GATHERING STORM:

THE OPEN CYBER FORUM OF INDYMEDIA

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The Independent Media Center is a network of collectively run media outlets for the creation of radical, objective, and passionate tellings of the truth.
                    -from the manifesto of the Boston IMC, March 2000

Let's make a network of communication among all our struggles and resistance's. An intercontinental network of alternative communication against neoliberalism...(and) for humanity. This intercontinental network of alternative communication will weave the channels so that words may travel all the roads that resist...(it) will be the medium by which distinct resistances communicate with one another. This intercontinental network of alternative communication is not an organizing structure, nor has a central head or decision maker, nor does it have a central command or hierarchies. We are the network, all of us who speak and listen.
                    -statement from the 1996 Encuentro in Chiapas

TEAMSTERS AND TURTLES, TOGETHER, AT LAST
                    -demonstrator's sign, Seattle N30, 1999

In Seattle and Davos, DC and Prague, in Calgary and Nice, media activists and environmentalists, labor rank and file and tree huggers coalesced into a formidable force that has had an impact not only on the international money lenders, but has caused major disruptions for agribusiness giants such as Monsanto and fashion outlets at the Mall like Gap and Nike.

One of the notable aspects of the activism of the past three years has been the powerful integration of the movement with the alternative media. This is not an attempt to "get on TV", but a commitment to create new forms of information sharing using new spaces and technologies and new ways of collaboration. This media movement has emerged through the creation of Independent Media Centers (IMCs), where media activists have constructed their own public information spaces, both physical and virtual, by integrating

various media formats and technologies: camcorders, web radio, streaming video, microradio, digital photography, community cable access channels, DBS transponders and laptop journalism. This time the revolution is not only televised, but digitized and streamed.

Behind the strategic blockades of the radical environmentalists and the lively and passionate video tapes and web sites produced by the camcorder commandos and data dancers, the IMCs represent a sea-change in the form of public action and its documentation. The most radical aspect of the anti-globalization movement is its non-hierarchical nature. The decision making is by consensus. All participants are themselves empowered. And that goes for the media, as well as the movement.

The Independent Media Centers have emerged as models, not only for new ways of media making, but as practical examples of collective production. Many different streams came together: the video activist community, the micro-radio pirates, the computer hacker/codewriters, the 'zine makers and the punk music world. These multi-media activists were ignited by several gatherings called The Next Five Minutes, organized by Geert Lovink, David Garcia and others in Amsterdam during the 1990s. These meetings provided a window on the possibilities of collaborative and participatory mega media events. As the global movement for justice and accountability arose to counter corporate globalization, there was finally a recognition by progressive groups of the importance of alternative media and the realization that the information/ entertainment oligarchy is at the forefront of global capital. The anti-globalization movement sees clearly that corporate media is an integral part of the problem. For these activists, creating new ways of communicating must be part of the solution. The success of the Independent Media Centers is seen as a concrete example that alternative structures for life and work can be effective and powerful.

From the beginning there has been a committment to democratic process on all levels within the IMCs. Decision making procedures are discussed frequently on IMC list serves. The movement for an alternative media, with its flexible and open structure, its democratic rendering of the use-values of new technologies, and its continual involvement in interconnecting people in a

transnational movement, provides an model of the evolution of a radical opposition, from the spontaneous appearance of individual creative practice, to the collective gathering of small co-operatives with enhancement of practical and technical skill, and to the growth of national and international collectives. The same force that binds together this movement also keeps it democratically communitarian. The following is a text which was intended to be included in a "how to" pamphlet for creating independent media centers:

DECISION-MAKING PROCEDURES: Current IMCs are collectively organized projects that run on principles of consensus. This organizing structure is inextricably bound to the successes of the IMCs. This non hierarchical process encourages every media maker to contribute his or her best work, and to participate as much as s/he desires. One model which has worked well when an IMC is operating at full capacity is having two meetings a day - one general meeting each evening and one 'spokescouncil' meeting each morning.

Each general meeting has been a consensus-based, meeting with multiple facilitators for the sake of parity (gender, racial, background, etc.). Each spokescouncil meeting has included team coordinators and/or empowered team representatives. Both meetings have meeting groups which hold decision-making power. At the general meetings, consensus has been reached among everyone present, while at the spokescouncil meetings only the empowered reps participated in the consensus (though everyone else in the room took part in the discussion). At general meetings coordinators have introduced themselves so their team members would know to whom they should go if they had where to bring their concerns. The coordinators brought would then bring those concerns to the spokescouncil meetings. This decision-making process has worked quite well, but it requires that both spokescouncil and general meetings be open to all.

The same force that binds together this movement also keeps it democratically communitarian. One characteristic of this media activity, and likewise the anti-globalization movement of which it is a part, is the fact that they are forthright in proclaiming the negation of capital. This movement increasingly refuses to compromise with the powers that be. Indeed, after Seattle, Prague and Genoa, it seemed as if the anti-globalization movement was beginning to

have the upper hand. As the summer of 2001 unfolded, there were increasing revelations about the illegal actions that took place during the Florida elections. Enron was collapsing and exposing the level of corruption that was possible in the age of corporate shell games. But then the World Trade Center was attacked and we see the steady rise of repression, increasing pressure on the constitution and civil rights in the rush to wage the "War on Terror".

In the current climate, the role of the Independent Media Center movement has not diminished. During the days following the World Trade Center attack, the New York Independent Media Center provided up to the minute first hand reports from ground zero. An imc video made during the first week has been screened in literally hundreds of venues, as people hunger to make sense of this tragedy.

Around the world, indymedia centers have continued to proliferate and thrive. The response the the December fall of the Argentine government(s) gave impetus to a wide use of the argentina.indymedia.org, both as a mobilizing tool for demonstrations and street actions, but as a forum for sorting out the situation and prospects for the future. In the emergency situation, the web site bacame a way for people in other parts of the country to exchange information that went beyond the internet. The rich media posts (video, audio and still photos) enabled groups to have spontaneous exhibitions in the streets of other cities and towns. Print outs of photos, texts and posters which had been posted on the argentine indymedia site were hung on clothes line in public parks. People gathered around the exhibition in the same way as people had done to read Chinese wall newspapers.

Video from Buenos Aires was circulated and projected in conjunction with these exhibitions, and also shown in union meetings, at "assembleas" (the self organizing collectives that have sprung up in many neighborhoods), at universities and in the streets.

The IMC Chiapas was initiated just before the indigenous groups from that beleaguered corner of Mexico left of a journey across the country to Mexico City. The IMC was mobile: on one of the buses in the caravan, where activists edited on lap tops the news as the group gained momentum adding followers

from each village they passed. Each day short videos, audio clips, photos and text provided testimony of the prior day's adventures. By the time the group was in Mexico City, an hour program had been edited, which combined with C-Span style coverage (with simultaneous translations) was uplinked via satellite to the Free Speech network and made available in streamed video on the web. This momentous event was unprecedented in Mexico. The Zoccalo plaza was filled with its largest crowd ever. This received scant attention in the main stream press, but the IMC sites all pointed to the Chipas posts and hundreds of thousands of visitors from all over the world were able to get first hand reports of the events.

Structure of the IMC's
The sub-groupings of an Independent Media Center are loosely divided by medium: within the physical space of the IMC, within specific web groupings and within email lists which service the various participants. For example, at an IMC there may be a Photo corner, where photographers have computers and space for scanning, to post still pictures to the web. This group will have separate meetings in addition to the general meetings. The photographers are part of a general indymedia-photo list serve, and may even have a separate list serve for photo within that location, i.e. photo-Seattle, photo-DC, etc. In addition to photo, there are similar groupings of video, radio, print, and tech/web.

In many cities there is a permanent physical dedicated space, in others the spaces for different activities can be in different locations. For example, in Argentina, the video collectives met in one space and the photographers another. Sometimes this is done for security reasons. Several IMC's have set up micro-radio stations which receive the programming via the web and are housed in separate spaces to make sure that the radio transmissions (technically illegal, but media activists claim the broadcasters are within their rights because they are broadcasting on the public airwaves.)

The sign in sheet (to receive an IMC press pass) at the Washington DC April 12 Independent Media Center tried to spell out the expectations of ownership and control:

The IMC is an all-volunteer, collectively-run media center operating as an alternative to corporate media and corporate institutions. It is a resource for pooling resources and getting the message out - it is not a resource for profit.

By presenting my I.D. and signing on to be an IMC affiliate, I confirm that I have read and understand the following and will work within these guidelines in order to make the most efficient use of space and resources to accomplish the IMC's mission (see below). I understand that if I choose to behave outside of these guidelines, I am not acting in agreement with the IMC and my participation will be limited at the discretion of the IMC core team.

I will behave non-violently when in IMC spaces, when covering events as an IMC participant, or in any capacity related to the IMC's functioning. This includes refraining from abusive language and behavior that is racist, homophobic, or sexist.

I will not engage in ANY illegal activities while in an IMC space.

There is a "Principles of Unity" agreement that calls for consensus decision making. Developing an authentic consensus is always difficult and time consuming. As an IMC handbook puts it:
There is a tricky trade-off to negotiate: on one hand, you want to let able, willing people with the ability to take action do so without too much hassle about it; on the other hand, you want checks and balances to make sure people's voices are heard and to keep decision making power from centralizing beyond what is functionally necessary.[1]

Questions of Representation
Indymedia was initiated by groups who had already been active in alternative media: Paper Tiger, Deep Dish, Headwaters Video Collective, Sleeping Giant, Changing America, Speak Easy, Free Speech TV and others. There was a convergence between these media activists and the movements for justice and against corporate globalization. In a challenging essay that has been

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widely distributed on list serves and web sites, Betita Martinez, Bay Area Chicana activist, has charged that the antiglobalization movement is mostly white[2], without major participation of people of color, who are often on the victims of the sort of restructuring that is imposed by IMF and World Bank "reforms". Within the IMCs there is in fact a dependence on the technical skills of mostly white young males. Since the IMCs are by and large volunteer organizations often using equipment loaned for the occasion, many working class youth cannot afford to donate their time and may not have the technical equipment to contribute to this sort of non-profit work.

There are those who are attempting to address this situation. In a note for planning a tactical meeting on the IMCs someone wrote: How can we bridge gaps in gender, color, culture, age, access, language, and "otherness" for capacity building and empowerment? These are on-going discussions on the web and in IMC community meetings about outreach to communities of color. For the most part the IMCs have been able to work without breaking into constituent identity groups which was quite destructive of many left movements in the 1990s. The indymedia groupings are around tasks and types of equipment and there is a conscious attempt to broaden the representation. *I was proposing to think about the possibility of a radical democratic citizenship... in which we are going to try to articulate in a common identity this multiplicity of political space*.
<div align="right">-Chantal Mouffe[3]</div>

The Format of the Web Page
Though quite popular and visited by literally millions, the indymedia websites are not about spectacle, but about involvement, engagement and participation. The front page is divided into columns, the first being links to all the IMC websites from the various locations through out the world. The

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center section is a loosely edited, regularly up-dated, news post. The right hand column is for on-going continual posting open to all. The software which is used was initially developed in Australia by Matthew Arnison and other techs with CAT (Community Activist Technology) for use by activist organizations on that continent.[4] It has been tweaked and formatted by Manse Jacobi, of Freespeech TV, Chris Burnett of Regeneration TV, and others of the IMC tech team. This software enables any browser/reader to easily post their own text, photos, audio, video files and or still photographs. Each location site has archives of pictures, audio/video and texts. The selections on the center column of the indymedia website are selected and edited into an on-going montage of information. However, these selected items are drawn from the spontaneous posts; they run unedited in the form that was initially posted. These "headline stories" are immediately linked to any comments which are posted unedited in response. This is clearly different from the simplified news bites which are fed to passive viewers of CNN.com. Meanwhile, the side bar of the indymedia page is a first-come, first-serve, open bulletin board. This side bar can be searched for specific media, for example for all the video posts, or radio or photo segments. It has been estimated that over 15,000 still photographs alone are available through IMC sites.

Transmission

From the first days in Seattle, there has been an emphasis to disseminate the IMC productions beyond the internet. **The Blind Spot,** Seattle IMC's daily newpaper which was composed and available on line, was also printed in hard copy tabloid editions of several thousand and distributed to cafes, demonstrations and other public locations. The web radio was transmitted on micro and community radio stations in many locations, often over several channels in the host location. In Seattle the video was literally bicycled (the streets were closed to cars) to a satellite uplink. For five days, an hour program comprised of a half hour of the Seattle actions was transmitted by Deep Dish TV along with a half hour documentary giving background information. These satellite transmissions were picked up by community

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[4]For more information, there is an interview with Mathew Arnison by Madhava in Punk Planet, April 2001, p 101-103

stations: public access, educational and governmental channels, and retransmitted to their audiences.

This network of collaborating media channels did not just spring up during the WTO protests. Deep Dish Network and Freespeech TV have been collecting independent work for this ad hoc network for years. Deep Dish pioneered this sort of targeted programming during the Gulf War in 1991, when they produced ten programs before, during and after the war. At a time when only military press conferences and heroic stories of US troops were presented on the corporate channels (and I include PBS in the corporate list, as much of their programming at this time was funded by General Motors, maker of the tanks used in the war), Deep Dish, working with independent and community producers from around the country, was able to present the many voices of opposition to the Gulf War.

During the 2001 political conventions in Philadelphia and Los Angeles, thirty five hours of live programs were transmitted live, using roll-in tapes from the day's events. Each day, a morning news program, hosted by Amy Goodman and Juan Gonzalez of Pacifica Radio, was presented. In diversity, in depth of content, in exposing the contradictions of the Republican Convention, the IMC programming far surpassed anything either commercial networks or Jim Lehrer could offer.[5]

The entire operation is done with a small grant from Freespeech TV, and a few

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private donors, even though the production is on a scale that would cost main stream news outlets millions. The IMCs are successful because of the high level of volunteer assistance, especially from the digital tech community. An example of the improvisatory nature of the network is what happened when the Seattle indymedia site got literally millions of hits during the WTO meetings. Technicians browsing the site from various locations were aware that the site was overloaded with visitors. Several mirror servers, including some from other countries, sprang into action, expanding the band width capacity to handle the over-flow.

(We need) a nimble, plural, international guerrilla strategy to break the corporate grip on democracy.[6]   Hilary Wainwright, Red Pepper

Years before the world wide web, Hans Magnus Enzensberger wrote, "The open secret of the electronic media, the decisive political factor, which has been waiting, suppressed or crippled, for its moment to come, is their mobilizing power."[7] He could hardly have predicted the way in which the media themselves were mobilized. Using e-mail and the web, activists have been able to create a community of information gatherers and distributors, which can react quickly to events and build a net of audience/producers at local, regional and international levels.

Enzensberger notes the collaborative potential: "A further characteristic of the most advanced media--probably the decisive one...is their collective structure."[8] The collaborative nature of the Indymedia work is something the mainstream press can't fathom. In covering this media revolution, the corporate press, either unwilling or unable to see the implications of this new form of information sharing, has focused on trying to find evidence of "hacking". Hacking is something the main stream reporters can deal with. The more complex forms of anti-global cyber activism they can't appreciate. They are stuck with the notion of a sort of individual geek working as maverick

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computer terrorist and they have a hard time "getting" decentralized consensus based media affinity groups.

In Australia, during the demonstrations in Melbourne at the September 2000 meeting of the World Economic Forum, "J.M.G." posted:
The inabilities of the mainstream media to comprehensively document the issues and events surrounding S11 are contrasted by the growing number of community based, independent media outlets and individuals granted a forum for interactive dialogue through IndyMedia. The IndyMedia site provides a 'channel' for open discourse, free of editorial, as a simple click on the 'publish' button enables anyone and everyone to upload their stories. Rather than challenging or infiltrating the mainstream the objective of IndyMedia is to create a system outside of the dominant socio-political culture, empowering citizens by providing greater access and opportunity. Under this method of communication the traditional concept of the 'audience' is refuted - challenging the reader/writer to come to their own conclusions by wading through the diverse range of stories relating to s11 and other events. The sheer enormity and breadth of information available has lead to a greater level of engagement with both the issues and the other reader/writers. Creating this space for audience control has harnessed the inherent qualities of hypertext - unlike the majority of on-line news services, which remain overwhelmingly one-way in their transmission.

Mainstream Coverage of Indymedia
The anti-corporate stance can sometimes be a complicated by the contradictions between the desire for exposure of the issues and the need for material support for the IMC operations. What is the principled stand when profit driven corporations who happen to have millions of viewers wish to utilize the footage or information gathered in this non-hierarchical, non-profit mode? There are endless discussions on the various IMC list serves about whether the footage should be given out right to mainstream networks in hopes of maximizing exposure, or whether this sort of archival sale can be a way of supporting and sustaining the IMC movement.

The distrust of mainstream media has been codified in the "IMC Blueprint" with the following rules:

Try to get mainstream media to schedule times to come to the IMC so it is possible to let everyone know they were are coming. If possible, we try to clear a the scheduled mainstream media visit through a general meeting.
2. All mainstream media doing articles on the IMC should register as mainstream media - it is even possible to give them special passes to wear while they are in the IMC.
3. Someone from the outreach team can accompany mainstream media at all times when they are in the IMC.[9]

Sometimes IMC activities catch the interest of the press and greatly increase the number of visitors to the web site. As related by "J.M.G.":
Creative applications of the Internet technology during the S11 protests demonstrated the ability of the Net to not only function as an organizational tool but also as a form of civil disobedience in cyberspace. The tongue-in-cheek link to John Farnham's 'You're the Voice' - chosen as the S11 song - and the clever 'hactivism' which redirected users from www.nike.com to www.S11.org, generated considerable discussion within the press, radio and television media. This publicity alerted new audiences to the existence of the site incrementally increasing the number of hits the site received. The old media was important in publicizing and drawing attention to the new, highlighting the fact that, although the Net is an important new tool, activists still largely rely on coverage in the traditional media and cannot rely solely upon the emerging communications networks.[10]

Main stream critics have snidely put down the indy media activity as being contradictory: using corporate tools such as the internet to attack corporate agenda. Indymedia makers have countered that that is a time honored guerrilla tactic-- to turn the tools of the oppressors against them. However, a more considered rejoinder is that the internet was developed in a collaborative process through public funding via educational institutions. The creation did not spring from a search for profitable products to market. The entire effort was subsidized by public grants and nurtured in an atmosphere of mutual cooperation, not unlike the process of indymedia itself. The early

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internet researchers were not initially making products that the commercial sector could (and would) develop. As e-commerce takes over much of the band width, it is efforts such as indy media that are preserving the authentic interactive potential of the internet and, as such, preserving its role as a progressive public resource.

Problems

The open format of indymedia makes it a vulnerable target for the right wing and agents of the National Security Apparatus. There have been posts that are clearly an attempt at disinformation. These have been roundly attacked by counter posting, but sometimes damage is done. The infiltration of the movements in Philadelphia and Los Angeles were troubling, but rather obvious. The Indymedia web was a way that specific agitators and infiltrators were identified and cautioned against. But this sort of counter reaction is also subject to misuse by infiltrators. As the Bush regime takes power in Washington, these efforts to destabilize the movement will surely increase, and may become more tricky to fight as police tactics become more subtle and difficult to spot.

Another, recently developing problem is the use of the posting as a sort of chat room. Some of the discussions have become hang-outs for particular characters, who regularly visit and post just to rant with their friends. This happens less in times of activist actions (such as during Prague) but makes it sometimes tedious to read the posts.

A major problem is sustainability. This effort has been built largely with volunteer work. There are tensions and burn-out to contend with. Since the initial work is usually getting coverage of an event, it has been hard to continue the work with the same energy and direction. One exciting way to overcome this is now being explored, through the development of

Several efforts are now going on to try to present a regular daily news cast in the U.S., which could provide an on-going focus and center for media activities.

Dialogue

The process of indymedia is completely open, and completely accountable: there is no gate keeping, no selection process (except for what is selected for emphasis on the center news column). Any statement is immediately available for comment, discussion and/or correction, or disruption (as may become a growing problem). Hopefully this open accountable structure can deflect sabotage attempts by provocateurs and other agents of state repression.

This open structure is especially appropriate for the type of movement which has evolved around globalization. As "J.M.G." points out:
The time limitations of the {mainstream} news format, demanding concision and the production of neat binary oppositions, does not lend itself well to a comprehensive coverage of something as diverse and complex as the S11 protests. Whereas there are clear difficulties in the format of mainstream news, oversimplification of the issues was inappropriate as both the political issues and the protesters themselves were multifaceted and resistant to basic explanations. The Internet technology, as applied by the IndyMedia news service, was much more conducive to permitting a proliferation of heterogeneous voices.

The struggle against neoliberalism has many fronts, reflected in the loosely compiled, spontaneous postings, which vary from rant to thoughtful essay. The discussions on the indy sites range from first person reporting of events to reflection on tactics (how the Prague demonstrators utilized colorful pepper spray-proof costumes), to non-violence (one of the most active discussions are the comment pages with a photo of a molotov cocktail landing on a line of police in Prague), to cautionary identification of police informants, to detailed information about bio-genetic experiments. Those who are physically present at an IMC are only a fraction of those who participate. Photographers, video makers, radio people, writers and web mavens can post from any location, any continent. During the Prague uprising, photos from solidarity demonstrations in Sao Paolo were posted. Each photo, each video, each radio and text post to any of the indymedia sites is then subject to discussion within the site on the web. There is no single voice, no "party line".

There are passionate postings about race and inclusion, about effective strategies for facilitating meetings, about securing legal assistance, and

documentation procedures for anticipated court trials. This movement is comprised of eclectic groupings of progressive organizations, from those labeled sects, to those engaged in electoral party building, to those who eschew any formal organization designation. Indymedia has served an important function in facilitating communication between many of these groups and individuals. For perhaps the first time an open and on-going global dialogue is evolving about building a different kind of world. People and groups on the left are talking to each other. Through these discussions and the international coalitions that grow with them, a movement is emerging whose strength and breadth have no need of vanguardism and whose medium is history itself.