

Indymedia's Independence:

From Activist Media to Free Software

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The Debut and Growth of The IMCs

Indymedia is an aggregate of loosely affiliated activist media centers scattered across the planet. Its ascension captures the confounding contradictions of modern globalization. While forces backed by the FCC centripetally consolidate media outlets into a few corporate behemoths, a countervailing current pulls some news media in the opposite direction; Independent Media Centers ("IMCs") are a prime example. A confluence of opportune events led to the creation of the first IMC in Seattle. These colliding rivulets included the success of the Seattle 1999 anti-WTO protests, accessible web and Free Software technologies, a growing public reliance on online news, and the insight and labor of activists. Internet technologies have been the basis of Indymedia's operations and growth, and in many ways the political objectives of the IMCs are reflected by their use and production of Free Software. The deployment of Free Software web publishing systems has also become integral to the IMCs' mission. This fascinating interconnection between political values and the technological context of the IMC emerges from an analysis of Indymedia's development over its first five years.

Indymedia centers are run as local collectives that manage and coordinate a news website; some also operate an affiliated media resource center for local activists. These websites give any user of the site (regardless of whether or not they are part of the collective) the ability to create, publish, and access news reports of various forms – text, photo, video, and audio. The result is a free online source for unfiltered, direct journalism by activists, sometimes uploaded in the heat of the moment during a demonstration or political action. Although individual centers are autonomous, each is connected to the others through a global infrastructure of technology and workers who share a commitment to open publishing. Where traditional journalism holds editorial policies that are hidden in the hands of a few trained experts, Indymedia provides the alternative of "open publishing," a democratic process of creating news that is transparent and accessible to all, challenging the separation between consumers and producers of news.

The emergence of the first IMC marked the beginning of a different kind of globalization, one deliberately constructed by activists as an alternative to the system of global media privateers and the neoliberal logic of free market idealism; they imagined a "globalization from below" challenging the assertions made by politicians that free markets naturally lead to economic development and democracy.

At the time of formulation, the initial organizers did not architect Indymedia as a model for export. Yet, this ingenious idea- to *become* the media instead of relying on or reforming the established media- has taken hold worldwide. In the first 10 months, 33 IMCs appeared in over 10 countries on four continents. In the last year Indymedia has been setting up popular media labs and training events in the West Bank, in Andean indigenous and campesino communities, in MST landless peasant camps in Brazil, in squatted banks and piquetero community centers in Argentina. Today there are more than 110 IMCs around the world, on 6 continents, in over 35 countries, and using over 22 languages. Now, just as we can point to what has been aptly coined as the "digital Wal-martization" of the "mainstream" media, we can also web-click into hundreds of distinctly textured autonomous nodes of media.

Along with the multi-voiced content, the symbolic presence of these collectives speaks volumes against the One Man Media Show. Instead of the flat world of unexamined patriotism, free-market idealism, rational choice theory, and bland party politics doled out nightly on the major network channels, Indymedia provides a stream of localized voices that rarely find their way into the mass media. The IMCs manage to do this by cultivating a degree of cohesiveness within an otherwise culturally, linguistically and politically diverse arena, the culture of progressive activism. The assumption is that current economic globalization systems can only be successfully confronted by a unity that transcends the boundaries of nations, political affiliations, identities, and narrow interests.

Indymedia also draws from a long history of Internet collaborative sociality and technological production, notably the Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) movement. This movement is a complex aggregate of social practices, licensing schemes, technical methodologies, and philosophies through which hackers around the world collaborate in Internet-based volunteer associations to produce "free" software. In distinction to proprietary software, Free Software legally provides its users the right to use, copy, distribute, and modify the underlying directions of software, source code. Although companies and Free Software developers can charge for the medium of software distribution and support services, the underlying source code always has to remain freely accessible. As such, FOSS technologies are also a much cheaper and robust alternative to proprietary software.

Low-cost FOSS technologies, like servers and email clients, have been indispensable to the technical operations of the volunteer-run IMCs. Concurrently, FOSS free speech philosophy resonated with the emergent IMC commitment to open publishing. Out of these interconnections, Indymedia has embraced a rather unique political position, recalibrating the typical understanding of free speech as an inherent value guaranteed primarily through legal protection. Mindful of the economic and political conditions that constrain speech, IMC activists use both editorial and technological innovations to create avenues for expression as a means to achieve the political ends directed by local collectives.

In this section I provide an overview of the unique political culture of DIY media and unity-in-diversity by evaluating its development over time. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus claimed the only constant was change, the flow of a river iconic of the inherent flux of life. Alongside the natural world of streams and mountains, social entities are also subject to growth and turbulence yet they are beholden to a different "law" than that of natural law. Human deliberation, action, debate, and struggle are the stewards of change. Approaching this networked media movement through the vantage point of directed temporal transformation reveals a wealth of insight about the unique political culture built by Indymedia as well as these "times of globalization." It is as much a social precipitate of a peculiar historical moment as it is a political vehicle whose purpose is to usher in historical transformation.

A Nascent Response

The initial explosion and spread of Indymedia are unforeseen products of the liberatory possibilities of networked technologies during an era of aggressive neoliberal economics. The idea that an unbridled market can resolve the minutest social problem is a long standing "religious belief." As Karl Polyani convincingly explained over fifty years ago, economic liberalism "evolved into a veritable faith in man's secular salvation through a self-regulating market" (1944:135). Whether we now refer to it as economic globalization, neoliberalism, or the Washington Consensus, its foundational principle remains starkly simple: let the economy rein loose and everything will fall into place.

This simple theoretical formula belies a more complicated and laborious history. Multinational corporations, transnational legal bodies and corollary trade treaties, and massive media

christenings, all with tremendous geo-political power, have been indispensable to sustaining a reality that ideologically occludes American protectionism and unchecked military aggression enabled by these structures.

Despite its ability to coerce nation-states into development restructuring programs (often in the name of democracy), neoliberal policies and ideology are met with strong forms of dissent. Indymedia first emerged out of historic struggles against neoliberal logic. In the mid- to late-1990s, opposition among various groups took place across the globe. Ya Basta!, The Direct Action Network, and the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) were notable players, while the first WTO protests in the streets of Seattle registered a potent, distilled version of this dissent in an area of the world where spectacular street protest had been in extended hibernation.

Aware that the mainstream media would rarely report on these passionate denunciations by diverse constituents, a decision was made to self-disseminate the news. The idea was to resolve "the necessity for communities to be controlling their own message, to really be saying for themselves their concerns" (Perlstein, 2000 WTO History Project interview) and to amplify the previously dampened alternative voices by bringing people together who had before been doing similar media projects "independent" of one another. The IMC gave birth to a new type of collaborative independence.

During the anti-WTO demonstrations in Seattle, while traditional journalists parroted statements from the Chief of Police press conference that no rubber bullets or tear gas were being used, Indymedia reporters on the street captured chilling videos and photos to the contrary. Although scooped by the on-the-street, "embedded" IMC journalists, the impact of the IMC during the WTO received praise even from mainstream media. ABC News said, "The very people who were in Seattle to fight what they believe are the ill effects of global trade have found new power in the global trade of information."

The significant element was that protest organizers not only chose to enact a DIY media operation with spectacular footage, but that *they could* do so. Activists exploited existing Free Software technologies, such as content management systems and servers, to enact web-based technologies of news dissemination that eventually would become a template for others to follow. The cheap and accessible nature of Free Software and digital media, and a growing trend to read news online, facilitated the adoption of the IMC as a news model for other activists. It was a prime example of the politics of localization through the technologies of globalization. Right from the start, principles of local autonomy guided what would reticulate into a global network of far reaching proportions.

In Its Technological Times

Some critical theorists of capitalism claim the Internet era of cheap hardware, fast broadband connections, and global networks of communications is no cause for celebration, but rather a dire expression of virulent economic forces and ideology. They challenge the idea that political and economic empowerment necessarily inhere in the assemblage of technologies (web pages, file transfer protocols, content management systems, web communities, server infrastructures, Internet Relay Chat, etc.) we tend to think of as a unitary whole, typically designated as "the Internet" or "cyberspace."

I agree that an unexamined, Utopian rhetoric of "computer revolution" may conceal more than it reveals. Information technologies are indeed made possible by massive economic inputs that contribute to the growing disparities in wealth between the rich and poor. The Internet's commercial turn in the mid 1990s opened it to the vast workings of finance capital, the service industry, and consumer capitalism. However, these critiques offer only a diluted, partial perspective of the realities of technological use. Given the ways that hackers, activists,

technologists, youth groups, housewives, and patient advocates also make and deploy communication technologies to create alternative worlds of intense sociality, meaning, production, and politics within the midst of commercialization, we should be reluctant to animate the constellation of technologies that compose the Internet with a hardened, always determined nature, such as the spirit of capital. In other words, while many technologies are developed and deployed for a specific set of purposes, the use of technology in other unique contexts shapes its political valence and social possibilities as well. The IMCs give voice to the polysemic and protean quality of technological artifacts: the contextualized social manipulation of technology often far exceeds either its initially prescribed and/or currently hegemonic roles.

In 1999 the time was technologically ripe for a decentralized network of independent media nodes. In some respects, virtual and decentralized alternative media had been underway for two decades. The "lower-tech" era of Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) offered thousands of virtual ponds of community-based news for users that dialed into their favorite forum. In the mid to late 1990s, this form of tele-communications was replaced by a roaring sea of many leagues: the Internet. USENET allowed mailing list style communities to mix interest-driven news with critical commentary, often ensuing in lively internal debates. Newspapers began to publish web-versions of their print publications while different web communities, such as the geek website Slashdot, "recycled news." Slashdot did not generate its own news articles but linked to already existing articles on technology, science, and the law, so that the community of readers could unpack and further dissect their meaning. News in this case was as much collective, cross-cutting commentary as it was the viewpoint provided by a journalist or a newspaper. In the 1990s, news was already detaching from the formal channels of journalistic circulation in the new freedom provided by virtual spaces.

Politically minded geeks bred during the era of cheaper PC's, home-schooled programming, and virtual interactions chose to use Free Software for the implementation of the early proliferation of Indymedia centers. Mailing lists and Internet Relay Chat (IRC) – both widely available in free software versions at the time – were the main communication tools that facilitated conversation between dispersed tech-activists first establishing centers in different locations like Washington DC, Boston, London, and Seattle. The continuing vigorous expression of counter-globalization street dissent around the world boosted the desire and need to establish more of these centers. Ad hoc collaboration and charismatic energy tactically guided a transformation of what was first conceived of as an event-based ephemeral phenomenon to cover protests into permanent websites with locally affiliated collectives.

The first IMCs were established primarily by a handful of dedicated technology volunteers who collaborated with individuals interested in creating a local node. Some technology workers acted as "detectives," procuring free or low-cost server space. Others were implementers, installing and customizing platforms. A few of the IMC technology workers performed all of these tasks. Within a year, a larger, slightly more formal technology "working group" coalesced to coordinate the hefty technical tasks needed to provide, install, and maintain open publishing web-platforms, as well as the communications infrastructure, for this emerging network. This working group dedicated itself to complete various self-adopted tasks in a relatively autonomous fashion. As one long-term member of the IMC-tech working group put it, "We run according to a principle I personally like to think of as 'inverse consensus.' We do whatever needs to be done and inform the group of what was done. If no one has a problem we forge ahead, otherwise it enters a more formal process of deliberation."

When activists first used technology for open publishing, they also turned to already existing Internet infrastructures and the tools provided by another relatively new social movement – that of "liberated," Free and Open Source software. For example, the first web-publishing tool, Active, was an open source project for media dissemination coded by Australian hackers. System administrators ran and installed back-end Free Software tools such as the Apache web server, the GNU mailing list manager, and the Linux operating system.

Without a doubt, Free Software has been a primary enabler and an important presence in the Indymedia movement. Use of proprietary software would have incurred prohibitive costs for a 100% volunteer association. Today all IMC network software is, by charter, Free Software, affirming the philosophical affinities for access and openness between these two domains. Collaboration and coordination ensue in a similar fashion to the volunteer associations of FOSS projects, and a number of geeks move fluidly between these two dominions.

Despite these interconnections and affinities, the political, philosophical, and technical purpose of these movements diverge. As noted pointedly by Mako Hill, an activist and developer intimate with both worlds, "Every piece of IMC software serves the same fundamental function – empower Internet users to be their own media – and does so by following extremely similar models." Technical means are directed toward political ends. One IMC coder and technology worker feels that this well-defined technical goal leads to less contentious debates among IMC software programmers. He explained that since the IMC software "market is very small and well-defined" in comparison to that of FOSS, technical debate is less charged among IMC coders. As he stated bluntly, "if it works, it gets used."

However, there are different opinions about which technologies are appropriate for achieving these political ends. This debate is reflected in the existence of multiple back-end IMC publishing tools. Programmers forked Active into SF-Active in order to use a different database. Eventually Indymedia coders programmed other similar tools from scratch, like Mir and Dada, to satisfy different legal needs and personal ambitions for open publishing. For example, Mir was originally spearheaded by German IMC tech workers to comply with the more restrictive German free speech laws, as well as for the experience of designing an entirely new platform while applying the lessons learned from a couple of years of Indymedia online publishing. While these projects are not competitors, different tech groups have clustered around the various platforms, reflecting a range of approaches to open publishing, which also allows programmers the opportunity to work with a variety of technologies and programming languages.

In distinction to IMC software projects, the goal of Free Software is to craft a diverse range of quality software applications for the sake of better technology, its means closely knit with its ends. To facilitate the ongoing creation of Free Software, an underlying and legal commitment is made to guarantee that the blueprint of this software – the source code – is free for others to access and improve. Free Software developers often view expressive rights as essential to ensure the growth, quality, and progress of knowledge. FOSS developers also place a high premium on open technical production as an avenue for creative, expressive activity. They often think of coding as a type of "diligent craftsmanship" in which they imbue objects with an element of their creative self. One Debian developer captured this spirit when he said: "It is hard to teach the everyman the value of free. [We] need to teach [that] free is a product of the creativity of the programmer. They sat down and they put creativity into it and they put thought into it." At the core of Free Software philosophy and practice is a deep faith in the necessity and power of expressive activity that springs deep from within the individual self.

Indymedia displays a different version of openness and free speech rights than that of FOSS. Its edifice is an expression of the opinion that free speech does not only flow from legal protection, nor is free speech a right that should necessarily be valued over all other ideals. Political expression and participation is fundamentally seen as a by-product of structural conditions and the invisible workings of ideology. One IMC activist asserted that though local centers and individual activists "have different beliefs in the sanctity of free speech," many IMCs have undergone a "maturation of the free speech ideal." In one respect, this maturation could be seen as a realization that provides a partial solution to Marcuse's influential, trenchant critique of free speech in *Repressive Tolerance*. Marcuse notes that free speech is as much about access to economic resources as it is about legal protection: "The change of influencing, in any effective way, this majority is at a price, in dollars totally out of the reach of the radical opposition. Here too, free competition and exchange of ideas have become a fare. The left has no equal voice, no

equal access to mass media and their public facilities" (1965: 199).

Indymedia's current position is a less-than-uncompromising commitment to free speech. Instead it seeks to level the playing field of expression by providing a platform for that "equal voice." IMCs are altering structural conditions through the founding of "public facilities" in the form of technologies necessary for "the change of influencing."

II. MOVEMENT THROUGH TIME: THE FOUR PILLARS OF INDEPENDENCE

"What are Indymedia's long-term goals? That's a big question, one that every Indymedia organizer would likely answer in a different way."

From the IMC Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

As the FAQ states, Indymedia activists are no doubt motivated by different reasons. Despite this heterogeneity, every collective shares mailing lists, tasks, workers, a similar logo, and even a political culture- albeit not wholly unified- that has grown piecemeal through time. The first Seattle IMC produced a succinct but potent mission statement that resonated with other activists forming new IMCs:

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

This mission statement can be considered the kernel of a political sensibility which activists transformed into a stronger and more detailed formulation, their "Principles of Unity." This codification far exceeds a marking of aspirations and political identity, but rather is the basis for practical action. For example, public archiving of mailing lists, an extensive documentation guide, and a commitment to Free and Open Source Software embodies their commitment to transparency while accessibility mandates open publishing and user-friendly software.

Yet, Indymedia beholds a more complicated political idiom. To begin to decipher this language, I find it useful to unpack one of its most ordinary terms, "independent," which is the phrase most closely associated with this movement. Unlike "freedom," the term wedded to Free Software, which beckons an association of "free agents" oriented towards securing their own expressive rights for creation and pedagogy, the "independent" of IMC calls into being a slightly different range of political sensibilities and possibilities. Social change, a broader public, mutual aid, and justice are a few components of this independence idiom. It is to four of those associations that I now turn.

Independence encompasses at least four different interarticulated evaluations – all of which are expressed in their Principles of Unity. Each of these meanings of independence also enunciate "tension points" within Indymedia, revealing one of the most fundamental and vexing roadblocks of all radical and reformist political endeavors – balancing between ideals and the pragmatics of incorporating those ideals within a context of multiple voices, cultural differences, material constraints, localized needs, and – as ironic as it may sound – other ideals. This balancing act is more difficult for Indymedia given its dually hybrid nature as it tacks between the local and global, as well as the virtual and physical.

One meaning of the word is "independence from external influence," which is clearly spelled out in their FAQ: "No corporation owns Indymedia, no government manages the organization, no single donor financed the projects, Indymedia is not the mouthpiece of any political party or

organization." There is an overwhelming desire to have Indymedia stand as independently as possible from the control and more subtle influences of external forces. Decision-making, content creation, and political visions must be generated from "within" and from "below." Thus far, one way Indymedia has sought to maintain this independence is through volunteerism. The bulwark of this organization primarily runs on the power of volunteer labor complemented by various charitable donations that come in the form of money, hardware, and bandwidth.

Yet, this commitment to keep money and other external relationships at bay has not existed as an uncontested default. It was recently challenged but informally reasserted following a contentious debate between local and global actors over the prospect of accepting money from the Ford Foundation, an American foundation whose historical politics many IMC activists find problematic. In the end, a mandate from "below" prevailed, barring the infusion of millions of dollars earmarked for salaries, infrastructure, and conferences, keeping most of the Indymedia network largely separate from the channels of economic and monetary exchange.

One Italian activist felt that cultural differences over the role and perception of money in different societies might have played a role in this debate. He explained that Americans, who largely spearheaded the IMC initiative, are perhaps more desensitized to money as there "are many more money transfers in the USA than in some other countries." He suggested Americans probably "have a more aseptic idea of money" while "in some other regions they have a deeper idea of it, which involves not only the money as a means of material exchange, but also as a vehicle of social relations." As such, accepting money from the Ford Foundation, even if there were no purported strings attached, would "have meant having a relation with Ford." One fascinating element of this analysis is less whether it can be proved than if it accurately captures unwritten cultural perceptions that enter the play of politics behind the global face of the IMC, even if there are efforts to bracket them out.

The second sense of "Independent" is a commitment to guard the local autonomy of IMC centers. In this case, the potential threat is not the external world of corporations and governments, but rather an internal power imbalance emerging from the globalized facets of Indymedia. Global working groups hold a high degree of technical know-how and decision making power. Local centers can be beholden to the decisions made by tech workers in other global coordinates. Thus, one of the ironies of Indymedia is that its virtual and global modes are largely in place (one might say entirely) to make locality possible. Yet there is always a lurking danger of inadvertent global interference, domination, and obfuscation- a by-product of Indymedia's hybrid nature and the concentration of technical and tacit know-how among global actors.

Various safeguards have been instituted to abate this potential problem, such as the creation of a liaison position to be filled at every IMC. Liaisons are points of linkage. They relay information back and forth so that local collective members are informed about global events. The liaison is empowered to only proceed with global decision making after receiving the backing of her local group. Other procedures, such as an extensive documentation project, have been implemented to mediate between the local and global facets of Indymedia. The tension between local and global currents within Indymedia may never find a final resolution, but there are continual efforts to address the potential sites of conflict that emerge from balancing two different scales of reality within the network.

Additionally, tensions between the global facet of the IMC and the autonomy of local centers reflect the disparities between the global north and the global south. Activists from the north (USA and Europe, in particular) often have more recourse to funds and technical resources, as well as more political freedom of movement. Because of the concentration of such resources in the north, there is a fear that global decision making power and the representation of the IMC to wider publics will also follow this structural divide, in favor of the north. One IMC activist feels it is imperative that "activists in wealthier countries be mindful of this divide as to not exploit their privilege but use it for the purpose of addressing this inequality. However, there exists very different opinions as to how to carry this out without imposing a neocolonial paternalism."

The third meaning indexes a desire to ensure content independence. Indymedia relies heavily on

the concept of open publishing, formulating itself in opposition to the content provided in the mainstream media, as well as more publicly oriented newscasters such as National Public Radio – both of which accept ads for revenue. A grassroots organizer from Los Angeles explained the independence of the IMC is directed at "giving coverage to both that which is not being covered by the mainstream press and also to any censorship problems within the mainstream press." A centralized decision making process about editorial matters on the national level is discouraged, in favor of a transparent, bottom-up structure that enables news to be generated by local centers without encumbrances. In the process, the prevalent assumption of full objectivity in traditional journalism is disrupted.

The following is a description of open publishing in its most ideal form:

"Open publishing means that the process of creating news is transparent to the readers. They can contribute a story and see it instantly appear in the pool of stories publicly available. Those stories are filtered as little as possible to help the readers find the stories they want. Readers can see editorial decisions being made by others. They can see how to get involved and help make editorial decisions... If they want to redistribute the news, they can, preferably on an open publishing site."

IMC websites share a commitment to open publishing. In addition, they take a similar approach to design aesthetics, technical possibilities, and posting procedures as leading hacker news sites, like Slashdot and Kuro5hin. Such geek news sites in many respects re-visioned some fundamental assumptions about media by redrawing the tacit rules of journalistic reporting. One of their most innovative contributions was to visibly blur the strict division between "consumer" and "producer" that is fundamental to traditional journalism. Indymedia takes this one step further, by collapsing the binary opposition almost entirely. News is usually "home-made" by individuals both within and outside of the collectives, and produced in a diverse form of mediums – article articles, radio, video, and photos. The makers and "consumers" of IMC news blur into the same extended community.

However, as already touched upon, Indymedia is not a cacophony of voices where everything and anything goes, even if that tendency might be valued, even idealized. Despite a radically DIY commitment to empower individuals to be and to make the news, editorial "triage" exists to meet the IMC's local and global principles of unity. Ideals of one type of independence are modified to satisfy other goals within the organization.

Editorial collective members scavenge the IMC sites to purge duplicate and commercial posts, categorize articles under appropriate categories (features, local news, etc.), and if the content is deemed problematic (such as hate speech), relegate it to a different section of the site (which is still accessible to everyone). The San Francisco Bay collective offers the following explanation for this limited form of content hierarchy and partial censorship:

"SF Bay Area IMC is founded on the principle of open publishing. Reality dictates that the editorial collective will at times decide to hide posts and comments. This is not a decision that is taken lightly, however, and the editorial collective does its best refrain from hiding. Our vision for the function of the newswire, and the general framework in which all decisions to hide will be made, are as follows: The newswire is intended to be a community media resource, a space free from spam and abuse in general; and that space will not contribute to the oppression of traditionally oppressed and marginalized groups."

This lengthy explanation brings us to the final interpretation of the word "independence" for Indymedia, invoking its broadest meaning, that of political transformation. The independence of this demarcated media zone is a means to achieve societal independence by giving voice and face to forms of oppression, domination, and its counterpart, dissent. Indymedia is much less about an inherent commitment to reform the "professional standards and ethics" of journalism or to enact value-free free speech ideals. It is much more about using media and grass-roots expression for the purposes of political empowerment and change. As put simply by one activist, "Indymedia is

about struggling for social and economic justice."

The content and precise meanings of justice are, not surprisingly, subject to endless debate. Each collective has created its own unique landscape. The distinct political flavor of each local center depends on many factors like national political status, geopolitical location, the history and strength of activism in the area, accessibility to physical resources such as office space and computers, and other contingencies. Individual members of a collective are also motivated by different political concerns (such as militarism, colonialism, environmentalism, anti-capitalism, racism, GMO agriculture, globalism, etc.) and hold a range of distinct outward political affiliations (liberal democratic, anarchist, socialist), although all are situated strongly in the left end of the spectrum.

At the beginning of this section I distinguished the "independence" of the IMC from the "freedom" of Free Software to unpack the multivalent and historically specific meanings encompassed within the term "independent." In spite of this distinction, I would like to highlight their similarities. One of the most significant political elements shared by both social movements is that of "collective autonomy." Participants in each movement have successfully built large-scale volunteer endeavors based on the right to associate and produce under legal and social terms of their own making. Free Software developers extend engineering traditions of building on the work of peers without the incentive-reward mandates of intellectual property and capitalist profit. Indymedia activists draw upon and extend the technologies and methodologies of Free Software to affirm the principles of open publishing in the hope of helping to build a more just society.

In short, freedom and independence reflect that the participants from both arenas build and direct the values and goals of their respective endeavors. They both convey a powerful political message that speaks against the "cult of experts" and profit-driven rationale that drives production in technology, culture, and news. If we take one notable definition of politics and freedom as "the freedom to decide (collectively or individually) what it is that makes life worth living" (Graeber 2001:88), then both domains of Indymedia and Free Software are intimately bound by a commitment to this political form.

II. A SUCCESS OF ITS TIMES: THE PROCESSES OF KNOWLEDGE EMBODIMENT AND DISEMBODIMENT

Given the extraordinary range of geographical locations and political interests among IMC activists and collectives, its success should be occasion for surprise. At the least it should make us ask about the conditions by which forms of unity and cohesion have been established in the face of political difference, geographical dispersion, scarce resources, cultural differences and explosive proliferation of centers.

Part of the answer lies in two contrasting yet connected processes that were instituted to combat the problems brought on by scale and growth. One involves enculturation, or the process by which new members are socialized into the socio-political and organizational milieu of Indymedia. Of course, socialization is never total; it is on-going during the process of participation. But here I focus on a crucial location: the New IMC Process (NIP). NIP is a procedure by which a new IMC is created and integrated into the network. The NIP is a pivotal exercise in ethical and cultural pedagogy in which aspiring IMCs come to learn and embody a range of specific political and organizational values that may not have been entirely shared before entering the network. This "initial point of entry" is meant to ensure a degree of uniformity in governance, cultivate trust, and introduce aspiring members to the intricate workings of Indymedia.

The second process – a component of the first, but based on a different dynamic – could be called "knowledge disembodiment." For the first year of Indymedia's existence, many forms of "know-how" (which ranged from administrative to technological) existed solely in the actions and minds of volunteers. The only material manifestation of this knowledge was scattered in thousands of emails or ephemerally expressed on IRC conversation. Indymedia's documentation projects, which reflect an effort to transform implicit knowledge into a codified and accessible base, are among

the crucial conditions that have made the NIP possible.

These two procedural implementations were essential to the survival of this movement, which faced growing pains as more people requested the creation of new IMC websites for their particular locality. In the early period, the technical working group established new centers through a very informal process, usually responding to an email request for a new IMC. This was a charismatic and informal period in the truest sense of the words. It was soon clear that this ad hoc style of operations had serious limitations, especially as Indymedia grew in size without an adequate increase in technological and labor resources. The technology working group was already overworked, and as one member explained, it was "uncomfortable with making decisions with global import." It was soon clear that a change was in order.

An early iteration of a solution can still be accessed on the "independent media center process" site. This site opens with a self-reflective statement on the dangers of organizational stagnation: "Indymedia has accomplished a lot since the Seattle IMC was born in November 1999, but if we're going to continue to develop as an international network we need to be deliberate and conscious about our organizing." The basic guidelines of this early process have grown into the more detailed and nuanced New Indymedia Process. The NIP is as much about introducing and embedding activists in specific modes of political collaboration within a hybrid network as it is about facilitating work and economizing on scarce resources.

Again, in a highly self-reflexive mode, the website explains how this organized process achieves "decentralized" goals:

"The extent the network is effective in challenging abusive systems of power is directly related to our ability to create decentralized structures. It is our ability to be flexible and simultaneously united that has proven effective. However, it cannot be understated that in order for collaboration to occur network wide, there needs to exist a set of guidelines and a process by which we all agree to work."

To some degree, Indymedia self-selects its participants. The Young Republicans of Iowa City are not likely candidates to start up a local chapter. However, there exists enough of a plurality among the progressive, left-leaning, and radical components of IMC activists that Indymedia had to be mindful of how to integrate difference within the network. With this in mind, the NIP was created to be broad enough to appeal to this political gamut, yet be circumscribed enough to curb the "potential" noise of interference that they felt may have resulted without these provisions. They also had to be flexible enough to allow for collectives to mandate their own destinies but only within parameters that would not undermine the larger network.

Their Principles of Unity and the New Membership Criteria are seen as the enabling maps by which to forge the delicate balance between unity and autonomy. The New Membership Criteria functions by bringing local centers in alignment with the Principles of Unity. The very first provision mandates that local IMCs must agree "in spirit" with the Principles of Unity. Yet the subsequent requirements for membership inclusion have been perceptively crafted so "agreement in spirit" transforms into concurrence through flesh. This is achieved by requiring local centers to write a local mission statement, adopt a specific consensual decision making process, satisfy requirements for openness and transparency in their editorial policies, and agree to hold open meetings, among a number of other provisions.

Fulfilling these provisions is not a matter of a few days of paper shuffling and check lists. It can take multiple months of hard work – from learning the intricate and philosophical basis of consensus decision making, connecting with technical workers on IRC to get technical help, to hammering out the fine grained details of a local mission statement. For those who may not be schooled in the ways of consensus, creating a joint mission statement allows the group to experiment and experience this process first hand.

NIP is a fundamental pedagogical procedure for identity formation. It is in this period when local

groups start to cultivate an awareness of themselves as a "media collective" while they also learn a new political and technical vocabulary, which has moral correlates. In this case, they are those of mutual aid, open collaboration, resource sharing, positive social change, respect, and non-hierarchical forms of coordination. For many groups, this period can be quite frustrating but almost always productive. By the time a new center is established, the local collective usually knows more about itself, Indymedia, political processes of consensus, and web technologies than they knew when they first started the process. Collective members usually have met virtually and interacted with members of the wider IMC network. This is precisely one of the purposes of the NIP. It helps to build trust and community investment that will hopefully translate into staying power for the new centers. They should be at once committed to their own goals as a collective but also invested in the larger network.

This process is not without its bumps. The initial organizer of the Puerto Rico IMC thinks of the process as a double-edged sword. On the positive side, the process is not too formalized and linear. As such "you must read the mailing list archives, visit the Twiki, go to the IRC chat channels, contact people over email to ask them questions. This creates an intimacy with the project" – forcing one to "delve deep" into Indymedia. However, the time and effort involved for this laborious process can be "discouraging to some people who do not have time time, nor capacity, nor knowledge" to finish the process. Though the PR IMC was able to finally learn about consensus, the organizer also feels that consensus is really "something difficult to explain and learn from the Internet."

Documentation is a major facilitator during the otherwise daunting period of entry and integration into the Indymedia network. One might think of it as an insignificant and epiphenomenal element of Inymedia's politics – especially in comparison to its "innovative" technological face. But in fact, the role of pages and pages of mostly organized text is utterly significant. Just as servers and other technologies function as the inner plumbing behind websites, documentation is a resource infrastructure that, if well executed, is a boon for political organizing and activity, especially for those projects such as Indymedia whose nature is so reticulated and far reaching that they often escape easy categorization.

The following categories of information are now collectively compiled in "The Documentation Project" on a Wiki, accessible and modifiable by any member:

- "Process documents, Proposals, and Meeting summaries
- "Best Practices" and General "How To" Guides
- Work in progress
- Discussion and Discussion Summaries
- Anything else that helps our work"

The IMC Documentation project is an instantiation of the long history of open documentation on the Internet. In many ways, the Internet is one gigantic meta-documentation project – its own early technological development deriving in large part from the standardized process of collecting technical requirements through Request For Comments (RFC). First published in 1969, the RFC process grew into a massive compilation of over 2,500 technical memos and documents on computer networking, edited by Jon Postel for the first 28 years. The wealth of published information has been crucial to the creation of the open standards that characterize the architecture of the Internet. This legacy can also be seen in the public documentation for Free and Open Source Software projects, which rely on accessible records to promote the implementation and future development of FOSS technology.

For the IMC, documentation is a technology of transparency and mediation central to the continued vibrancy and growth of an organization, especially one that is pulled in multiple directions. Although the labor put into documentation may not be as dramatic as server stabilization during periods of street protest, it is still one of true expression of mutual aid. It gives potential and actual members a pragmatic yet malleable axis by which to enter this network,

facilitate work, and make their own contributions in the ever-shifting nature of Indymedia political and organizational culture.

Conclusion: Time Will Tell

"This is very much a work in progress, and creating a culture of democracy among people who have little experience of such things is necessarily a painful and uneven business, full of all sorts of stumblings and false starts."

In a recent article on new high-tech social movements such as those of FOSS and Indymedia, Jaime King convincingly argues that a commitment to openness does not automatically ensure against the formation of hierarchies, censorship, and other forms of subtle coercion, which he calls "crypto-hierarchies." He continues to suggest that rhetoric of openness might make these groups more susceptible to soft though pernicious anti-democratic impulses. While his cautionary tale of the dangers of a "gang mentality" conveys valid points, King fails to portray how participants among the FOSS and Indymedia movement have also self-consciously attempted to architect a peculiar vision into practice, a dialogical dynamic that recalibrates aspirations. His analysis of rhetoric in other words, is missing an analysis of their concomitant embodied and material practice that has shifted dramatically in the last number of years.

While ideals rarely match reality, Indymedia activists over the last four years have worked with a remarkable degree of diligence and awareness to make and materially realize a politics alongside their creation and delivery of news. We should also appreciate that the nature of politics is always to carve out a specific territory of possibilities from a much larger cloth. Political success often ensues by continually enacting and reexamining a circumscribed territory of possibilities instead of aspiring to establish them all. Though Indymedia does deploy the images and rhetoric of openness, they have also made an attempt to explain their political meanings and delimit a potential field into workable, hopefully sustainable, forms of political action. The future will hold new challenges for sustainability that surely will require other innovative forms of organizational process. Many activists spoke to me about the problems of volunteer burnout, the difficulty of integrating new members within an established collective (especially technology workers), and the subtle politics that result from cultural difference.

Yet, as it currently stands, Indymedia has successfully linked a culturally, linguistically, geographically, and politically disparate group of actors who otherwise may have remained largely localized instead of garnering the power borne from networked interconnections. Given the penchant for opinionated deliberation and dissent among the radical left, this feat is all the more astounding. It has been achieved through time, and literally because of time. Thousands of volunteers generously have given their time to make what has become a stable (through still shifting) aggregate of media centers.

Some may think that the dynamics of change I have described in this commentary are an organic process of evolution. While I clearly have a preference for retaining a sense of change borne through time, I prefer to leave biological metaphors with the biologists. These images naturalize and teleologize what are fully social and historical products of directed human labor and deliberation within the context of historical possibilities and constraints. There is nothing evident, essential, or obvious in what has transpired with Indymedia. An ethical idiom and its politics are never guaranteed (even when and if set in motion) but always have to be made and remade.

Footnotes

[1] I would like to thank the Indymedia activists who spent time teaching me about the intricate workings of the IMC. In this articles their identities are kept undisclosed to protect and respect their privacy. I would also like to extend a thanks to those in #techfed for keeping me sane. In particular DMH and Hacim Tortuga keep my wandering mind and thoughts more focused and contained, also accomplished by the thoughtful advice and editing of Ken Jordan.

[2] <http://indymedia.org/en/index.shtml>

[3] McChesney and Nichols, 2003.

[4] These are the "four freedoms" at the base of all Free and Open Source Software. See "The Free Software Definition," at <http://www.gnu.org/philosophy/free-sw.html>.

[5] For example, if the IMC had to rely on proprietary software to run all of their servers, costs would run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

[6] To be clear, the idea behind IMC did not originate with the Seattle IMC but was influenced by a long history of media activist projects within the context of political dissent such as the June the 18th anti-capitalism protests earlier.

[7] <http://depts.washington.edu/wtohist/Interviews/Perlstein.htm>

[8] Quoted from http://www.presscampaign.org/articles_7.html

[9] For classical thinking on this position see Terranova 2000 and Webster and Frank 1999.

[10] <http://slashdot.org>

[11] Interview April 12, 2004.

[12] This is stated in their Principles of Unity # 9: "All IMC's shall be committed to the use of free source code, whenever possible, in order to develop the digital infrastructure, and to increase the independence of the network by not relying on proprietary software." It is worth mentioning though that many local centers still run proprietary software on desktop machines although many centers have also moved to replace desktop software with Free Software.

[13] See http://yukidoke.org/~mako/writing/mute-indymedia_software.html. This piece provides an extensive and excellent examination of the different web platforms used and coded by the IMC-Tech Collective and the different political objectives encoded in different pieces of IMC software.

[14] Internet Relay Chat Interview April 16, 2004.

[15] See <http://docs.indymedia.org/view/Devel/WebHome> for a list of the different "code bases" and what they offer. Each prospective IMC looks over these code bases to learn the features provided by each (usability, presentation, portability, ease of administration, larger support network) and whether they match with their local requirements.

[16] Debian is a technically robust distribution of Linux. In existence since the early 1990s, it currently boasts over 1000 developers from around the world. See <http://www.debian.org>.

[17] Interview February 22, 2002.

[18] Interview April 24, 2004.

[19] <http://web.archive.org/web/20000816130236/seattle.indymedia.org/about.php3>

[20] See <http://docs.indymedia.org/view/Global/PrinciplesOfUnity>. One of the ironies of the Principles of Unity is that they have not been officially ratified at a network wide level, as there is no process by which to make decisions which impact the entire network. However, the Principles of Unity have been informally ratified through the New Indymedia Process (NIP), which will be discussed with more detail in the next section. NIP requires agreement with these Principles of

Unity, and as a result IMC's created during the last three years have effectively ratified these principles by joining the network.

[21] <http://docs.indymedia.org/view/Global/FrequentlyAskedQuestionEn>. For a recent summary of the debates and stakes surrounding these issues see <http://archives.lists.indymedia.org/imc-communication/2004-June/003185.html>.

[22] On the other hand, local IMCs have accepted grant monies and no official stance has been taken on the role of grant money for the global facet of the IMC though any attempt to infuse these types of monies have been successfully blocked. The role of formal pay, NGO funding, and the general professionalization of the IMC are some of the most contentious topics of debates among IMC activists.

[23] This debate was specifically over whether to accept money from the Ford Foundation and the creation of a Tactical Media Fund. <http://lists.indymedia.org/pipermail/imc-finance/2003-January/001686.html>

[24] Email interview May 18, 2002.

[25] As of course this activist was well aware of, many American activists did not support this initiative. He was, I think, perceptively noting that unconscious cultural perceptions do influence the ways in which activists in different parts of the role understand the nature of politics and this is a dynamic that plays into the many debates that characterize the Indymedia network.

[26] Interview April 23, 2004.

[27] Although NPR receives much of its budget from listener contributions, it also receives support from foundations as well as some money from ads which it frames not as advertising but as "sponsorship."

[28] Email Interview May 10, 2004.

[29] <http://www.cat.org.au/maffew/cat/openpub.html>. This page is linked to from many IMC sites, including the global FAQ.

[30] To be clear, Slashdot does not have an open editorial system, while the Kuro5hin editorial policy is more like that of Indymedia. But the hacker news sites do have similar approaches and concerns about hierarchy and transparency as open publishing sites.

[31] <http://www.indybay.org/news/2002/08/139500.php>. For another typical and well fleshed out editorial policy statement see http://nyc.indymedia.org/mod/info/display/editorial_policy/index.php.

[32] Email interview May 10, 2004.

[33] Interview April 10, 2004.

[34] <http://process.indymedia.org>

[35] [http://docs.indymedia.org/view/Global/NewImcHowTo#NETWORK OVERVIEW THEORY AND PRAC](http://docs.indymedia.org/view/Global/NewImcHowTo#NETWORK_OVERVIEW_THEORY_AND_PRAC)

[36] Consensus refers to a method of governance by which decisions are made through a process of deliberation and discussion until general agreement is reached by all members of a group. There are various means and procedures by which to arrive at consensus. For a short discussion on the history and deployment of consensus see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consensus>.

[37] Email interview May 18, 2004.

[38] <http://docs.indymedia.org>

[39] David Graeber, "The New Anarchists," at <http://www.newleftreview.net/NLR24704.shtml>

[40] It seems to me that King actually is attacking the shortcomings of the philosophical and political doctrines that animate these movements (free speech in the case of free software and

consensus among Indymedia), which he confusingly and problematically collapses as the same. To critique a social movement simply for its decision to practice consensus or follow free speech principles seems disingenuous, unless one is willing to engage with a more thoughtful examination of these underlying principles, their strengths and limitations, within the context of their actual implementation and in new organizational modalities. Mitchel 2002 on the other hand poses the problematic of democracy and openness in a more intelligible and intelligent manner "as a critique of the process of consensus that is deployed by Indymedia as opposed to some fundamental shortcomings in which rhetoric hides authentic drives for openness. "

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