

Indymedia: From Counter-Information to Informational Utopics¹

We can have a cynical attitude in the face of media, and say that nothing can be done about the dollar power that creates itself in images, words, digital communication, and computer systems that invade not just with an invasion of power, but with a way of seeing the world, how they think the world should look... Or we can simply assume incredulity: we can say that any communication by the media monopolies is a total lie... But there is a third option... that is to construct a different way, to show the world what is really happening, to have a critical world-view and to become interested in the truth of what happens to the people who inhabit every corner of this world.

- Subcomandante Marcos²

The Independent Media Center is a collectively run media outlet for the creation of radical, accurate, and passionate tellings of the truth. We work out of a love and inspiration for people who continue to work for a better world, despite corporate media's distortions and unwillingness to cover the efforts to free humanity.

- Global Indymedia Website³

We are creating a democratic, alternative local/global media system to counter the corporate multinationals and their globalization... We don't have the answers but we are making the road as we walk.

- Evan Henshaw-Plath, Indymedia Tech Volunteer⁴

Since bursting on the scene in Seattle in 1999, and through subsequent direct action protests against multilateral institutions and alternative forums in places like Prague, Quebec, Genoa, Barcelona and Porto Alegre, anti-corporate globalization activists have challenged global inequalities, while making new conflicts visible.⁵ Grassroots movements, such as the Citizens Network Against the External Debt (RCADE) or the Movement for Global Resistance (MRG) in Catalonia and the Spanish State,⁶ have made innovative use of global computer networks, informational politics (Castells 1997), and network-based organizational forms to resist growing corporate influence over our lives, communities and resources. The mass media, which are increasingly controlled by powerful global conglomerates (Alger 1998; McChesney 1999), constitute a crucial terrain of anti-corporate struggle. Activists have staged spectacular "image

events” (DeLuca 1999) to gain media visibility, while simultaneously building their own autonomous, self-managed communication networks. The Independent Media Center (IMC), or Indymedia, was thus initially created in Seattle as a way to break the corporate media monopoly and provide an alternative source of news and information. There are now more than 120 local Indymedia collectives throughout Europe, North and South America, Asia, and Africa.

Influenced by the decentered networking logic of the Internet, and the broader anti-corporate globalization movements from which it emerged, Indymedia is organized in a radically decentralized, horizontal fashion. Each local site is autonomous, but remains connected to the broader network, facilitating the exchange of ideas, resources, and information. Indymedia thus involves what I have called elsewhere (Juris n.d.) the “cultural logic of networking,” or the broad guiding principles, shaped by the logic of informational capitalism, which are internalized by activists and generate concrete networking practices.⁷ This cultural logic specifically entails a series of deeply embedded and embodied social and cultural dispositions that orient actors toward: 1) building horizontal ties and connections among diverse, autonomous elements, 2) the free and open circulation of information, 3) collaboration through decentralized coordination and directly democratic decision-making, and 4) self-directed networking (Castells 2001). It reflects the values associated with “open source” software development, incorporated in LINUX or the World Wide Web, forming part of a broader “Hacker Ethic” identified by Himanen (2001).⁸

This chapter explores the emergence of Indymedia as an alternative grassroots media network, and examines its unique form of operation and organization, with a particular focus on Barcelona and the Spanish State, where I carried out ethnographic field research from June 2001 to August 2002.⁹ Beyond technology and structural form, I also consider Indymedia as a novel kind of political and communicative praxis shaped by the cultural logic of networking. Through

their innovative use of new communication technologies, independent media activists engage in what Kevin Hetherington (1998: 123) dubs the spatial practice of “utopics,” whereby “a utopian outlook on society and the moral order that it wishes to project, are translated into practice through the attachment of ideas about the good society onto particular places.” Rather than projecting ideas onto physical space alone, however, Indymedia activists are using new technologies and processes to manifest and inscribe political ideals within both physical and virtual realms; thereby enacting a new form of communication-based practice I call “informational utopics.” Indymedia thus embodies an emerging network ideal, providing both a model of and model for new forms of radical, directly democratic politics.

Challenging the Corporate Media Blockade

The mass media are “actively involved in constituting the social world (Thompson 1995: 117),” not only by producing and disseminating ideas, values, beliefs, fashions, and political vocabularies, they also significantly shape the form, rhythm, and style of social events, which are increasingly attuned to media logics and formats (Altheide and Snow 1991: 3). Unusual, highly dramatic and/or emotionally compelling events garner significant media attention (Ibid: 17), while others fade from public view, as Manuel Castells (1997: 321) points out, “Since news is increasingly framed to parallel (and compete with) entertainment shows, or sports events, so is its logic. It requires drama, suspense, conflict, rivalries, greed deception, winners and losers, and, if possible, sex and violence.” Contemporary social struggles are not only significantly transformed by mass media, they largely depend on them, as Castells (Ibid: 336) continues, “In a society organized around mass media, the existence of messages that are outside the media is restricted to interpersonal networks, thus disappearing from the collective mind.” Information

age social movements thus wage “struggles for visibility” through the production of oppositional images and signs. By staging spectacular direct actions, anti-corporate globalization activists “hijack” (Peterson 2001) global media spaces afforded by important multilateral summits, transforming them into alternative image events that communicate oppositional political messages, while challenging the prevailing symbolic order.

Many grassroots activists are skeptical of such informational strategies, however, viewing mass media as agents of domination more than social change. Indeed, mass media networks are increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few large corporate owners. Robert McChesney (2001) thus points out that contemporary global media markets are now controlled by just seven, mostly U.S.-based multinational companies: Disney, AOL-Time Warner, Sony, News Corporation, Viacom, Vivendi, and Bertlesmann. These have an entrenched interest in reproducing the political and economic status quo, and, as McChesney (2001: 10) suggests, “Consumerism, class inequality and so-called ‘individualism’ tend to be taken as natural and even benevolent, whereas political activity, civic values, and anti-market activities are marginalized.” When it comes to political protest, mass media tend to emphasize sensational theatrics or violence, obscuring underling issues and radical demands (Gitlin 1980: 185). For example, a study in the *Columbia Journalism Review* of how ten major U.S. news organizations covered anti-corporate globalization protests in Prague, Quebec City, Gothenburg, and Genoa, found that editorial opinion reflected corporate viewpoints, while reporters tended to dismiss direct actions as a “circus” or “sporting event”(Guiffo 2001).¹⁰

In response to the corporate media monopoly, Indymedia activists are taking news production into their own hands- reflecting a broader Do-It-Yourself (DiY) philosophy (McKay 1998)- through the use of new technologies, such as the Internet and multimedia platforms,

involving electronic print, video, audio, and photography, to build an alternative, self-managed and participatory communications network. As DeeDee Halleck (2002: 416) explains, “This is not an attempt to ‘get on TV,’ but a commitment to create new forms of information sharing using new spaces and technologies and new ways of collaboration... This time the revolution is not only televised, but digitized and streamed.” Moreover, rejecting the prevailing liberal ideology of “objective reporting,” Indymedia activists openly declare their political leanings, while maintaining a commitment to fairness and accuracy.¹¹ Indymedia seeks to provide a forum for underrepresented voices within the mainstream media, including grassroots communities and activists, as a Barcelona-based activist pointed out, “When the difference between reality and what the television and press say is reality becomes so great, we need to create an independent medium... our slogan is basically, ‘Don’t complain about the media, become the media!’”¹²

The Emergence of an Alternative Grassroots Media Network

The diverse group of media activists and computer techs who founded the first IMC in Seattle were inspired by both the underground media democracy movement and the political and communicative strategies of the Zapatistas (Shumway 2001: 4). The EZLN rose up on January 1, 1994, and within days, a global network of Zapatista support groups had formed, using telephones, faxes and, above all, the Internet to share information about events as they were occurring, forging an “electronic fabric of struggle” (Clever 1995). Marcos proved adept at transforming new Internet-based networks into an arena for circulating communiqués around the world, laying the groundwork for an “intercontinental network of alternative communication,” which “is not an organizing structure, nor has a central head or decision maker, nor does it have a

central command or hierarchies.”¹³ This information-based strategy, organized around flexible, decentralized, yet globally coordinated networks, significantly influenced the future development of Indymedia, and the broader anti-corporate globalization movements within which it emerged.

At around the same time, grassroots video producers, pirate radio activists, computer hackers, ‘zine makers, anarchists and punks began developing collaborative multi-media practices and techniques during alternative media gatherings in Amsterdam called The Next Five Minutes (Halleck 2002: 417). Many of the U.S.-based networks that helped build the first IMC in Seattle, such as the Freespeech or Deep Dish TV, began producing and disseminating community-based broadcasts during the 1990s, including alternative grassroots programming during the 1991 Gulf War (Ibid: 425). The “Countermedia” project organized at the 1996 Democratic National Convention in Chicago was an important precedent, as independent journalists and media activists provided alternative electronic reports from the field, covering the staged event and simultaneous street protests. Although the website ultimately crashed and the project was considered a major disappointment, activists went on to build alliances with diverse media organizations who would later converge in Seattle (Shumway 2001: 4).

Meanwhile, an Australian-based activist and computer programmer, Mathew Arnison, became involved with community access media during the early 1990s, co-founding the web-based Community Activist Technology (CAT) in 1995.¹⁴ A year later, Arnison and several other CAT-based activists began working on “virtual conferences” for the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA), where they developed the first Linux-based automated publishing software. In 1999, activists founded the Active Sydney project, which would provide daylong media coverage during the first Global Day of Action protests on June 18, coordinated through the Peoples Global Action network. The webcast code was built directly on top of

Active software, creating a multimedia package including a calendar, event and group listings and newswire. Arnison later met up with Freespeech.org activists while working on his Ph.D. in Colorado, where they decided to further adapt Active Sydney for the upcoming WTO protests.

In October 1999, a small group of activists from alternative media networks, such as Freespeech.org, Protest.net, Paper Tiger TV, and Deep Dish TV, began working full-time, with \$30,000 in donations and borrowed computers, cell phones, and video equipment, to build a media space for the following month's action in Seattle (Hyde 2002: 3). Activists formed a "tech collective" to begin designing a website that would include text, audio and video reports uploaded directly from the media center, but after meeting with Arnison, they decided to incorporate his innovative "open publishing" technology, allowing activists from anywhere in the world to post their own reports and comments in real time (Shumway 2001: 4). When the mobilization began in late November, activists had "turned a downtown storefront into a bustling, high-tech newsroom filled with computers, Internet access, and their own website (Hyde 2002:3)." IMC issued press passes to independent journalists who reported directly from the streets through audio, video, and digital images and electronic reports, while activists in Seattle and beyond autonomously uploaded their own contributions.¹⁵ The center was divided into separate spaces for different working groups, including a photo shop, radio corner and computer lab for scanning, writing and web surfing. The Indymedia webpage itself was a resounding success, receiving more than 1.5 million hits during its first week of operation.¹⁶

Indymedia sites would soon be up and running in Philadelphia, Portland, and Vancouver, while activists opened IMCs during the March 2000 anti-Bio Tech protests in Boston and the mobilization against the World Bank and IMF in Washington D.C. the following month. The network quickly expanded on a global scale, as U.S.-based media activists traveled from city to

city helping establish local collectives in places like Prague, Barcelona, Amsterdam, Sao Paolo and Buenos Aires. As global tech volunteer Evan Henshaw-Plath points out, “There is a frenetic pace which draws people in... seeing the chaos, the activity, the energy has an effect on people... A mix of revolutionary protests and dot.com like caffeine... this energy is what’s driven the rapid growth of the Indymedia network.”¹⁷

The September 2000 mobilization against the World Bank and IMF in Prague represented an important milestone, as many activists from Europe and around the world took part in a real-life Independent Media Center for the first time. Barcelona-based activists later founded their own Indymedia collective during December 2000, while IMC projects subsequently emerged in Madrid, Euskal Herria, Galicia, and the Strait of Gibraltar.¹⁸ An Indymedia-Barcelona volunteer recalled his initial excitement during the June 2001 Barcelona Campaign against the World Bank in the following terms, “We spent hours and hours updating the page... coordinating with so many people was incredible... some made videos, others conducted interviews, while still others covered the actions. It was really beautiful.”¹⁹

At last count there were more than 120 local Indymedia collectives throughout Europe, North America, Asia, Africa and Latin America, and one source calculates that a new Indymedia center is created every eleven days.²⁰ The Italian IMC recorded more than 5 million hits during the anti-G8 protests in Genoa, while activists estimate the global network receives anywhere from 500,000 to 2 million page views per day.²¹ Now that so many people have instant access to an alternative source of news and information, which also provides concrete details regarding protests, marches, and direct actions, authorities in many countries increasingly view Indymedia as a major threat to public order. During the April 2001 protests against the Free Trade Area of the Americas in Quebec, for example, FBI agents appeared at the Seattle IMC and demanded the

names and e-mail addresses of everyone who had visited the site during the previous two days, while on the night of July 21-22, Italian carabinieri raided the Genoa Indymedia center, destroying computers and documents, while their colleagues ruthlessly beat and arrested activists at the Diaz School across the way.

Building Networks in the Digital Age

The introduction of new information technologies, such as the Internet, has greatly enhanced transnational coordination and communication among activists by facilitating the emergence of decentralized all-channel network configurations where every node is connected to every other (Ronfeldt and Arquilla 2001). As with broader anti-corporate globalization activism, Indymedia is organized through flexible, radically decentralized local/global networks. Moreover, the Internet does not simply provide the technological infrastructure for contemporary social movements; its reticulate structure reinforces their organizational logic. Manuel Castells (1997: 362) thus posits a “networking, decentered form of organization and intervention, characteristic of the new social movements, mirroring, and counteracting, the networking logic of domination in the information society.” Harry Cleaver (1995) similarly describes a rhizomatic form of collaboration developed by the Zapatistas to replace traditional organizations, while Ronfeldt and Arquilla (2001: 6) more generally characterize contemporary information age struggles as Netwars, involving protagonists who “are likely to consist of dispersed organizations, small groups, and individuals who communicate, coordinate, and conduct their campaigns in an internetted manner, often without a precise central command.”

Such portraits provide an apt depiction of global Indymedia, which is composed of a decentralized network of local collectives autonomously organized, yet coordinated through global communication networks, as Henshaw-Plath explains, “Indymedia is a network of networks of media activists. There is no central core or organization.”²² Individual sites include locally relevant news and information, while the global portal provides summaries and links to sites from around the world. The relatively simple, easy to install software means that new IMCs can be set up in a matter of hours.²³ The power of the network largely derives from its ability to maximize knowledge production and information distribution by empowering local nodes to act independently while coordinating through horizontal networking. Guided by an emerging networking logic, key activist “hackers” can use the Indymedia website and internal organizational infrastructure to act as relayers and exchangers- receiving, interpreting and distributing information out to diverse network nodes. As Christopher Burnett (2000) puts it, decentralized networks like Indymedia facilitate instantaneous “communication, collaboration, coordination and action (C3A),” and they do this across vast distances in real time.²⁴

Local Indymedia collectives are themselves organized along highly decentralized, non-hierarchical and directly democratic lines, usually involving consensus-based decision-making, autonomous working or affinity groups and coordination through larger spokescouncils or assemblies. Moreover, most local collectives have no paid staff.²⁵ Indymedia-Barcelona, for example, is organized around technical, editorial and video volunteer groups, which coordinate through bi-weekly consensus-based assemblies and e-mail lists. Internal organization and operation thus mirror the broader vision of participatory democracy espoused by activists, providing a concrete model of collaborative, community-based media production (Halleck 2002: 416) and a model for reorganizing society more generally, as Jeff Perlstein (2001: 2) points out,

“There has been a firm commitment to an organizational structure and process that foster democracy and equity as much as possible—an embodiment of the vision of a just society that we’re working toward with our media reportage and organizing.”

The broader Indymedia process, including the global IMC portal, is coordinated through a series of transnational editorial, technical and logistical working groups that communicate through global distribution lists and periodic web-based meetings using Internet Relay Chat (IRC) technology.²⁶ Specific groups are empowered to make decisions regarding their area of expertise as defined by the larger network. Each local IMC is encouraged to assign delegates to the various working groups- including tech, editorial, process, communication, finance, and translation- as part of the responsibilities associated with taking part in the network.²⁷ In addition, individuals and local collectives are also asked to send stories with international relevance to the features list, while mechanisms are currently being constructed to further coordinate the posting of photos, audio and video clips at a global scale. In addition, regional assemblies are periodically organized to share experiences and develop strategies, such as the European gathering in Berlin during late January 2002. Indymedia activists have thus used e-mail, listerves, IRC technology, translation software and physical forums to facilitate transnational communication and coordination, as a Barcelona-based activist recalled:

I learned how a group of people, some in the United States, others in London, and others, who knows where, were able to coordinate through a global listserve. It was an incredible sight to behold. Suddenly someone sent an e-mail saying, “I think this story is important, what do you think?” He sent the article, and in less than a week, ten people had answered, one responding maybe, two saying it wasn’t clear; but the majority felt it was important,

so we automatically distributed the tasks: “I will reduce it to so many characters,” “I will translate it into German,” and “I will do Italian.” The next day we started working, and the messages quickly began arriving: “Spanish translation finished,” “Italian complete,” “French complete.” Then someone sent a photograph, “what do you think about this picture?” The comments were sent around, and someone sent in another picture, and suddenly we had created an article! It was beautiful, I learned a lot with that list.²⁸

Revolutionary Technological Architecture

The IMC-Tech working group, which includes individual volunteers and local collectives dispersed around the globe, including Madrid-based Sindominio, keeps the global Indymedia network running by installing and maintaining web, database, and mailing list servers as well as software programs. Tech activity focuses on supporting the physical IMC infrastructure— including computers, software, power and net connection— and back end work, such as maintaining websites, producing code and system administration. There are now at least six web servers running Indymedia pages globally, but most local sites and the global portal continue to be housed on a single Seattle-based server called “Stallman,” which the global Tech working group currently manages, although locally-based volunteers play key roles.²⁹

Indymedia webpage layouts are similar throughout the network, but local sites often incorporate variations according to differences in operating software or design. There are typically three columns below the top banner. The center column displays feature stories selected, compiled, and variously edited by local content groups, which may also write original stories or opinion pieces. The left column contains links to technical and organizational

documents and local Indymedia sites around the world, as well as a search engine. The right column displays an event calendar, followed by the multimedia newswire where activists can post their own stories, photos, audio and video files. The center column features are typically selected from open newswire posts, and arranged as multimedia dossiers. In Barcelona, for example, these are organized according to diverse thematic headings. Moreover, features and stories are immediately linked to any comments or corrections uploaded in response. Some collectives closely monitor their sites, removing contributions considered inappropriate or hateful, while others, such as Indymedia-Barcelona, follow a more laissez-faire editorial policy.

The key to Inymedia's success revolves around its use of innovative open publishing software, providing a unique system where activists and collectives create and distribute their own stories by independently posting multimedia files. One of Indymedia's main slogans thus declares that, "Everyone is a Journalist!" The user simply fills out a simple form provided on the site, clicks "publish," and the story immediately appears. Viewers can then provide comments on the article, which are included below the original post, constituting an open forum for debate (Nogueira 2002: 295). Mathew Arnison defines open publishing as follows:

Open publishing means that the process of creating news is transparent to the readers. They can contribute a story and see it instantly appear in the pool of stories publicly available. Those stories are filtered as little as possible to help the readers find the stories they want. Readers can see editorial decisions being made by others. They can see how to get involved and help make editorial decisions. If they can think of a better way for the software to help shape editorial decisions, they can copy the software because it is free

and change it and start their own site. If they want to redistribute news, they can, preferably on an open publishing site.³⁰

Postings range from event chronicles to political rants to carefully considered opinion pieces surrounding a range of topics addressed by the diverse struggles associated with anti-corporate globalization movements, including tactics, ideology, outreach and, inclusion (Halleck 2002: 429). On most sites, such as Indymedia-Barcelona, new stories continually appear at the top of the newswire, knocking older posts down toward the bottom. When articles and other files are finally displaced from the front page, they are stored in various text, photo, audio, and video archives. As mentioned above, local editorial collectives usually select particularly relevant posts from the newswire to create feature stories within the central column. Most local sites continue to use adapted versions of the original Active software written in by a group of Australian hackers including Mathew Arnison. Significantly, Active was developed according to an open source model, which means the original code is always released and distributed together with the software, allowing new programmers to continually adapt, update and improve the program. With the assistance of an American tech volunteer, Barcelona-based programmers initially spent many hours adapting Active code to meet local needs, including the production of trilingual capabilities, involving Spanish, Catalan, and English.

Many local sites have incorporated and/or produced their own alternative software to meet specific needs. Indymedia tech activists have written at least five new programs from scratch, while others have adapted existing software, including weblog management systems like slashdot or Drupal. For example, the Indymedia-Madrid collective, the Agency of Permanent

Construction (ACP), has adapted slashdot software to design a newswire ratings system that enables users to vote on their favorite stories. The highest rated posts remain at the top of the column, reflecting a desire to provide more relevant and higher quality news stories without increasing centralized editorial control. Other alternative software packages include Freeform, in which all articles are promoted to feature status through a combination of rating and moderation, and Mir, designed by German Indymedia hackers to facilitate increased moderation prior to posting, given the prevailing legal environment that prohibits racist, hateful, and revisionist speech. These kinds of technical decisions are far from neutral, but rather reflect broader editorial strategies and political ideologies, as one observer concludes, “It seems possible that Indymedia simply encompasses multifarious political and social ideologies that can only be represented in multiple pieces of software.”³¹

Open Source, Informational Utopics and the Self-Regulating Network

The use of open source software allows programmers to easily adapt code to meet specific needs, while sharing technical ideas and experiences and program improvements through global networks, thereby facilitating project expansion and enhanced coordination. Free source code is open, public, and non-proprietary. It is free not only in a monetary sense, as in “free beer”, but also as in “free speech.” Software produced by multinational corporations, by contrast, tends to be expensive, closed, and centrally controlled. The GNU/Linux operating system provides a well known example of the collaborative open source development process: thousands of programmers and hackers from around the world, linked up via Internet, autonomously adapt source code and freely post new program versions along with the improved

source code so further adaptations can be made. This has led to what Eric Raymond (1999: 52) calls, “a self-correcting spontaneous order more elaborate and efficient than any amount of central planning could have achieved.” In terms of Indymedia, Arnison suggests that, “Because free software is built long distance, decentralized, and on the cheap, it naturally suits the needs of activist software projects like [Indymedia]... far more so than stuff from Microsoft, which is designed for a centralized corporate environment.”³²

This egalitarian impulse based on the free and open sharing of information, collective production, and horizontal connectedness forms part of the broader cultural logic of networking outlined above. Beyond social morphology, networks are increasingly associated with participatory democracy, self-management, and decentralized coordination through autonomy and diversity. The self-produced, self-developed, and self-managed network provides not just a model for effective communication and coordination, but also a model for re-organizing society as a whole. This emerging political praxis can be broadly characterized as anarchist, or what Spanish and Catalan activists call (left) libertarian.³³ Although not identical to anarchism in the strict sense, such networking politics share specific cultural affinities revolving around the wider values associated with the network as a broader model for (re-) organizing politics and society.

Informational utopias specifically involve the use of new communication technologies to physically express and embody these emerging values. Rather than projecting their utopian ideas onto physical spaces, Indymedia programmers and activists also write them into computer code, literally inscribing them into computer interfaces and “network architecture” (Lovink 2002), while projecting them outward through collaborative practice within virtual and offline forums. In this light, open publishing is not merely an efficient model of decentralized news production and distribution; it also represents a highly valued political and cultural goal in itself. By offering

concrete networking tools, including open publishing software, globally connected channels for communication and coordination, and real-time networking capabilities, Indymedia provides a unique social laboratory for generating innovative forms of collaborative production. Much more than an important source of counter-information, Indymedia can thus also be viewed as a crucial site and technological medium for the practice of informational utopias, whereby media activists appropriate and experiment with new networking technologies in order to physically enact alternative utopian worlds based on the values associated with the network as an emerging cultural ideal: decentralized coordination, grassroots participation, consensus-based decision-making, and the free and open exchange of information, ideas and resources.

More specifically, horizontal collaboration reverses the implicit hierarchy that shapes the traditional relationship between author and consumer, empowering grassroots users to freely and equally participate in the production process, as Henshaw-Plath points out, “It’s all about using technology to dis-intermediate the authority and power structure of the editor.”³⁴ The refusal of editorial control radically challenges our taken-for-granted notions of “audience,” while allowing users to draw their own conclusions about the veracity and relevance of particular posts, as Arnison suggests, “Open publishing assumes the reader is smart and creative and might want to be a writer and an editor and a distributor and even a software programmer.”³⁵ The open publishing process thus facilitates active participation over passive consumption through the provision of concrete networking tools and non-hierarchical infrastructures, as Henshaw-Plath explains, “I see my task as building technological systems where people can exert power through egalitarian systems that will reproduce horizontal cooperative social relations and institutions.”³⁶ According to this view, Indymedia represents much more than an important source of alternative news and information for grassroots activists within a “new communications commons” (Kidd

2003); its innovative collaborative production process also represents a broader model of and experiment in building a more directly democratic, just, and egalitarian society.

Conclusion: Current Debates and Future Challenges

Like any complex social process, Indymedia constitutes a highly uneven, often discordant terrain. While the vast majority of activists are firmly committed to the open publishing ideal, a countervailing tendency has emphasized enhanced editorial control. Openness and quality are not necessarily opposed, but as Indymedia expands, and along with it the sheer number and diversity of posts, many activists see an increasing need to develop additional mechanisms for shaping and controlling content. For example, a London-based activist from Southern Spain told me during the June 2001 Campaign Against the World Bank in Barcelona that the Indymedia-UK collective had decided to censor racist, sexist, anti-Semitic, and other forms of oppressive speech, moving inappropriate posts to a back page away from public view. He went on to suggest that, “too many media activists are committed to the liberal ideal of free speech.”³⁷ His comments reflect a broader cleavage dividing those- including many Indymedia pioneers- who remain steadfastly committed to horizontal collaboration and thus argue against any form of centralized editorial manipulation, from other activists who agree that Indymedia should provide an open forum, but only within certain guidelines defined by the network’s social justice goals. The issues are complex, as one activist confided, “I started out as a total free-speech libertarian... Two years later, I was the one pushing for more moderation (Beckerman 2003: 6).”

In addition to occasional hate speech, open newswires are often saturated with duplicate, irrelevant, or inaccurate contributions. In other cases, individuals have consciously attempted to

sabotage particular sites by posting disruptive messages under a variety of different user names.³⁸ Moreover, in a totally open system, all stories are knocked off the front page at the same rate regardless of quality or content. In response to this situation, many activists support a more proactive editorial approach, as a Barcelona-based volunteer explained, “The page has to change; we have to provide more editing. If we want to reach the next level, we really have to emphasize quality.” Although many collectives maintain a completely open publishing system, some editorial groups remove commercial or technologically faulty posts, while others screen for irrelevant content. Still others, such as Indymedia-Madrid, have introduced an automated user ratings system, thus striking a balance between editorial quality and horizontal collaboration.³⁹

A broad consensus seems to be emerging that Indymedia can indeed offer more relevant content, while taking advantage of new software tools and technologies to ensure the network’s broad commitment to self-directed and participatory multimedia production. For example, Mathew Arnison has proposed the creation of an “automated open-editing” system, similar to the open publishing concept already in operation. Users would independently post “sub-editing” stories in order to correct facts and sources; edit spelling, grammar or content; translate the story to another language; or nominate features for the central column. Such a process would empower users to produce high-quality content.

spirit of informational utopias, open editing would do much more than facilitate effective web page editing and design; it would also foster new technological and structural mechanisms for expanding grassroots participation, decentralized coordination and horizontal decision-making, bringing Indymedia even closer to the collaborative model of GNU/Linux software development.

Indymedia thus represents an important site where the hacker ethic meets the world of radical activism. Given the more broadly expanding network ideal, it should come as no surprise that more and more computer hackers are moving beyond free software to engage in diverse anti-corporate struggles- indeed, there is growing skepticism of “the market” as an effective safeguard of Internet freedom (Lovink 2002:2)- while grassroots activists increasingly express their political values through the creation of revolutionary network architectures, as Internet critic Geert Lovink (Ibid: 17) points out, “The days of offline activists, condemned to do street actions while fighting with the print media for recognition and to get their arguments heard, are numbered. Being both hacker and activist is no longer a contradiction.” Similarly, Richard Stallman has suggested that political activists are more important to the free software movement than computer programmers themselves.⁴² As the spheres of radical politics and new information technologies continue to intersect, newly emerging physical and virtual “permanent autonomous networks,”⁴³ such as Indymedia, will become increasingly important as innovative models and concrete mechanisms for producing more directly democratic social, political, and economic systems beyond the state and market on local, regional, and global scales.

¹ This chapter is partly based on interviews and observations conducted during fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation about the cultural logic and politics of transnational networking among anti-corporate globalization activists in Barcelona, Spain. Research was funded by grants from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, Inc. and the Social Science Research Council (with Andrew W. Mellon Foundation support).

² Cited in Nogueira (2002): 293.

³ See www.indymedia.org/publish.php3.

⁴ See <http://lists.indymedia.org/mailman/public/2001-November/000041.html>.

⁵ Throughout this article I refer to “anti-corporate globalization” as a way to characterize movements specifically opposed to economic globalization in the service of transnational corporate interests, which activists view as undermining democracy, the environment, labor rights, and grassroots development. The “anti-globalization” moniker, widely diffused by the mass media following Seattle, does not adequately describe movements that are internationalist in perspective, organized through global communication networks, and composed of activists who travel freely around the world in attendance of protests and gatherings.

⁶ MRG-Catalonia, which was founded shortly before the Prague mobilization against the World Bank and International Monetary Fund in September 2000, was ultimately “self-dissolved” in January 2003 as a response to declining participation and a political statement against the reproduction of rigid structures.

⁷ I adapt this term from Fredric Jameson (1991), who refers to postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism, and Aihwa Ong (1999), who explores a specific type of late capitalist cultural logic- transnationality.

⁸ Citing the hackers’ jargon file, Himanen (2001: vii) defines hackers as “people who ‘program enthusiastically’ and who believe that ‘information-sharing is a powerful positive good.’” In order to distinguish themselves from computer criminals, hackers began referring to virus writers, electronic intruders and other destructive computer users as ‘crackers’ (Ibid: viii).

⁹ See note #1 above.

¹⁰ Cited in Hyde (2002: 2).

¹¹ As Beckerman (2003: 3) points out, reporters within many Indymedia collectives are advised not to take part in their direct action protests they are covering.

¹² Personal interview conducted on June 4, 2002.

¹³ Quoted from the Zapatista Declaration issued during the first Intergalactic Gathering Against Neoliberalism and for Humanity held in Chiapas during 1996 (cited in Halleck 2002: 415).

¹⁴ See “90 minute chat with Matthew Arnison about IMC (pre-) history at www.cat.org.au/maffew/cat/imc_rave.html.

¹⁵ IMC activists also produced a written print paper called “The Blind Spot.”

¹⁶ See Indymedia faq page at: <http://process.indymedia.org/faq.php3>

¹⁷ Interview with Evan Henshaw-Plath, posted at: <http://lists.indymedia.org/mailman/public/mediapolitics/2001-November/000041.html>.

¹⁸ Indymedia Straight/Indymedia Madiag involves a series of local nodes within a broad region linking Europe and North Africa, including Andalusia, North Africa and the Canary Islands. See <http://madiag.indymedia.org/?l=es>. All other local Indymedia sites within the Spanish State can be accessed through: www.indymedia.org.

¹⁹ Personal interview conducted on June 4, 2002.

²⁰ See Beckerman (2003: 5), posted at www.cjr.org/issues/2003/5/anarchy-beckerman.asp.

²¹ See Indymedia faq page at: <http://process.indymedia.org/faq.php3>.

²² Evan Henshaw-Plath interview.

²³ For information about how to start a new IMC, see http://process.indymedia.org/want_imc.php3, http://process.indymedia.org/tech/new_imcs.php3, and the blueprint document posted at: <http://docs.indymedia.org/twiki/bin/view/Global/SeattleN30Blueprint>.

²⁴ For an interesting discussion of network decision-making, see www.cat.org.au/maffew/decisions.html.

²⁵ IMCs do not solicit, accept, or display paid advertising. Local collectives may accept cash contributions or in-kind donations, but there is no policy for the network as a whole, reflecting divergent criteria. For example, the Ford Foundation awarded the global network a \$50,000 grant in 2002, but the money had to be returned because many activists from places like Brazil, Italy, and Argentina would not accept corporate funding (Beckerman 2003: 6).

²⁶ For an explanation of IRC technology and how to attend IRC meetings, see <http://docs.indymedia.org/twiki/bin/view/Sysadmin/IrcHowTo>.

²⁷ For a complete listing of working groups, distribution lists, general information regarding the global Indymedia process, and links to additional documents, see: <http://process.indymedia.org/>. There is currently a Spanish documentation site under construction at <http://docs.indymedia.org/twiki/bin/view/Main/EnEspanol>.

²⁸ Personal interview conducted on June 4, 2002.

²⁹ The main network server was previously located in Boulder, Colorado and Boston, Massachusetts. Some activists have suggested that additional servers should be added in order to decentralize. For example, see Mathew Arnison's discussion posted at www.cat.org.au/maffew/decisions.html.

³⁰ Cited from a document called, "Open publishing is the same as free software," posted at: www.cat.org.au/maffew/cat/openpub.html.

³¹ Cited from "Appendix A. Software (.) Politics and Indymedia," from a book manuscript entitled "Collaborative Literary Creation and Control: A Socio-Historic, Technological and Legal Analysis," edited by James Miller et al at: http://mako.yukidoke.org/projects/collablit/writing/BenjMakoHill-CollablLit_and_Control/book1.html.

³² Evan Henshaw-Plath interview.

³³ This brand of left-wing "libertarianism" should be distinguished from the variety prevalent in the United States. The former involves a radical critique of both the market and the state, while the latter is oriented toward limiting the role of the state in order to unleash the dynamic potential of the free market.

³⁴ Evan Henshaw-Plath interview.

³⁵ Cited from <http://www.cat.org.au/maffew/cat/openpub.html>.

³⁶ Evan Henshaw-Plath interview.

³⁷ For a discussion surrounding “Censorship, the IMC Mission, and Free Speech” written by an Indymedia -UK activist, see: http://process.indymedia.org/on_censorship_and_free_speech.php3.

³⁸ See the case of Biodun Iginla posted on the Ottawa IMC site at: <http://ottawa.indymedia.ca/2002/07/986.shtml>.

³⁹ For a proposal regarding an Indymedia -wide rating system, see <http://process.indymedia.org/tech/ratings.html>.

⁴⁰ A weblog (sometimes shortened to blog) is a website of personal or non-commercial origin that uses a dated log format updated on a frequent basis with new information about a particular subject or range of subjects. The information can be written by the site owner, gleaned from other websites or sources, or contributed by users. This definition was adapted from: http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/0..sid9_gci213547.00.html.

⁴¹ Quoted from www.cat.org.au/maffew/cat/openedit.html.

⁴² Stallman contributed this observation during a July 2003 presentation in Seville (personal correspondence with Víctor Manuel Marí Sáez).

⁴³ Paul Garrin initially adapted the “permanent autonomous network” concept from Hakim Bey’s “Temporary Autonomous Zone” in the context of the struggle to liberate domain name space from centralized control (cited in Lovink 2002: 88). I use it here in a much broader sense to characterize sustained networking projects and architectures designed to create autonomous social and political spaces more generally.

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