Ch. 2: Indymedia.ie: a critical space for social movements in Ireland

Margaret Gillan (Community Media Network) and Laurence Cox (Dept of Sociology NUIM)[i]

Introduction. From the *Late Late* to Indymedia.ie

"Hegemony" – the way popular consent to power and economic structures is organised – is an alien word to many people, seemingly coming from a different world to the familiar trivialities of Middle Ireland. But the complacent idea of Gay Byrne's *Late Late Show* as the nation's living room is a perfect example of hegemony at work: the state broadcaster offering a cosy, semi-official version of "national community". Its liberal version appears in comments about how "it was a breakthrough" when something appeared on the *Late Late*: not grasping that "issues" make the mainstream media as a result, not a cause, of social movements struggling against the official state of affairs.

News is "popular" in Ireland; in radio's early years people complained vociferously about uneven access (Pine 2002, Horgan 2001). Twentieth-century media were seen as breaking down rural isolation, providing social cohesion and helping Ireland join "the wider world". Yet in practice knowledge and access to knowledge was tightly controlled within Ireland until very recently. State censorship covered everything from contraception information to interviews with members of democratically-elected political parties; most people had access only to state TV; a single commercial distributor had de facto control over what periodicals were sold; while a monolithic education system allowed only minor diversity in religious education but none in history or politics.

Alongside these official realities, Ireland has widespread traditions of unofficial knowledge. Oral versions of history have long contradicted first the colonial account (Lennon 2004) and then the official pieties of state nationalism. Radical groups - republican, socialist, atheist or feminist - published their own periodicals in the teeth of police and populist repression (for example, a left-wing bookshop in Cork was attacked by a mob and forced to close in 1970). Working-class community groups printed pamphlets about areas into which "professional" journalists did not venture, at times setting up their own radio or even TV stations (Gillan 2010). Magazines associated with alternative lifestyles, from gay and lesbian to organic farming, came and went.

From the later 1980s, Ireland entered on a particular brand of neoliberalism backed up by "social partnership" with unions and tax haven arrangements with multinationals. An ever-tightening net of privatisation, public-private partnerships, EU fiscal rectitude and international free-trade agreements meant that government's scope for new concessions to popular interests – such as the limited welfare state arrangements which had previously secured working-class support for Fianna Fáil (Allen 1997) – declined. This in turn undermined popular consent to power and led to a greater reliance on physical repression, particularly visible from the early 2000s in growing police violence against political protestors.

Well-paid TV commentators pronouncing that all was well did not sit easily with armoured police beating protestors in public locations, particularly when those protestors were the children of the

new middle classes (ní Dhorchaigh and Cox 2011). Hence the 2000s saw a legitimacy crisis for the Irish state, growing as the historical realities of Magdalen laundries, industrial schools and clerical sexual abuse started to be named – realities which implicated much of the older population in one way or another. New kinds of hidden realities sought a voice and a space.

However, the intensified commercialisation of media in the 1990s and 2000s prompted the designation of broadcasting spectrum and mobile phone infrastructure, not as culture or arts but as "natural resources" – in a neo-liberal context, valuable assets for sale. Without a protected public broadcasting service and ethos, media become tools for their owners to decide what is newsworthy.

Thus the 2001 launch of Indymedia Ireland marked a radically different model of media: Internet-based, non-profit, run on a shoestring, democratically produced, open to many different voices, and telling the stories that were firmly kept out of the nation's living room. This chapter discusses its context of media politics in Ireland, global Indymedia, how Irish Indymedia was born and what happened next.

Who shapes the news in Ireland?

Chomsky and Herman's (1994) propaganda model discusses how ownership, funding, sourcing, flak and anti-communism are used to mould the media to ruling class interests.

Ownership: the state and large corporations are Ireland's main proprietors, with more concentrated media ownership than in most OECD states (Flynn 2013), despite some locally-owned papers. In 1983, Tony O'Reilly had this to say about what media ownership meant for the ability to exploit Irish oil and gas fields: "Since I own 35 per cent of the newspapers in Ireland I have close contact with the politicians. I got the block he (the geologist) wanted." (Connolly 2006).

Funding: virtually all media are advertising-dependent, so that in practice they sell an audience to advertisers rather than the reverse, and speak to groups with the disposable income advertisers are seeking.

Sourcing: Irish media have very little research capacity of their own and rely heavily on official sources and commercial news agencies, with government spokespersons and other journalists the most frequent interviewees. Occasional non-controversial "community content" does not alter this basic picture[ii].

Flak: a journalist criticising a major corporation or state body can expect their boss to be contacted immediately with formal complaints, demands for redress and threats of legal action, while this is rarely true for social movements and community groups. In Ireland, elite circles are so small that flak can often be exercised on a first-name basis.

Anti-communism: while as in the USA most Irish journalists are deeply suspicious of anything left of the Labour Party, anti-communism's functional equivalent is anti-republicanism. The smear of "republican involvement" is often enough to damn a whole movement in the media, whether it be local opposition to Shell in Mayo or community organising in Dublin.

Finally, conventional journalistic practice demands that 'news' must always be 'new', with little interest in what happened next with yesterday's news, be it the oil fields or how new rules restrict

community broadcasters. Conventional media are highly selective in what they cover; what constitutes 'newsworthiness' is determined by something other than what is directly affecting people.

Ireland's media environment has its own peculiarities. The early days of radio left a hybrid model of a **state broadcaster - RTÉ** - operating partially commercially and partially through state funding, unlike the purely commercial US model or the UK's public service model, leading many to assert that public service broadcasting doesn't exist in Ireland. The state's continuing insistence that RTÉ make ends meet through commercial activity undermines public service broadcasting, places it in ongoing conflict with commercial media, stresses competition rather than needs, and hinders strategic alliances with non-profit alternatives. Because of RTÉ's "market monopoly", radio piracy was an obvious response.

Commercial broadcasting media have operated since the development of Century Radio in 1989 as the first licensed alternative to RTÉ Radio 1 in an effort to kill off the pirate stations. That initiative was tarnished by the rapid turnover of media ownership since, but also by the findings of the Flood and Mahon tribunals, which uncovered corrupt payments to politicians – including then-Minister Ray Burke - particularly around the Century licence.

Community radio emerged through a loophole in the 1988 Wireless and Telegraphy Act, and has since been legally recognised as separate from state and commercial broadcasting, but government policy reviews often force community and commercial media to compete on the same terrain, and activists must continually struggle for the recognition of their distinct ethos and situation.

The Irish media landscape, to put it mildly, is imperfect. The Moriarty Tribunal's final report found that media magnate Denis O'Brien had paid over £147,000 to Michael Lowry, the Minister in charge of issuing mobile phone licences from 1994-1996 (Moriarty 2011). O'Brien owns a large share of the Irish radio market and a 'substantial interest' in Independent News and Media (INM), and has a track record of attempting to prevent journalists reporting on the tribunal whilst he was attending (Browne, 2013). Nonetheless, the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI, 2012a) did not require significant changes to ownership rules, other than placing added regulation on *community* media.

Thus it is not surprising to find a lack of confidence in the veracity and integrity of 'news' and critical reporting, fueled by issues around journalistic ethos in current affairs programming on RTÉ (BAI 2012b). RTE's requirement to compete with commercial operators helps explain its embroilment in 'infotainment', sensationalising issues, and lowering ethical standards.

In this environment people seeking to either put out information ignored in the mainstream, or to challenge official versions of stories, have not only to articulate their experience, but also to create a suitable form. This gives rise to various 'alternative' uses of media. This happened long before Indymedia (Thompson 1984, Tilly 2004); but since the 1960s increased access to various media, sometimes facilitated by technological changes, but also by better educational opportunities, including adult and community education, enabled more people to access and participate in media production themselves.

The alternative media response

Alternative media (whether print, broadcast or digital) are alternative in three ways. Firstly, they seek to democratise *access to the media* and enable groups and experiences which are excluded from "official" (state and commercial) versions of reality to be heard. Secondly, they seek to democratise *authorship and production*, so that the writer or speaker is no longer a well-paid professional employed by a corporation or state but an ordinary citizen speaking to other citizens. Thirdly, they seek to democratise *distribution*, to break out of the ways in which the construction of different media "markets" channels different sorts of information to different "audiences", understood primarily as the target groups for different advertisers (Atton 2002, Downing 2001).

Ireland has many different kinds of alternative media. The longest-established are radical media, usually associated with political organisations (socialist, republican, feminist etc.) and tied to their campaigning activity. Following these are community media, produced by and for members of particular (usually urban working-class) communities on issues which matter to them and are either not represented or caricatured in the "mainstream media". There are independent media, often produced by individuals with some professional training and an interest in "breaking into" conventional media from a critical standpoint. Finally, alternative media in the counter-cultural sense, linked to everything from music scenes via alternative spirituality to zine networks.

Around 2000, these media were facing two crises. One was a crisis of organisations. Many social movements had become institutionalised and state-funded under "social partnership", meaning that their primary interest was now getting their issue into the media read by politicians and civil servants, rather than mobilising ordinary people to campaign. Linked to this, traditional distribution strategies – using members to sell periodicals or buy subscriptions – were in steep decline, while the expansion of activism outside the major cities to small towns made the distribution challenge harder than ever. Few alternative media ever made a profit, but now the financial and organisational costs of maintaining a print publication *not* directly supported by funders (in Ireland, usually some branch of the state) were harder than ever to sustain.

The growing availability of computers and the Internet started to provide a real solution. After an initial, then-costly purchase, publication costs shrank from printing and postage to nearly zero. Similarly, although only those with computers (or access to Internet cafes) could read online material, *geographical* distribution was no longer a problem. Furthermore, well-produced Irish material could be read by respected activist peers abroad. In 1999 a special issue of Community Media Network's *Tracking* covered alternative print media. Five years later, most of those media either no longer existed or had migrated to the Internet. It is in this context that Irish Indymedia came into existence.

Making global Indymedia

In 1999, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) met in Seattle for talks to lower customs and legal barriers protecting developing countries from multinational competition. An alliance of trade unionists opposing the "race to the bottom" on wages, environmentalists objecting to WTO's rules forbidding individual countries from banning goods produced in destructive ways, and global justice activists attempting to prevent a further worsening of world poverty, brought 50,000 protestors to the streets of Seattle.

Despite police brutality and suspensions of civil rights, protestors were successful in preventing the meeting from concluding and in emboldening developing countries' delegates – used to being isolated from one another and threatened into agreement by Northern representatives – to ally and refuse the unfair terms proposed by the WTO leadership. The WTO, one of the flagship institutions of neoliberalism, has not concluded a global trade round successfully in the 15 years since.

The US media were as hostile to social movements as the Irish, and a barrage of caricatures, anonymous stories from police sources, and assertions of the perfection of free-trade filled the airwaves, while protest organisers found themselves unable to gain any coverage for their issues. In this context, Indymedia – "Independent Media" – was born, using the Internet to circumvent *de facto* censorship of protestors' concerns (and police violence), and enabling immediate upload of text, audio and video and comments. The site was an outstanding success, with over a million hits (Feeney 2007: 240). Following Seattle it was simply left running, becoming a broader tool for circumventing US media hegemony[iii] and spawning an international network of autonomously organised sister sites[iv].

Indymedia – and other activist Internet tools of the day such as PeaceNet, riseup.net etc. - were the forerunners of today's interactive "Web 2.0". Radically democratic, with content directly generated by users, they enabled participants to speak and listen directly to each other across great distances without the mediation of "professional journalists". So successful was this model that it later manifested as social media such as Facebook and Twitter (Indymedia London 2012). Indeed, many of the computer activists who collaborated on projects such as Indymedia went on to work on the commercial forms of Web 2.0. Similarly, video activists who honed their production and editing skills on street protests went on to work in mainstream media, bringing new styles and methodologies. As Hardt and Negri (2000) observe, capitalism has little creativity of its own and is routinely parasitic on commodifying popular invention.

The Free Culture Movement and Oscailt

The Wikileaks and Snowden crises highlight the changes brought about by Web 2.0. People are changing from largely consumers of media to being makers – if not always creators of original media at least more interactive with the content. But underlying this change is an ongoing dynamic of challenge and struggle.

The 'free culture movement' was made up mainly of technology workers and hobbyists – 'hackers' and 'geeks' - who began three decades ago to respond to an inherent contradiction within the new technology (Davidson 2011). The minimal costs of computer-based methods of production and distribution undermine the commodification of information. 'Hackers' did what people had always done with new technologies - they experimented and shared. As GNU, the free operating system, clarifies:

> *"Free software" means software that respects users' freedom and community. Roughly,* the users have the freedom to run, copy, distribute, study, change and improve the software. *With these freedoms, the users (both individually and collectively) control the program and what it does for them.*

When users don't control the program, the program controls the users. The developer controls the program, and through it controls the users...

Thus, "free software" is a matter of liberty, not price. To understand the concept, you should think of "free" as in "free speech," not as in "free beer".

Since the formation of the Free Software Foundation in 1984 and its idea of 'copyleft' (giving rights to modify information like software so long as others can modify yours), a range of other initiatives have emerged, such as the Linux operating system, the Creative Commons licensing system and more recent file-sharing sites such as Pirate Bay – most recently, Pirate Parties in various countries.

Some claim that the fundamental relations of production under capitalism are seriously challenged by free software (Davidson 2011). More 'business friendly' initiatives such as the 1998 Open Source Initiative diverted attention from the political to claims of technical superiority. However the drive behind free culture continues:

It it totally wrong to regard our role as to represent "consumer interests". On the contrary it's all about leaving the artificial division of humanity into the two groups "producers" and "consumers" behind.' (Fleischer 2005)

Irish Indymedia was no stranger to this technical development, and designed the Oscailt ("open") software for its own website, involving

'a search engine, categorisation of stories into topics, regions and types, the ability to publish audio and video files ... and localised frontpages for each county in Ireland and each topic.' (www.indymedia.ie 18.06.2003).

Oscailt has been adopted by a number of high profile non-profit sites internationally (Redmond, 2006; Oscailt 2012). This places Indymedia.ie within a global movement that reaches beyond content to address technological issues of control of media production and the social implications of such controls (Oscailt, 2007; Feeney 2004).

History of Irish Indymedia: history and politics

IMC (Indymedia Centre) Ireland came out of the wave of Irish protests against neo-liberalism around the turn of the 21st century (Cox 2006). Latin American struggles had long inspired Irish activists via solidarity and development work. Paulo Freire's participatory adult education in Brazil informed much Irish community development; in 1975 Comhlámh was established for returned development workers (Comhlámh 2013); Irish participants in Nicaraguan "Brigades" learnt about the Sandinista mass literacy campaign and in 1995 the Nicaragua Support Group began to establish a Latin American Solidarity Centre which saw activity expand around Brazil, Columbia, Peru, Mexico, Venezuela and Haiti among others. LASC encouraged development education which created links between the local and global (LASC 2013).

In particular, the Zapatista revolution in Chiapas (Mexico) against neoliberalism depended strongly on networking between movements and skilled communication use:

In August 1996, we called for the creation of a network of independent media, a network of information. We mean a network to resist the power of the lie that sells us this war that we call the Fourth World War. We need this network not only as a tool for our social

movements, but for our lives: this is a project of life, of humanity, humanity which has a right to critical and truthful information. (Marcos 1997)

The effectiveness of such networks was seen when a loose global coalition of high-powered activists and NGOs stopped the OECD's Multilateral Agreement on Investment in 1998, foreshadowing the organisation of the Seattle protests. Within Irish groups such as Community Media Network (CMN), young activists like Mick McGowan (1995) wrote about travelling to Chiapas and the Zapatista use of media for empowerment by 'talking with' internally with their community and 'talking to' the outside world through carefully staged media events.

Few Irish activists participated in the 1999 Seattle protests which sparked the first Indymedia, but several were involved in the 2000 Prague protests at the International Monetary Fund / World Bank summit, and the 2001 Genoa protests at the G8 summit. The policing of Genoa was the most violent of all European summit protests in the 2000s: the city centre was barricaded off, freedom of movement was suspended, protestors were portrayed as terrorists and over 400 activists and 100 police and carabinieri were injured.

On July 20th activist Carlo Giuliani was shot by a carabiniere and his body run over twice. The following night the Diaz schools, used as media, medical and legal support centres, were entered by heavily armed police who systematically beat the sleeping inhabitants, leaving over 60 severely injured and three in comas, including British journalist Mark Covell.[v] Arrestees were abused at the Bolzaneto detention centre, and in 2007 police officers were convicted around this. In 2010, 25 officers received prison sentences and Mark Covell won compensation (Kington and Hooper, 2010).

The Genoa events catalysed Irish Indymedia. Ten Irish media activists travelled there to work with Italian Indymedia; several later became involved in developing the Irish centre (Crudden 2011a). In August, they organised a public screening of Italian Indymedia's Genoa documentary in front of the Italian embassy:

I feel as if our small group who went to Genoa to film are becoming part of something bigger. We're doing Indymedia in our own city now. It's not a website but it is part of Indymedia, Indymedia Ireland. (Crudden 2011b: 17)

The early Irish activists mostly used video. Their 2-hour Genoa documentary *Berlusconi's Mousetrap* was produced in collaboration with other activists who filmed events and using footage from the international Indymedia archive. Taking a year to complete (not long for such a project), it generated discussion about how such media can be produced, authorship, the importance of documenting events, engaging with media, and accessible forms. The production was a binding factor for early Indymedia[vi]; it models how material can be assembled by people in different locations and how collaboration and sharing material for editing can enable a range of outputs speaking to different audiences.

Meanwhile Irish police were also travelling, to seminars in Britain and Europe where they were told that anti-globalisation protestors were "the new terrorists" and encouraged to react more aggressively. This was manifested at anti-privatisation protests in Dublin and most famously at the May 2002 Reclaim the Streets protest which saw a "Garda riot" on Dame Street, with police batoning bystanders (including taxi queues and journalists).

Activist video recordings were used in court to identify numerous Gardaí, providing evidence of police lying (MacRuairi 2004, RTS Press Release 2003) and a humiliating defeat for the Garda. This

and the increased presence of activist video cameras on subsequent demonstrations, led to Gardaí taking video of activists at protests, apparently collecting identification of peaceful protestors and eventually presenting "video stand-offs" where activist and Garda videomakers were locked in a "video shoot" of one another.

Thus Indymedia Ireland was born: initially closely associated with the global justice / anti-capitalist movement against neo-liberalism, highlighting political issues marginalised or directly censored in the mainstream media and bringing to light police brutality which was (and remains) under-reported at best by state and corporate media[vii].

As participants wrote before the launch, "…Again and again and again and again sustainable, alternative, co-operative actions and perspectives are marginalised and ignored by Irish mainstream media in favour of an establishment 'party line' ", citing the police treatment of an independent cameraman, one of five people arrested at a Critical Mass cycling demo (Anon. 2001a). Similarly, Indymedia Ireland's first story covered the arrest of 16 people, including an independent cameraman, protesting outside the private-public partnership meeting at the Burlington Hotel (Irishvidhead 2001).

The site took off slowly, with two other stories in October 2001, none in November and one in early December. Six were posted on December 18th, followed by near-silence until after January 30th 2002. From then on the site was consistently active.

Irish Indymedia and the wider left

The Irish left is not homogenous[viii]. For our purposes it falls into three main camps. A reformist left, consisting of parts of the Labour Party and trade unions, together with many NGOs and single-issue campaigns, focuses on gaining access to an imagined "mainstream" and downplays the threat to existing power structures implied by any change. Thus this left focusses on gaining access to the mainstream media and often acts as though it risks contamination in the eyes of "respectable" opinion from any association with alternative media.

The hierarchical left, represented particularly by Trotskyist and republican parties and some movement organisations, seeks much more radical change but is also concerned with contesting the existing public arena. Thus it tends to combine interventions in mainstream media with the use of other media, in particular "own-brand" media dedicated to members of a particular party or movement, and is wary of "uncontrolled" spaces such as Indymedia.

Finally, the non-hierarchical left, represented particularly by anarchists and direct action-oriented movements as well as some community groups, tends to see little scope for using mainstream institutions for social change, and is suspicious of organisationally controlled spaces, preferring independent, self-created media.

Responses to the new Indymedia.ie was shaped by these allegiances. The mainstream political boards.ie site discussed Indymedia shortly after its foundation, noting its focus on protests both sympathetically and critically (boards.ie 2002). The anarchist Workers Solidarity's viewpoint underlines the importance of Indymedia to movement participants:

There is nothing like reading a press report, listing to a radio report or watching a TV report of something you were involved in, particularly if it was oppositional politics. It doesn't matter if it was a service charges picket, a critical mass cycle protest, a sit-in or whatever. When you watch the state or capitalist media you don't recognise the event. It's different from the one you were at, there are mistakes, distortions or just damned lies. It's frustrating as hell.

That's why when somebody gets an alternative media outlet together where participants report on the action, where the journalists are working to an agenda of truth and wish to inform and publicise reality, then you're just blown away. 'Okay, you say, we have our left papers'. Yeah I know but watching footage of the Shannon protest, hearing the voices reading the truth is so refreshing. I was there - the report is real - the crap in the papers or local radio is just twisted. (McBarron 2002)

As Indymedia Ireland became a political object, it inevitably satisfied some people more than others. Writing in *An Phoblacht* on Indymedia's first anniversary, Justin Moran noted that it was used "almost exclusively by groups and people that have limited access to the establishment media - republicans, socialists, environmentalists, anarchists and a variety of other groups making up what could broadly be termed the progressive left in Irish politics", adding

Their success is all the more impressive when it is considered that Indymedia is run on a shoestring, with contributors and editors providing their material for free. The quality of their work is often in stark contrast to the laziness of the well-paid corporate media in Ireland who don't supply the aggressive reporting Indymedia can do.

At the same time, he objected to the lack of central control – "a great deal of poorly written, inaccurate and sometimes downright surreal material appears" – and that the site's comments facility enabled political conflicts to be expressed publicly (Moran 2003). From the perspective of 2013, that *An Phoblacht* thought a comments facility was too radical says a lot about how far activist media pushed then-conventional norms[ix].

The tension between Indymedia and traditional left groups had already come to a head in its first few months of existence. Indymedia was not rule-free: advertising, both commercial and for political parties, was barred, as was hate speech. In April 2002 the Socialist Workers Party barred its members from using the site after IMC editors removed an election advertisement. The issue was debated on the editorial list, with SWP members losing the argument (O'Brien 2002). The SWP later quietly conceded the issue and members returned to Indymedia Ireland.

A sophisticated analysis of Indymedia's relationship to traditional left groups came from Marc Mulholland, in a lengthy post on Indymedia:

The leaders of the various leftist groups have decided not to participate in a site they regard as beneath their dignity. They know that they will be attacked by ireful posters in disrespectful and probably vulgar and abusive terms. The rank and file of the various vanguard revolutionary parties are obviously discouraged from going to have a look-see. Those who do speak-up for their parties usually (though not always) sign on anonymously.

He noted that the heyday of centralised left politics depended on organisational control of the skills and equipment for traditional printing. Transformed in the early 1990s by desktop publishing, the rise of Internet fora was enabling activists to break away from party leaderships and form a broader

left (Mulholland 2003). In comments, Indymedia activist Chekov responded to calls for Indymedia to have a broader political base:

> *"It would be hard for indymedia to be any more broadly based politically since the project is open to literally everybody except those promoting hate ideologies. The editorial mailing list, where all decisions are debated, is open to all and includes some people who are, in practical terms, opponents of indymedia. In recent times we have had reasonably regular postings from representatives or members of FF, FG, Labour, SF and the Greens, so it is hard to say that there are barriers to participation from a broadly based user base.*
>
> *I think that the reason why the left is over-represented on indymedia is that people with a more right wing point of view are massively over-represented in the mainstream media..." (Chekov 2003)*

Within the left, Indymedia Ireland was particularly associated with direct action groups, who were more likely to experience violent policing and whose perspectives were largely excluded from the mainstream media. Anarchists played a key role here within a wider coalition including socialists, republicans, radical democrats and media activists.

Irish Indymedia and other movements: the Mayday experience

While the Internet created possibilities for interactivity and early Indymedia sites offered simple uploading facilities for stories and photos, the questions of who constituted core organising groups, who were active participants, and the skills and the knowledge needed for basic participation remained unresolved. Indymedia was known to activists but the lack of engagement amongst communities used to self-organising, for example in Dublin's inner city, was notable.

By 2003 Irish Indymedia activists were questioning how they related to real-time, face-to-face activity, geographical place, and control issues; some members voiced a need to 'get their feet back on the ground' and to be in touch with community activity. The prospect of an EU summit around Mayday 2004, a visit from US President George Bush, and an anti-immigration referendum posed a unique challenge. Indymedia activists wanted to respond and aspirations were high.

Indymedia activists approached two groupings around setting up an independent media centre to cover the Mayday events – the protest organisers, Dublin Grassroots Network (DGN), and the the Community Media Network (CMN) [x]. Overall, the 2004 Mayday events themselves were a real success, claimed as the largest ever protests by the non-authoritarian left in Ireland, and the centre played an important strategic role. DGN activist Dec McCarthy (2005) wrote "It is likely that these media activists prevented the wholesale criminalisation of the Mayday protests."

But internal problems were worked out at another level, particularly in and around the Independent Media Centre. While the project met widespread goodwill, horribly poor resources with too few individuals doing too much meant problems were inevitable. Even before the event there were unacceptable levels of noncommunication in co-ordination and planning[xi], assumptions made around allocation and use of available resources, and conflicts around use of the building[xii].

Irish activists and international Indymedia representatives ensured rigorous and useful evaluations afterwards[xiii]. However these focussed on organisational mismanagement, emphasising lack of

experience and the magnitude of the event. While important lessons were drawn for international activist groupings, some key factors were bypassed, particularly the differences between different movements' approach to organising, their internal culture and expectations. The failure to discuss these meant that an important learning opportunity was lost.

A sexist division of labour, privilege, and accountability became highly visible as the event progressed. Except for preparation work on the building by volunteers and paid labour[xiv], men were nowhere to be found when undesirable and 'boring' work had to be done. During the event all 'housework' was done by women–'manning' the door and reception desk rota, organising morning and evening clean-ups and dealing with refuse; ensuring toilets were clean; opening and locking up; not least dealing with the visit from the Special Branch after it was all over. Women involved also experienced verbal abuse and threatening behaviour from visitors, but probably the worst insult was being treated as though we weren't part of the activist energy sustaining the events.

After it was all over, CMN was evicted with three weeks' notice; the burnout amongst activists has not been assessed. Gender issues remain apparent amongst media activist organisations; until there is recognition of the structural and cultural inequalities that dominate society and responsibility taken for redressing how these manifest within our organisations, this will not change. The situation becomes more fragile where resources are short, and so our media organisations are vulnerable.

The contribution of Irish Indymedia

Despite these internal weaknesses, other high-profile conflicts in the 2000s symbolised Indymedia's importance. From 2001, the government offered Shannon airport to the US military for its wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and "extraordinary rendition", the secret abduction of those seen as enemies to a global network of prisons and torture chambers. This was met with widespread protests, from retired military officers to the far left. In particular, nurse Mary Kelly, followed by five members of the social justice group "Catholic Worker", damaged US military planes at Shannon. After two failed trials a jury acquitted the Catholic Workers of all charges; Mary Kelly's conviction was ultimately quashed in 2011. As usual, both RTÉ and corporate media presented the police version of events.

From 2001, Shell plans to extract offshore gas using an experimental high-pressure pipeline through communities in Erris, Co. Mayo, have met increasing local opposition, which has been countered by increasingly violent police and private security (Storey, this volume). From 2003, the destruction of the rich archaeological landscape of the Tara-Skryne valley in Co. Meath was met with a long-running series of protests (Newman, this volume).

In all these cases, Indymedia served as a space where campaigners could make arguments excluded from mainstream media (such as the role of corruption) and highlight police brutality and other issues (the banning of protestors from whole regions of the country, the use of psychiatric services as court punishments or the employment of East European fascists by private security firms). Salter and Sullivan (2008) show the importance of Indymedia Ireland for the Mayo campaign.

Indymedia Ireland also helped to launch a new kind of activist video production[xv]. Along with its own films, such as *Berlusconi's Mousetrap* and *Route Irish* (documenting the anti-war movement[xvi]),

particular mention should go to the productive Revolt Video Collective[xvii], which has produced a wide range of short films on key campaigns and issues.

The bigger picture

In the 2000s, the Internet – and Indymedia – had become crucial to many movements as a tool to mobilise resistance, highlight success, publicise issues and scandals, and generate critical perspectives. Nonetheless, access remained shaped by class, gender and race.

Class was important not simply for access - in a country where 24% of 15-year-old boys are functionally illiterate and computer access through the 2000s was far from universal – but also in terms of who the Indymedia format spoke to. There are long-standing working-class political traditions which are very much open to Indymedia's "radical news" approach; but much larger middle-class groups grow up familiar with the "official news" format (and its understanding of the state as somehow theirs) which a "critical news" approach inflects rather than transforms. Thus while working-class republican and socialist groups sometimes used Indymedia, community groups by and large did not (see Gillan 2010 on community media).

Gender is another important dimension; in the early 2000s this affected access to and familiarity with computer technology, but as the decade wore on the most important gendered aspect of Indymedia became the level of aggression in comments threads. "Trolling", whether by dysfunctional individuals, by police and corporate opponents or by political sectarians, became a serious problem in driving people away from Indymedia – not only women, of course, but there can be little doubt that trolling's impact is gendered (Sarkeesian 2012).

Finally, **ethnicity:** in a period in which most non-Irish people in Ireland were recent immigrants, levels of access to expensive technology and English often formed practical barriers. So did the allusive nature of much Irish writing on politics, assuming easy familiarity with individuals and organisations, and the assumption of forming an "alternative elite".

Indymedia was not responsible for these inequalities. At the same time, it did little to overcome or problematise them. Indications are that the editorial team was *more* middle-class, *more* masculine and *more* native than the overall usership, and this probably played a role.

Despite these limitations, Irish Indymedia was crucial in particular for those campaigns which represented wide-ranging movement alliances in the 2000s, particularly the anti-capitalist movement, the anti-war movement and events in Mayo. In a small country, it enabled rapid sharing of news between movements and organisations, and became for some years central to radical politics, playing a role for which there is no easy parallel. It was also used by mainstream journalists, who routinely followed Indymedia for potential "stories" which they could then research independently (or simply rewrite).

Internationally, Irish Indymedia was seen as being one of the best, with a dedicated and technically-skilled team of volunteers, a high quality of much news reporting and analysis, a central role in its social movement landscape and a longer lifespan in this role than most other Indymedia centres.

Where to for Irish Indymedia?

Today, Irish Indymedia might be seen as past its sell-by date. Many movements have abandoned it, leaving a higher proportion of personalised anti-corruption crusades, animal rights activism, dissident republicanism etc. Serious debate has declined and it is no longer the central forum for Irish movements. Moreover, as social media – the commercial and depoliticised form of the new democratic media once pioneered by computer activists – have become more widespread, movements have increasingly come to reappropriate them and treat Youtube, Vimeo, Twitter, Facebook etc. as the most effective venues for online communication. In the 30 days before our writing this, the site had just under 50,000 hits; by comparison in 2008 the site had 13 *million* hits a month (Indymedia Ireland 2008)[xviii].

Yet Indymedia remains important for announcements and events, helping activists avoid timetable clashes and hear of each other's activities. Socialists, anti-war activists, campaigners against the petroleum industry and others continue to use it, albeit more to announce their own activities than engage in discussion. The need for a shared space has not gone away, even if it has become harder to imagine what it might look like.

As austerity politics continue and the gulf between popular views and state action on cuts, oil and gas, support for US foreign policy etc. continues, mainstream media still represent an elite orthodoxy, in which alternative perspectives are pushed to the margins. The shape of hegemony has changed but not vanished, and the need for unofficial spaces remains.

A classic example is the 2011 "Rossport recordings" issue, when a young researcher's accidental recording of Mayo police joking about raping and deporting protestors posed a practical problem for her and campaigners. There is little doubt that she was correct that releasing the recording and transcripts on Indymedia[xix] was the best way to publicise the recording, and that state and corporate media would have been intensely reluctant to publish it.

Once the recording had gone viral mainstream media were forced to discuss it in order to preserve their own credibility. Taking their lead from police sources, a Minister for Justice who openly sided with the police and an ombudsman "investigation" which was riddled with factual errors, the official media did their best to turn the issue into a personal attack on her and an anti-feminist "can't you take a joke" approach.

Women's organisations – some embarrassed at the failure of their training of the police around rape and domestic violence – came out in support of the researcher. More broadly, the issue spoke not just to widespread criticism of a "rape culture" in policing Rossport but to the widespread acceptance of sexual violence and threats in Irish mainstream culture. Indymedia was not the only venue where the campaign could raise these issues, but it was a significant one.

In 2014, the future of Irish Indymedia is not obvious, but the needs that created it still exist. Neoliberalism and austerity politics – now justified by the Troika of the European Commission, European Central Bank and IMF – remain dominant in official politics, driving many people into poverty and despair. Policing, of political protestors and working-class youth alike, remains brutal and cynical. State control over RTE remains tight, and only a handful of commercial media outlets are not directly beholden to major corporate interests.

Outside of these closed spheres of power, violence and official culture, popular movements are reviving, as seen by the failure of the 2012 household charge, the massive protests around the

death of Savita Halappanavar and the resurgence of opposition to fracking across the west Midlands. Whether Indymedia will provide the space for such movements to develop and network or this will happen elsewhere remains to be seen.

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i   Both authors have regularly read and sometimes contributed to Irish Indymedia but neither are part of the editorial team. This chapter is written for a general audience, focussing on the historical context for Indymedia Ireland, its relationship with movements and its wider significance. For this reason the chapter is based on publicly accessible documents except in the discussion of the 2004 Independent Media Centre, where our first-hand experience may add something to what has already been published. A more participatory research project on Indymedia would be valuable, if demanding, and we hope this chapter may provoke someone to carry out such work.

ii   Crime correspondents, for example, rely heavily on the Garda Press Office and their individual Garda contacts, and hence typically reproduce the police view on protests while downplaying evidence of police violence.

iii   On the workings of Indymedia internationally, see Coleman (n.d.)

iv   These take a range of political directions: Feeney (2007: 241) highlights the different choices made by the Irish and UK Indymedia centres.

v   Subsequently all charges were dropped against those arrested ,and the deputy police commissioner admitted to the planting of Molotov cocktails and the faked stabbing of a police officer to justify the raid.

vi   However, the film's analysis of Genoa, which presents protestors as unwitting dupes in Berlusconi's power play, is deeply misleading. Following the vicious police attacks on the Naples summit protest in March, many Italian activists were aware of the risks; Laurence warned a Dublin preparation meeting of precisely this. In practice, too, the police brutality at Genoa backfired both on the police and on Berlusconi; a subsequent anti-repression demonstration brought out more protestors than the summit itself, and in 2003 Italy saw massive anti-war demonstrations and a very successful European Social Forum.

vii   For all of these reasons participants were sometimes anonymous or used pseudonyms; hence we only give names of participants who have put their own names to public documents.

viii   In practice *all* political orientations are complex and mixed, but right-wing and authoritarian tendencies often insist on a pretence of unity and loyalty – which regularly falls apart at times of crisis.

ix   Ex-IMC Ireland editor James O'Brien (2012) writes that anarchists "tended to be the foremost advocates of structures which would, it was hoped, consolidate the site and enable to become much more popular" – a position he contrasts with one oriented towards consensus and tolerance of multiple voices. The group's constitution is available at http://www.indymedia.ie/constitution.

x   Margaret was CMN Co-ordinator at the time and responsible for the building which had been made available to CMN under a caretaker agreement. Laurence was one of the DGN media spokespeople.

xi   Although the CMN Steering Group made clear at the start that a planning group had to be named and commit to meeting regularly to co-ordinate the event, neither the Indymedia or DGN members named made themselves available for meetings.

xii   Indymedia activists stated that CMN had 'given' their building to support the Mayday activities; the notice on the indymedia website directed international visitors to a non-existent DGN desk in the CMN building; an entirely predictable police raid on summit accommodation left a huge problem for DGN and resulted in a focus on the CMN building which could not be used for accommodation.

xiii   See http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2004/05/291226.html and http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/wsm/rbr/rbr9/mayLearnOrg.html

xiv   This included roofing, plumbing and electrical safety. Where labour had to be bought, CMN paid, but had little funds. Surprising sources of help revealed unexpected goodwill from many corners.

xv   See http://www.indymedia.ie/videos for a partial listing

xvi   http://ie.indymedia.org/route_irish_documentary

xvii   http://revoltvideo.blogspot.ie/

xviii   See Indymedia London 2012 for a detailed analysis of this issue.

xix   http://www.indymedia.ie/article/99445