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The Global Independent Media Center Network

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THE GLOBAL INDEPENDENT MEDIA CENTER NETWORK

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Dedicated to the memory of Brad Will

"Don't hate the media, become the media."
—Jello Biafra

The Independent Media Center network (IMC) is perhaps the best-known example of the power of do-it-yourself media represented in this book. Birthed during demonstrations in Seattle against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in late 1999, five hundred independent and alternative media activists helped expose the blatant commercial exploitation of many of the world's peoples and resources at the hands of a few rich people and corporations. Operating from a storefront that cofounder Jeff Perlstein described as a "community-based people's newsroom" they produced up-to-the minute text and photo accounts for the Web, as well as low power FM and community radio reports, a newspaper, and a video series.

The IMC outperformed the corporate media. It drew 1.5 million visitors to its site and broke stories that had been largely unreported in the corporate U.S. media. Since then, this collaborative experiment in radical democracy and networked communications has grown to a worldwide network involving approximately five thousand people in one hundred fifty groups in fifty coun-

tries. Just as importantly, activists covering social justice issues around the world have since replicated the IMC model. They also have provided a model for the recent explosion of sites based on user-generated multimedia content.

The IMC pioneered many of the technologies and software that are now part of the Web 2.0 menu. The people involved developed a multimedia networked system that allows anyone with access to the Internet to upload content. The system also fully utilizes the Internet's digital capacity to operate simultaneously at local, regional, and international levels, with links to a multitude of sites.

However, the success of Indymedia is not its technological wizardry. If there is magic afoot, it is a result of the committed volunteer crews, who combine their collective intelligence and experience with a new organizational structure and common set of social justice values. Not without growing pains, which are discussed below, the IMC remains committed to adapting to the multiple interests of their member sites and the movements to which they belong.

Indymedia's philosophical DNA of participatory democracy informs every aspect of the network, from the horizontal links among autonomously operated local sites and special teams to the consensus-based forms of decision making and the dynamism of the open publishing, archiving, and collaboration software. From the initial focus on protests against the agenda of capitalist globalization orchestrated by the WTO and other transnational bodies,[1] the global IMC now provides reports from a wide diversity of social justice movements. The mission statement notes:

> The Independent Media Center is a grassroots organization committed to using media production and distribution as a tool for promoting social and economic justice. It is our goal to further the self-determination of people underrepresented in media production and content, and to illuminate and analyse local and global issues that impact ecosystems, communities and individuals. We seek to generate alternatives to the biases inherent in the corporate media controlled by profit, and to identify and create positive models for a sustainable and equitable society.

BECOME THE MEDIA

The IMC became the model for a new kind of grassroots global media that is autonomous of both the old corporate and state systems. Mixing and mashing from the principles and practices of radical media, social justice organizing, and the open source software movement, the IMC prefigured current experiments in citizen journalism. Instead of being driven by the profit motive

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1. Transnational bodies include institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Internet Corporation on Names and Numbers. They are not directly responsible to national governments, which would be "international." Instead, they combine national governments, global bureaucracy, and private partnerships with transnational corporations.

of capitalist media or the narrow framing of citizens' interests in reporting from national capitals, produced by public broadcasters such as National Public Radio or the BBC, IMC volunteers combine accuracy with "radical" opinion and "passionate tellings of the truth," bringing direct witness from their special vantage points within local, national, and transnational social change movements. There are no IMC stars, and very few talking "experts" in their videos. Not satisfied with armchair critiques of big media, the IMC approach is instead encapsulated in an early banner of IMC Italy: DON'T HATE THE MEDIA—BECOME THE MEDIA.

Committed to enacting the participatory communications that government and so-called public stations only preach, the IMC champions values of solidarity, cooperation, and openness. Many of the centers share servers and operating code, systems of content management, and the basic Web page logo and layout. The decentralized networked structure is designed so that each center manages itself after signing a common agreement based on the IMC's Principles of Unity (https://docs.indymedia.org/view/global/principlesofunity). As the network has grown, IMC teams have developed new ways to promote local and transnational cooperation both on- and off-line, including easier translation functions and more participatory forms of collaboration in production and discussion.

In the beginning, the principles of openness were extended to everyone within reach of the Internet. Indymedia's open publishing, initially developed by techies from Australia and Colorado, provides a 24/7 forum to directly represent oneself through audio, video, or print reports. (See Matthew Arnison's sidebar on Open Publishing.) All site visitors are encouraged to comment, to add translations of articles on the site, and to post notices of upcoming events. The hyperlinked design encourages visitors to select content from among the extensive range of news, commentary, resource links, or discussion opportunities. In addition, in those areas of the world where access to the Internet and to other kinds of media production is limited, IMC groups provide media and journalism production training for community members and sponsor off-line forums for local people to watch and discuss media presentations.

THE NEXT GENERATION

The IMC was not the first media movement to encourage the stories of those excluded by the dominant media and society or to emphasize participatory democracy. Nor was it even the first global network to focus on challenging capitalist globalization, or as Indymedia South Africa puts it, to "encourage a world where globalization is not about homogeneity and exploitation, but rather, about diversity and cooperation." The radical and tactical grassroots media projects this book outlines are only the latest generation in their long history. The IMC represents a new convergence of networks, of global social justice movements, of radical media makers, and of free and open source software, whose stories start at least two decades earlier.

Beginning in the late 1970s, social justice movements began to mobilize against what we now call the Washington or neoliberal agenda.[2] The livelihoods of ordinary people were shattered as multilateral organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund encouraged national elites to cut social programes and to privatize and deregulate public institutions, and instead to spend state budgets on weapons and exorbitant loans with high interest rates. Beginning in the hardest-hit countries of the southern hemisphere, social movements and nongovernmental organizations began organizing across national borders, exchanging information via the existing technologies of linked computer newslists, faxes, and phone lines as well as through face-to-face meetings. Gradually, they built what radical political economist Harry Cleaver calls "an electronic fabric of struggle," most famously in the transnational solidarity campaign in support of the Zapatistas' resistance to the North American Free Trade Agreement, in Chiapas, Mexico.

The Zapatistas were an inspiration to the emerging grassroots antiglobalization movement around the world, and especially to activists involved in communications change. Several IMC founders were especially influenced by the link the Zapatistas made between radical democracy, internationalism, and the importance of media networks, and had either participated in meetings in Chiapas, had heard Subcomandante Marcos at an independent media network meeting in New York City in 1997, or had read or watched a video of his communiqué of 1996: "We have a choice: We can have a cynical attitude in the face of media . . . (or) we can ignore it and go about our lives. But there is a third option . . . (and) that is to construct a different way—to show the world what is really happening—to have a critical worldview and to become interested in the truth of what happens to the people who inhabit every corner of this world."

The Zapatistas were one node in a growing network of activism against neoliberalism, which relied on the Internet and combined older media with participatory practices. In 1997, South Korean labour and student movements experimented with on-the-spot broadband-Internet-based reporting during demonstrations against the International Monetary Fund, forming two powerful broadband news cooperatives, NodongNet and JinboNet. During the June 18, 1999, Reclaim the Streets demonstrations in London, European activists utilized some of these community-activist technologies, which were then adopted in Seattle.

The Seattle IMC represented a leap forward in both scope and scale for this new political media movement. In the home of Microsoft and other software giants, and under the glare of the global mainstream media, the Seattle IMC brought together older and younger radical media activists and artists from the open source software movement, micro- and community radio, independent video and public access television, zine makers and the independent press, and the punk music world.

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2. Neoliberalism was first popularized by the Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher governments in the United States and the UK. Both leaders argued that there is little need for government because free markets can, and should, self-regulate society. They implemented a drastic set of national and international changes, the most publicized of which were their efforts to privatize public institutions and remove most regulations governing corporate behaviour. From the perspective of media justice advocates, these and other measures contributed to the unfettered growth of media monopolies and the end of the Fairness Doctrine.

While the corporate media repeatedly showed shots of the smashing of a Starbuck's window, the IMC presented images of police in full riot gear teargassing largely peaceful demonstrators, myself included, among the giant puppets of turtles (and other animals threatened with extinction), the costumed dancers, the drum-and-bugle bands, the trade unionists, and other people of all ages.[3] Just as importantly, the IMC provided context, making available interviews and commentary from a wide range of people from the United States and elsewhere about the costs of World Trade Organization policies and the values represented by corporate neoliberalism. The new website was so successful, that it received over 1.5 million hits from around the world, and mainstream publications such as the *Christian Science Monitor,* the *New York Times,* and the *Washington Post* began to cite its content.

The IMC turned the tables on the dominant media's model of news making and of organization. They rejected the commercial media, in which information is packaged as a commodity to be sold to audiences via subscriptions or within the tight frames of advertising and product placement. They also rejected the professional spin of nongovernmental organizations, whose spokespeople tended to stick to the narrow talking points of reform. In contrast, the IMC presented a do-it-yourself approach for both media producers and audiences. Their open publishing format and volunteer production teams bypassed the professional gatekeepers of media organizations and nongovernmental organizations. They wanted not only to circulate counterinformation but also to create a very different kind of synergy between producers and audiences.

This interactive approach to citizen journalism was made possible partly by the creativity and resourcefulness of the technical crew. The crew brought with them a common ethos of collaborative problem solving derived from the open source software movement. They built a digital environment featuring free software and open source code, which in large measure spurred the network's rapid growth. Centers everywhere could quickly share and adapt the resource to their own local needs. The global technical crew remains indispensable, supporting and improving via cyberspace and on-site visits both local sites and the network as a whole.

GROWING PAINS

The astonishing pace of the IMC network's development from one center to over one hundred fifty has not been without growing pains. Like many of the precursor radical media, the IMC network continually deals with problems of sustainability, uneven and unequal distribution of resources among people around the globe, attacks from hostile governments and individuals, and the difficulties inherent in sustaining a more democratic communications model in an increasingly enclosed corporate media environment. Although IMC strives to be transparent, there are nonetheless technological, economic, and social barriers to entry and full participation.

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3. For an extensive discussion of the media in Seattle and other global protests, see *Representing Resistance: Media, Civil Disobedience and the Global Justice Movement,* a volume edited by Andy Opel and Donnalyn Pompper. Praeger, 2003.

For example, although there are significant numbers of centers and projects in the southern hemisphere, the network is still dominated by young, white, male, professional-class North Americans and Europeans. In its Principles of Unity the IMC has committed itself to working toward nonhierarchical and antiauthoritarian relationships. However, a study by Lisa Brooten and Gabriele Hadl, based on discussions with IMC women and men, suggests there is still a lot of work to be done.

Nevertheless, what is remarkable is the way the IMC has tried to attend to all of these issues. Its strength has been the pragmatic and imaginative way participants use the network structure to create connective tissues of solidarity. The network is run by several different working groups that cooperate through knowledge-sharing newslists and wikis, which are open to new members and can be accessed on the website. There are also several transnational, regional, and subregional working groups as well as issues forums and ongoing discussion links among groups of women and indigenous peoples.

The global technical team continues to support centers around the world, online and sometimes in person. There have also been several solidarity initiatives to assist developing sites in centers of global conflict, such as Palestine and Iraq, or in regions with fewer resources, such as Africa and Latin America. Intraregional projects such as newsreels enable collaboration across national borders. Newer projects, such as Indymedia Estrecho and the Oceania hub site, defy older colonial definitions of regional borders. Indymedia Estrecho combines collectives from Spain, the Canary Islands, and Morocco, providing links of solidarity across one of the oldest migration routes between Africa and Europe. The Oceania Indymedia website brings together contributions such as columns, articles, political cartoons, and photos, from the Southeast Asia and Pacific region. Member centers also are collaborating on a video project.

EDITORS OR LIBRARIANS?

The IMC also has revised its initial ideas and policies about how best to encourage participatory communications. Partly in response to racist, sexist, and hate-filled commentaries, and partly through a reevaluation of what free speech really means, local centers and the network as a whole have revised their policies and their content-selection and editing practices. Many IMCs have realized that in a world where media power is so unevenly distributed, the barriers to democratic communication go well beyond simple questions of access and require complex policies and practices to facilitate, support, and prioritize participation by specific marginalized groups and individual voices.

Not without controversy, most sites have set up new kinds of editorial controls. One team selects, translates, and publishes stories from around the world on the center column of the main indymedia site, which helps to increase global diversity and to counterbalance the U.S. and Eurocentric perspectives of the mainstream global news services. Another team, the global newswire working group, clears duplicate posts and commercial messages, and hides spam and objectionable posts on the very back pages of the site. Most local sites also publish a policy statement, which explains the

guidelines for using the open newswire. Some sites, such as IMC Germany, have created an extra step for anyone using the open newswire; rather than automatically feeding to the front page, news posts are published on a special page and then filtered by an editorial team for racist, fascist, sexist, and anti-Semitic content, as well as for newness or originality of analysis.

Each of these modifications has elicited a great deal of controversy. Many have argued against any new gatekeeping protocols. "Who sets the ideological filters? Who applies them? How is this process accountable to the volunteers who are giving their labour to Indymedia working groups, let alone the casual reader?" writes Luther Blisset in an October 2004 post. On the other side of the argument, some groups like San Francisco Indymedia would like a much heavier editorial role for Indymedia collectives. "The network at large needs to be less about small clubs of friends running a Web log and must tackle the challenges of being a global, noncommercial media network."

Others, such as Matthew Arnison from Sydney, Australia, one of the original code programmers, argue that the whole idea of editing should be reconceived so as to "involve a new wave of people in media democracy." He envisions developing new software that would enable users to find stories without hours of searching. As Graham Meikle has discussed, the trend toward selection and ranking of content could lead to a professionalisation of news writing and editing and/ or to a much more peer-to-peer network, in which audiences are actively enlisted in ranking and curating stories. The question posed by Sheri Herndon of the original Seattle IMC is whether the IMC crews should be editors or librarians.

GROWING LOCALLY

Most IMC sites began as the result of a specific event, such as the series of antiglobalization protests in the early 2000s or the more recent peace campaigns. The heady excitement of organizing is often enough to inspire small, closely knit teams to work all out for several months. However, this carnivalesque pace of production and dependence on individual volunteers often leads to individual burnout and collective disarray. Now, after the first years of rapid, ad hoc growth, the network requires new IMC centers to proceed formally through an application process, to develop a "local mission statement, adopt a specific consensual decision-making process, satisfy requirements for openness and transparency in their editorial policies, and agree to hold open meetings, among a number of other provisions." (See also docs.indymedia.org/view/Global/ WebHomeWG#New_IMC.)

Individual centers have experimented with different ways of reaching into their own communities and using their own particular traditions of media and social justice movement organizing. The IMC group in Bristol, England, cooperates with other local, national, and international alternative media groups, but it also emphasizes localness: "Please refrain from posting articles which are not directly related to Bristol or the southwest." In June 2003 the Bristol IMC jointly produced a Community Media Day as a platform for debate and skill sharing. In Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, the IMC has over three hundred volunteers, whose accomplishments include creating a

multimedia center in the local post office, starting a free monthly paper funded by local labour groups, producing news segments for community radio, and starting a new radio station.

The tremendous power of the convergent and networked architecture of the Internet and of information and communication technologies has shrunk the battles over resources but has by no means eliminated them. Telephone lines, computers, Internet access, and volunteer expertise and time remain unequally distributed between rich and poor countries and individuals. As Luz Ruiz of Chiapas Media puts it, "Most people in Chiapas don't have access to water, let alone the Internet." Nor do most poor people, and especially women, have the free time to volunteer.

In many centers in poorer countries where there are very few phones, let alone Internet hook-ups, IMC activists work with the existing circuits of social-movement communications. In Chiapas, the birthplace of the Zapatista movement, whose approach to radical grassroots democracy has inspired so many IMCistas, mainstream communications means word of mouth. The Chiapas center uses the Internet mostly as a distribution conduit. Local production of programs is primarily via audiotape and radio.

In Brazil, the national website links several different centers and production teams. The teams also work primarily off-line, through existing networks of community radio and video; through news sheets printed for distribution in schools, workplaces, and neighbourhoods; or through short-term video screenings in poor neighbourhoods or central plazas.

In Ecuador, the IMC has organized three independent film festivals of social documentaries from Latin America. It also encourages website visitors to link to other alternative media, such as the *National Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador* in Ecuador, *Aporrea* in Venezuela, *Znet* in the United States, or the French daily *Red Voltaire*. The Pueblos Originarios, or indigenous peoples team, in Argentina encourages everyone to think of him- or herself as a reporter and a distributor of news, suggesting that visitors distribute IMC content to their friends and workmates.

Begun during protests against the Free Trade Area of the Americas, the Buenos Aires IMC took off during the massive civil disobedience in Argentina against the national government and the International Monetary Fund, in late December 2001. Argentina was once the darling of free-market fundamentalism, with a large and well-educated urban population. However, after more than a decade of IMF-imposed structural adjustment programs, half of the Argentine population lives below the poverty line.

Despite three decades of state and military repression, Argentinians have nonetheless maintained a strong tradition of social-movement organizing, radical journalism, and media making. The younger generation now involved with Argentina Indymedia draws from these traditions. Their philosophy, that every person is a reporter, was first articulated by Rodolfo Walsh, a famous Argentinian journalist who was killed by the military junta in 1977. The IMC team also has adapted the practices of the radical filmmakers of the 1970s, whose work encouraged dialogue between workers and neighbourhood militants, intellectuals, and journalists.

The new generation of Argentinian IMC media makers facilitates unemployed workers, youth, neighbourhood activists, and the Mapuche, an aboriginal group, in documenting their lives and struggles on video. Supporting the voice of the voiceless has become all the more crucial as the Argentinian state has regrouped and begun a campaign of divide and rule, vilifying and marginalizing the most militant of the social movements that had protested against them. In June 2005 a journalist with Indymedia Rosario was attacked, and his camera stolen, by groups supportive of President Nestor Kirchner. Rosario had been reporting on a protest by the unemployed and by human rights organizations.

THE THREAT OF A GOOD EXAMPLE

It is not just in Argentina where the authorities have taken exception to what Noam Chomsky calls "the threat of a good example." The IMC has been consistently raided by national and international security agencies in the United States, Canada, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Spain. Several sites, especially the global IMC Israel and Palestine IMC, have been systematically attacked. In 2002, in advance of the European Union meetings in Barcelona, the Spanish police announced they were tracking the IMC and other alternative information networks. In October 2004, just before a European Social Forum meeting on communications rights, the FBI seized the hard drives of the Ahimsa servers in the United States and the United Kingdom, claiming that the action was part of an "international terrorism investigation." The servers linked twenty IMC sites and several Internet radio streams. After an international solidarity campaign, in which the Electronic Frontier Foundation provided legal support, the servers were returned and the IMC discovered that the Italian government had prompted the actions.

The IMC's tactical media innovations also make the sites vulnerable. For example, the innovative text messaging and Internet reports during the New York protests against the Republican National Convention provided both demonstrators and police with easily accessible, up-to-the-minute reports. The same week, the Justice Department demanded that the IMC service provider hand over records listing names of Republican delegates. Despite the intimidation, IMC editor Gupta told *Democracy Now!* reporter Jeremy Scahill that it was a significant step forward in tactical resistance. Gupta also told Scahill that "Technology can't substitute for good organizing."

Finally, IMC activists face the same threat of violence that increasingly is faced by journalists around the world. On October 27, 2006, New York City-based IMCista Brad Will was killed when progovernment attackers opened fire on protesters in Oaxaca, Mexico. Brad, a documentary filmmaker, died with his video camera in his arms. In response to his death, the New York City IMC published this statement: "[Brad Will] was part of this movement of independent journalists who go where the corporate media do not or stay long after they have gone. Perhaps Brad's death would have been prevented if Mexican, international, and U.S. media corporations had told the stories of the Oaxacan people."

CREATING THE FUTURE IN THE PRESENT

As the neoliberal project has fostered the extension of corporate media worldwide, it has also created conditions of radical possibility. In a short time, the IMC has grown into a worldwide communications network that provides a vital resource for social justice movements amid the encroaching global corporate enclosure of media. It represents a qualitative shift from a scattering of media "alternatives" to an autonomous multimedia network that is independent of the ownership of global corporations and governments and of the logics and languages of the mainstream "stenographers to power."

The activists in the IMC network and in sister networks such as the ones mentioned in this book are providing insights into what a truly democratic and participatory media environment could look like. Many are also realizing the need to challenge the global corporate lords of media directly and to link with national and transnational efforts to take back our common communications resources.

In January 2007, as I write this, several IMC members are in Nairobi, Kenya to support an Indymedia convergence during the seventh annual World Social Forum. The intention of the convergence is to provide a local communications space for reports on the conference, training workshops, and support for developing the local Kenya IMC. The global IMC also will link other sites that are taking up the issues from the Forum.

In addition, IMCs and their allies from Europe, North America, and Latin America have been involved in the World Summit on the Information Society, a UN-sponsored forum about the future of global media and communications, which was held in Geneva in 2003 and in Tunisia in 2004. And in the United States, members of local IMCs have participated in a number of different national media reform and media justice conferences, including those sponsored by Free Press, Action Coalition for Media Education, and the Grassroots Radio Conference.

Building a new global system of communications that is responsive to, representative of, and accountable to people all over the world presents no end of challenges. Removing the first lines of electronic gates is only the beginning; the deep divisions among us—of class, gender, race, and colonial history—continue both on- and off-line. What is remarkable is how much the IMC continues to morph and change, to find collective solutions to problems, and to develop new kinds of collaboration.

"Until the lions can tell their own story,
tales of the hunt will always glorify the hunter."
—*African proverb*

Open Publishing in a Nutshell

Matthew Arnison

It was 1999, one week before the protests in Seattle, and the first Indymedia website was almost ready.

Seattle was buzzing, with tens of thousands of global justice protestors converging on a key meeting of the World Trade Organisation. The Independent Media Center was expecting five hundred media activists, who would report daily using their own daily newspaper, radio and video broadcasts, and the Internet.

I was working from Sydney, Australia, on software running on a computer in Colorado[4], which would publish and broadcast news from the IMC in Seattle.

In 1999 the word *blog* had only just been coined, and blogging software wasn't easy to find. So we adapted our own software from an earlier event,[5] which collected text, audio, and video reports. The software automatically published each report on the front page of the website.

Before we switched on the website, however, we had a question to answer: How could we control access to publishing on the IMC website? How could we protect ourselves against potential spammers and other saboteurs?

We could set a password on the publish button. But how would we get that password to five hundred media activists? Could we even modify the software quickly enough to add password support before the protests started?

Then, we wondered, what would happen if we had no password? Maybe the audience could make its own decision to publish? The IMC collective took the plunge and decided to forego a password and to trust the audience. Later, we coined a name for that experiment in trust: open publishing.[6]

The results were breathtaking. The website exploded with stories reflecting the amazing events of that week in Seattle.

As we had hoped, the decision to go with open publishing on the website helped IMC volunteers keep the front page up to date with breaking news. For example, the corporate media reported as fact a claim by the Seattle police that no rubber bullets had been fired. Within hours, digital photos of rubber bullets

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4. Free Speech TV (freespeech.org) was a vital collaborator on the first IMC website.

5. The software was called Active (active.org.au), and was written by Community Activist Technology (cat.org.au).

6. M. Arnison, "Open publishing is the same as free software," purplebark.net/maffew/cat/openpub.html, March 2001.