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Indymedia as a Social Movement?
Theorizing the New Global Justice Movements

by

Kate Milberry

**A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
through Communication Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts
at the University of Windsor**

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

December 2003

■ **Kate Milberry**

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Abstract

In four years, the Independent Media Center (IMC) has become the largest alternative media network in the world. From its humble and uncertain beginnings in November, 1999 at the massive protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle, Indymedia, as it has come to be known, has developed a democratic and participatory communication system that challenges the dominance of the corporate mainstream media. However, so far Indymedia has been examined almost exclusively as a component of the new global justice movements that seek to contest the oppressive forces of capitalism. In this thesis, it is my contention that Indymedia has developed into something much broader than its originators first envisioned. Thus, I examine IMC as a social movement in its own right, independent of other movements to which it remains aligned. An interrogation of current literature finds it lacking in the ability to account for Internet-mediated movements, and revealing the need for a new theoretical formulation.

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Prologue: Notes on Method

Things did not turn quite as I had expected.

This study attempted to employ a two-phase methodology: a thorough review of social movement theory and interviews with founding Indymedia activists. In analyzing the social movement literature, I hoped to ascertain how the theory might be applied to Indymedia, and where it falls short, requiring new formulations. Through the interviews with IMC activists, I hoped to fill gaps in current social movement theory identified in the analysis of the small but growing literature on the new global justice movements by posing questions only those intimately involved with Indymedia can answer.

Initially, I thought the main source of data collection about the IMC would derive from the email interviews conducted with activists. The format I chose lay somewhere between a standardized interview – typically a survey or questionnaire, wherein results are systematically coded and statistically analyzed – and a non-standardized interview, wherein participants have more control in the process (Mann & Stewart, 2000). This “semi-structured” format “may be fairly formalized, using an interview protocol organized into specific thematic areas, or it may branch out tangentially from a small selection of more open-ended questions” (ibid, p. 75). Information culled from web archives, the popular press and the limited (but growing) literature on Indymedia were to be supplementary to the interviews, and provide background for the interview questions.

The expansion and popular use of the Internet since the early 1990s has presented scholars with a new and widening range of research possibilities in the areas of information gathering and conducting research (Mann & Stewart, 2000). Internet-mediated research affords qualitative researchers new tools to assist in interviewing,

including email, instant messaging and online surveys. There are advantages to an Internet-based methodology, including: speed and immediacy in data collection; increased accuracy in recording of data; easy data storage and archiving; and increased flexibility in arranging interviews (Clarke, 2000). Some argue that email initiates a “democratization of exchange” not present in conventional research methodologies. Selwyn and Robson (1998) observe that email can foster non-coercive and antihierarchical dialogue in a context of equal opportunity and reciprocity. “In this way email goes some way to transcending the traditional biases that beset interviewing techniques” (p. 2). However, others suggest that existing racial, gender, class and geographical biases duplicate themselves to some degree on the Internet (Clarke, 2000). Thus, despite the apparent anonymity offered by its largely text-based communication, the Internet has not yet proven to be the “great equalizer” some once predicted it would be.

Researchers note other limitations in online qualitative research, such as technology failure and the absence of sound and visual cues that facilitate face-to-face (F2F) communication. “A great deal of tacit information that would be conveyed in a conventional interview situation is lost. What electronic interviewing can be seen to gain in accuracy it therefore loses in terms of the additional, and often valuable, non-verbal data” (Selwyn & Robson, 1998, p. 4). Ethical issues arise around privacy, anonymity and confidentiality, all of which are difficult to preserve when working in an online environment. “With electronic information moving in packets (chunks) across millions of computers around the world, access is not easily controlled as it may leave tracks across the server computers” (Clarke, 2000). Further, while anonymity can eliminate some

obstacles of face-to-face discussion, it can eliminate responsible behaviour online (Salter, 2003). Concerns over lack of computer and Internet access, as well as computer literacy, are not as pressing in the case of Indymedia, as it is a computer-mediated movement with participants who tend to be technologically astute. However, the issue of access is addressed in greater detail in Chapter Three.

The rhizomatic nature of the Internet, with its intricate and interconnected web of information expanding in every direction into cyberspace, seemed to reflect, or perhaps foreshadow, the course of this research. Invoking Deleuze's emphasis on rhizomatic thinking, Braidotti (1994) discusses "the need to work on transforming the very image of thought and of subjectivity as an intensive, multiple, and discontinuous process of becoming" (p. 110). As it turned out, the interview method reflected such a process of becoming, wherein flexibility was paramount, and my vision of the final product transformed as the latter slowly came into being. I began this portion of my research with the intent of conducting interviews via email. From the literature on Indymedia, I identified relevant potential interviewees – key activists who were involved in the founding and/or development of the movement – and sent out letters of information to IMC Seattle, where it all started. An activist there said he would pass on the letter to the relevant individuals, and offered his personal assistance. When I did not hear from anyone over the next couple of weeks, I began to track them down myself, using information culled during the course of my research. For example, the creator of one activist website with articles on Indymedia that I had searched for background information turned out to be a member of the original tech team. I discovered another founding member's email address on a post in one of Indymedia's hundreds of listservs.

Google searches revealed another original member, who was too busy to participate, as well as a longtime IMC activist who happened to be the author of several academic papers on IMC that I was consulting.

And so it went. After contacting everyone, I found that some wanted to conduct telephone interviews, as they were too busy to formulate their answers over email. This was a logistical blip, which required the acquisition of a tape recorder and telephone recording device, and raised the issue of additional costs. It also required additional time for transcription. One participant began the interview via email, but wanted to conclude in person, something I was not able to facilitate. One of the strengths of email interviews is that participants usually take more time to formulate their answers. In my experience, these tend to be more focused and grammatically correct than responses from telephone interviews, where participants can be distracted or face time constraints. This was one of the problems I encountered with the telephone interviews I conducted. Another problem was unanticipated. In an effort to conduct original research, I tried to design questions that would elicit new information; however, participants often dwelt on conveying information that was readily available in the existing literature on Indymedia. Sometimes, they would repeat things they had said in other published articles, and I often found their previous quotes to be better, and thus felt obliged to use already-published material. The telephone interviews I conducted were at least an hour long, but despite my efforts at redirection, I was able to educe very few new insights.

The results of my efforts to interview IMC activists were disappointing. From the outset, I considered learning about Indymedia from the perspective of participants to be an important component of my research. The questions were structured to elicit

experience-based accounts of the IMC to complement, or perhaps enhance, what may be derived from the current literature. The intent, however lofty, was for social movement theory to learn from those actually involved in the forming and sustaining of social movements, not just those who observe and theorize them.¹ Although I contacted a dozen people – men and women from North and South America, as well as Australia, I received only four responses. Of those, one was incomplete, and another was unusable. While I did not achieve my original goals for these interviews, I have inserted comments from these interviews wherever possible.

Once the data were amassed and assessed, I had hoped to conduct a second set of interviews, possibly in person, to fill in any “holes” in the research. These were to be “in-depth” or unstructured interviews, following the non-standardized format, which are characterized by a greater emphasis on participants’ subjective experience (Mann & Stewart, 2000). In this type of interview, the interviewer provides focus via general questions, but participants structure the form and content of extensive reflective responses. One main concern with the in-depth interview is that it may mirror the researcher’s own agenda too closely, but this is countered by the taken-for-granted notion of “the narrator as the prime ‘knower’ of self” (ibid, p. 76). Also, I had hoped to visit IMC Cancun in Mexico, for the Anti-World Trade Organization demonstration in September 2003, to conduct in-person interviews and observe an IMC in action as it covered a major protest. Unfortunately, these aspirations were beyond the scope of a master’s thesis, as I quickly learned. Lack of time and money prevented this valuable field research, which I hope to undertake in future research.

¹ For a list of questions, please see Appendix A.

Chapter One: Introduction

The whole story is not being told.

One need only casually survey the international press to understand that the corporate mainstream media in North America are telling only one side of a complex, multifarious story. What story is this? It is the story of the global encroachment of capitalism, the reigning economic system that is set to declare hegemonic victory over the planet. From the perspective of the North American corporate mainstream media, the globalization of capital is the height of social evolution – a vanguard in the onward march of wealth, technological development and general human progress. But there is another side to the story. In fact, there are multiple sides. And other, less dominant, less powerful media outlets serve as conduits for the different perspectives that surround the advance of corporate globalization, led by the United States, but trumpeted by its client-states around the world. Many of these lesser known perspectives reflect a resistance to the globalization of capital that continues to gain momentum, a resistance that is very rarely recorded by media outlets bound to the capitalist ideology of their owners – that is, to the bottom line.

The alternative press has a rich and lengthy tradition in the West, mirroring the rise of industrialization and seeking to tell stories often silenced by the ruling elite. Similarly, the trajectory of contentious collective action can be traced to the dawn of modernity. But something rather new has happened. The two practices – that of media activism and social activism – have converged in a novel way. Or perhaps it is more appropriate to say they have collided. The result is an alternative media outlet that

challenges the inevitability of capitalism and the deleterious effects of corporate globalization on the world's disempowered. The result is also a social movement that contests the dominant logic of capital as it is manifest in the corporate mainstream media. The result is Indymedia. Formally known as the Independent Media Center, it is a globally linked, loosely organized network of autonomous media outlets that strives to cover local and international issues of social justice. It combines activism and journalism to join with the hundreds of thousands of people across the globe who are opposed to capitalism and agitating for an end to its domination.

The spark for this thesis was generated in my participation in the resistance movement to corporate globalization. That spark was fanned by my experience as a journalist in the alternative press, contesting the dominance of the tightly controlled mainstream corporate press with its narrow window on the world. The idea of fusing activism and journalism – something that came so naturally to me – was outright blasphemy, and was viewed with the appropriate blend of horror and disdain by most. Even members of the so-called alternative press were increasingly falling into line with their corporate mainstream counterparts as growing advertising revenues demanded inoffensive copy. I broke completely with conventional journalism after covering the massive protest against the Free Trade Area of the Americas in Quebec City in 2001. After witnessing the state deploy its military and law enforcement agencies against its own citizens; after the civil rights I had grown up believing in were trampled or downright ignored; and after being the victim of police brutality myself, I shed the last bit of journalistic “objectivity” I might have had. I didn't write my story about the Summit of

the Americas to “tell both sides” of the story. I wrote to change the world. Call me naïve: I was certain there had to be another way.

A similar sentiment informs Indymedia. My initial research into the phenomenon revealed a news medium that shamelessly wore its bias on its sleeve, its volunteer reporters never having to abandon their commitment to social justice and progressive social change. But more importantly, Indymedia provided a framework to develop a critique of capitalism, and its twin aids in oppression – hierarchy and centralization of power. This critique had been slowly forming and gaining sophistication in the Anti-Corporate Globalization Movement. Initially an organ for this burgeoning movement, Indymedia evolved into a separate movement, albeit with similar qualities, such as a dedication to consensus and decentralization. However, IMC developed into something much broader than its originators had first envisioned. Not only did it provide a voice to a movement that was alternately ignored or misrepresented in the corporate mainstream media; it was an experiment in the kind of democracy that it championed in its reportage. The ability of people to become journalists, to represent themselves, and to respond directly to the news was more than novel; it was radical. It contested the hierarchical, gatekeeping role of the “real” news media, and enabled the telling of stories that had largely remained untold. The Internet was key to the formation of Indymedia, as it facilitated the global dissemination and exchange of information previously unavailable to social justice and media activists.

So the Independent Media Center is a unique byproduct of the alternative media. It is an interesting offshoot of both the Anti-Corporate Globalization Movement and the media democracy movement. But is it a social movement in its own right? To answer this

question, intersecting literatures devoted to social movement theory, alternative media and the Internet demand attention, and I examine these in detail. Chapter Two offers a survey of social movement theory from its inception, tracing the North American and European traditions, and noting where these part ways on the sticky issue of class. This is an important distinction to observe, as a strongly anti-capitalist sentiment has emerged within the Anti-Corporate Globalization Movement, which birthed Indymedia. After reviewing the literature on social movement theory, it becomes evident that there has not yet been a full accounting of the complexities of these movements, particularly as they are characterized by their use of the Internet and focus on social justice.

A detailed history of Indymedia follows in Chapter Three. The story begins with its first heady days during the massive protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle in 1999. Several important observations are made here, including IMC's philosophical and organizational debt to the Zapatistas, its immediate ancestry in the Anti-Corporate Globalization movement, and the long history of "muckraking" journalism, which Indymedia revived. Other central elements of Indymedia are discussed, including the Internet, which serves as the foundation of the movement, and reflects the movement's decentralized, non-hierarchical structure. Despite the Internet's capacity to empower and liberate, there are problems inherent with computer-mediated organizing, and these are fleshed out in some detail. The myth of objectivity is raised and debunked, and Indymedia's "biased" style of reporting – made possible through a software development called "open publishing" – is validated. Open publishing – the ability of anyone to publish a story on anything from anywhere, so long as they have access to a computer and the Internet – has not been without its own problems, and these are

thoroughly investigated, along with possible solutions. The chapter closes with a discussion of the Internet, its democratic potential and its limitations within a movement like Indymedia. Most notable of these is access, or lack thereof, and the increasing privatization of cyberspace.

Finally, in Chapter Four, we arrive at the heart of the matter. Is Indymedia a social movement? A careful interrogation of classic definition of social movement reveals that, indeed, IMC may be considered a social movement, yet there are aspects that remain unaccounted for. Most glaring are those factors that contribute to Indymedia as a hybrid movement: its focus on the global and the local; its virtual and physical manifestations; and its dual nature as both a movement and an alternative news medium. Thus, a new theoretical formulation is warranted. A review of recent scholarship, especially that which attempts to account for the impact of the Internet on recent contentious collective action, shows some useful theoretical attempts. After nearly two decades of emphasis on culture and identity, a class-based analysis, and a solid anti-capitalist critique have emerged as credible contenders for understanding and explicating the new global justice movements. Unlike the so-called new social movements, Indymedia does not strive for recognition of difference as a primary objective. Rather, following the Anti-Corporate Globalization Movement, IMC derives its theoretical foundation from the politics of redistribution. Capitalism, therefore, is explicitly criticized in Indymedia reportage for its unequal allocation of power and wealth, which has led to increasing immiseration the world over. Implicitly, Indymedia offers a challenge to corporate mainstream media, as tools of the capitalist status quo, via its organizational structure. That is to say, its emphasis on consensus, decentralization and participatory democracy thwart the

dominant rule. What is novel about the new global justice movements is not necessarily a return to a Marxian analysis of oppression. Rather, it is that people from varying geographic locations, diverse experiences and assorted oppressions have come together under the broad banner of anti-capitalism. Instead of valorizing difference, they have named a common enemy, and have located the roots of injustice in an all-encompassing economic system: capitalism.

Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework

The impact of social movements on modern society has been profound. Appearing in increasing numbers in the eighteenth century, social movements signaled a shift in the way people interacted with power. In the modern era, repertoires of collective action developed in resistance to oppression and became modular – that is, easily transferable from one setting or circumstance to another. In turn, this engaged people in the political processes that shaped their lives in meaningful and effective ways (Tarrow, 1998). There is a rich literature that theorizes the causes and effects of contentious collective action. In this chapter, I will briefly trace the history of social movement theory from its origins in collective behaviour theory through to more recent approaches, including resource mobilization, social constructionism and new social movement theory. Typically, European social movement theorists tended to view contentious collective action through a Marxian lens, proffering structural analyses to varying degrees. A paradigm shift occurred, however, sharply delineating “old” social movement theory, which was class based, from “new” social movement theory, which subjugated a structural critique of collective action while privileging a cultural one. This rupture and redirection of theory set the tone for scholarship from the 1980s onward. However, it is my contention that social movement theory’s fascination with cultural analysis, replete with its emphasis on identity and the politics of difference, makes it ill-equipped to fully appreciate the complexities of contemporary social movements, which are increasingly more structurally-focused, and characterized by their use of the Internet and emphasis on

global justice. Recently, there have been some attempts to account for Internetworked social movements but these, as we shall see, leave room for further contemplation.

2.1 Collective Behaviour Theory

Drawing from the field of sociology, the emergence of modern social movement theory in North America began with a critique of the collective behaviour model. This model postulated that social movements differed little from other group manifestations, such as panics, crowds and crazes. Collective behaviour is also considered noninstitutional in contradistinction to the routines of everyday life. It is rooted in individuals experiencing anomie, and is understood as a response to societal stress or breakdown. In this regard, the nature of collective behaviour is psychological rather than political; further, it is often regarded as a dangerous or irrational form of behaviour (Buechler, 2000, p. 20). Generally, this theory advanced the notion that social movements were “little more than the most well-organized and self-conscious part of an archipelago of ‘emergent’ phenomena, ranging from fads and rumours, to collective enthusiasm, riots, movements and revolutions” (Tarrow, 1998, p. 14). From its infancy, however, social movement theory took issue with the unitary concept of collective action that lumped social movements in with the extreme and threatening behaviour of panics, crowds and crazes. Here we have the first vague notion of contentious collective action as a planned, political response. A different set of theoretical tools was required, and various offshoots of collective behaviour theory developed, including symbolic interactionism, structural-functionalism and relative deprivation.

Symbolic interactionism is a variant of classic collective behaviour theory wherein creative agency triumphs over structural determination, and the creation and interpretation of meaning are key. This model views collective behaviour as the spontaneous development of norms and organization that contest the status quo, and provoke individual reactions to social disintegration, which then form into a general, collective response. Another version of collective behaviour theory parallels the overarching theoretical paradigm of *structural-functionalism* in an attempt to link broad, structural factors to specific occasions of collective behaviour unfolding in several necessary stages. The first stage comprises a set of structural conditions that encourages collective behaviour (structural conduciveness); the next stage is structural strain, such as deprivations, conflicts and discrepancies; and the third element encompasses generalized beliefs that provide meaning and motivation. The final three stages are: events or actions that catalyze collective behaviour; physical mobilization of actors; and the absence or suspension of social control (Buechler, 2000, p. 26). In the structural-functionalist model, collective behaviour occurs only when all of these elements are present and, as with symbolic interactionism, it accounts for panics, crazes and social movements, all considered irrational, abnormal outbursts. Finally, an approach that identifies *relative deprivation* as the motivating force behind collective action represents another variant of classic collective behaviour theory. In sum, this concept stipulates that a group decides to act collectively when people judge themselves as lacking certain resources in relation to another group. Again, this version of the theory regards collective behaviour as presenting dangerous and illegitimate threats to the status quo. While these variants of the collective behaviour model indicate a more thoughtful and closer analysis of contentious

collective action, there is still the notion that this sort of behaviour is aberrant, and to be feared. Later theories sought to understand activism in its broader political context, as normal social responses to various social stimuli.

2.2 Resource Mobilization Theory

The demise of the collective behaviour paradigm came about during the tumultuous 1960s with the advent of “new social movements”. According to McAdam (1982) theorizing social movements as a response to social strain was problematic in that it did not take the larger political context into consideration. In assigning causation of social movements to individual discontent, collective behaviour was considered abnormal and apolitical. Resource mobilization theory arose during the 1970s as a response to the shortcomings of collective behaviour theory. It held that in contentious collective action, passion gave way to rational calculation, and the collective good acquiesced to individual gain as mobilizing factors. Thus, activism relied on the ability of social movements to muster resources and engage in planned, rational action (Laraña, Johnston & Gusfield, 1994). In this analysis, activists were not considered “under the sway of sentiments, emotions, and ideologies that guided his or her action”; rather, collective behaviour “should be understood in terms of the logic of costs and benefits as well as opportunities for action” (p. 5).

Resource mobilization theory sought to contest grievance-based formulations of social movement theory, considered insufficient to explain collective action. It centred on the way people mobilized for collective action, and the formal organizations that resulted (McAdam, McCarthy & Zald, 1996). Proponents of this model argued that increased

personal resources, the professionalization of activism and the availability of external financial support could adequately account for contentious collective action. The focus, therefore, was on resource aggregation, and facilitation by social movement organizations (SMOs), formal or professional organizations that identify their goals with those of a social movement. Under this model, people engaged in contentious collective action by weighing the relative advantages or disadvantages of their involvement; sometimes, social movement organizations offered incentives to encourage participation. Resource mobilization theory analyzed social movements in terms of conflicts of interest, as with other forms of political struggle, and considered them “normal, rational and institutionally rooted, political challenges by aggrieved groups” (Buechler, 2000, p. 35).

In contrast to collective behaviour theory, which focused on *why* collective action occurred, resource mobilization theory attempted to answer the persistent question of *how* social movements organized and mobilized (Tarrow, 1998). Following its development, it becomes clear how social movement theory broadened to include more practical aspects to collective contentious action. Incorporating perspectives and positions of social movement actors into the theory was an important step in the evolution of this area of study. However, resource mobilization theory has been criticized on a number of fronts: for its narrow rational choice perspective; its refusal to acknowledge social psychological factors; its overly quantitative approach; its preoccupation with funding; and its failure to contextualize social movements in terms of class. I agree with Fitzgerald and Rodgers’ (2000) contention that resource mobilization theory’s utilitarian orientation, which underscores reform of and acceptance by the existing system, makes it an insufficient model to theorize radical social movement organizations (RSMOs). This is, in part, due

to “its emphasis on a presumed inevitability of bureaucratization, which runs counter to the ideology and internal structure of RSMOs” (Fitzgerald & Rodgers, 2000, p. 575). This empirical style of theorizing is restricted “to those aspects of social movements that can most easily be observed and measured: large, professional social movement organizations rather than more diffuse activities, networks or subcultures” (Kriesi et al quoted in Buechler, 2000, p. 55). This model’s insistence on funding, bureaucracy and formal organization cannot explain the success of informal mass movements with few resources (Piven & Cloward, 1995), as evidenced by the new global justice movements, particularly Indymedia. According to Fitzgerald and Rodgers, the ideology of more radical organizations (and for our purposes, movements) has “an anticapitalistic component, which makes...lack of resources partly an intentional decision.” Success, therefore, “occurs not simply *despite* a lack of resources but perhaps *because of* a lack of resources” (p. 575). Again, this sentiment resonates when considering the wildfire spread of the global justice movements, linked globally by the Internet but having little else in the way of formal resources.

2.3 Political Process Model

The political process model developed as an alternative to resource mobilization theory. Here, the success or failure of social movements depended on political opportunities created by ruptures in the institutional structure and the ideology of power-holders (McAdam, 1996). Thus, “revolutions owe less to the efforts of insurgents than to the work of systemic crises which render the existing regime weak and vulnerable to challenge from virtually any quarter” (p. 24). Three essential components comprise this

theory. The first demarks the political structure as an external factor not under the direct control of challengers, but critical to a movement's success. The second is an internal factor: the organizational strength of activists, the product of interaction between movement members, leaders and incentives. The final component is McAdam's "cognitive liberation", or a change in group consciousness "whereby potential protesters see the existing social order not only as illegitimate, but also as subject to change through their own direct efforts" (Buechler, 2000, p. 37). The political process model was not that much different from resource mobilization theory and endured many of the same criticisms, particularly for the emphasis on the rationality, instrumentality and individuality of participants in collective action. It also denuded participants of agency in its reliance on external factors to facilitate change. However, the importance placed on new ideas found in the notion of cognitive liberation anticipated the paradigm shift in social movement theory, in which cultural analysis rose to prominence (McAdam et al., 1996).

2.4 Social Constructionism

Resource mobilization's tendency to spotlight resources and organization while ignoring the role of culture in collective action provoked a reaction amongst social movement scholars, particularly in Europe. Indeed this reaction was the harbinger of the paradigm shift from structural to cultural analysis of collective action (Tarrow, 1998). An emphasis on culture first emerged in social constructionist theory. Social constructionism revisits the symbolic interactionist version of collective behaviour theory discussed above, approaching collective action "as an interactive, symbolically defined and

negotiated process among participants, opponents and bystanders” (Buechler, 2000, p. 41). Central to this theory is the concept of framing, which describes how activists make sense of their social worlds (Hunt, Benford & Snow, 1994). Frames constitute shared understandings and identities that generate the trust and cooperation amongst activists necessary for collective action. In the context of social movements, frames dignify discontent, identify grievances and assemble the grievances of various groups (Tarrow, 1998). Grievances are framed in three ways. *Diagnostic framing* identifies a problem as well as a target for action; and *prognostic framing* suggests solutions, including strategies and tactics specific to the target. Together, they mobilize consensus, creating a base from which movements may recruit; however, collective action is not the necessary outcome of this process. In order for people to act contentiously, they must have compelling reasons to do so. Thus, *motivational framing* provides inspiration and rationale for action (Hunt et al., 1994).

There are other elements that add to the complexity of the concept of framing. According to Snow et al. (1986), the process of *frame alignment* includes rhetorical strategies that attempt to align collective and personal identities. Social movement actors thereby work to create an intersection between a target population’s culture and their own values and goals (Tarrow, 1998). *Master frames* - successful collective action frames that are appropriated as a cultural and ideological resource by subsequent social movements – are critical to the evolution of social movements. Similarly, *audience framing*, whereby the values and goals of a movement are imputed to its observers, is equally important, acting as a gauge for other framing efforts (McAdam, 1994). Finally, the media are crucial in a social movement’s efforts to broadcast its demands. But Tarrow (1998)

suggests the media are anything but neutral in the framing of activists' concerns and events. On the one hand, the media provide a broad base for consensus formation that is difficult for movements to achieve on their own. On the other hand, "while the media may not work directly for the ruling class, they certainly do not work for social movements" (p. 116). While Tarrow perhaps understates this point, it certainly has been evident regarding mainstream news coverage of the new global justice movements, where the neutrality of the media was easily questioned, and the reporting ranged from befuddled to clearly biased (Giuffo, 2001; Smith, McCarthy, McPhail & Augustyn, 2001; Solomon, 2000). As we shall see, it was this type of reporting that made the need for a new style of reporting, such as can be found in Indymedia, all the more urgent to participants in the Anti-Corporate Globalization Movement.

Despite advancing social movement theory and acting as a bridge between structural and cultural critique, social constructionism is not without certain limitations. The main criticism is that it is not an inclusive, over-arching model for comprehending collective action; rather, it has offered some analytical tools, such as the concept of framing, for examining social movements more closely. For example, while framing is very useful for understanding aspects of contentious collective action, it is situated within a broader context that remains untouched by the concept. Buechler (2000) suggests that both resource mobilization and social constructionist theories are similarly fallible in their ahistorical, abstract and general approach to theorizing collective action. The rise of new social movement theory signaled an attempt to fill the gaps left by its predecessors.

2.5 The Rise of Identity and New Social Movement Theory

Social constructionism heralded the cultural turn in social movement theory that occurred during the 1980s, challenging resource mobilization theory as the dominant paradigm for interpreting the dynamics of collective action. The concept of framing was increasingly important as cultural analysis became central to new social movement theory, acting as a framework within which notions of identity, both individual and collective, were popularized.² Hunt et al. (1994) find a connection between framing processes and identity construction. “Not only do framing processes link individuals and groups ideologically but they proffer, buttress, and embellish identities that range from collaborative to conflictual” (p. 185). Thus, they conclude, frames and identities belong to an obdurate ‘reality’ that conditions, constrains, and enables collective action. However, even before academics embraced culture as a mode of analysis for examining collective action, activists themselves were turning to “identity politics”³ in an attempt to deal with how social identity – as defined by race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality – is mediated through culture. The personal, it turned out, was political. Activists and, increasingly, scholars concerned with identity engaged with all aspects of culture: the

² In the literature surveyed here, a vague definition of culture as symbolic systems of meaning seems to establish the parameters for its application within social movement theory. However, as Gupta and Ferguson (1997) observe, the concept of culture is a complex, evolving and widely ranging one that is difficult to pin down. Appadurai (1996) discusses the question of culturalism, which he describes as conceptual movement “from culture as substance to culture as the dimension of difference, to culture as group identity based on difference, to culture as the process of naturalizing a subset of differences that have been mobilized to articulate group identity” (p. 14). So, while scholarship has pushed the notion of culture as a theoretical and analytical tool, its use within social movement theory during the 1990s is somewhat limited.

³ Following Scatamburlo-D’Annibale and Langman (2003), identity reflects a system of shared cultural narratives “through which groups label and designate themselves and differentiate themselves from others. Identities operate in the lives of individuals by connecting them with some people and dividing them from others. In this regard, identities are constituted in and through their relations to one another thereby making difference constitutive of identity” (p. 260).

political meanings of everyday life, interpersonal relations, subjective experience, lifestyle and popular culture. "The argument that these domains are actually crucial political battlegrounds, rather than private or apolitical realms, opened new areas of culture and social life to political action and scholarly examination," (ibid, p. xiii). The emphasis on identity was part of a broader move toward an analysis of collective action that examined culture as it shaped, and was shaped by, social movements (Johnston & Klandermans, 1995). Melucci (1995) suggests that social conflicts (post-Sixties, pre-Seattle) "have not expressed themselves through political action, but rather have raised cultural challenges to the dominant language, to the codes that organize information and shape social practices" (quoted in Johnston & Klandermans, 1995, p. 41). What was being contested, then, was not the political or economic systems that ordered society, but the dominant cultural codes that facilitated or complemented those systems.

The move toward cultural analysis, therefore, reflects a clear distinction between political activism, which sought change at a structural level, and activism that began - and potentially ended - with the individual's subjective experience in the world. However, this development in social movement theory has proven problematic for some scholars, particularly the fact that an exclusive focus on identity can obscure the concrete reality of class, as well as structures of power and privilege, creating an unnecessary division between groups that, however diverse, share common class interests (Scatamburlo-D'Annibale & Langman, 2003). Clearly, neither a reductionist, economically determined reading of Marx that only recognizes class-based oppression, nor a postmodern interpretation of culture that ignores the role of political economy in identity formation will suffice. Drawing upon the Marxian concept of mediation, Bannerji (1995) points to

the mutually formative nature of identity, difference and class: “it is... absurd to see identity and difference as historical forms of consciousness unconnected to class formation, development of capital and class politics” (p. 30). What is most productive is to comprehend the dialectical relationship between class and identity, while acknowledging how varieties of oppression are shaped – indeed linked - by the social relations of production

Nonetheless, within a framework of culture, identity became a focal point of “new social movements” (NSMs) - those born in the counterculture revolution of the 1960s, like the civil rights movement - and those that matured in the seventies and eighties, like feminism, environmentalism and gay/lesbian rights. As noted, European scholars first began to theorize these movements that did not appear as rational instruments of social change. Instead, “organized protest was emerging in social sectors and forms and with a focus on issues that could not be explained by classical Marxian categories and predictions” (Darnovsky et al., 1995, p. xiv). Thus, the turn to culture in new social movement theory signaled a shift away from structural analysis that had typically marked European scholarship, if not the American theoretical traditions discussed above. Accordingly, these scholars argued that the social base of new social movements tended to transcend class structure, with the search for identity becoming key to movement formation (Laraña et al., 1994). In new social movement theory,

The collective search for identity is a central aspect of movement formation. Mobilization factors tend to focus on cultural and symbolic issues that are associated with sentiments of belonging to a differentiated social group where members can feel powerful; they are likely to have subcultural orientations that challenge the dominant system. New social movements are said to arise ‘in defense of identity’ (p. 10).

Here, the centrality of identity in NSM theory, within the parameters established by a cultural analysis, is evident. However, while cultural identification of exploited groups has been rightfully acknowledged, an exclusive focus on identity conceals the political and economic foundation of exploitation, as well as the structural parameters that produce difference (Scatamburlo-D'Annibale & Langman, 2003).

Leading the post-Marxist charge were Laclau and Mouffe (1985), who essentially broke with the major tenets of Marxism to formulate a theory within a non-materialist framework, arguing for a new basis to unite social movements. Under this framework, no subjectivity was privileged; “thus, identity movements, political economic ones, and struggles with the terms of everyday domestic life can be equally valued in the struggle for liberation” (Starr, 2001, p. 39). Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of “radical democracy” urged “expanding the chains of equivalents between the different struggles against oppression” (p. 176). They considered classism to be a theoretical obstacle, suggesting that the working class was in large part dependent upon the radicalization of multiple democratic struggles that existed largely outside the parameters of class. Thus class and class struggle were excised from an analysis of the so-called new social movements, replaced with the theory that movements could be “constructed by ideological and political means which are relatively... autonomous from economic class conditions, motivated not by the crude material interests of class but by rational appeal of ‘universal human goods’...” (Wood, 1988, p. 2). The authors, and post-Marxism in general, have been roundly criticized for their misinterpretation of Marx. Admittedly, as Wood points out, there are numerous impediments to class-based organization; however, these are not determinants that obscure the common interests of class. To suggest otherwise “is to

accept the very mystifications that sustain the hegemony of capitalism” (p. 199).

Additionally, as Geras (1990), along with a host of others, observes, Marxism has always opposed all forms of oppression – sexual, national, racial, religious and economic – while regarding the working class and the abolition of capitalism as imperative to the ultimate goal of human emancipation.

A schism thus occurred in the social movement theory developing in Europe, effectively dividing “old” social movements – those dominated by labour – and the new ones increasingly led by the middle class. Marxism as the traditional master framework for understanding collective action was usurped by culture, under whose rubric the concept of identity rose to prominence. “NSM theorists stressed that social transformation is mediated through culture as well as politics narrowly defined – that the personal and the cultural are as politically real as, and are not reducible to, power struggles in the state and economy.” (Darnovsky et al, 1995, p. xiv). The Marxist formulation of ideology as a unifying and totalizing element for collective action, therefore, stands in stark contrast to the “pluralism of ideas and values” advocated by new social movement theorists (Laraña et al., 1994, p. 7). The paradigmatic shift in social movement theory reflected a similar change in the action of contemporary movements. As Melucci (1994), observes, “Conflicts move from the economic-industrial system to the cultural sphere. They focus on personal identity, the time and space of life, and the motivation and codes of daily behaviour” (p. 109). That is to say, activists in new social movements turned their gaze inward, focusing on issues as they affected their personal lives, and pursuing social change through politicizing culture. By choosing to view social injustice through such a narrow lens, however, NSMs neglected to situate their concerns

in the broader political economic context. In this way, they effectively eliminated the possibility for lasting change, instead settling for advances and improvements within the existing status quo.

As discussed earlier, recent scholarship has been critical of the cultural analysis of contentious collective action, particularly its focus on identity as a conceptual framework for explicating social movements – especially the new global justice movements.

Fitzgerald and Rodgers (2000) acknowledge the importance of identity formation but suggest a single-issue approach may restrict collective action. Starr (2001) notes other problems: “no single identity ever completely captures anyone’s shifting and complex sense of self; every articulated identity already excludes...” (p. 32). She also has doubts about the potential for agency offered by culture, adding that cultural analysis has not demonstrated how movements can impact structure, which is necessary for progressive social change to occur. The absence of class from the discourse of new social movement theory is problematic for Epstein (1996), who states “it is impossible to take our understanding of race, gender, or questions of social division and disintegration further without acknowledging the fact of class polarization” (p. 136). Finally, identity politics can be divisive. As Carroll and Ratner (2001) observe, “the affirmation of particular identities and interests discourages the formation of more inclusive and encompassing visions that might unite oppositional groups within a counter-hegemonic unity-in-diversity” (p. 606). Clearly, culture as an over-arching framework, and identity as one of its tools of analysis, cannot fully explicate the new global justice movements, as the above criticisms demonstrate. Unlike a structural analysis that roots social injustice in the economic system that organizes society, cultural analysis does not present as a universal

paradigm; it does, however, remain critical to the development of an holistic theoretical model for understanding the contemporary activism for social justice.

2.6 *Networks in Theory*

The concept of networks helps to address the division created by a narrow focus on identity, as mediated through cultural analysis, in social movement theory. Castells' (1996) notion of the "network society" is a good starting point.

New information technologies, by transforming the processes of information processing, act upon all domains of human activity, and make it possible to establish endless connections between different domains, as well as between elements and agents of such activities. (p. 67).

The result is a deeply networked, interdependent economy that has transformed society; in fact, the network is the central organizing principle of the information society. Writing during the 1990s, the heyday of identity politics, Castells observes that as people organized meaning around *who they were*, rather than *what they did*, the process of globalization relied on increasingly integrated "networks of instrumental exchange" (p. 3). Klein (1990) also finds this discrepancy. "At the moment when the field of vision among left-wing progressives was shrinking to include only its immediate surroundings, the horizons of global business were expanding to encompass the whole globe" (p. 122). Thus, rather than a synthesis between globalization and identity, Castells notes a contradictory trend: an expanding distance between "the Net and the Self" (p. 23).

Here is perhaps an appropriate place to flesh out my use of the term, 'globalization'. Beck (2003), defines globalization as "the processes through which sovereign national states are criss-crossed and undermined by transnational actors with varying prospects of power, orientations, identities and networks" (p. 11). For Smith

(2000) it is “the global integration of economic, political and societal relations” (p. 2). Appadurai’s (1996) understanding of globalization as a rupture of intersocietal relations instigated by the diptych of electronic media and global mobility is somewhat more in-depth. While electronic mediation “transforms preexisting worlds of communication and conduct” (p. 3), global mobility creates migratory audiences that transgress the once-secure bounds of the modern nation-state. The result of globalized communication and mass migration, according to Appadurai, is the creation of “diasporic public spheres, phenomena that confound theories that depend on the continued salience of the nation-state as the key arbiter of important social changes” (p. 4). Indeed, globalization has called into question the role of the nation-state as supranational organizational bodies, like the World Trade Organization and International Monetary Fund, along with multinational corporations, “first create, then exploit governmental vulnerabilities in labour markets, environmental protection, tax collection and financial regulation” (Bennett, in press, 2003). However, as Tarrow (1998) points out, such changes enhance possibilities for transnational collective action. Although the electronic revolution has facilitated the globalization of capitalism, it has also enabled the globalization of protest, as Dyer-Witheford (1999) observes: “New information technologies therefore appear not just as instruments for the circulation of commodities, but simultaneously as channels for the circulation of struggles” (p. 128). Thus, social movements become increasingly global both in target and in form (Smith, 2000, p. 17).

Until very recently, the theoretical work on contentious collective action has had difficulty accounting for contemporary movements wherein specific concerns, such as those pertaining to identity, are encompassed within a global paradigm, and interwoven

with more collective social justice goals. The movements that oppose corporate globalization⁴, like the Zapatistas and the Anti-Corporate Globalization Movement (ACGM), are prime examples of network-based social movements. Both the Zapatistas and the ACGM oppose the neoliberal policies that foster global trade liberalization and guide corporate globalization. Instead of delivering on promises of improved opportunities and standards of living for even the poorest of the world's population, corporate globalization has contributed to poverty and threatened healthy environments, on which human life depends (Brecher, Costello & Smith, 2000). So, despite the demolition of trade barriers worldwide, "capitalism remains a system of domination, exploitation, and despoliation of the environment, with powerful nations acting as both agents of transnational capital and in a continued legacy of imperialism" (Morris & Langman, 2002, p. 2). In other words, globalization as currently experienced, is unsustainable, and thus far, has only delivered for an elite minority of power-holders.

The global scope of these movements' opposition stems from what might be termed identity-based experience. Scatamburlo-D'Annibale and Langman (2003) suggest that experience has an important role, when placed in the context of the broader sociopolitical and economic framework that shapes and gives form to experience. For example, the experience of the indigenous of Chiapas with the loss of their lands, from which they derive subsistence living, is the direct result of neoliberal trade policies enacted by the Mexican state at the global level. While identity is part of their discourse, neither the Zapatistas nor their supporters worldwide understand their movement to be

⁴ Anti-corporate globalization activists are clear that while they oppose the globalization of capitalism and neo-liberalism, they very much support the globalization of equality, democracy, human rights, and environmental and social justice (Callinicos, 2003).

one of identity. “What is at stake is political economic: indigenous lands, corn, NAFTA and the purchase of the Mexican political system” (Starr, 2001, p. 167). The Zapatistas’ response – locally generated but internationally supported – is an instance of “globalization from below”⁵, wherein people at the grassroots level across the globe link up to impose their needs on the process of corporate globalization. According to Brecher et al. (2000), it is through such networking that ordinary people may contest “globalization from above”. Here we see how individual identity gives way to a broader notion of identity that encapsulates the global citizen in pursuit of a planetary good.

2.6.1 Transnational Advocacy Networks

Networks are a critical part of the way current global justice movements organize themselves, and social movement theory is beginning to explore the implications of this organization phenomenon on contemporary activism. Tarrow (1998) defines social networks as the basis for contentious politics within nations. Building on this, Keck and Sikkink (1998) describe transnational advocacy networks (TNANs) as made up of people who work internationally on a particular issue, yet share values and a common discourse, as well as information and services. These networks provide alternative channels of communication and are distinguished by “the ability of nontraditional actors to mobilize

⁵ One manifestation of “globalization from below” is evident in The World Social Forum, held annually since 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Here, “groups and movements of civil society opposed to neo-liberalism and a world dominated by capital or by any form of imperialism, but engaged in building a planetary society centred on the human person, come together to pursue their thinking, to debate ideas democratically, [to] formulate proposals, share their experiences freely and network for effective action” (www.worldsocialforum.org). In 2003, 100,000 people gathered to discuss alternative approaches to globalization that promote human rights and environmental protection. The World Social Forum was founded in response to the World Economic Forum, which is funded by more than 1,000 multinational corporations, and has been instrumental in advancing neoliberal economic policies since 1971.

information strategically to help create new issues and categories and to persuade, pressure, and gain leverage over much more powerful organizations and governments” (p. 2). Because transnational advocacy networks operate at the level of the state and deal with bureaucracy and regulation in an attempt to change policy, their objective is to reform, not transform, the existing social order. Therefore, they have difficulty accounting for contemporary grassroots movements, like the Zapatistas and the Anti-Corporate Globalization Movement, which seek the transformation of the status quo.

Information is the glue that holds transnational advocacy networks together, and the mainstream media are the conduit by which this information is transmitted to the public. Dependence on the media can be problematic, however: such networks must rely on the “newsworthiness” of their information (thus it must be framed in such a way as to be palatable to the corporate mainstream media) and, to some extent, sympathetic journalists (Tarrow, 1998). There is a clear distinction between transnational advocacy networks, described as “connective structures that cross national boundaries”, and social networks, which are “the bases for contentious politics within domestic societies” (p. 188). That is, TNANs are not social movements, and therefore not necessarily conduits for political agitation or structural change. As a theoretical formulation for explicating the new global justice movements, then, the model of the transnational advocacy network falls short. However, as a TNAN can provide resources and opportunities for domestic movements in formation, and act as a safe alternative to social movements in countries under undemocratic or authoritarian rule, it is not to be overlooked.

2.6.2 Meshworks and Rhizomes

Escobar (2000) builds upon the concept of networks, in which “reality arises in the bringing together of heterogeneous social, technical and textual materials into patterned networks”, to build a new theoretical model for contemporary social movements (p. 3). Such a model, he argues, is necessary, due to the fact that social movements have changed in response to the globalization of neoliberal capitalism. Escobar begins with Castells’ (1996) characterization of networks based on new communication technology: “A network is a set of interconnected nodes... Networks are open structures, able to expand without limits, integrating new nodes as long as they are able to communicate within the network...” (p. 470). However, Escobar rightly rejects this formulation because it refers to networks as instruments of a capitalist economy, and does not allow for the possibility of resistance to the dominant logic of capitalism. “Social movements are rather seen as reactive and defensive mobilizations ... they cannot guide the reconstruction of the social orders” (p. 7). Escobar is insightful in his implication that networks must contain some sort of agency on the part of those who challenge the status quo if this concept is to adequately address the new global justice movements.

For Escobar (2000), networks have an agenic quality, regarding them as a source of the production of information, culture and power. He develops the concept of *meshworks*, which are self-organizing, composed of diverse elements, and hybridized with other meshworks. Importantly, meshworks “accomplish the articulation of heterogeneous elements without imposing uniformity” (p. 10) resulting in alternative configurations of culture, economy, nature and identity. This “difference-in-equality” (p.

11) is a recurrent theme when theorizing current anti-corporate struggles, which tend to retain their diversity, while sharing overarching principles and goals.⁶ Escobar addresses this theme when describing a meshworks' unique evolution:

New nodes are brought into the meshworks through strategies of interweaving that enable the construction of collective agendas and fronts of struggle, which subsequently become part of the localizing strategies of the particular social movements making up the meshwork... (p. 10).

This is an apt description of the new global justice movements, gathered together under the wide umbrella of the Anti-Corporate Globalization Movement. Of particular note is the assertion that the integration of difference is crucial in order to present common "fronts of struggle" that are effective locally, yet resonate across movements and causes. Although it is not a totalizing paradigm, the concept of meshworks is nonetheless an effective tool for analyzing contemporary social movements characterized by their resistance to capitalism but widely diverse in strategies, constituency, individual goals, and geographic locale.

Finally, scholars have revisited the metaphor of the rhizome as it relates to interaction between the Internet and current global justice movements – each of them networks in their own right. Although social networking amongst activists occurred long before general public use of the Internet, the latter has enhanced internal communications in social movements, and "has dramatically extended and speeded up the process" (Cleaver, 1995, p. 5). Indeed, Internetnetworked movements like the Zapatistas and the Anti-Corporate Globalization Movement not only use the Internet, but resemble and complement its rhizomatic nature (Cleaver, 1995; Klein, 1999). In biology, a rhizome is a root-like stem that grows horizontally along or under the ground, producing roots as well

⁶ See Chapter Four for a discussion of global identity.

as shoots that develop into new plants. Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) sociological adaptation of the rhizome describes "an accentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automation..." (p. 21). Because it lacks a central command, the rhizome may withstand rupture by reconfiguring along old lines or creating new ones.

This aptly describes the Internet as well as contemporary social movements, like the Zapatistas and the ACGM, which share structural similarities. For example, the leaderless configuration of both movements has long confounded state enforcers that seek to control and destroy them. Thus the linking of many groups and individuals via the Internet allows for horizontal organizing and independent action nonetheless unified in a borderless global movement. While such rhizomatically organized and autonomous yet linked movements provide an alternative to traditionally hierarchical organization, this alternative faces its own obstacles, including "the problem of creating and recreating effective connections along a growing number of dimensions and directions of movement" (p. 23). This is exacerbated by the Internet's virtual elimination of face-to-face communication. In general, the sociological adaptation of the rhizome provides an accurate and useful metaphor for understanding how both the Internet, and the new global justice movements, are organized. Again, however, it offers only a partial explanation for these movements, and a universal model is still needed.

2.7 The Internet and the New Global Justice Movements

It becomes evident that the concept of networks is helpful when theorizing contemporary social justice activism. Recently, social movement theory has attempted to account for the role of a different sort of network – the Internet – in popular protest, particularly as the latter has metamorphosed through the use of computer-mediated communication. Indeed, network theory provides a conceptual framework for understanding the decentralized, non-hierarchical nature of both the Internet and the *new* new social movements, like the Zapatistas and the Anti-Corporate Globalization Movement. The Zapatistas, which Escobar (2000) describes as an early meshwork, responded to corporate globalization by employing a strategy of localization via an instrument of global communication. Beginning in 1994, the Zapatistas used the Internet to turn a local dispute over land in Chiapas, Mexico into an international debate over the ill effects of corporate globalization. They incorporated their localized concerns over the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) into an international agenda opposed to global economic policies that usurp national political sovereignty and recolonize debtor nations. The Zapatistas and their supporters worldwide thus fashioned an ideology that rejected neoliberalism, “which for them refers less to policy or theory and more directly to degrading environmental conditions and escalating human rights abuses” (Russell, 2001, p. 359). Thus, they used the Internet to weave “a new electronic fabric of struggle” (Cleaver, 1995, p. 1) to rally support for their revolution throughout Mexico and across the globe.

The Anti-Corporate Globalization movement built on the foundations laid by the Zapatistas, using the Internet to connect with social justice activists around the world, to

serve as a forum for education and discussion, and to disseminate information unavailable in the corporate mainstream press. The Internet was also critical in the logistical organization of the massive demonstrations against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle in 1999. This protest marked the birth of the ACGM, which gathered within its folds other activist movements, organizations and networks. For the first time in living memory – possibly ever – many different grievances and causes were represented under one broad banner: social justice. Thus workers walked arm in arm with environmentalists, feminists, human rights workers, farmers, and fair trade advocates. As with the Zapatistas, the target of their accusations was singular: corporate globalization. Although their complaints were numerous and complex, 50, 000 activists stood united in their opposition to the debilitating effects of capitalism at the global level. “It was clear that virtually all protesters in the streets of Seattle sought the incorporation of values other than profit-making into economic decisions and the democratization of economic decision making” (Smith, 2000, p. 3). Arguably, the “Battle of Seattle” marked the beginning of a new form of activism: the new communication technology that made the globalization of capital possible also spurred the globalization of protest and facilitated “globalization from below”. Robertson’s (1992) concept of globalization as “both to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole” resonates here (p. 8). Clearly, the Internet was instrumental in both shrinking vast geographical distances, and in disseminating a new sort of global consciousness.

The Internet is the matrix in which contemporary social justice-oriented movements first took global root. According to Dyer-Witherford (1999), the Internet “in

many ways realizes radical dreams of a democratic communication system: omni-purpose, multi-centred, with participants transmitting as well as receiving, near real-time dialogue, a highly devolved management structure..." (p. 250). Thus the medium is also the message, as Cleaver (1999) notes, and the Internet's architecture is reflective not only of the organization of these movements (i.e. non-hierarchical, decentralized) but also their values and goals (i.e. participatory democracy). The Internet distinguishes the global justice movements in the annals of social movement history, and is an integral component of contemporary collective action. According to Bennett (in press, 2003), the Internet is a distinct feature of global activism wherein

communication practices are hard to separate from organizational capabilities, as activists increasingly operate in networks without walls, conventional leadership or membership, geographical or issue boundaries, or other aspects of conventional hierarchical organizations or formal coalitions (p. 7).

This indicates the novel and unique nature of the new global justice movements, in which lines are constantly blurred. For example, as Bennett points out, the Internet is at once a communication medium and an organizing tool. Further, it provides the structural foundation for some movements, including Indymedia, as we shall see in Chapter Three. Hierarchical and geographical boundaries are collapsed, in part due to the medium that facilitates these movements, the Internet, and in part due to an evolving global consciousness. Here, the dialectical relationship between these movements and the Internet becomes clear.

There is no doubt the Internet has had a significant impact on the organization, mobilization and development of the *new new* social movements. As discussed earlier in this chapter, organization is a key element of social movements. It signals identity to both

members and others, influences ties formed with other organizations, and is a central mechanism in the transformation of political systems (Clemens, 2003).

Once organizational form is viewed as being simultaneously a statement of identity and constitutive of broader institutional fields, social movements appear as not only vehicles of preexisting interests and causes of specific political outcomes, but as critical sources of institutional change (p. 196).

A recurrent theme in scholarly discussions of the Internet is its revolutionary potential in the hands of social justice activists. According to Tarrow (1998), the prevailing understanding of social movement organization is formal and hierarchical; a less common meaning refers to connective structures that link members and sympathetic movements geographically and across social movement sectors. However, he observes, it is difficult “to create organizational models that are sufficiently robust to structure sustained relations with opponents, but are flexible enough to permit the informal connections that link people and networks to one another to aggregate and coordinate contention” (p. 124). This has become increasingly clear from the above review of the literature, which reveals, at best, useful tools and partial explanations that might help craft a new model, but no totalizing, universal paradigm with which we may explicate the new brand of activism that emerged in the late 1990s.

The limitations of current social movement theory become apparent in the general lack of attention paid to the impact of the Internet on organizing, mobilizing and sustaining contentious collective action. Communication technology has doubtless mediated politics and other social interactions to varying degrees throughout history, and the Internet may be viewed as the latest in a long line of “revolutionary” new media (McChesney, 2000). But many argue a special case for the Internet. Hill and Hughes

(1998) assert that the Internet's "immediacy and uncontrollability" are unparalleled in the history of human communication (p. 179). Langman and Morris (2002) suggest the Internet is part of "a major world historical transformation" (p. 7) that has spawned new forms of social movement organization. According to Smith (2000), electronic communications and exchange are among the most significant innovations in contemporary protest repertoires, facilitating "inexpensive transnational communications" and enabling activists "to almost instantaneously transmit alternative media accounts and images of protests to contrast those of mainstream, corporate-owned media outlets" (p. 15). The Internet has generated a new "species", a "cross-national network of citizen activists linked by electronic mailing lists and World Wide Web home pages that vibrate with activity, monitoring the global political economy like a virtual watchdog" (Diebert, 2000, p. 264). They engage in cyberactivism, variously defined as "politically motivated movement relying on the Internet" (Vegh, 2003, p. 710); "use of the Internet to become informed, to communicate and to organize for activities" (Elin, 2003, p. 113); and "the extensive use of the Internet to provide counter-hegemonic information and inspire social mobilizations (Morris & Langman, 2002, p. 4). While cyberactivism can take many forms, such as cyberprotest (online direct action or "hactivism") like virtual sit-ins, web site defacement, and email campaigns, the term is limited here to describing the organizing and mobilizing of contemporary social justice movements. The general consensus is that the Internet, as a communication technology and organizing tool, has had a significant impact on social movements and activism for progressive social change, and from this position I do not deviate.

The most advanced integration of the Internet into social movement theory thus far is the concept of “internetworked social movements” (ISMs). This describes “networks of networks” consisting of broad coalitions of other social movements linked by the Internet (Langman & Morris, 2002, p. 9). In this formulation, the Internet is acknowledged as the locus of a new form of struggle; however, it is also highlighted as the vehicle that brings local struggles to the global stage, expanding the scope and potential of social justice activists in their work for progressive change. In order to comprehend ISMs, an understanding of what Langman and Morris (2002) call the “fundamental dialectic of the Internet” (p. 8) is necessary. This dialectic is represented by the Internet’s seemingly conflicting roles in the promotion of corporate globalization, *and* in the resistance to capitalist domination. Dyer-Witherford (1999) addresses this tension with his observation that “new information technologies appear not just as instruments for the circulation of commodities, but simultaneously as channels for the circulation of struggles” (p. 248). In this way, the relationship between dominance on the one hand, and resistance on the other, is dialectical. Just as these new technologies have enabled and fostered globalization, in turn, the process of globalization has necessarily affected the ways in which social movements organize and mobilize (Smith, 2000, p. 8). Thus, the Internet at once fosters the solidification of corporate rule, and its contestation. In the next chapter, I shall investigate the Internet’s role in the growing global resistance to capitalism, as well as the forces that seek to seek to control cyberspace, effectively eliminating its oppositional potency.

Chapter Three: History of the Independent Media Center

3.0 Genesis

The Independent Media Center was founded in the fall of 1999 as part of plans to shut down the Third Ministerial Meeting of the World Trade Organization in Seattle. Untold thousands of people were expected to descend upon the city to join the massive demonstrations. Organizers expected a media shutout of their issues and actions and the need for an alternative news source was paramount. After an abortive initial attempt to create a participatory media network during the 1996 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Indymedia went online on November 29, 1999, the day before the WTO meeting was to begin. Activists involved in the start-up included social justice and alternative media groups such as Free Speech TV, Paper Tiger TV, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), Adbusters, Public Citizens and Direct Action Network⁷. “Together they became instrumental in simultaneously organizing a series of events and demonstrations against the WTO as well as building the alternative news service that would cover them” (Shumway, 2001, p. 6). They raised funds, secured a physical location and furnished it with borrowed and donated computers, and other necessary media-making equipment.

Uniquely, Indymedia was designed as a predominantly web-based project that delivered to the world first-hand, eyewitness accounts from inside the action. These reports were uploaded to the website and available almost in real time and, in some cases, updated every few minutes. Publication was instantaneous; editing was non-existent.

“The most significant innovation was the distribution apparatus set up on the website which combined photographs, text, and high quality audio and video streaming,” (Scatamburlo-D’Annibale & Chehade, in press, 2003, p. 4). This was facilitated by “open publishing”, a new development in software pioneered by the founders of Community Activist Technology. Called “Active”, this software is based on Linux, an open source code that is non-proprietary and continually developed by the collective effort of an international community of users. A global volunteer tech collective created (and continues to maintain) the IMC web infrastructure, with members collaborating online from their various locations around the world.

Throughout the weeklong series of protests, Indymedia served as both a resource and a medium for “underrepresented groups to tell their own stories in their own voices” (Perlstein, 2001, p. 1). But the debut of the IMC represented more than an alternative to the mainstream corporate media; it offered a “space for organizing, a space that was a refuge, and a space for convergence” (quoted in Perlstein, p. 2). It was the beginning of a social movement. Yet Indymedia is commonly referred to as part of the Anti-Corporate Globalization Movement (ACGM) that spawned it (Halleck, 2002; Hyde, 2002; Kidd, 2002); or worse, “a propaganda tool for the activist community” (Hayhoe, 2002, p. 5). Admittedly, “while Indymedia is not a conscious mouthpiece of any particular point of view, many Indymedia organizers and people who post to the Indymedia newswires are supporters of the ‘anti-globalization’ (alternative globalization, anti-corporatization) movement” (Independent Media Center [IMC], “Frequently Asked”, n.d.). But lumping Indymedia in with the ACGM does not explain how the phenomenon has spread so

⁷ See <http://docs.indymedia.org/twiki/bin/view/Global/ImcAllies> for a more extensive list of IMC supporters.

rapidly across the globe, awakening in activists of all stripes the urgent need to resist, contradict and supplant the hegemonic power of capital, to tell a different version of the story than the corporate media, and to tell it differently. At writing, there were 120 IMCs linked by a decentralized global network, and there are no indications that this growth is waning. "The IMCs have sought to create such spaces for civil society to come together, free of commercial and governmental influence, to explore the possibility of creating the society we desire" (Perlstein, p. 2). Others (Scatamburlo-D'Annibale & Chehade, in press, 2003; Shumway, 2001; Uzelman, 2002) have presented Indymedia as a social movement in its own right. Morris and Langman (2002) include the IMC as part of a new wave of "internetworked" social movements facilitated by the rise of the Internet. They call the independent media network a "cybermovement that has developed in parallel and synergy to the [Alternative Globalization Movement] protests" (p. 9). I shall explore this latter notion, beginning with an examination of the Zapatistas, from whom the IMC directly descends. But first, a brief history of the alternative press and the tradition of activist journalism, in which Indymedia certainly has roots, is warranted.

3.1 Alternative Press and Activist Journalism: A Brief History

Historically, the notions of democracy and a free press have been linked. Journalism's contribution to democracy can be traced to Guttenburg's printing press (Downing, 2001a). In the modern era, the media have initiated civic conversation, acting as a forum for political debate and public participation, creating the ideal conditions for a democratic public sphere. Curran (1991) suggests that in a democracy, the media should represent all significant interests, "facilitate their participation in the public domain,

enable them to contribute to public debate and have an input in the framing of public policy” (p. 30). In the Western world, there is a long tradition of the alternative press and activist journalism, both of which centre around a particular concern for democracy. Alternative media, following Kidd (1999), operate counter to mainstream, corporate media, and in opposition to the dominant ideology. Downing finds such activity dating as far back as the 1500s in North America and Europe, beginning with Martin Luther’s pamphlet war. Pamphlets continued to be an instrument of political agitation, along with flyers and newspapers, around the time of the American Revolution in 1776, including Thomas Paine’s famous *Common Sense*.

Radical alternative media maintained a symbiotic relationship with social movements, as evidenced in the abolitionist, suffragist and labour presses of the 19th century. Bagdikian (2000) notes these publications were major media players, and as a result of their wide reach, helped enact progressive policy changes in the U.S. However, Hackett (1998) points out that the rise of the commercial press contributed to the decline of more radical journals, particularly the labour press. He suggests that relaxation of legal and economic constraints in the newspaper industry were political attempts to destroy the radical journalism of the working class. The alternative press became increasingly marginalized and was no longer part of the mainstream media by the mid-20th century. Contemporary examples of the alternative press range from underground zines and comic books to online activist publications to corporate-looking newsweeklies. Some of the more radical – that is to say less obliged to commercial interests – examples include *Z Magazine* and its online counterpart, ZNet, as well as the Canadian online publications *rabble.ca* and the now defunct *flipside.ca*.

Activist journalism, understood here, is characterized by a commitment to social justice⁸ as well as a refusal to adhere to the founding principle of professional journalism, a still revered canon: objectivity. In the mid-19th century, Karl Marx envisioned a press dedicated to pursuing social progress; he eschewed objectivity and viewed journalism as a means to transform social policy. Marx regarded the capitalist press as an instrument of social control and his task as a journalist was to challenge and ultimately change this (Altschull, 1984). Around the turn of the century, publisher Joseph Pulitzer popularized the now famous words of American journalist Finley Peter Dunne, stating that the role of the newspaper is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. McChesney and Scott (2002) highlight Upton Sinclair as an exemplar of the tradition of muckraking journalism in the early 1900s. Sinclair's radical analysis of the limits of capitalist sponsored media follows the birth of both modern monopoly capitalism and modern corporate media, and was typical of the socialist, anarchist and progressive press of the time. Antonio Gramsci (1920) rendered a scathing critique of the media as "ideological agents of capitalism" well before its hyper-commercialization. He worked as a journalist engaged in the politics of class struggle and the battle for proletarian liberation, actively campaigning for the overthrow of the Italian police state. In the United States, investigative journalist and media critic George Seldes continued the tradition of challenging authority. From 1940-1950 he published a political newsletter, *In Fact*, and published numerous books, including exposés on the tobacco industry, the nuclear arms industry and the cold war. Inspired by Seldes, journalist I.F. Stone began his own weekly in 1953, and led the attack on McCarthyism, racial discrimination and the Vietnam War.

⁸ Following Gindin (2003), social justice is understood as the fostering of full and mutual development of all the capacities of all members of society.

Today, the trajectories of alternative press and activist journalism intersect with Indymedia. Pavis (2002) discusses what appears to be at once a medium and a movement; she describes a “justice journalism” that marks an abrupt departure from conventional notions of newsgathering, production and dissemination. Indymedia has reanimated the muckraking goals of a century ago, inheriting much from this controversial tradition, including a disdain for objectivity and a vocation for protecting and advancing the public good: “Journalists can and should be agents for social change” (p. 3). Pavis draws attention to a critical difference that singles out Indymedia and makes it stand alone in the history of alternative media: the Internet. Thus, Indymedia is a medium within a medium, with the Internet serving as the both the foundation of a movement and the centre of production and distribution of information. Further, the attendant technology has given birth to an entirely new way to conceptualize and present the news. Arnison (2002a) posits that software developments have facilitated a new brand of journalism based on the concept of open publishing. As one of Indymedia’s defining principles, open publishing enables consumers of the news to become its producers and editors, contesting professional journalism’s sacred mantra, the long debated notion of objectivity. We shall investigate these claims in detail below; but first, let us turn to an examination of Indymedia’s lineage.

3.2 Lineage

3.2.1 The Zapatistas

The Independent Media Center embraces a style of collective action that is distinct in the annals of social movement history; its structural framework and organizational approach combine to create a new brand of activism. But Indymedia is not an isolated phenomenon. It is the product of a lineage that may be traced back to the radical media social movement initiated by the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) in 1994. These freedom fighters of Chiapas, Mexico, were among the first to advocate the creation of a global network of alternative communication to resist the crippling effects of corporate globalization. "Let's make a network of communication among all our struggles and resistances. An intercontinental network of alternative communication against neoliberalism...[and] for humanity" (Zapatista proposal cited in Ruggiero, 1999, p. 43). Castells (1997) calls the Zapatistas the first informational guerrilla movement. According to Cleaver (1995), they used the Internet to weave "a new electronic fabric of struggle to carry their revolution throughout Mexico and around the world" (p. 1). On January 1, 1994, the day the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect, the Zapatistas issued a declaration of war on the Mexican government, subtitled, "Hoy decimos basta! – Today we say enough!"⁹ The revolutionaries were at once placing themselves in an historic struggle against colonization and oppression that was five centuries old *and* at the fore of a new battle against the tyranny of neoliberal globalization (Castells, p. 77).

⁹ *First declaration of the Lacandon Jungle*, retrieved April 23, 2003 from <http://www.ezln.org/documentos/1994/199312xx.en.htm>.

The plight and cause of the Chiapans were detailed in comunicués that were smuggled out of the jungle or told to independent journalists. This information was then broadcast by supporters via the Internet and disseminated to sympathetic audiences the world over (Cleaver, 1995, p. 7). At the time, their use of the Internet was novel, and it enabled the Zapatistas to circumvent a media blackout enforced by the Mexican government. In turn, this put the global spotlight on the state and mobilized international pressure against its violent efforts to suppress the insurgency (Schultz, 1998). According to Russell (2001) the revolutionaries tailored their message to win the support of North American and Western European social movements. "The EZLN directed its communication strategies at an emerging transnational public sphere supported, in part, by the growth of the Internet, where it sought the leverage necessary to neutralize the Mexican government's tactical advantages" (p. 360). What makes this social movement different is that the Zapatistas eliminated the need for conventional media to popularize their struggle. As Ford and Gil (2001) observe, they "inspired a flourishing, widespread, and varied network of radical media communication that afforded them the opportunity to communicate directly with civil society" (p. 219). In doing so, the Zapatistas birthed an entirely new way of contesting power.

Despite being a localized and sometimes violent conflict, the grassroots struggle of the indigenous of Chiapas resonated with people all over the world and international support is credited for the survival of the EZLN. "In the course of their struggle for social justice, they recognized the common struggle of all humanity, incorporating a very wide range of interests, and thus interest, into their movement" (Salter, 2003, p. 134). Morris and Langman (2002) describe the Zapatista movement as an "instance of savvy

cyberactivism, [that] while grounded in profound local justice issues, linked these to a global analysis” (p. 11). Evidently, the Zapatistas’ analysis of capitalism and its effects under the new global order rang true for more than the oppressed peasants of Chiapas. As Castells (1997) observes: “They fight against the exclusionary consequences of economic modernization; but they also challenge the inevitability of a new geopolitical order under which capitalism becomes universally accepted” (p. 77). Thus the Zapatistas were engaged as guerilla fighters in a civil war and as theorists of a new movement in a netwar¹⁰. Their political theory, known as Zapatismo, offered “another way to think about power, resistance and globalization” and confounded notions of guerrilla tactics and leftwing politics (Klein quoted in Noguera, 2001, p. 71). According to Starr (2001), Zapatismo embodies the theory of “globalization from below” with its analytical focus on political economic concerns and its naming of neoliberal capitalism as the enemy. The Zapatistas articulated “a new anti-capitalist vision of the public sphere that is actually a network of spaces through which people can transcend personal or cultural differences to engage in collective struggles against oppression and participate in a meaningful conversation about how to create a better world” (Shumway, 2001). By using the Internet to contest the status quo, the Zapatistas made the connection between media democracy and political democracy.

Not only have the Zapatistas theorized about a better world, one where neoliberalism does not oppress, they have put theory into practice. That is to say, they employ in their daily lives the principles and methodologies they demand for all

¹⁰ Arquilla and Ronfeldt (1997) define “netwar” as a “war about knowledge”, a “societal-level ideational conflict waged in part through internetted modes of communication” (p. 5). See also *Information Warfare and the Zapatistas* at <http://www.actlab.utexas.edu/~zapatistas/infowar/mapped.html>.

Mexicans, indeed for people and societies throughout the world. Schultz (1998) calls this “communicative praxis”, or “the construction of meaning, projects, visions, values, styles, strategies and identities through interaction with and against one another” (p. 4). The concept of communicative praxis portrays the struggle of the Zapatistas as a collective project developed over time. It also adequately describes the EZLN’s structure, which marks a radical departure from other social movements. For example, Martinez-Torres (2001) points to their non-hierarchical form of organization, characterized by anti-cacique-ism¹¹, from which derives a rejection of top-down authority and vanguardism. “The Zapatistas, not surprisingly then, have a humanistic and revolutionary but also anti-vanguardist ideology, having repeatedly stated that they do not want state power” (p. 350). Their organizational structure is a model of “alternative communication and political participation,” say Ford and Gil (2001, p. 228). They point out that while the Zapatista army functions as a typical military organization, the movement as a whole relies upon consensus achieved through an indigenous decision-making body made up of representatives from various Chiapan communities. As Garrido and Halavais (2003) observe, the movement “encompasses a participatory process for social change, one that is concerned as much with social equality, freedom and participation in decision-making as it is with economic opportunity, women’s rights, and reduction of poverty in indigenous communities” (p. 169). The Zapatistas, therefore, embody the practical application of a revolutionary democratic political theory that they demand for all of society.

Despite their obvious differences, the underlying similarities between the Zapatistas and Indymedia as radical media movements are clear. Both share an

¹¹ *Cacique* refers to a Mexican village strongman, or generally, a dictatorial leader (Martinez-Torres, 2001).

understanding of the connection between media democracy and political democracy, yet break from traditional social movements in their decentralized organizational structure and democratic communication strategies. Like the Zapatistas, IMC participants locate themselves in an historical continuum in the battle against the oppressive forces of capital. But they, too, recognize a new enemy in corporate globalization, one that requires new tactics and new responses, both of which are facilitated by the Internet. Indeed, the Internet distinguishes the EZLN and Indymedia from their predecessors in the history of social movements. Computer-mediated global networks have enabled the Zapatistas to represent themselves free from interpretation or filtering by the mainstream corporate media. Indymedia has adopted the communication strategy of the EZLN, with its emphasis on “open spaces for free discussion of controversial issues” characterized by a “free-form methodology where all have equal right to express themselves” (Martinez-Torres, 2001, p. 352). IMC reporters assume the power to tell their own story, or the story of their compatriots, outside the approved parameters dictated by the mainstream corporate media, thus thwarting journalistic convention. According to one founding member, Indymedia gains support by employing the global networking strategy of the Zapatistas: “affirm local struggles while simultaneously inviting an exploration of larger networks of struggle” (Perlstein, 2001, p. 2). Further, the Zapatistas’ non-hierarchical organization based on consensus decision-making has evidently served as a model for Indymedia; like their revolutionary forebears, IMC journalists not only theorize about how to effect change, they participate in the process. “The IMC movement can be seen as a concrete example of how alternative structures for life and work can be effective and powerful” (Halleck, 2002, p. 417). Altering power relations within a movement, in

addition to striving for this goal in the larger society, is crucial if activists do not wish to replicate the dominant power structures in their work for social justice. As Uzelman (2002) points out, “social change happens not just in how we think the world but also in how we live it” (p. 92). Within the IMC network this is done by organizing collectively and democratically, by empowering people to tell their stories, and by releasing these stories into the vast expanse of the World Wide Web.

3.2.2 The Anti-Corporate Globalization Movement

While Indymedia has roots in the Zapatistas’ new brand of social movement, its immediate history resides within the Anti-Corporate Globalization Movement (ACGM).¹² Clearly, the theory of Zapatismo has coincided with increasing social strife spurred by the naming of a common enemy: global capitalism. And, as Uzelman (2002) suggests, Indymedia is “illustrative of a broader shift in political strategy on the part of groups struggling against capitalist subordination” (p. 95). The ACGM was in its infancy at 1997’s Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit in Vancouver, Canada. About 1500 people demonstrated at the University of British Columbia, voicing their outrage that the Canadian government had allowed notorious human rights abuser, then Indonesian president Suharto, into the country. What got lost in the mainstream media coverage, however, was the critical analysis of the expansion of capital across the globe, particularly in the form of free trade agreements. The movement grew slowly but steadily until it burst onto the international scene at the “Battle of Seattle”, 1999’s massive

¹² Also called the pro-democracy movement or alternative globalization movement or anti-capitalist movement. I have chosen ACGM for two reasons. It is how many activists refer to the movement themselves; and, more broadly, it handily encompasses the various and diverse aspects of the global movements against capitalist domination and hegemony, and for social justice.

protests against the World Trade Organization. Since then, its growth has been borderless and unprecedented, and continues today, incorporating other, related social justice concerns in addition to the unmitigated spread of neoliberal capitalism, such as democracy and peace. The union of diverse movements into “super movement spheres” that share information and resources via global, computer-mediated networks, is part of a baseline shift in social movement activity (Morris & Langman, 2002). The weeklong Seattle protest drew upwards of 50,000 people with widely varying concerns unified by their common opposition to the debilitating effects of global trade liberalization. The event, which initially shut down the WTO meeting, served as a “coming out” party of sorts for the ACGM.

While it drew upon a long history of contentious collective action dating back to the 1960s, the Anti-Corporate Globalization Movement grew out of the anti-free trade campaigns conducted in Canada and the U.S. during the 1990s.¹³ According to Smith (2000), “these campaigns may mark a crucial turning point in the direction of economic globalization by demonstrating a capacity for mass, grassroots challenges to international trade agreements that violate popular concerns about human and labour rights and environmental protection” (p. 1). Reflecting its global nature, the ACGM’s origins may be traced back to the mid-1980s “where resistance to IMF [International Monetary Fund]-imposed structural adjustment policies arose as countries of the global South sought to address a mounting problem of international debt” (Smith, p. 4). THE IMF and World Bank give out loans to “developing” countries only if they agree to implement severe structural adjustment programs (SAPs). These force already indebted countries to

embrace “free market” policies that inevitably include cuts to social programs, the privatization of public agencies and services, the change from sustainable to cash-crop farming and the elimination of restrictions on foreign investment and ownership. Joseph Stiglitz (2002), former president of the World Bank, is one of the IMF’s most vocal and strident critics. He agrees that globalization has not been a positive force for the world’s poor, the environment or the stability of the global economy, suggesting that its policies regarding “developing” countries are informed by a colonial mentality. This is hardly surprising as opposition to neoliberal globalization can be traced further back, if one considers the “legacy of anti-colonial struggles” (Morris, 2003, p. 3). So, while organizers of the anti-WTO protest in Seattle cultivated connections with church, school, union and other local community groups, they also utilized mobilizing structures of transnational social movement organizations, such as Greenpeace and Public Citizen, to involve activists around the world.

The Battle of Seattle is one of the most significant recent episodes of collective action, and it points to a future of social movements that is increasingly global both in target and in form and that is in more direct confrontation with global institutions than its historical predecessors (Smith, p. 17).

This prediction has been borne out by the wildfire spread of subsequent demonstrations that took on not just supranational governing bodies and policies, but global proportions as well.¹⁴

In addition to its global reach, what distinguishes the ACGM from its predecessors is its organizational structure. Like the Zapatistas, this movement eschews

¹³ For more on how anti-NAFTA networks and anti-MAI computer-mediated activism contributed to the development of the EZLN and the ACGM, see Ayres (1999); Cleaver (1999); Deibert, (2000); Dyer-Witherford (1999); and Kidd, (2002).

hierarchy and central leadership, preferring instead to enact participatory democracy through consensus-based decision-making. As the EZLN “are transforming the conditions of life in the villages they work with, particularly for women, while holding their own in a war against the Mexican government” (Starr, 2001, p. 108), so too are ACGM activists working for change, beginning with the structure and process of their own affinity groups.¹⁵ According to Halleck (2002), “the most radical aspect of the antiglobalization movement is its nonhierarchical nature” in which “all participants are themselves empowered” (p. 417). Such anarchist tendencies evident in this style of organizing have been widely noted (Canadian Security Intelligence Service [CSIS], 2000; Downing, 2001b; Epstein, 2001; Morse, 2003; Starr, 2001). Indeed, Epstein suggests that anarchism is the dominant perspective within the ACGM, noting its influence in various social movements from the late 19th century through to the civil rights and counterculture movements of the 1960s. This is evident in their shared emphasis on “a structure based on small autonomous groups, a practice of decision-making by consensus, and a style of protest that revolves around mass civil disobedience” (p. 8).

For their part, anarchists welcomed the ACGM, as Morse (2003) notes:

The emergence of the anti-globalization movement has produced a feeling of near euphoria among anarchists. Not only are our commitments to direct action and decentralization shared broadly in the movement as a whole, but we are also enjoying a political legitimacy that has eluded us for decades. We can now articulate our anti-statist, utopian message to activists around the world and we are no longer dismissed as terrorists or cranks.

¹⁴ For example, such protests were staged at the IMF meeting in Washington, (16 April 2000), at the World Economic Forum in Melbourne (11 September, 2000), the FTAA meeting in Quebec City (20-21 April, 2001) and the G8 Summit in Genoa (20-21 July 2001), to name just a few.

¹⁵ According to the website, Direct Action to Stop the War, an affinity group is a small, decentralized, nonhierarchical group of people who work together autonomously on direct action or other projects. “Affinity groups challenge top-down decision-making and organizing, and empower those involved to take creative direct action.” Spanish anarchists first used this model in the late 19th and early 20th century, and anti-nuclear activists revived it during radical direct action in the 1970s (<http://www.actagainstwar.org/article.php?id=14>).

Thus, as many members of the ACGM have openly embraced anarchist sentiments, they have legitimized anarchism as a viable alternative to traditional social movement organization. One example is People's Global Action (PGA), an international network that grew out of the Zapatista *encuentros*¹⁶, and disseminates information and coordinates the actions of grassroots movements across the globe. One of PGA's hallmarks is "a call to direct action and civil disobedience, support for social movements' struggles, advocating forms of resistance which maximize respect for life and oppressed people's rights, as well as the construction of local alternatives to global capitalism" (PGA, 2001, #4). It organized the J18 Carnival Against Capitalism protests that took place around the world on June 18, 1999.¹⁷ This action was characteristic of subsequent ACGM demonstrations, with its critique of globalization, simultaneous protests in multiple cities, grassroots democracy, and carnival theme (Morris, 2003). Similarly, the Anti-Capitalist Convergence (CLAC), a Montreal-based group that explicitly opposes capitalism and the neoliberal policies that facilitate it, is "autonomous, decentralized and non-hierarchical" (CLAC, n.d., #5). These are but two among many similar groups that participate in the global fight against capitalism and loosely identify with the Anti-Corporate Globalization Movement.

One strength of the ACGM's loose, decentralized organizational structure is that it is almost impossible for the state to manage or contain. Notes Klein (2000),

It has proven extraordinarily difficult to control, largely because it is so different from the organizing principles of the institutions and corporations it targets. It responds to corporate concentration with a maze of fragmentation, to

¹⁶ Encuentros are international convergences of solidarity in the struggle against economic and political domination organized by the EZLN. For further discussion see Ford and Gill (2001).

¹⁷ Activists from Community Activist Technology set up the precursor to Indymedia to cover the J18 protests in Sydney, Australia, using the software that most IMCs currently use (Morris, 2003).

globalization with its own kind of localization, to power consolidation with radical power dispersal (p. 3).

The lack of a single, identifiable leader means that the movement cannot be decapitated, and thus weakened by the loss of its motivating force. According to ACGM activist Enver Villamizar, consensus-based decision-making requires activists to be responsible for their actions. In this way, “the movement itself is the leader. It establishes the aims and the people act within it.”¹⁸ This fact has not been lost on national security agents. “The anti-globalist [sic] movement is a body that manages to survive and even thrive without a head” (CSIS, 2000). This mode of organizing also enables the movement to be inclusive of divergent goals and tactics, and such unity in diversity is another strength. As the Anti-Capitalist Convergence’s vision statement asserts: “We encourage the involvement of anyone who accepts this statement of principles. We also encourage the participation of all individuals in working groups, in accord with their respective political affiliations” (CLAC, n.d., #5). Activists with varying political views are thus welcome to participate; further, those whose end goals are more reformist than transformative may work together within the movement, as can those who engage in civil disobedience and those who observe strictly non-violent tactics.

The notion of identity has evolved in contemporary transnational movements that resist neoliberal globalization. “The global opposition movement unites a wide range of political voices... against the political and economic practices of the developed West (Vegh, 2003, p. 88). Langman and Morris (2002) point out that in the ACGM, “various collective identities intersect and are mutually transformed in relation to previous identities.” They suggest that a global collective identity is emerging, a “global justice

¹⁸ Personal interview with Enver Villamizar conducted April 25, 2003.

identity” that embraces the numerous and diverse interests involved, such as environmentalism, fair trade, human rights, feminism, and labour rights. Starr (2001) hints at the possibility of pushing beyond the boundaries of a “politics of difference” into a “unity of many determinations” (p. 160). The 1999 WTO protest in Seattle marked the first time in the history of social movements where so many different groups, including labour, environmentalist, feminist, anarchist and animal rights, organized against a common enemy, “thus providing the basis for a new politics of alliance and solidarity to overcome the limitations of postmodern identity politics” (Kellner, 2003, p. 7). Chief among these limitations is the inability of identity politics to engender the conditions and resources required to bring about progressive structural change.

The decentralized, collective approach has proven effective in organizing geographically distant and politically diverse groups. It also facilitates participatory democracy – the essential aim of the ACGM in its “glocalized”¹⁹ efforts to redress “environmental degradation, abuse of human rights and unenforcement of labour standards,” (Starr, 2001, p. 83). Consensus as a strategy for decision making often results in the practice (and not simply the pursuit of) participatory democracy during a protest. “Out of necessity, as a movement, we had to find a way to effectively coordinate large groups of people towards a common aim,” says ACGM activist Enver Villamizar.²⁰ In order to build unity among students, activists and workers during the protest against the Organization of American States in Windsor in 2000, Villamizar states that achieving consensus was imperative. This was done through planned and impromptu

¹⁹ The term “glocalization” appeared in the late 1980s in articles by Japanese economists in the *Harvard Business Review*. Sociologist Roland Robertson popularized the term, defined as the tempering effects of local conditions on global pressures. Thus glocalization is the co-presence of both universalizing and particularizing tendencies (http://searchcio.techtarget.com/gDefinition/0,294236,sid19_gci826478,00.html).

spokescouncils – a trademark of the ACGM – wherein participants discuss the issues at hand and jointly decide the best course of action. “We needed a method to develop our tactics. It was getting ourselves together to discuss the issues, and our goals and how to accomplish them”. Out of this process of discussion, debate, and group consensus, came the realization that “in order to build [the movement] we must take decisions together and work together.” This realization of the need for solidarity extends from the practical concerns of on-the-street mobilizing; yet, it extends to the theoretical and ideological underpinnings of the movement as a global force, and highlights the ACGM’s revolutionary potential.

The similarities between the ACGM and Indymedia are many. However, their shared decentralized nature, emphasis on consensus as an internal organizational tool, and reliance on the Internet are the most obvious. Interestingly, the organizational structures of both movements loosely resemble the Internet.²¹ As Eagleton-Pierce (2001) points out, “the Internet’s anarchy and decentralized architecture suit the relationships activists wish to foster” (p. 336). It is no surprise then, that Indymedia, and the ACGM out of which it grew, share a similar framework. Shumway (2001) refers to Indymedia as “a movement with no single guiding force or leader” (p. 5), noting that its internetnetworked communication structure “is complementary to the deliberately anarchic design of the Internet itself” (p. 7). This format, like the ACGM’s, “is appropriate to the diverse and complex networks of activists” that form the global Indymedia network (Halleck, 2002, p. 421). However, while both Indymedia and the ACGM may be considered Internetnetworked social movements, the former’s use of the Internet is distinct in several

²⁰ Personal interview with Enver Villamizar conducted April 25, 2003.

²¹ For a discussion of the development of the Internet, see Cleaver, 1995 and Kidd, 2002.

ways. First, IMC is primarily Internet-based. Second, its interaction is sustained, and not intermittently determined by major protests. Third, in an effort to achieve consensus, Indymedia has developed a hybrid communication system, consisting of “real” and virtual interaction. Below, we shall investigate the implications of these differences for the organization of IMC.

3.3 Organization of Indymedia: The Virtual and the Physical

The choice of the Internet as medium for Indymedia has generated organizational triumphs and challenges unique to the history of social movements. “Once selected, the choice of a particular solution or organizational model then has consequences for both the environment and the system of relations among organizations” (Clemens, 2003, p. 196). Initially, IMCs were temporary and transient, moving to the next major protest site, and lasting the duration of the protest. IMC Seattle was the first to attempt to make the website an ongoing project, after being offline for 10 months following the 1999 WTO demonstrations.²² In the early history of Indymedia, IMC members would travel to various protests to help activists in host cities set up a site. Although this worked in the short term, once the protest ended, the IMC often ended too. One criticism of this approach was that the sites were established by activists from outside the community, who were unconnected to the people and groups working for progressive change there. In the global South, there was also the issue of a language barrier, which made the sites established by Northern tech teams seem even more foreign. The idea of a global site was

²² Personal interview with Sheri Herndon conducted July 7, 2003.

floated early on and soon IMCs began cropping up independently of major protests and plugging in to the network on their own.

The Principles of Unity²³, which are part of the Membership Criteria that all new IMCs must agree to, were adopted in 2000 and enshrine the unifying tenets of Indymedia, including consensus based decision making, open publishing, decentralization and egalitarianism. Each local IMC is organized in a similar fashion: numerous Internet-based working groups take responsibility for the day-to-day functions of the organization, such as fundraising, editorial and technology, as well as planning for future events and actions. Participation in these groups is largely virtual, conducted over the Internet via a variety of email lists. However, the more established locals also have regular meetings, either at the physical site (only a few IMCs have permanent offices) or another public meeting space. There are also global working groups²⁴ that attempt to address issues that concern the organization at a network level. In an effort to bridge differences and achieve compromise within the global organization, working groups from local IMCs are encouraged to share information with each other, facilitated by a global email list, the Communication Working Group.²⁵ This is an in-process attempt at what Downing (2001) calls “an electronic democracy using digital technologies” (p. 18). This group is also responsible for the network-wide Internet Relay Chat (IRC) meetings (<http://irc.indymedia.org>), which enable real-time discussion, as opposed to the asynchronous email lists. Rabble, known as Evan Henshaw-Plath offline, is a member of the IMC Tech Working Group. He says the potential for IRC communication is the development of an “ongoing virtual Indymedia convergence centre” which could “be

²³ To view the full document, visit <http://docs.indymedia.org/view/Global/PrinciplesOfUnity>

²⁴ For a complete list, see <http://docs.indymedia.org/view/Global/WebHome>.

valuable to developing more cohesiveness and solidarity in the Indymedia network, and also really promote some critical and productive dialogue that is needed” (2002c, p. 1). Besides instantaneous communication, IRC allows members of the tech group to convene in cyberspace, despite their geographically dispersed locales. “To have a conference call every week would be too much money. We can agree to meet every week on IRC, talk for an hour or so and then part, no matter where in the world we are” (ibid).

As an organizing tool for social movements in general, and Indymedia in particular, the Internet has obvious advantages. These include the ability to collapse geographical and democratic divides and the opportunity to challenge class, racial and gender barriers. Some scholars suggest, optimistically, that Internet-based communication has the ability to transcend traditional biases. Selwyn and Robson (1998) note the “concepts of race, gender, age and sexuality do not necessarily apply when communicating electronically” (p. 2). However, despite potential advantages of computer-mediated communication, Indymedia volunteers have increasingly realized the importance of face-to-face interaction in light of the Internet’s shortcomings as a communicative resource.

To date, the majority of Indymedia's network-wide coordination has occurred over the Internet. With all of its advantages, email communication poses serious challenges and limitations. Our experiences with email-based decision-making and collaboration raise issues like a lack of network-wide representation, English-language bias, gender imbalances, the need for discussion facilitation, and north-south inequities regarding Internet access (Gaba, 2002, p. 1).

According to Selwyn and Robson, the fundamental obstacle to Internet communication is that it is very self-selective, and limited to those with access to a computer. They point out that this population is severely constrained along lines of class, race, age, income and

²⁵ Visit <http://docs.indymedia.org/view/Global/CommworkWg>.

gender. The challenge of crafting a decision making structure for the global IMC network has been ongoing and somewhat frustrating for participants; to date, all efforts to develop network-wide processes for decision-making and planning have failed (Morris, 2003). It has become clear that what has proven to be one of Indymedia's principle strengths is also, paradoxically, one of its greatest challenges.

Indymedia's decentralized structure allows for tremendous creative freedom and initiative. It also creates difficulty in network-wide decision-making. One of Indymedia's greatest challenges is striking a sustainable balance between the concepts of "decentralized" and "networked" – having enough network-wide organization to coordinate effectively, while maintaining a flexible, dynamic structure that will continue to support creative impulses and impromptu collaborations (Gaba, 2002, p. 3).

For now, observes Morris, "a density of communication processes is weaving the network together. Issues are addressed and decisions made in an ad hoc way" (p. 18). The lack of consensus on a global decision making protocol continues to plague Indymedia at the network level.

Epstein (2001) is wary of the longterm viability of such an informal, ill-defined organizational structure. She cautions that "a movement capable of transforming structures of power...will probably require more stable and lasting forms of organization..." and will likely require "some relaxation of anti-bureaucratic and anti-hierarchical principles..." that currently guide Indymedia (p. 13). However, this seems antithetical to IMC's goals. Arnison (2001b), a founding IMC activist, suggests the opposite: maintain a decentralized network and keep decision making as local as possible.

Fair global decisions are slow and take a lot of work to organize. If they are taken too far I feel they will lead to suppression of diversity and grim power struggles. After all, the global corporate and government monopolies on power and culture are at the heart of the globalization debate that Indymedia thrives on... (p. 2).

It is plain that IMC activists, like their counterparts in the Anti-Corporate Globalization Movement, are committed to eking out an organizational framework that is fundamentally different from what structures and drives global capitalism.

Callinicos (2003) also warns of certain limitations implicit in the style of organizing through affinity groups and making decisions by consensus. He criticizes the fragmented nature of the ACGM – the “movement of movements”. “The result can be a plethora of separately organized and differently motivated protests that can diffuse energies and create confusion” (p. 100). Protest thus has a tendency to be reduced to a form of self-realization rather than a vehicle to achieve a definite political outcome. However, Callinicos does not insist on any major digression from the ideals and goals that inform the new global justice movements. While he acknowledges the presence of varying perspectives within the ACGM, highlighting the age-old tension between reform and revolution, Callinicos suggests that the success of the movement lies in the “effective articulation of ideologies and the organized pursuit of political strategies” (p. 103). This is different from the “relaxation” of key principals of the movement, such as its consensus-based decision making, and its opposition to hierarchy.

IMC volunteers appear loathe to abandon, or even weaken, these principles. But it is obvious that the organizational structure of Indymedia has been the cause of some internal strife, particularly at the global level. According to founding tech member Matthew Arnison, the network needs to establish a broad framework that maintains autonomy and diversity while allowing for the effective articulation of ideologies and the organized pursuit of political strategies.

I'm not actually sure how many decisions we need to make globally. The problem with trying to do too much on a network level is it just concentrates and bottlenecks things and creates big potential problems with conflicts of interest and editorial control.²⁶

Arnison further suggests that it is problematic to concentrate power at the network level, where hierarchy could develop as a select few began to make decisions and take action on behalf of others. As a global network, Indymedia will need to develop some overarching framework and general protocol for decision making. However, to what extent the network must abandon or water down the experiment in participatory democracy is yet to be determined. While the "enemy" – global capitalism – is highly organized, and derives much of its power from centralization and hierarchy, it remains to be seen if a different model, one that may indeed wrest and retain power, is possible.

A solution to the problems of the global IMC is in process at the network level. One aspect of that solution may involve formally incorporating physical, in addition to virtual, communication. Many local IMCs conduct face-to-face spokescouncils, adapted from the ACGM, to augment the consensus-based decision making process. "Most decisions are made at the local IMC level, often using a spokescouncil model with working groups acting as committees" (Gaba, 2002, p. 4). Additionally, some locals also conduct workshops and training sessions. The success of face-to-face communication in advancing the individual nodes of the network has encouraged volunteers at the global level to converge in person, instead of just online. So far, these convergences have occurred at major protests in the coordination of an event-based IMC and at independent media conventions, such as the Allied Media Conference, where IMC activists converged in June 2003. And "Indymediacs", as one volunteer observes, "sometimes, gasp! ... even

²⁶ Personal interview with Matthew Arnison conducted August 8, 2003.

visit each other just for fun” (Mark B, 2002, p. 1). But the importance of consistent in-person interaction in addition to virtual contact has become increasingly evident. “The need for a full-fledged conference of all IMCs has never been greater,” Gaba (2002) observes.

When we have had the opportunity to gather in person, we have seen astounding results: major steps forward in our organizational development and knowledge sharing, and the incalculable sense of increased trust. These past opportunities to gather face-to-face have been humble efforts, created on minimal budgets, tagged on to other planned events, and as such, have had their limitations (p. 2).

IMC activists continue to address these limitations at regional and continental convergences, which are ongoing; plans for a Global Conference remain in the works.

The result of interweaving virtual and physical communication is “a new composition of social relationships increasingly difficult for capitalists and the state to manage” (Cleaver, 1998, p. 6). The threat Indymedia poses lies not in the potential to usurp the dominance of the mainstream corporate media, but in its communicative praxis, or “the construction of meaning, projects, visions, values, styles, strategies and identities through interaction with and against one another” (Schultz, 1998, p. 4). As one IMC founding member observes, “where the threat is is that we are organizing a coordinated social network and that means improving our communications from the many, to the many, and to all the nodes” (Herndon quoted in Kidd, 2003, p. 16). This threat is the practice, as well as the pursuit, of a viable alternative: participatory democracy. This makes Tarrow’s (1998) fear that virtual activism might serve as a substitute rather than an incentive to real world activism seem rather unfounded.

3.4 Inter-‘Active’: Open Publishing Meets Independent Media

The Internet has played a critical role in the development of Indymedia, nurturing its tendencies towards communication, consensus and collectivity. These are all key elements in the participatory democracy IMC strives to create, within its own organization, within the media, and within society at large, as part of its opposition to the ill effects of globalization. Such resistance is mediated by technopolitics, or “the use of new technologies such as computers and the Internet to advance political goals”, which opens up new terrain for political struggle and provides new opportunities for resistance, illustrating how the Internet can be used as an instrument of democracy (Kellner, 2003, p. 2). The virtual communities created in cyberspace are, in some cases, “consciously conceived as constituting a new, electronic form of civil society in which many-to-many cybercommunications undermines the control of established societal gatekeepers – including the giant media corporations – over flows of information” (Dyer-Witherford, 1999, p. 252). Importantly, through electronic networks, activists and members of social movements are increasingly able to speak for themselves (Ford & Gill, 2001, p. 206). This has been greatly aided by the groundbreaking “Active” software that facilitated Indymedia’s open publishing format, enabling anyone with access to the Internet to directly represent themselves directly, with a minimum of gatekeeping to ensure the freest circulation of information (Kidd, 2003).

According to Arnison (2002b), a longtime Indymedia activist and member of Community Activist Technology which created the software, “Open publishing is the same as free software. They’re both (r)evolutionary responses to the privatization of information by multinational monopolies” (p. 329). The free software movement,

founded by Richard Stallman in 1984, aims to give computer users the freedom denied them by the increasingly commercialized software industry (Ortellado, 2003). The movement is centred around Stallman's operating system, GNU, and the notion that all users have the freedom to run, copy, distribute, study, change and improve the software. Free software, accordingly, "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'" (GNU, 2003, p. 1).²⁷ From this hacker ethic of sharing derives the movement to democratize computer systems architecture through decentralizing control in an effort to promote an electronic commons as an alternative to the capitalist information economy (Morris & Langman, 2002).

This ethos has informed Indymedia from its inception and has resulted in a decentralized and democratic media network that challenges conventional (corporate) news practices, and notions. As with the free software movement, open publishing contradicts capitalist norms by which contemporary society is ordered: "the product is free, and the process of production is free and transparent" (Arnison, 2002b, p. 1). Open publishing allows Indymedia to maintain a process of creating news that is accessible to the reader. Anyone can contribute a story, watch editorial decisions being made, or join the editorial collective. In contrast to conventional media, publication is immediate and editing is limited. This format was immediately hailed as a breakthrough in alternative news reporting. It challenged the one-to-many "broadcast" model of communication employed by both the mainstream and alternative media in conventional news creation

²⁷ The free software movement is not to be confused with the open source movement. According to Stallman, 2003, they "disagree on the basic principles, but agree more or less on the practical recommendations". Open source accepts semi-proprietary and proprietary programs, while free software views non-free software as a social problem and rejects any restrictions on the use of source code. For more information, visit the Free Software Foundation at www.gnu.org.

and dissemination. The IMC's many-to-many approach to communication is facilitated by open publishing software, and by the Internet's multinodal framework, which puts the "means of production" into the hands of citizens, converting them from consumers of the news, into producers of it. (Scatamburlo-D'Annibale & Chehade, in press, 2003, p. 5). With open publishing, anyone with access to the Internet can upload text, photos, audio or video files to Indymedia, unedited and unfiltered, simply by clicking the "publish" button.

As a progenitor of Indymedia, the free software movement is a critical component of its structural foundations, inseparable from the organizational framework provided by the Internet. Free software is as much a concept as it is a movement. "The means is the end. The journey is the destination," notes Arnison (2002b, p. 1). Thus it is the act of creating software freely – and in the process, challenging the social norm that profit is the obvious motive and result – that is radical. Similarly, with Indymedia the very process of making media outside the rigidly controlled parameters set by the mainstream corporate arena is as radical as the stories that are told.

3.5 Objectivity Revisited

As the IMC gives voice to those ignored or forgotten by the corporate mainstream media, it circumvents editorial gatekeeping and subverts journalistic control. "Ideally, each newly empowered audience member would become a regular content producer and a more politically involved citizen..." (Shumway, 2001, p. 12). This issues a direct challenge to the notion of objectivity, long viewed as a founding principle of modern mainstream media. Media professionals are quick to defend objectivity, believing it lends

credibility and authority to their accounts; however, they reserve it for themselves, labeling any account coming from outside their ranks as biased or “unobjective”. Indeed, the function of the dominant media system depends upon a perception of neutrality and independence to mask the corporate bias inherent in the system and the attendant vested interests of the media owners. The latter, as members of the capitalist ruling elite, typically benefit from the maintenance of the status quo. Thus the corporate mainstream media, as instruments of power, work to ensure this (Bagdikian, 2000; Hackett, 1998; Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

The notion of objectivity as central to the presentation of news grew out of the “crisis of journalism” that assailed the industry around the end of the 19th century. It coincided with a concentration in newspaper ownership and the rise of advertising. Rampant commercialism fueled “yellow journalism”, which resulted in “problems of degraded public information, manipulation of prejudice, and the agenda-setting by the web of vested interests behind the commercial press system” (McChesney & Scott, 2002, p. 7). The concept of professionalism - a response to this crisis – envisioned trained journalists who would be influenced by neither their own, nor the media owners’, biases in their reporting of the news. But Upton Sinclair, a muckraking journalist and scathing media critic of the time, was not convinced that this would address the structural bias of increasingly corporate media: “The perversion of news and the betrayal of public opinion is no haphazard and accidental thing...it has been a thing deliberately planned and systematically carried out, a science and a technique” (quoted in McChesney & Scott, p. 9). Arguably, this “science and technique” has been perfected by today’s merger happy media conglomerates: six multinational corporations control the American mass media

and in Canada, press barons such as Thomson, Black and Asper have long dominated the print media. Although most news outlets are often successful in maintaining the façade of objectivity, upon closer inspection, it is nonetheless compromised by subtle, but chronic, factors. These include over-reliance on “official” sources (which generally serve to reinforce the status quo), management influence (particularly in the case of interventionist owners such as Asper and Black) and self-censorship by journalists themselves (Winter, 1997).

Generally, the public has been willing to swallow the notion that the news media operate objectively, in the public interest. According to Winter, however, this mythology is debunked by substantial evidence that the news is largely a corporate and management product. This is a far cry from the mainstream corporate media’s perceived image as the cornerstone of democracy – its “lifesblood and oxygen” – charged with keeping the public informed. “The result is ‘media think’: group think on a vast scale which pervades the media and through which they promote narrow ideological dogmas about the world around us, including globalization, privatization and deficit hysteria” (p. xxviii). Media think is also referred to as a “common sense” perspective, a naturalized process whereby the media create a general sense of the world. This generates “a conventional wisdom, which is presented as a view of the world that is eminently reasonable, evidently the result of a long process of rational and objective evaluation by policy makers whose overriding concern is the public interest” (p. 114). Questioning this conventional wisdom is unthinkable, and challenging it, almost impossible.

Alternative media, historically, have challenged the notion of objectivity while contesting the status quo. In doing so, they confront the near-invisible power that

structures society. According to Hackett (1998), the alternative media provide examples for producing the news outside the regime of objectivity. In this way, they engage in a two-fold project of democratization:

insofar as they provide access for voices that are marginalized in the mainstream press, alternative media are promoting the democratization of the media system itself, by making it more pluralistic; and they are part of a process of democratization *through* the media” (p. 212).

From dissident origins in the 19th century labour, abolitionist and suffrage movements, to the muckraking tradition of the first decade of the 20th century, to the movement press of the 1960s, alternative media have squarely and consciously located themselves within varied and particular contexts. Commitments have ranged from coverage of underreported news to unapologetic advocacy of certain causes. Today the community and/or social justice approach of alternative media provides a counterbalance to the mainstream media’s corporate agenda. “The role of alternative media as unofficial opposition to mainstream media has been crucial to the extension of public discussion and debate about a wide range of concerns and issues,” argues Kidd (1999, p. 113). Some alternative media organizations, including Indymedia, dispense entirely with the notion of objectivity, striving instead for the more realistic and honest goals of fairness and accuracy. According to Pavis (2002), Indymedia reporters “don’t have any interest in unbiased reporting... Journalists can and should be agents for social change” (p. 3). As a network of grassroots “people’s” journalists, IMC “covers stories people in power wish to be silent about and conventional journalists therefore find it difficult to examine without being accused of being ‘unprofessional’” (McChesney quoted in IMC Seattle, n.d.). Open publishing has enabled a new style of reporting, one that turns its back on the cornerstone of what typically has been considered “real” journalism, and contests the

“official”, sanitized version of the news delivered by corporate interests. However, although open publishing distinguishes Indymedia amongst alternative media outlets, it has not been without its critics, or its share of problems, as the following discussion illustrates.

3.6 Problems with Open Publishing

Open publishing has been controversial since its inception. Hayhoe (2002) suggests this format invites “inaccurate information and conspiracy theories” and creates a haven for hate speech (p. 4). Such abuse of the newswire, in addition to commercial posts and spam attacks, led to the implementation of the first editorial controls, whereby articles are “hidden”. Today, this is a general editorial policy that most locals seem to follow. In hiding racist, commercial, spammed or duplicate articles, as well as those with technical problems, the main newswire is kept from overload. “Indymedia is a democratic newswire. We *want* to see and hear the real stories, news, and opinions from around the world. While we struggle to maintain the newswire as a completely open forum we *do* monitor it and remove posts” (IMC, n.d., “Posting”). Hidden articles remain available, in their original format, just a click away from the main page, along with any comments or revisions, and reasons for their removal. “The editing or filtering process happens *after* stories are published to the site, *not before*. Articles may be ‘hidden’ after they have been uploaded, according to the published editorial policy of the local IMC group” (IMC, n.d., “Proposal”). Even the slightest editorial intervention has met with opposition but, as Henshaw-Plath (2002b) notes, “There is nothing democratic, or really even empowering, by having articles...buried by racist and off topic crap” (p. 3). As well, in response to

increasing concern over accuracy and quality, editorial collectives at many local IMCs have developed basic guidelines for the features section of the website, focusing on spelling, formatting, and sometimes fact-checking.

The exertion of editorial control, however minimal, sparked a fiery debate between advocates of pure free speech and those who wish to preserve the social justice goals of Indymedia. Adherents of both perspectives regard themselves as protecting the integrity and original spirit of IMC. The debate erupted over a March 2002 proposal by Evan Henshaw-Plath, a founding IMC activist, to remove open publishing from the main page of the global site. Instead, the centre features column of the site would highlight stories written by local IMCs, which “has the advantage of pushing traffic out to local IMCs and reducing the power concentrated in a global page” (Henshaw-Plath, 2002b, p. 3). Open publishing would be taken off the main page, but remain accessible, by default, one link away in an effort to encourage decentralization of the network, promote local IMCs and solve some major technical problems. But many saw the proposal as a form of censorship, and in contravention of Indymedia’s mission to provide a voice to all.

Gregory Boduch added the following comment to the proposal:

... You are treading on very dangerous ground here. Are you willing to disable one of the only legitimate forums we have, to silence the masses, if only temporarily, in this current political climate? ... We [should] move toward too many opinions over too few.²⁸

Opposition to altering the original format of open publishing on Indymedia was passionate: “You have subordinated the voice of the people to an editorial board. The intent behind this is obvious. You have destroyed the principle of a free and open press

²⁸ View comments on *Proposal to reform www.indy by highlighting local IMCs* at http://internal.indymedia.org/front.php3?article_id=538.

upon which IMC was founded.”²⁹ But many IMC supporters agreed that Indymedia’s first responsibility was to promoting the social justice issues which inspired it, not to promoting free speech at any cost. According to programmer Chris Uzal, Indymedia was not “some kind of outpost of news and editorial freedom. The collective seriously needs to lose this attitude or they will lose Indy altogether... as it stands, Indy has no credibility.”³⁰

Technical difficulties arising from the sheer volume of posts to the global site threatened the sustainability of open publishing, one of the reasons behind the proposal to take it off the main page. According to the IMC tech collective, the servers and databases were becoming overloaded, and the hard drives were filling up.

We are working to maintain an archive of posts and databases, which contain huge numbers of articles which nobody looks at. Many of these articles... don’t have any substance and aren’t interesting for even archival purposes. The number of posts to www.indymedia.org has grown out of proportion to the quality or effectiveness of the site (Henshaw-Plath, 2002b, p. 5).

There have been other creative suggestions to deal with the challenges of open publishing, aside from moving it to a secondary page. One included deleting stories from the global site after a certain number of days and implementing a two-tier system where anyone can post but only logged users can moderate the newswire, encouraging greater responsibility in the end user.

If I’m in a particularly good mood for reading everyone’s insanity, I should be able to modify my settings with a ... “raw and uncut” option. If I only want to see what the community has deemed as “interesting”, “informative”, “funny” or “underrated”, then I should be allowed to filter out the crap. There’s nothing anti-

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

democratic about that. If anybody gets a hair in their ass about being hierarchical, I would argue that these posts need some kind of hierarchical attrition.³¹

Although there was much debate, and opinions polarized on the issue, in the end, Henshaw-Plath's proposal passed unanimously on April 13, 2002.

IMC Philadelphia (www.phillyimc.org) came up with its own solution. In the spirit of the free software movement, this local developed its own version of Active, incorporating code from Slash.³² According to volunteer Josh Marcus, "We hacked up Slash to support multimedia submission (image galleries/thumbnails, audio, and video) and anonymous article posting, as well as introduced a simpler moderation system to serve as a democratic, transparent editorial system" (Anon., n.d., IMC Philadelphia). The editorial process is slightly different at IMC Philadelphia, where members join the collective by creating a user account; this enables them to rate articles as part of the democratic editorial process.

Anyone at all can participate as an equal citizen of this information sharing community. We hope that we can harness a great, untapped resource – the excitement, interest, and commitment of readers – in order to enhance a useful news site that we can trust to keep us informed. The system ranks articles from poor (1) to excellent (10); the site then averages the ratings and uses the combined result to make decisions about article layout. Members are encouraged to give reasons for their rating and all ratings are made public, accountability being considered key to democracy.

Corporate media [are] rarely held accountable for editorial decisions... As an alternative, we propose this participatory editorial process, free of financial pressures and threats of censorship, in which the reasons behind editorial decisions are openly displayed and discussed (IMC Philadelphia, n.d., "What is").

³¹ View comments on *Proposal to reform www.indy* by highlighting local IMCs at http://internal.indymedia.org/front.php3?article_id=538.

³² Slash is the source code and database originally used to create Slashdot, the award-winning news discussion site. It is licensed under the GNU General Public License and is a "bonafide" free software project (<http://yass.slashcode.com/about.shtml>).

Clearly, despite its problems, open publishing has enabled IMC activists to push forward their project of participatory democracy, enacting alternatives to the status quo internally as they contest it externally.

3.7 Evolution: Proposals for Open Editing

Some suggest that quick technical fixes are not enough: open publishing must evolve to meet the demands of a growing network. The only way Indymedia's open publishing format can deal with its massive audience is through open editing, according to Arnison (2002a). Variations on a new model of open publishing that incorporate open editing have been floated. These seek to improve the functionality of the website while reflecting the current goals of Indymedia as a whole: "transparency, collaboration, inclusion and free speech" (Oja Jay, 2001, p. 1). Arnison elaborates on the concept of open editing as a potential solution to the overwhelming volume of posts, as well as to the chronic problem of the abuse of open publishing in the form of hate speech. This would allow readers to "sub-edit" other people's stories, as well as sort, rewrite, translate and highlight them. Just as open publishing automates the collection of stories from participants, open editing would automate the editing of these stories by participants. In addition, Arnison advocates user-created highlights pages, which he describes as a "mutation of weblogs." Also called a "blog", this is another Internet-based phenomenon that laid important groundwork for Indymedia. A blog is a personal website wherein the "editor" compiles lists of links to little known corners of the web and to current news items, accompanied by commentary. Often, editors with expertise might expose the

inaccuracy of particular articles, provide additional facts, or offer opinion, filtering or “pre-surfing” the web for readers. “By writing a few lines each day, weblog editors begin to redefine media as a public, participatory endeavor” (Blood, 2000, p. 2). In 1998, there were a handful of such sites; today the phenomenon has exploded, generating its own software, as well as classes in journalism schools (Mattos, 2003). Kahn and Kellner (2003) describe blogs as a “democratic and oppositional culture” with which the global media must contend, and which have caused a “revolution in journalism”. As a type of Internet-mediated “participatory journalism”, the blog reached its pinnacle, arguably, with the debut of Indymedia at the end of 1999.

A highlights page as one function of open editing would allow Indymedia readers to create webpages updated with the stories that interest them most; Indymedia would survey all the highlights pages hourly and build its front page from whatever people are highlighting at the time. Arnison (2002a) regards the concept as twofold: “Making weblogs even easier to create and use so that people can quickly use them for this kind of open editing. And gathering the links from all those weblogs onto the front pages of Indymedia” (p. 2). For him, it involves “a return to the heart of open publishing” (ibid). Another open editing proposal to create “filter” web pages would help alleviate newswire overload by sorting stories according to various themes or goals. It would also facilitate an editorial process without modifying or removing posts from the newswire, thereby avoiding “the prioritization of articles along one set of values, [which] is limiting and unnecessary” (Oja Jay, 2001, p. 2). Another suggestion includes a more sophisticated ratings system with editorial comments. All of the above suggestions

envision a more evolved open publishing process, one that builds upon the original intent of open publishing, while adapting to the reality of the massive growth of Indymedia.

Despite the problems of open publishing, and the controversy around proposed solutions, contributions to the IMC are overwhelmingly a blend of “activist dispatches, on-the-street reporting, and thoughtful analyses...” (Scatamburlo-D’Annibale & Chehade, in press, 2003, p. 6) that are true to Indymedia’s mission statement of providing “radical, accurate and passionate tellings of the truth.”³³ Supporters of open publishing suggest it is a self-correcting system, arguing that the critical evaluation skills people apply to information on the Internet help safeguard against erroneous stories or disinformation posted by agents provocateurs. “People who post the wrong thing to an open publishing website will stand out like a sore thumb to the readers, and are therefore easily skipped over, or voted down...” (Arnison, 2001a). This was illustrated in a feature posted originally on IMC Victoria in September, 2003 that detailed a “grey propaganda operation being run systematically through the international IMC network, hijacking our own open publishing tools to distribute pro-war propaganda”. According to the story, a website run by a “corporate spokesmodel” was posting its pro-war commentaries to multiple IMC sites in order to get hits to its own site.

Those anarcho-geeks that run the IMCs have built what they call an Open Publishing newswire. It reaches everywhere, it’s got street cred, and anyone can publish anything there. Even better – they are so committed to ‘Free Speech’ or some such pinko bullshit that they won’t be able to yank our stuff even when they know they’re being hosed! We can use their network to pump our message out to their audience of punk thought-criminals (IMC Victoria, 2003).

Most of the links to www.gabriellereilly.com started out as feeder stories planted systematically on the Indymedia network. However, IMC volunteers quickly ascertained

³³ This is part of the mission statement located under the banner at www.indymedia.org.

the plot and the lengthy feature story on IMC Victoria, linked from the global site, apprised all IMC users. In addition, the offender was asked to cease and desist. It remains to be seen what further action will be taken against stories originating from www.gabriellereilly.com, such as removing them to hidden pages.

3.8 Internet and Democracy: Access vs. Enclosure

3.8.1 The Digital Divide

The Internet has forever altered progressive social change work. “Activists have not only incorporated the Internet into their repertoire but also...have changed substantially what counts as activism, what counts as community, collective identity, democratic space, and political strategy” (McCaughey & Ayers, 2003, p. 1). Diebert (2000) suggests that the rise of global citizen networks, linked through the Internet, may be viewed as counter-hegemonic forces and expressions of democratic participation. But there is little consensus on the extent of the democratic possibilities offered by the Internet. In fact, academics have split into two camps: the cyberoptimists and the cyberpessimists. The technological utopians begin with the notion that democracy requires an informed, active citizenry, concluding that the Internet’s potential for virtually unlimited information will lead to increased democratization of society. The critics tend to be more skeptical, suggesting that the glut of information available a mouse click away will encourage political passivity, confusion and isolation, supplanting thoughtful discussion and active participation (Hill & Hughes, 1998). The extremity of both positions is apparent: neither can technology be treated as a neutral fix for democracy, nor as its deterministic ruination (Saco, 2002).

Nonetheless, the issue of access, or lack thereof, must be addressed. This tempers the euphoria of the cybertimists because it compromises the democratic ideals and goals of Internet-mediated social movements, as a host of scholars have noted (DeVaney, Gance & Ma, 2000; Norris, 2001; Thornton, 2001). The “digital divide” is a phenomenon that must be addressed when discussing the democratic potential of the Internet. It separates developed nations from underdeveloped nations, and stratifies Internet access by economic, racial and gender classifications.

There has always been a gap between those people and communities who can make effective use of information technology and those who cannot. Now, more than ever, unequal adoption of technology excludes many from reaping the fruits of the economy. We use the term “digital divide” to refer to this gap between those who can effectively use new information and communication tools, such as the Internet, and those who cannot (Digital Divide Network, n.d.).

Although the Internet’s relatively inexpensive technology has enabled more people to circumvent the corporate media’s stranglehold over the news and become their own journalists, less than 10 percent of the world’s population has Internet access (NUA, 2003). “Despite the incredible growth of the Internet since the early 1990s, many citizens still do not have easy access to basic IT tools, whether it's access to hardware, software, or the Internet itself” (ibid). Thus, its global potential notwithstanding, the Internet’s reach has been geographically constrained to wealthier nations, and within these nations, along class, gender and ethnic lines. Importantly, Internet access is not defined solely by availability of software, hardware and connection. “It is also a question of media literacy, computer networking skills, and funds to pay Internet specialists” (Ford & Gill, 2001). But the issue of access extends beyond *who* will be able to use the Internet to *how* people will be allowed to use it, as we shall see.

3.8.2 Corporate-State Enclosure

The democratic potential of the Internet is further diminished by the enclosure of the Internet. Until recently, cyberspace has been relatively unregulated and non-commercial, reflecting its architecture and the culture in which it was created. This hemming in has been instigated by corporations and by government (in the form of legislation) at the behest of corporate interests, and places restrictions on *how* people will access the Internet. “Today, courts and corporations are attempting to wall off portions of cyberspace. In so doing, they are destroying the Internet’s potential to foster democracy and economic growth worldwide” (Lessig, 2001, p. 1). Kidd (2002) draws an analogy between the British enclosure movement of the 15th century and the current commercialization of cyberspace. After the decline of feudalism, the new landowners – products of an emergent capitalism – forcibly fenced in commonly held lands. Lessig defines a commons as “a resource to which everyone within a relevant community has equal access. It is a resource that is not, in an important sense, ‘controlled’” (p. 2). He notes that the development of the Internet depended on a sharing of core resources – the communal tending of a virtual commons by researchers and cybervisionaries. “This commons was built into the very architecture of the original network. Its design secured a right of decentralized innovation. It was this ‘innovation commons’ that produced the diversity of creativity that the network has seen...” (p. 1). Anti-globalization theorists have taken up the concept of the commons in their search for alternatives to capitalism, particularly its modes of ownership, governance, customary practices and communications (Kidd, p. 70).

Contrary to its origins as a publicly funded, decentralized network developed by a community of researchers, the architecture of the Internet has been privatized. Much of cyberspace is now dominated by “the usual suspects, such as the dominant global media giants, [which] control traffic and exploit their content through advertising or subscriptions” (Kidd, 2002, p. 72). The corporate-state encroachment on the Internet goes against its architecture and portends a foreclosure of the innovative and democratic potential embedded there. “The promise of computer networks is threatened everywhere by concerted campaigns of disempowerment being waged by state and market forces” (Ford & Gill 2001, p. 206). Salter (2003) observes how the web is increasingly being used for the traditional broadcast-style communication – the one-to-many model of the corporate mainstream media, rather than the many-to-many model that is inherent in its architecture. Thus, rather than the users providing content, increasingly this is coming from industry and the state. “One might argue that a form of enclosure is occurring whereby ‘small-holders’ are being forced into the heavily populated, controlled and regulated areas ... rendering the Internet just another colonized mass medium...” (p. 139).

Anticipating the need to protect the rights of citizens in cyberspace, the Electronic Freedom Frontier was established in 1990. The volunteer organization challenges legislation that endangers freedom of speech and expression on the Internet, and defends “the vast wealth of digital information, innovation and technology that resides online” (Electronic Freedom Frontier [EFF], n.d.). It acknowledges the power of the Internet to facilitate communication, and the threat this poses to the status quo: “Governments and corporate interests worldwide are trying to prevent us from communicating freely

through new technologies” (EFF, n.d.). Thus, the continued colonization of the Internet by state and corporate actors presents a serious threat to the real possibility of a citizen designed and controlled worldwide communications network. McChesney (2000) suggests that the democratic potential of the Internet is fading fast, noting that the “non-profit and civil sector has been relegated to the distant margins of cyberspace; it is nowhere near the heart of operating logic of the dominant commercial sector” (p. 183). As space on the Internet becomes increasingly proprietary and as regulations concerning virtual activities become more invasive and restrictive, it becomes evident that the enclosure of the cybercommons looms as yet another barrier to access.

3.8.3 Indymediation: How IMC Works to Facilitate Access

Capitalism has clearly marked the Internet as the newest frontier in its never-ending quest for market expansion. Nonetheless, many still consider it an invaluable resource for social justice activists and progressive social movements. Kellner (2003) regards the Internet as a contested terrain, used by corporate, state and grassroots actors that range the political spectrum. While acknowledging the technological revolution that delivered the Internet is a defining characteristic of “global technocapitalism”, he suggests the forms these take “are neither fixed nor determined” (p. 1).

Although there is a real threat that the computerization of society will intensify the current inequalities in relations of class, race and gender power, there is also the possibility that a democratized and computerized public sphere might provide opportunities to overcome these injustices (p. 1).

Thus, while the Internet has been appropriated as a tool for the advancement of global capitalism, it nonetheless offers new opportunities for contestation by marginalized groups and oppositional movements.

The issue of access and the attendant limitations of the Internet have not been lost on Indymedia. Donated server space (a substantial amount from Loudeye Corp., a Seattle webcasting company, enables the network to operate in an arena where all territory is proprietary. However, it appears that the digital divide has had some impact on Indymedia, beginning with the distribution of IMC locals. Half of these are in Canada and the United States, where Internet access is high (59 percent of the population) (NUA, 2003). From its inception, there have been complaints that white, male technophiles dominated Indymedia. Some suggest that hierarchies based on class, race and gender - capitalism's triptych - have migrated to the Internet, and reestablished themselves within the IMC network. Another criticism obtains from the northern ("first world"), English-language bias of the global listservs, where volunteers from various locals collaborate on network-wide projects and develop global protocols.

To a certain extent, the inequalities that prevent access to Indymedia have affected its internal democratic project, while making its external goal of media democracy more challenging. According to Henshaw-Plath (2002b),

There are problems of classism, racism, and sexism in our groups. We all want to find a way to work towards addressing them. The reality is that making horizontal democratic institutions work when [we] have had a lifetime of acculturation in to authoritarian power dynamics is a truly difficult process (p. 2).

As Buechler (2000) observes, "movements that challenge some form of inequality inevitably sustain and recreate other forms of inequality within their ranks, including class, race, or gender relations" (p. 105). In addition to "a lifetime of acculturation"

hindering the process, the IMC network is operating without a blueprint; it is something new, something for which there is no existing model. Jeff Perlstein (2001), another founding member, observes: “We’re faced with the challenge of creating spaces that don’t mirror the existing systemic oppressions and hierarchies. But we’re of this very system and can manifest these internalized dominations despite the very best intentions” (p. 4).

IMC volunteers have gone beyond merely identifying the potential for internalizing and duplicating existing structures of power and domination, however. They have channeled this self-consciousness into numerous projects across the network that grapple with the issue of access in all its complex manifestations. In acknowledgement of the fact that many people do not have Internet access, many local IMCs have launched projects in other media, including print, radio and television broadcasts and video documentaries. For example, the global-imc print team is currently working to get a publication off the ground. “The focus will be on providing a paper that is both easy to print and distribute as a means of communicating news, features and images to those without access to or knowledge of Indymedia on the Internet” (IMC, 2003, “Restarting”). Print projects are difficult to implement, as most of the volunteer time is devoted to keeping locals online, and they have met with varying success. Some, like IMC-Vancouver’s *IndyOffline*, have apparently been dropped. In the case of IMC Kitchener-Waterloo, activists forsook Indymedia to concentrate on the development of a new print publication, *The Blind Spot*. That IMC collective dissolved in a merger with another activist network to continue developing the paper, while maintaining an alliance with the

umbrella IMC Ontario. Publications from other IMCs, like New York City's *Independent* and *Offline*, from Indymedia UK, appear to be thriving.

To address another aspect of access – that of multimedia literacy – some locals have created media centres to offer media education and access within their communities. Others offer multimedia training workshops, and make equipment available for use by members of the local collective. Connecting people from less privileged countries with the skills and hardware necessary to access the Internet has been the focus of the Tech Solidarity Project. It was conceived to deal with consistent requests from IMC activists in the global South for computer and media making equipment, and sent its first shipment of computers to Quito, Ecuador.

Even though the Internet and computers are reshaping the world they are only doing it for those who have access to the equipment ... Indymedia has prided itself as a network which takes the tools of media and communications and puts them in the hands of people working for social change. For this mission to become a reality we need equipment (IMC, 2002, "Sending").

The Tech Solidarity Project works with the Alameda County Computer Recycling Center (www.accrc.org), which takes used computers from Silicon Valley and refurbishes them for non-profits, the poor, and educational institutions around the world. IMC volunteers install a Spanish language version of the free software operating system, Linux, and organize workshops to instruct the activists receiving the computers on basic use. There is also an IMC page, entitled Tech Help and Tutorials, which provides a range of technical how-to information.³⁴

Clearly, Indymedia is a work in process. But it is a process wherein participants are aware of potential obstructions and limitations to their goals of global justice and

³⁴ See http://docs.indymedia.org/view/Global/TechTutorials#Tech_Help_and_Tutorials for more information.

participatory democracy. They make a conscious (and documented) attempt to address the problems they see as plaguing society, such as hierarchies of power, from which stem numerous social ills, such as classism, racism, sexism and poverty, in their internal structure. The efforts of participants to sustain their new model of democratic, participatory, interactive, non-hierarchical communication media are thus fraught with difficulty. But in mediating this difficulty, they are forging a path whereby everyone has access to Indymedia, and to the instruments of media making. "This project thinks big and is attempting to not only solve the needs of a single organization but to build capacity across the breadth of the movement for a just society" (IMC, 2002).

Chapter Four: Making the Case: Indymedia as a Social Movement

There is a clear gap between current social movement theory and the new global justice movements, of which Indymedia is a part, as the preceding chapters illustrate. A rethinking of social movement theory in light of the influence of the Internet is therefore required (Langman & Morris, 2002). The question remains, however: is Indymedia a social movement? Or is it, as most scholars have postulated, simply an extension of the Anti-Corporate Globalization Movement, a tool of the new social justice activists? Tarrow (1998) defines social movements as “collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents and authorities” (p. 4). Under this broad and generally accepted definition, Indymedia easily qualifies as a social movement, as the detailed history of IMC in Chapter Three demonstrates. Indymedia’s collective challenge – to liberate the news from the clutches of globalized monopoly capitalism, to give a voice to the voiceless, and to empower the powerless through information – is based on a common goal of global social justice. Social solidarities of volunteers are born in mutual concern and shared activism at the local level – for example, media activists realizing the need for an alternative to the mainstream corporate news in their communities. An understanding that local problems are shared by communities throughout the world unites the various IMCs across international boundaries, and this is manifest in the global website. Four years after its birth in late 1999, Indymedia continues to sustain its virtual alternative media making project. Not only has it maintained its existence in a world hostile to its method and message, it is thriving, and there are currently 120 nodes affiliated with the global

network. Since its inception, Indymedia has come in conflict with “elites, opponents and authorities” with each new post to the newswire. The very fact of open publishing contests the power given to the corporate mainstream media by the ruling elite. Further, the content of the stories on IMC issues a direct challenge to the status quo, as supported and perpetuated by the ruling capitalist class and aided by the mainstream corporate media. More concretely, Indymedia volunteers have come into direct conflict with authorities during police raids of their offices and protest convergence centres. In fact, violence by the state against members of the global justice movements seems to be increasing in frequency and viciousness.³⁵

According to Melucci (1996), a social movement does not simply express a particular conflict; it pushes that conflict beyond what is acceptable to the system of social relationships wherein the action is played out. “In other words, it breaks the rules of the game, it sets its own non-negotiable objectives, it challenges the legitimacy of power...” (p. 30). Indymedia is not merely the reflection of a general dissatisfaction with the corporate news media. Certainly, dissatisfaction with corporate-controlled news is a motivating factor, but it is encompassed within the broader goal of self-representation. In this way IMC encourages people to become journalists, “reporting on events from his or her own perspective rather than being forced to rely on the narrow range of views

³⁵ On April 21, 2001, the FBI ordered Seattle IMC to submit computer logs in connection with the anti-FTAA protests in Quebec City. According to a Seattle IMC press release, “this kind of fishing expedition is another in a long line of overbroad and onerous attempts to chill political speech and activism... This order to IMC ... is a threat to free speech, free association, and privacy.” On July 22, 2001, Italian police stormed the IMC convergence centre in Genoa, reportedly trashing and confiscating computers and other media equipment. At the same time, a raid at a school being used as a “safe space” by anti-corporate globalization activists across the street resulted in extreme police brutality. This came after police shot and killed activist Carlo Giuliani during the Genoa protest against the G8. See <http://lists.indymedia.org/mailman/private/imc-minneapolis-tc/2001-April/000902.html>, <http://italy.indymedia.org/news/2001/11/13753.php> and <http://italy.indymedia.org/news/2003/05/277642.php> respectively.

presented by corporate-owned mainstream media sources.”³⁶ This latter notion is as novel as it is radical, and contradicts the capitalist system of control that regulates the flow of information and, in many documented cases, restricts it (Chomsky 1989, 2002; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; McChesney, 2000). By enabling people to speak for themselves, Indymedia is thumbing its nose at power, openly challenging the authority of the ruling elite and the authenticity of its medium of normative persuasion, the mainstream corporate news media.

More than breaking the rules, Indymedia is writing a new rulebook, wherein the ideals of justice, equality and participatory democracy take precedence. According to its mission statement, IMC seeks

to further the self-determination of people under-represented in media production and content, and to illuminate and analyze local and global issues that impact ecosystems, communities and individuals ... 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.³⁷

It is evident that Indymedia falls within the parameters established for contentious collective action culminating in a social movement. However, there are aspects of IMC that are not accounted for in the basic definition. As discussed in Chapter Three, the Internet is the distinguishing feature of Indymedia and while scholars have just begun examining internetworked social movements, IMC remains distinct even among these. Enabled by the Internet, Indymedia is a hybrid movement, with its simultaneous focus on the local and the global; its virtual and physical manifestations; and its dual nature as both a movement, and an alternative news medium. As such, it is both a radical media movement, and the facilitator of other movements. “Indymedia’s identity is always going

³⁶ See <http://lists.indymedia.org/mailman/private/imc-minneapolis-tc/2001-April/000902.html>.

³⁷ Ibid.

to be in relationship to other social movements because we are a communication tool, and communication is about connecting things.”³⁸ This positions Indymedia uniquely in the history of contentious collective action, and suggests the need for a new theory. Such a theory will need to take a transformative, rather than reformative, approach, acknowledging the structural focus on the new global justice movements. It will encompass a non-reductionist interpretation of Marxism that offers a class-based analysis compatible with an identity-based exploitation in the context of an overarching socio-political and economic framework.

4.1 Hybridity

The emphasis of the *new new* social movements on the local and the global is singular to the history of contentious collective action. According to Sheri Herndon, one of the founders of IMC Seattle, Indymedia is a good example of “globalization from below”.³⁹ As discussed earlier, this phrase refers to grassroots organizing at the local level that is internationally linked, attempting to transform the world through global solidarity.

What is the relationship of the part to the whole, the node to the network, the cell to the organism? They are integrally related, yet remain unique; they are symbiotic, yet function to their own rhythms and needs; there is self-determination at all levels, local to global, yet there is always a link (Herndon quoted in Nogueira, 2001, p. 73).

The decentralization of the global network is a foundational structural component of Indymedia, as Chapter Three illustrates. In the very early days, before there was an

³⁸ Personal interview with Sheri Herndon conducted July 7, 2003.

³⁹ Ibid.

official process to start an IMC, new nodes would often crop up without receiving approval from anyone. Evan Henshaw-Plath, a co-founder of Boston IMC, among several other locals, recounts how he helped set up the second Independent Media Center with a group of activists organizing around BioDevastation 2000. "I don't think we told anybody in Seattle that we were starting an Indymedia Center in Boston; we just did it. That's how most IMCs have gotten started. They've just done it – created their own Indymedia – and then later they sometimes got in touch with the network."⁴⁰ Indymedia's initial efforts were devoted to "summit hopping" – setting up IMCs in cities that were the target of large protests. Coverage tended to be global in scope, and these protest-specific IMCs seemed to have little connection to the host community. Often these locals (including Windsor, Montreal and Prague) were shut down immediately following the action, to be revived by local media activists later on. However, as Herndon observes, increasingly, "IMCs are forming that have nothing to do with protests or some event in their cities. They're committed to covering their local issues".⁴¹ Thus, the concept of Indymedia has evolved from a one-off, event-based phenomenon to an ongoing project in radical media activism, dedicated to the coverage of local social justice issues, often placed in a global context. According to Perlstein (2001, p. 2), "the Zapatistas provided a model for this mode of operation: affirm local struggles while simultaneously inviting an exploration of larger networks of struggle".

But a tension between the global and the local arose with the creation of the global site in 2000. Since then, Indymedia activists have engaged in a debate over how to establish various processes to guide the network. Using an ad-hoc consensus model, few

⁴⁰ Personal interview with Evan Henshaw-Plath, conducted July 28, 2003.

⁴¹ Personal interview with Sheri Herndon, conducted July 7, 2003.

global decisions have been made, with locals having yet to agree on a formal mode of decision making at the network level. Certain process documents have been approved, including the Principles of Unity and New Membership Criteria. As well, a proposal to revamp the main page of the global site in order to highlight stories from local IMCs passed unanimously. But consensus is hard to achieve at the network level, in part due to class, gender and language biases, and the lack of participation from all locals. Generally, however, the inability to agree to formal processes that would govern all the nodes in the global network seems to indicate the fierce independence of the local IMCs, whose members appear loathe to give up any of their autonomy. Clearly, one of Indymedia's important tasks is "bringing global issues down to the local level" (Gaba, p. 1, 2002).

However, as Gaba further notes,

One of Indymedia's greatest challenges is striking a sustainable balance between the concepts of 'decentralized' and 'networked' – having enough network-wide organization to coordinate effectively, while maintaining a flexible, dynamic structure that will continue to support creative impulses and impromptu collaborations (p. 5).

Another indication of Indymedia's hybrid nature is in its manifestations as both a virtual and physical movement. Scatamburlo-D'Annibale and Chehade (in press, 2003) suggest that Indymedia displays characteristics of conventional social movements, "as well as traits that are particular to its formation and development in virtual space" (p. 9). As we have seen, for IMC, "the Internet is more than just a communication medium, it becomes...an organizational principle" (Bennett, in press, 2003, p. 32). But, while the Internet provides a structural foundation, virtually linking a global network of IMCs in cyberspace, Indymedia is at the same time grounded in the "real". That is, as well as maintaining an online presence, it manifests itself physically. For example, some IMCs

have office spaces, while many others are working toward this goal. In addition to communicating via the Internet, either through email list serves or Internet Relay Chat, most Indymedia volunteers meet face-to-face on a regular basis to discuss the business of running their local. Finally, while organization and mobilization for coverage of major protests occur through the Internet, IMC volunteers converge in person, and conduct a large part of their activism on the street. As discussed in Chapter Three, the physical component of IMC lends crucial balance to a movement launched in cyberspace.

“Physical and virtual spaces for interaction, dialogue and transformation are the essential forums where a vital, vibrant, and true democracy can take place” (Perlstein, 2001, p. 1).

Indymedia’s dual role as a member of the radical alternative media, and as a radical media movement also supports the case for IMC as a hybrid movement. Downing (2001) defines radical alternative media as “relatively free from the agenda of the powers that be and sometimes in opposition to one or more elements in that agenda” (p. 8). In this role, IMC produces content, rarely found in the mainstream corporate media, which contests the logic of global capitalism and critiques the status quo from an environmental, social justice and human rights perspective. On a given day, stories on the global site might include a feature on CIA efforts to assassinate the president of Venezuela; a critical story about the Central American Free Trade Agreement; a report detailing problems in post-war Iraq; and an article on worker exploitation at the US-Mexican border. This tends to be information that corporations and their supporters in government would rather keep out of the media spotlight, as it is unflattering to the ruling capitalist regime. As Winter (1997) observes, “the news media today legitimize a fundamentally undemocratic system. Instead of keeping the public informed, they manufacture public consent for policies

which favour their owners: the corporate elite” (p. xxvii). At other times, stories that appear on Indymedia can generate broader mainstream media coverage, and spur positive action or investigation by authorities.

Indymedia is more than a member of the radical alternative media, however. “The IMC project has been informed by the belief that a media project needs to be more than a site for creating and distributing progressive content” (Perlstein, 2001, p. 1). It is, in itself, a radical media movement. The network’s sheer size (there has been a new IMC every 11 days since its inception in 1999); its tenacity (four years on, it continues to thrive, evolving to meet new challenges); and its global reach (there are now 120 locals spanning every continent) are initial indicators of its movement status. There are other ways Indymedia distinguishes itself from online publications dedicated to progressive ideas and alternative perspectives, however. Unlike Znet (www.znet.org), FAIR (www.fair.org) or Common Dreams (www.commondreams.org), for example, Indymedia organizes activists locally around its global project, linking activism directly to the needs of communities while reflecting these needs as universal concerns. While the Internet serves as IMC’s structural foundation, as discussed earlier, it does not exist only in cyberspace, like many activist groups and publications. Rather, it manifests itself physically – in on-the-street reporting; in print publications; in offices spaces; and in the various meetings of IMC volunteers.

Indymedia further differentiates itself in the world of Internet-based alternative media projects with its emphasis on decentralization and use of consensus as a guide for decision-making. This mode of organization is probably the most radical aspect of the movement. Since the beginning, “there’s 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” (Perlstein, 2001, p 2). The focus on participatory democracy as part of the internal process of Indymedia, as well as the external goal, is another sign of its status as a radical media movement. However, this begs the question: Is IMC simply a part of the movement to democratize the media? Is it an appendix of the Anti-Corporatization Movement? Or does it retain its individuality as its own movement, independent of other movements with whom it may share similar objectives and philosophies?

4.2 Indypendence

Indymedia’s challenge to the systemic oppressions and hierarchies within the corporate media, and society in general, is one that is shared by other movements, such as the Anti-Corporate Globalization Movement (ACGM) and the media democracy movement. Many scholars have considered the IMC phenomenon a part of these collective actions and have thus overlooked the characteristics that demark Indymedia as a social movement in its own right. Halleck (2002) asserts: “IMCs evolved within the larger antiglobalization movement and are not external to, but integrally part of, this movement” (p. 419). In the case of the ACGM, Indymedia was clearly created as a tool for activists to help further the movement. At the Battle in Seattle, and subsequent ACGM protests, Indymedia helped mobilize the demonstrators, and then chronicled the action and issues from their perspectives – quite a novel approach. Heeding the call of the Zapatistas to “become the media”, IMC volunteers took the notion of advocacy

journalism a step further; in creating an organizational framework to promote the Anti-Corporate Globalization Movement, they became their own movement. Although Indymedia was initially tied to the ACGM, and indeed acted as a conduit for it, it has now evolved into a separate entity, with an independent organizational structure, its own mandate, and unique objectives. "While Indymedia is not a conscious mouthpiece of any particular point of view, many Indymedia organizers and people who post to the Indymedia newswires are supporters of the 'anti-globalization' (alternative globalization, anti-corporatization) movement" (IMC, n.d., "Frequently Asked"). IMC has moved beyond its early role as a protest-specific medium for reporting on demonstration actions (although this is still an important component of its coverage), to embrace various issues of local and global social justice. While it continues to facilitate other movements (for example, the current peace movement), Indymedia has clearly developed an identity as a social movement in and of itself (Scatamburlo-D'Annibale & Chehade, in press, 2003).

Albert (2001) calls Indymedia "an amazing and glorious outgrowth of the anti-globalization project", and suggests it is ripe for its own agenda, focused specifically on activism targeting the mainstream media (p. 2). Arguably, this has already occurred with stories that criticize the media mergers and monopolies, as well as mainstream media's corporatized coverage of various events and issues appearing regularly on Indymedia. A hot topic of media criticism in early 2003 was US corporate media's biased coverage of the war in Iraq. This is not only reserved for other media, however: Indymedia's journalism is habitually the focus of critique, through the "comment" function, which encourages readers to be critical consumers of the news, and forces participants to continually reevaluate their work. As we have seen, Indymedia's challenge to the

mainstream corporate media is twofold, evident in its internal structure, which enables anyone with Internet access to become a journalist, and in the content it produces.

Because of IMC's media activism it is considered a component of the broader media democracy movement, which challenges the mainstream corporate media from within and without. According to Hackett (2000), "the struggle to democratize the communication media is arguably one of the most important" (p. 1) of all contemporary popular struggles. He suggests the media democracy movement is characterized by "efforts to change media messages, practices, institutions and contexts... in a direction which enhances democratic values and subjectivity, as well as equal participation in society decision making" (p. 5). Such principles and goals are fundamental to Indymedia's organization and activism and the IMC is obviously grounded within the media democracy movement (Scatamburlo-D'Annibale & Chehade, in press, 2003).

According to IMC founding member Sheri Herndon,

Indymedia is creating an alternative. As a whole, it is not necessarily focused... on media reform... We could have a significant impact on the media reform effort if we made it more of a focus. We don't... I would argue that in the broadest sense of the term, Indymedia is part of media democracy because it is creating an alternative... In a way, we should be allied with that effort, recognizing we might have different tactics and long term strategies. But we have similar long term goals: we want to own the media that actually legally belongs to the people.⁴²

However, it is also clear that Indymedia radically diverges from other groups working within this movement in that it dispenses *entirely* with conventional approaches to media making and reform. In a world where six major corporations dominate Western mass media, and thus generally control the planetary flow of information, attempts to democratize the mainstream corporate media, or compete with an alternative model, can seem futile [Bagdikian, 2000]. Herndon discusses Indymedia's response to the media

merger frenzy: "It isn't so much resisting the corporate media at all; that's not our model. Our model is to bypass it."⁴³

IMC volunteers, therefore, seek no reform of the dominant media system at all; instead, they have created their own system, one that reflects their values, goals and philosophies. "Rather than challenging or infiltrating the mainstream [corporate media], the objective of Indymedia is to create a system outside of the dominant socio-political culture..." (Halleck, 2002, p. 426). To this end, IMC reporters emphatically renounce conventional journalism's cherished notion of objectivity, upon which the credibility and authority of the corporate mainstream media depend. They "claim no pretence of value-neutrality and objectivity and instead seek to expose such 'professional' codes as ideological covers for the biased coverage offered by the corporate media" (Scatamburlo-D'Annibale & Chehade, in press, 2003, p. 7). The crucial difference between Indymedia and the dominant media system it opposes is the fact that IMC reporters readily admit their biases. The corporate media, on the other hand, invoke the myth of objectivity to hide their profit-inspired motives. According to IMC supporters, "the fact that Indymedia wears its bias on its sleeve... makes the organization a more credible news source" (Hayhoe, 2002, p. 5).

Indymedia has thus encouraged a cross-fertilization amongst anti-corporate globalization activists, media reformers and independent journalists, making the line between activism and journalism increasingly fuzzy (Messman, 2001). Indeed, as Klein (2001) notes, "IMC represents the merger of media and activism: an organization that doesn't only cover the actions on the street but spreads the very information that helps

⁴² Personal interview with Sheri Herndon, July 7, 2003.

⁴³ Personal interview with Sheri Herndon conducted July 7, 2003.

draw thousands to the streets in the first place” (IMC, “Quotes”). In this way, Indymedia reporters may be regarded not as media reformers in the tradition of the media democracy movement, but as activist-journalists (Downing, 2001; Kidd, 2002) who are agents for social change (Messman, 2001; Pavis, 2002). Indymedia distinguishes itself from the media democracy movement, as well as the overall trajectory of contentious collective action, in that it is at once a cause, and an effect, of social justice activism. Born of the ACGM, it now exists independently; at the same time, it facilitates the activism of other social movements. Thus, it acts as both a medium that enables information flow and exchange via the Internet, and as a radical media movement in its own right. The notion of the activist-journalist is critical to this distinction because, as key actors, IMC reporters are mobilizing to consciously affect two outcomes: a change in the political structure of society (in solidarity with the ACGM); and a change in the way society’s media system is structured (by creating a radical alternative). So while Indymedia has roots in, and necessarily remains associated with the media democracy movement, its unique and separate identity is evident.

4.3 Theorizing Indymedia

As the review of the current literature in Chapter Two suggests, there are limitations in contemporary social movement theory that prevent it from adequately accounting for the new global justice movements, and thus can neither appropriately classify nor fully comprehend Indymedia. Some scholars have begun to flesh out these limitations. For example, Fitzgerald and Rodgers (2000) argue that the reform-oriented bias of existing theoretical models – particularly resource mobilization theory – is

inadequate to theorize more radical social movement organizations. They thus propose a new, transformative model that is helpful for understanding the *new* new social movements. The focus on identity in new social movement theory is problematic for Phillion (1998), who posits a return to Marxist class analysis, albeit a more inclusive, nonreductionist one. This helps to conceptualize the notion of identity within the new global justice movements as it is related to economic inequality fostered by global capitalism. Fraser (1997) also questions the shift from redistribution to recognition, proposing a critical theory that embraces both, and ultimately rejecting affirmative remedies for social injustice in favour of transformative ones. Thus, a new global identity arises out of what Starr (2001) (borrowing from Marx) calls a “unity of many determinations”, marking the advent of new, structurally focused movements that encompass notions of identity and culture in their organizing (p. 158). Buechler (2000) also takes up the theme of a global identity, but his formulation of the Anti-Corporate Globalization Movement posits a fusion of structural and cultural theoretical approaches that is problematic. Typical of post-Marxist accounts, he reduces class to just another form of oppression, making it a subjective experience, rather than an objective condition wherein oppression may be multiple and intersecting, but not its causes.

4.3.1 From Reformation to Transformation

Precisely because social movement theory proved inadequate to fully explicate the more radical elements of the social movement sector, Fitzgerald and Rodgers (2000) developed their own model, which seeks understanding from the perspective of activists. They founded their construction of this new model on a critique of the dominant

theoretical paradigm that regards social movement organizations as reform oriented, with a bias “that views incorporation into the current political/economic system as the desired goal... [and] bureaucratization and institutionalization as necessary and inevitable” (p. 574). Although the argument here is for Indymedia as a social movement, Fitzgerald and Rodgers’ analysis of radical social movement organizations (RSMOs) easily applies to IMC. Like RSMOs, Indymedia criticizes and rejects outright the “current political/economic system”, resisting “bureaucratization and institutionalization”. RSMOs and Indymedia are structurally nonhierarchical, with progressive social change dependent upon the efforts of many ordinary people, and not one great leader. “In this way, social change does not need to wait for a convergence of special opportunities and/or selected people; the opportunity is always there when any group is willing to organize and effect change” (p. 579). As well, both are nonbureaucratic by design, and attempt to foster an egalitarian structure. With Indymedia, internal democratic practices reflect larger goals of democratic independent media and global social justice. Thus, as with RSMOs, “the desired social changes are enacted within the organization as well as through direct action” (p. 580). Membership is not considered a key to their success or strength, although Indymedia’s growth has continued unabated since its inception.

The ideology of radical social movement organizations is characterized by skepticism of the ability to achieve meaningful change through the existing power structure. Comments one activist in the Anti-Corporate Globalization Movement: “We truly don’t want a seat at the table to ‘reform’ trade rules, because capitalism only plays by the rules if it wrote those rules in the first place” (Cockburn, St. Clair & Seula, 2000). The split between reform and revolution is a problem that has plagued movements

seeking social transformation for two centuries (Callinicos, 2003). The lack of faith in reformism, which may be found within Indymedia, derives from a radical emancipatory ideology, one that seeks to create something new, or at least different. Fitzgerald and Rodgers (2000) suggest this radical perspective can influence the direction of action, noting that “because the emphases on structural changes are interwoven into the very internal structure, ideology and strategies of the RSMOs, they can create a practical example of their larger scale emancipatory goals” (p. 581). Radical social movement organizations reject hierarchical structure and capitalist ideology, and in the process are discredited within the larger power structure. Critically, as with Indymedia, they seek neither approval nor validation from this structure, disregarding the corporate mainstream press completely. Recall Herndon’s words: “Our model is to bypass it.”⁴⁴

Communication is perhaps the most important part of this model in the task of conceptualizing Indymedia as a social movement. According to Fitzgerald and Rodgers (2000), RSMOs’ “precarious relationship with the mainstream media in turn creates a need to build alternative means of communication” (p. 585). This notion throws into question the theoretical concept of framing as described in Chapter Two. Rather than packaging their movements’ issues and goals in a way that is (hopefully) palatable to the media, and relying on professional journalists to present their story, the authors suggests that activists build their own news source. In this way, there is no dilution of ideas or intent. However, the ability to reach new audiences remains potentially problematic. Indeed, it was activists’ fear that their concerns would not be adequately represented in the corporate mainstream press that fueled the idea for an alternative news source during 1999’s WTO Ministerial meeting in Seattle. But Indymedia need not have worried about

⁴⁴ Personal interview with Sheri Herndon, conducted July 7, 2003.

preaching only to the converted: its debut generated 1.5 million hits during the course of the WTO protests, and the network has been used ever since as a source by mainstream corporate news outlets.⁴⁵ But forces are at work to counteract Indymedia's popularity. For example, IMCs routinely suffer harassment and repression from the state (Downing, 2001; Kidd, 2002, Scatamburlo-D'Annibale & Chehade, in press, 2003), and discrimination from corporate sources, such as IMC's recent removal as a source from Google's news service.⁴⁶ Not surprisingly, "organizations that openly promote antiestablishment values and practices become the objects of study, surveillance, and attack" (Fitzgerald & Rodgers, p. 586). This often contributes to the short lifespans of many radical movements and leads to a general assessment of failure by academics. Much of the previous social movement theory is concerned with traditional measures of success, determined in part by their impact on quantifiable social change. Fitzgerald and Rodgers, however, propose that success be assessed contextually, and from the perspective of the participants.

4.3.2 Reviving Marx

In addition to an emphasis on reform in recent social movement theory, there is also a focus on identity that has proved itself misplaced when searching for a model to explicate the new global justice movements. With the emergence of new social

⁴⁵ During the WTO protests in Seattle, 1999, Indymedia was the first to report that the police were using rubber bullets - something police had denied - forcing mainstream media outlets to correct their story. At the 2000 Republican National Convention in Philadelphia, IMC videographers exposed police violence against demonstrators, contradicting mainstream media reports of violent protesters. In 2000, at the G8 protests in Genoa, 2000, Indymedia broke the story on extreme police violence and their fabrication of evidence against activists, later "authenticated" by the mainstream press.

⁴⁶ See <http://www.ucimc.org/feature/display/11786/index.php>, http://argentina.indymedia.org/news/2003/04/96061_comment.php#960>>%20>92, and <http://www.metafilter.com/mefi/25872> respectively.

movements (NSMs) in the 1960s and 1970s, the concept of identity based on race, gender, sexual orientation or disability, seemed to replace that of class as the central focus of contentious collective action, casting doubt on classic Marxist analysis of social turmoil. Callinicos (2003) defines identity politics as “the belief that possession of a particular identity had replaced all other bases of collective action...” (p. 113). Thus, in much contemporary scholarly work, particularly new social movement theory, analyses of the political economic structure have not been given priority. But, as Scatamburlo-D’Annibale and McLaren (in press, 2004) observe, “the failure to recognize capitalism as a fundamental determinant of social oppression and the tendency to delink struggles against racism, sexism and the like from the international division of labour, results in a facile culturalism and a toothless liberal pluralism” (in press, p. 24).

Recent scholarship has taken issue with the post-Marxist approach to social movement theory, striving to demonstrate how capitalism has become an overarching totality that determines, increasingly, social position. Phillion (1998) offers an alternative conceptual framework based on the language of class in an effort to mediate between class and identity. He finds in “unfettered global capitalism” and the resulting class polarization compelling reasons for a class-based analysis of social movements, beginning with a revival of the notion of working class agency. In Phillion’s account, social movements arise in response to capitalism’s “self-destructive appropriation and use of labour-power, space and external nature or environment...intrinsically challenging capital’s capacity to be flexible” (p. 89). He suggests that there is an increasing transformation of new social movements into class-based movements, pointing out that working class, poor, ethnic and racial minorities and women – typically constituencies of

NSMs – are often the most oppressed under capitalism. Starr (2001) also takes up a similar theme, noting that the new global justice movements have created a multi-class alliance, working to “expand the meaning of class to incorporate a wider framework of dispossession” (p. 164). Phillion reminds that Marxist analysis, while insisting on class primacy, always made room for noneconomic struggles that fought the logic of capital and, therefore, the concerns of new social movements are easily embraced.

[B]y employing a nonreductionist Marxist class analysis that theorizes the gamut of political/economic/cultural conditions, external and internal, that undergird the existence of capitalist exploitation, new social movements put themselves in a better position to challenge the very noneconomic forms of oppression/alienation that [new social movement theory] contends Marxist class analysis fails to problematize” (Phillion, p. 100).

Marxism clearly remains useful in searching for an holistic model to explicate the new global justice movements, and their overt concern with capitalist exploitation gone global.

In theorizing Indymedia, therefore, it is important to include an analysis of class. As Callinicos (2003) notes, “The movement against corporate globalization is more than anything else a response to the persistence and indeed growth of structural inequalities at both global and national levels” (p. 95). What is unique about the anti-corporate movement, of which Indymedia is a part, is its explicit naming of a common enemy: global capitalism (Starr, 2001). “All over the globe there are large anti-capitalist movements afoot and their explicit rallying cries challenge the oppressive system of capitalism in its current ‘global’ and imperial forms” (Scatamburlo-D’Annibale & McLaren, in press, 2004, p. 26). This is not to discredit the role identity necessarily plays in organization and mobilization; however, it is subordinate to the role of the economic

structure, which provides the backdrop for anti-corporate activism. Employing a class-based analysis need not “threaten the anti-capitalist movement’s rightly prized diversity. It does not imply an acceptance of the moral priority of workers’ claims over those of other groups oppressed by capital” (Callinicos, p. 98). Rather, it acknowledges the unique position of the working class to derail the functioning of capitalism, reorganize production and redirect economic life. Ultimately, the various social justice struggles that characterize IMC’s reportage contest an increasingly universal economic regime that is oppressive and destructive. Issues commonly covered by Indymedia, such as land reform, labour, human, civil and environmental rights and the right to self-determination, are grounded in a general critique of “unfettered global capitalism”.

What draws many of these activists to Indymedia? Perhaps people who protest the power multinational corporations, faceless international financial institutions and inaccessible governments have over their lives found encouragement in Indymedia’s news wire, which encourages them to present their own account of what is happening in the world (IMC, n.d., “Frequently Asked”).

Thus, many of the activists who start up local IMCs, particularly in the global South, are motivated by the injustices rooted in the economic policies promoted by such supranational instruments of capitalism as the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and international treaties like the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade.

4.3.3 Redistribution vs. Recognition?

The shift from class to identity, or redistribution to recognition, marked by the advent of new social movements is also problematic for Fraser (1997), who notes “group identity supplants class interest as the chief medium of political mobilization” (p. 11).

Her response is to present a critical theory that synthesizes the most transformative aspects of both approaches. She suggests that the various axes of injustice – race, gender, sexual orientation and class – intersect, affecting multiple interests and identities. Writing before the advent of the Anti-Corporate Globalization Movement, she presents two understandings of injustice. The first is socioeconomic, based in the political-economic structure of society, and the second is cultural, which is rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation and communication. Although the two are analytically distinct, the boundary between the two often blurs in practice. “Cultural norms that are unfairly biased against some are institutionalized in the state and the economy; meanwhile, economic disadvantage impedes equal participation in the making of culture, in public spheres and in everyday life” (p. 15).

It is Fraser’s assertion that socioeconomic maldistribution *and* cultural misrecognition may be experienced simultaneously, and thus both may be responsible for inspiring contentious collective action, that is revealing. This formulation may not be the most apt for the ACGM and Indymedia, who have not articulated cultural recognition as a goal in and of itself. However, there are doubtless struggles within, and reflected by, these movements that also deal with issues of recognition and representation. Fraser suggests that for people who experience both kinds of injustice, remedies of redistribution and recognition are required. This need not be problematic for a structural critique, which suggests that the economic system and one’s position in it establish the framework within which other forms of oppression may be experienced. “The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life” (Marx quoted in Scatamburlo-D’Annibale & McLaren, in press, 2004).

A class analysis thus explicates the structural determinants of race, gender and class oppression. Fraser is clear that any solution must be transformative – that is, “aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework” (p. 23). Like Fitzgerald and Rodgers (2000), Fraser concludes that it is only through transforming the structure of society that progressive social change will be affected.

This is in line with Indymedia’s goal of creating an entirely new media system wherein people have access to and control over the news that is important to them, in contrast to efforts of the media democracy movement, for example, that seek to “fix” the current system. Indymedia addresses issues of redistribution stemming from the abuses of global capitalism that inherently acknowledge issues of recognition. For example, IMC’s coverage of the 2003 World Trade Organization rounds in Cancun, Mexico focused on the deleterious effects of globalization, such as mass privatization, unrestricted access for multinationals and drastic public-sector cutbacks. Indymedia critiques of the WTO’s agenda centred around related trade and investment treaties that would reinforce a global regime of liberalization, privatization and deregulation, while giving more control to transnational corporations and weakening governments’ ability to provide public services for their citizens, control or protect natural resources, and set health, safety and environmental standards that contradict corporate interests.

Certainly, these are issues of redistribution. However, their effects on local cultures are undeniable. One Korean farmer described how the “waves” of globalization “destroy our lovely rural communities” in an account posted on IMC Cancun.⁴⁷ Lee

⁴⁷ All quotes from Lee Kyung-Hae may be found at <http://cancun.mediosindependientes.org/newswire/display/419/index.php>.

Kyung-Hae detailed the destruction of traditional farming practices and the identity of the farmer, as well as the ensuing devastation of rural life wrought by the corporate globalization of agriculture.

Those farmers who gave up earlier his farming went to urban slum. The others who had tried to escape from the vicious cycle had to meet bankruptcy with accumulated debts mostly... Once I run to a house where a farmer abandoned his life by drinking a toxic chemical because of his uncontrollable debts. I also could do nothing but hearing the howling of his wife.

Lee Kyung-Hae fingered the WTO, and its “false logic of neo-liberalism”, as the cause of these problems. “Uncontrolled multinational corporations and a small number of big WTO official members are leading an undesirable globalization of inhumane, environmentally degrading, farmer-killing and undemocratic policies.” He joined the massive anti-WTO demonstrations in Cancun, where, in a dramatic protest caught on video by Indymedia, he committed suicide.⁴⁸

Typically, the policies of such supranational regulatory bodies affect the poorest, most underprivileged segment of the world’s population, and thus issues of redistribution and recognition are intertwined. Klein (2003) calls the brutal economic model advanced by the World Trade Organization a form of war, waged against those whose identities do not conform to the Western economic model.

War because privatization and deregulation kill – by pushing up prices on necessities like water and medicines and pushing down prices on raw commodities like coffee, making small farms unsustainable. War because those who resist and “refuse to disappear,” as the Zapatistas say, are routinely arrested, beaten and even killed. War because when this kind of low-intensity repression fails to clear the path to corporate liberation, the real wars begin

In a bold and surprising move, the developing countries participating in the WTO meeting walked out of talks in a united bloc, refusing to capitulate to the stringent

⁴⁸ See <http://cancun.mediosindependientes.org/feature/display/350/%20index.php>.

demands of the wealthy Western nations. According to IMC Cancun, “Developing countries have said for weeks that they were already overburdened and hurt from previous concessions, and were not prepared to negotiate until the issue of agriculture was sufficiently addressed.”⁴⁹

4.3.4 Toward A Global Identity

It is evident, then, that within *new new* social movements, an holistic critique of injustice is evolving, one that situates cultural analyses firmly within a class-based critique. Starr (2001) suggests that the new global justice movements are more structurally focused, a trend that bucks the identity and culture-based foundation theorists have claimed for social movements from the 1960s onwards. Importantly, however, she argues that out of this merging of identity and culture, a global identity has arisen. Together the various global justice movements, such as the Zapatistas, the Anti-Corporate Globalization Movement and Indymedia, comprise an international anti-corporate movement. As Langman and Morris (2002) suggest, “in the intersection of various identities a global collective identity may be forming” (p. 6). The basis for a global identity, according to Starr, is a common “naming of the enemy”; that is, various movements with differing ideologies are uniting around the same basic critique of global capitalism. “Anti-corporate critiques and practices are emerging from different classes, nations, social systems, ethnicities and religions. Is this the ‘unity of many determinations?’” (p. 161). Quite possibly, given the fact that the different global justice movements, united under the umbrella of an international anti-corporate movement, can

⁴⁹ See <http://cancun.mediosindependientes.org/feature/display/758/index.php>.

engage in contentious collective action using the discourse of identity, but also make connections outside the framework of identity politics. For example:

Neither the Zapatistas themselves nor their supporters understand their movement as a movement of identity, although identity is part of their discourse. What is at stake is political economic: indigenous lands, corn, NAFTA and the purchase of the Mexican political system (p. 167).

For Starr (2001), the promise of anticorporatism lies in its ability to develop a diverse and unified constituency, one that need not subsume individual identity under a universalizing rhetoric, but one that does not privilege identity as the most important aspect of the various social justice responses to capitalist globalization. The emergence of a global identity that broadly unifies difference and finds common cause in social injustice leads Starr to conclude that identity is no longer the most critical organizing principle of the *new new* social movements, “as they embrace multiple oppressions, confront corporations on many fronts at once and recognize allies who cannot be contained by an identity politics framework” (ibid). With the naming of a common enemy – global capitalism - multiple oppressions no longer require multiple theories of oppression, as a post-Marxist, identity-based approach to social movement theory would suggest. Following Marx, Scatamburlo-D’Annibale and McLaren (in press, 2004) note that capitalism is a universal form of exploitation whose eradication necessitates the eradication of all manifestations of oppression. Thus, class provides an inclusive framework for analysis. “Multiple forms of oppression do exist but these are best understood within the overarching system of class domination and the variable discriminatory mechanisms central to capitalism as a system” (p. 21). It becomes clear how Starr’s conception of the anti-corporate movement contributes to a model inclusive of Indymedia, with its embodiment of both structure and culture in its internal makeup, as

well as in its external objectives. The anti-capitalist stance and multi-class composition of many of its volunteers do not obscure, but rather embrace, the role of identity in the structural critique offered in much of IMC's coverage. Further, the acknowledgement of manifold oppressions and diverse identities while speaking "with clarity about the enemy" (p. 167) indicates that Indymedia fits within Starr's new theoretical formulation.

The theme of a global identity is one also taken up by Buechler (2000). He suggests the *new new* social movements engage in "a different type of identity politics". "In these movements, attempts to build bridges across groups promote an identity as global or planetary citizens that transcends the bonds of any one collectivity, organization or place" (p. 78). However, Buechler's "revised Marxist approach" to social movement theory is problematic. While he highlights the material foundation that underpins attitudes and ideologies informed by class, race and gender, and locates exploitation within class relations, he does not privilege class in the analysis of contentious collective action. Neither does he favour identity as a theoretical foundation for understanding social movements. Instead, he posits a "blending" of class and identity into an oppositional movement with a broad range of issues. Thus,

class acquires its subjective weight as a meaningful identity from cultural elements, and those cultural elements are often provided by ethnic, racial, gender, and other identities. Hence, class never appears in a pure form but is rather alloyed with other identities, discourses and movements (p. 126).

Class as an objective condition and not merely a "subject position" is not reducible to another form of discourse, however. As Marx (1994) famously stated: "Consciousness does not determine life, but life determines consciousness" (p. 112). According to

Scatamburlo-D'Annibale and McLaren (in press, 2004), class resides in an economic and social category, and cannot be treated as exclusively cultural or discursive.

To conceptualize class in this manner not only replaces an historical materialist understanding of class with a cultural analysis of class, it also conflates individuals' objective locations in the intersection of structures of inequality with individuals' subjective understandings of how they are situated based on their 'experiences' (p. 19).

This illustrates the distinction Marx postulates between the objective fact of class position and the subjective experience of class consciousness. Thus, "consciousness (therefore by implication culture) is also always ideology, that is, that it is conditioned by material reality" (Milner, 1999). The attempt, therefore, to sharply distinguish between political and cultural movements may well be a conceptual error that creates a false dichotomy, as Buechler suggests. Clearly, social movements contain elements of both. However, due to the objective nature of capitalism as an economic structure that defines power relations between owner and worker, class may not be reduced to an individual subjective experience.

Despite its shortcomings, Buechler's (2000) model for understanding contemporary collective action on a global scale is somewhat useful for conceptualizing Indymedia as a social movement. His attempts at holism mirror Indymedia's efforts to pursue progressive social change internally, within its own ranks, as well as externally, in the global community. Although his post-Marxist analysis is problematic, he acknowledges a structural foundation. Similarly, IMC's media critiques tend to locate the common cause of social injustice within the institutions of capitalism, and corporate globalization. The merging of culture and structure is evident in Indymedia's

incorporation of both identity-based and political-economic elements, within the movement itself, and within its media reportage and analysis.

From the above discussion, it becomes evident that Indymedia may indeed be classified as a social movement in its own right, its membership in the Anti-Corporate Globalization and Media Democracy movements notwithstanding. However, most recent social movement theory has not yet evolved to account for newer phenomena – particularly the Internet, and the shift to a structural focus – that demark Indymedia. Current scholarship has returned to a class-based analysis, banished by new social movement theory and post-Marxian formulations from the 1980s on. Further, acknowledgement that social justice activism must seek transformation rather than reformation of the structure, also dominates the latest literature. Identity, once the darling analysis. However, it has taken up a more humble position, one that is contained within a class-based analysis that recognizes economic inequality fostered by global capitalism. A structural critique is useful for understanding Indymedia, as its coverage is characterized by stories of the Anti-Corporate Globalization Movement and its overt anti-capitalist stance. However, the role of identity has not been entirely displaced, and activists often become involved in Indymedia, and anti-capitalist activism in general, based on their particular experience of oppression under capitalism. Thus, this approach to social justice activism is holistic, and through the naming of a common enemy, a broadly united front emerges. This has led some scholars to observe the formation of a global identity that embraces diversity of experience within a shared objective. Finally, IMC's approach, following the ACGM, is transformative; rather than seeking reform of the mainstream corporate media system, it has created an entirely separate alternative.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

In my examination of the Independent Media Center, I have narrowed the lens considerably, focusing on just one of the multifarious aspects of IMC's complex existence. What emerges is a picture of a recent phenomenon that is many things at once: a radical media alternative giving voice to the voiceless; a hybrid social movement engaging virtual and physical environments; a new brand of activism blending journalism with social agitation. A thorough interrogation of the literature reveals that social movement theory has yet to catch up to the latest developments in contentious collective activism, particularly as it assimilates and adapts to ongoing technological change. Nonetheless, this interrogation supports the case for Indymedia as a social movement in its own right, independent of other movements with which it may be aligned. As a social movement, IMC joins other contemporary global justice movements under the banner of the Anti-Corporate Globalization Movement, all struggling against a world capitalist regime. New formulations are being developed to address the ACGM, and culling from these it is possible to cobble together a new theoretical model that embraces the various peculiarities of Indymedia. This model can account for its internetworked nature, its hybridity, and its naming of capitalism as a common enemy.

There are many ways I could have approached a study of Indymedia. In choosing, out of necessity, only one, I have left others out. In no way, then, is this thesis an exhaustive or definitive report on IMC; it is simply one side of a many-sided story. And it is a story that will never be told, not fully; rather, it is continuously recreated – and thus retold – in its constant unfolding. But happily, this opens the door for further research

into Indymedia as its growth continues unabated, and it evolves to meet new challenges. Currently, IMC is at something of a crossroads, and many debates rage on the global listservs. One of these debates concerns the ability to extend IMC's experiment in participatory democracy to the global collective. Establishing some sort of protocol in this area is crucial to the stability and longevity of the movement, and may prove to be a defining moment. Another debate concerns the approval of US-IMC, the first nationally organized IMC in North America. It has caused some kaffuffle, with critics fearing for the "internationalist" spirit of the movement, which has characterized Indymedia since its inception.

What bears further investigation, however, is the explicit intent with which this "local" was created: to affect political change *offline* rather than merely reporting about social injustice and educating its readers *online*. "What better tool for changing the US regime than a US IMC?"⁵⁰ Typically, Indymedia has not concerned itself with achieving policy or regime change. Indeed, that has generally been the purview of the Right, particularly in the United States. Instead, IMCs have dedicated themselves to providing space for those underrepresented in the corporate mainstream media, and empowering people to tell their own stories, to become the media. The main thrust of Indymedia's reportage has been to expose corruption and educate the public which, although associated with social justice, has never been considered a recipe for concrete change. While activists worked internally to promote democracy within their own locals, and externally in the stories they wrote, there was little connection between the online life facilitated by Indymedia, and tangible change offline – that is, in the "real" world. Thus

⁵⁰ See <http://lists.indymedia.org/mailman/public/new-imc/2003-September/004359.html> for a more detailed discussion.

far, Indymedia has not mounted any campaign that pursues a specific change as a direct objective.

What is the link between online activism and real social and political change? Vegh (2003) suggests that the Internet is another means for activists to achieve their traditional goals, and that it is increasingly integrated into resistance. But the question remains: "To what extent does the Internet create or not create activist opportunities?" (McCaughey & Ayers, 2003, p. 8). More importantly, do these opportunities result in change? For example, do democratic politics as practiced by Indymedia translate from the virtual into the physical environment? The literature surveyed on IMC portrays it as the media arm of the Anti-Corporate Globalization Movement, a radical alternative news medium, a member of the media democracy movement, and a social movement in its own right. In light of this, perhaps a close examination of the growing phenomenon of e-democracy might prove fruitful. This literature shows how citizen engagement online has a direct effect on offline life, bridging the "democratic divide" via agenda-setting, and keeping discussion alive long past elections (Horvath, 2002, p. 2). The aim is to make democracy more compelling to the average citizen, to transform governance and citizen participation, and generally improve living conditions. While Indymedia has similar stated goals, it is false to conclude that the "communications revolution will profoundly strengthen the fabric of political culture in wired societies," (Noveck, 2000, p. 18). Has all IMC's virtual educating and agitating amounted to anything tangible besides, perhaps, personal empowerment? This, along with many more questions about Indymedia, awaits further academic investigation.

Appendix I

Questions for Indymedia Activists

1. How and why did you become involved in Indymedia? What is the extent of your current involvement?
2. What are the motivating goals of Indymedia and from where do they derive?
3. How does an “anti-capitalist” perspective inform Indymedia – both internally and/or externally?
4. Do issues of class, race and gender affect the interworkings and objectives of Indymedia?
5. How does Indymedia hope to affect progressive social change? How do you measure the success of Indymedia?
6. In order to be successful, some scholars contend radical social movements must meet the needs of their constituency, build community, and undertake political mobilization. Has Indymedia done this and if so, how, and to what extent?
7. How has Indymedia evolved beyond its original status as a protest-specific medium to a radical alternative news medium dedicated to issues of social justice?
8. Based on your experience with Indymedia, what is your perception of it as a social movement and/or its relationship to other social movements?
9. How effective is Indymedia in disseminating different or new information? How does it differ from traditional alternative media?
10. What is distinct about Indymedia’s decision-making structure? How has this contributed, if at all, to the IMC’s success?
11. How has the organizational structure evolved over time? How have debates over open publishing, editorial policy and open editing affected this?
12. Indymedia encourages people to “become the media”. Can you describe the importance of empowerment of participants to the IMC’s organizational structure?
13. In what way has the Internet affected how news is created/delivered and how social justice activism is conducted?
14. What role has the Internet played in IMC’s shift from facilitator of a social movement (the ACGM) to a separate, if still connected, entity?
15. Based on your involvement with Indymedia, how have notions of the global and the local impacted the creation and evolution of the IMC?

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Vita Auctoris

Kate Milberry was born in 1971 in Toronto, Ontario. She graduated from Cardinal Newman H.S. in 1990. From there she went on to the University of Toronto where she obtained an honours Bachelor of Arts in English and History. She was the first candidate to successfully defend her master's thesis in the new Communication and Social Justice program at the University of Windsor in 2003.