering. A work space for media would be a center where people could charge their batteries, catch up with their email and perhaps post interviews with some of the veterans from the international struggles against corporate globalization who were expected to

attend, such as Vandana Shiva, Indian eco-feminist, Jose Bové, French farmer and anti-McDonalds militant, and Walden Bello, professor at the University of the Philippines Malaysia, anti-sweatshop activist and director of Focus on the Global South (www.focusweb.org).

Seattle media activists Sheri Herndon, a community radio veteran, Jeff Perlstein video activists, and Dan Merkle, a movement lawyer were in touch with several networks: microradio proponents, internet hackers, alternative print journalists and video activists. Media makers from across the country began to discuss coverage of the impending activities in Seattle on many list serves.

Catalyst Software

At the time, the idea of a web presence for the upcoming event was only a small adjunct to more traditional media activities that were being planned. A timely visit by an Australian computer geek to Boulder changed that, however. Mathew Arnison had helped develop a template and code for an interactive web site used by Australian activists- "low-tech grassroots net access for real people", he called it. This ingenious open-source software, called Catalyst (or CAT, short for Community Activist Technology), allowed anyone to post text, photos, audio and video very easily to the web from any home or public computer. Arnison happened to stop by the Boulder offices of Free Speech TV a few months before the planned Seattle convergence. He discussed this web tool with Manse Jacobi and Brian Drolet, who were then in the process of developing FSTV's coverage of Seattle. Arnison showed them how convenient it could be, with the CAT software, to post a variety of media to web sites and to generate public commentary on stories. Jacobi began negotiations with Seattle folk to reserve server space that could accommodate what he began to realize might be large files of multi-media reports. Chris Burnett, a computer expert who had founded Burn! (perhaps the first activist web space hosted in the Department of Communication at the University of California, San Diego) came on board and helped to tweak the code in preparation for Seattle. Burnett, through his work at Regeneration TV, a streaming

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music and politics site, also helped contact musicians for a benefit concert to raise funds for the center, now dubbed IMC, The Independent Media Center. Ani DeFranco and Michael Franti gave a sell-out concert two weeks before the WTO meetings and raised \$60,000 for the Seattle preparations.

The Space

A store front in the center of downtown Seattle was leased and computers, TV monitors, audio mixers, cables and used office furniture started accumulating in the space as soon as the doors opened. In keeping with the movement protocol of consensus decision making and open meetings, the group began regular discussions on how to set up the space and maximize effective use of the equipment and the web resource. Representatives from the media group went to the organizational meetings of the many WTO activist groups planning to participate in the demonstrations in order to develop efficient and convenient ways the independent media makers and the organizers could communicate. For the first time, there seemed to be an authentic respect for alternative media from movement organizers, who have often preferred to talk with mainstream corporate reporters than to "waste their time" with small independent news outlets. The convenient downtown IMC space became a gathering place for both media makers and organizers. In the same way, the web site, www.indymedia.org became a virtual center for activist discussions and multi-media posts of demonstration preparations.

The Responsive Web

Almost as soon as the IMC web page was initiated, it began to receive posts not only from activists in Seattle, but from others around the world, many of whom were either sending people to Seattle or were involved in local actions in solidarity with the events in Seattle.¹

This original web site created the prototype for the typical indymedia web page that would proliferate after Seattle.

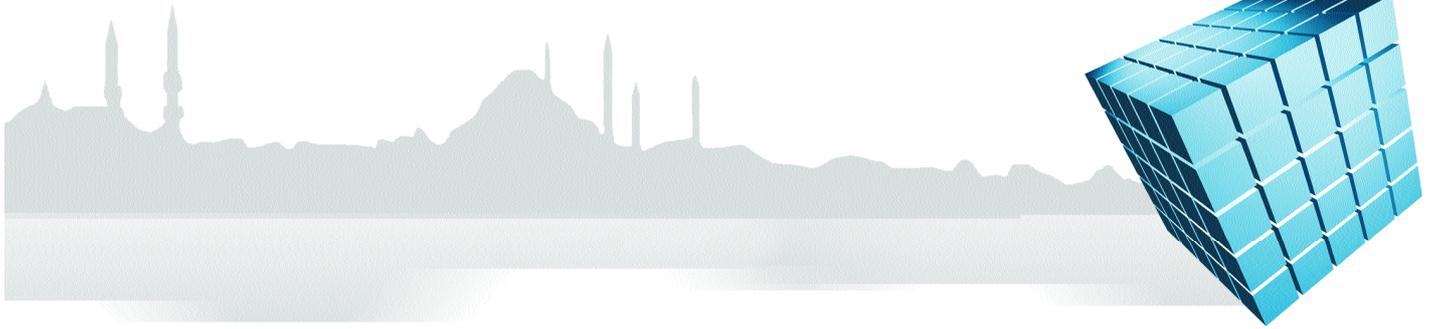
It involved three columns: one on the right, the "Newswire", for new posts which is completely open to anyone who wanted to send information or media imagery, and a center column for "features" which was edited by a team who scanned the news wire and selected the most relevant items for the highlighted and selected central space. A third column, on the left provides a search engine and organizational information and now includes links to the growing lists of centers which continue to come on line. Indymedia "news" is not traditional journalism that is "objective" and without a point of view. Most imc-ers feel that mass media only pretends to be objective and upholds the status quo. Indymedia is activist media. Evan Henshaw-Plath, one of the tech angels who keeps various indymedia sites going, put it this way: "...we are trying ...to make decentralized, democratic, community controlled media outlets which can be used to advance social change. "

In the years since Seattle and the initiation of the indymedia format, there have been passionate discussions about the open nature of the news wire. Many of the web sites are besieged with crank posts, occasional racist slurs and even a sort of "left spamming". There have been calls for heavy moderation and censorship of racist and offensive material. Most IMCs have resisted any censorship of the open newswire. Rather than remove offensive material, the response has been for people who disagree to respond to the posts themselves, which has made for some lively discussions.

The Situation Escalates in Seattle

As more and more people jammed the downtown streets and protesters began using civil disobedience, the Seattle police reacted with

¹ For an interesting discussion of the internet as the "commons" see: Kidd, Dorothy. "Talking the Walk: the Media Enclosures and the Communications Commons." Dissertation. Simon Fraser University. 1998. Kidd has also written specifically about indymedia and the idea of an information commons: Kidd, Dorothy, "Indymedia.org and Anti-corporate Globalization" In *Representing Resistance: Media, Civil Disobedience and the Anti-Globalization Movement*. Andy Opel, Ph.D. and Donnalyn Pompper, editors, Greenwood Publishing Group.



teargas, pepper spray and truncheons. The battle of Seattle had begun. Stunned protesters flocked to the IMC to tell their story to eager radio DJs, camcorder journalists and the print crew. At one point a tear gas canister was even lobbed in the door of the center itself, in what was the first of what would be a regular event at other IMC's: direct attack by repressive state forces.

As the battle continued, more and more people, not just in Seattle, but around the world, heard about it and wanted to find out just what was happening.

The mainstream news outlets had few spokespeople from among the demonstrators, and concentrated on ominous military style reports from the police chief and mayor. News that an alternative source was available on the web spread like a wild fire across the net. www.indymedia.org began to get thousands of hits from all over the world. No one had predicted that there would be so much activity on the web. The server at Free Speech TV received were hundreds of thousands of people using the site.

What was unusual about indymedia was the sense that this was a world-wide community linked by technology, that was discussing an immediate, emergency situation, whose outcome no one could predict. Many people use the internet for list serve discussions about social issues. Others have used live chat rooms for what is usually rather inane but instantaneous real-time discussions that often move too fast for considered response and thus are accurately described by the word "chat". At indymedia.org the global community of people concerned with social justice, with the environment, with workers rights logged on and connected with each other in what was truly a global village never imagined by McLuhan.²

The sense of connection and an understanding of the power not only of the technology that could create this linkage, but the power and size of the community

around the world who were in agreement with the protesters created an exhilaration among people who often feel outnumbered and defeated. The media makers who came to the IMC in Seattle also felt the exhilaration of connection. For the first time, video activists were collaborating with community radio producers, with photographers, with print journalists, with computer mavens. Indymedia has encouraged such collaborations, not only in the establishment of other indymedia centers and web sites, but in promotion of video screenings programming on community radio, and in sharing resources, studios and equipment.

Indymedia Spreads Across the Globe

Since Seattle, the indymedia movement has spread to over 130 locations. There are IMC's in 51 countries. The United States alone has 47 different web sites, that extend from the state of Maine to one for San Diego and the border region. These sites can represent dozens of people who regularly take part in a permanent center (as in New York City, Los Angeles and D.C.), or smaller organizations with only a few people who meet in members' homes mostly to tend the web site. There have been several face to face meetings which attempted to bring indymedia folks from different locations together: in San Francisco as an adjunct to a Project Censored Conference in 2001 at a Ruckus Camp outside of San Francisco. Both of these meetings were able to bring some of the global representatives together through small travel grants from anonymous donors. Most of the participants in indymedia greatly value the horizontal and open structure that now exists and are quite resistant to any sort of central leadership or "board of directors". The face to face meeting in San Francisco did, resulted in a document outlining the "Principles of Unity" for the IMC's, mostly at the urging of the web tech people, who felt that without that minimal agreement, too much of the decision making fell on their shoulders. This document was sent to all the existing imcs for ratification. The ensuing discussions are posted at

² A paper presented at the IAMCR 2002 Conference (International Association of Media and Communication Researchers) address the issue of counter public sphere such as indymedia. John-Downey and Natalie-Fenton, "New Social Movements, Counter Public Spheres and Global Modernity", July, 2002.

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www.process.indymedia.org, which also contains helpful hints for starting your own indymedia organization.

Problems and Prospects

There are many discussions on Indymedia listserves about trying to broaden the participation in the IMC movement to include more people of color, more women and more working class members. At the current time, indymedia activists are volunteers, who often donate their own equipment and time. This makes it hard for people who have fewer resources to participate, and there have been accusations that the IMCs are in the hands of rich white boys. There are many discussions about how to empower others in the technical aspects of the work. Perhaps one of the more difficult hurdles is the process itself, in which coming to consensus on something can be excruciatingly time consuming and painful. Coming to consensus agreement on issues means that only one person can block an action.

This can spell paralysis or at the very least hours of emotional ranting. For people who have jobs and family commitments this process can be a barrier to full participation. This process has also been accused of being a custom imposed by U.S. activists, and not necessarily the way that other movement media people want to function.

Other issues which are coming to the fore are connected with funding and staffing. As the movement continues, there are questions of sustainability. Can the level of participation that has characterized the IMC movement to this point be ensured if the organization relies on volunteers with private resources? Can the participants continue to volunteer their equipment and time? In each organization there are people whose work is crucial to the project and who need support. And what about health care? Will the spontaneity and autonomy of the movement be compromised if groups opt to secure foundation or government arts funding? How can IMC's in the "North" contribute to those in the

"South" without falling into a sort of missionary attitude or worse? As the groups move out of emergency mode into sustaining mode, the problems of organization and sustainability loom large.

How this massive and chaotic operation can be sustained without sacrificing its immensely creative and inspirational energy to deadening bureaucratic administration? With many international meetings such as the WTO in Cancun in September, 2003, the Porto Allegre World Social Forum (2002), the G8 meeting in Calgary (2002), new cities come on line and there is a flurry of travel by flying squads of techies and activists to help get the new centers "on line". But as the IMC movement becomes more popular imc "groupies" sometimes appear, who aren't necessarily all that helpful and who often do not respect local customs and mores. And some obvious undercover trouble makers have appeared, sent from various security agencies—local police, FBI and perhaps even military agents in the post 9-11 militarized atmosphere.³

There are also pressures for IMCs to become regularized NGOs. For Indymedia, a horizontal network with strong anarchist sensibilities, the calls for government registration, hierarchical organization and centralization of power are an anathema. There is a concern about paying for work. Many worry that the ethos of volunteerism which has been the strength of the IMC movement will disappear as certain individuals are incorporated into grants proposals as paid staffers.

The test of the movement will be the strength of the centers in the South. Already the South African IMC has made important contributions in bringing to light the problems of water privatization and the thousands of evictions perpetrated by the ANC government on behalf of the banks. In Argentina, where chaos ensued in December 2001, the IMC became a key source for information, as literally millions logged on every week. The reasons of the burgeoning use of this network are the open and

³The Rand Corporation, which provides reports to the U.S. Defense Department has pointed to Indymedia as a potential terror network in *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy*, edited by John Arquilla. (Rand Corporation, 2002.).



readily accessible technology and publishing space, which mirrors the collaborative structures of the anti-globalization movement, whose processes are transparent and whose operative principle is consensus.

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