

Indymedia and the new net news

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Bit 1 Scores of farm workers on hunger strike in the US. A campaigner for affordable housing abducted in Cape Town. Tens of thousands of anti-war demonstrators marching in Istanbul. None of those stories made my daily paper — instead, I read them all this morning on the global Indymedia network . Developments in communication technologies have often enabled new approaches to the production, distribution and reception of news. In this article, using Carey's analysis of the impacts of the telegraph (1989) and Burnett and Marshall's discussion of 'informational news' (2003) as starting points, I want to offer some examples from the brief history of the Indymedia movement to show how the Net is making possible a significant shift in who gets to make the news.

Bit 2 The telegraph offers a number of useful perspectives from which to consider the impacts of the Net, and there are some striking parallels between the dot.com boom of the 1990s and the dot.dash boom of the 19th century. Telegraphy, writes James Carey, 'permitted for the first time the effective separation of communication from transportation' (203). The telegraph was not only an instrument of business, but 'a thing to think with, an agency for the alteration of ideas' (204). And a consideration of the telegraph offers a number of examples of the relationships between technological form and the nature of news.

Bit 3 One such example, in Carey's analysis, was the impact of the telegraph on the language and nature of journalism. 'If the same story were to be understood in the same way from Maine to California,' he writes, 'language had to be flattened out and standardised' (210). Local colour was bleached out of news reports to make them saleable in a market unconstrained by geography. 'The origins of objectivity,' Carey argues, 'may be sought, therefore, in the necessity of stretching language in space over the long lines of Western Union' (210). The telegraph didn't just affect the quality of news — it greatly increased the quantity of it as well, forcing greater attention to be paid to the management of newsrooms. News became a commodity; not only that, just like cattle or wheat, news was now subject to all the vagaries of any other commodity business, from contracts and price gouging to outright theft (211). And in Western Union, the telegraph made possible the prototype of today's transnational media firms (201).

Bit 4 As the telegraph solved problems of communicating across space, it opened up time as a new arena for expansion. In this sense, the gradual emergence of 24-hour broadcasting schedules is traceable to the impact of the telegraph (Carey, 228). A key legacy of this impact is the rise to primacy of CNN and its imitators, offering round-the-clock news coverage made possible by satellite transmission. This too changed the nature of news. As McKenzie Wark has pointed out, a 24-hour continuous news service is not ideally compatible with the established narrative strategies of news. Rather than cutting and shaping events to fit familiar narrative forms, CNN instead introduced an emphasis on what Wark calls 'the queer concept of "live" news

coverage — an instant audiovisual presence on the site of an event' (38).

Bit 5 This focus on speed and immediacy, on being the first on the scene, leads to news that is all event and no process. More than this, it leads at times to revealing moments when CNN-style coverage becomes obvious as a component part of the event it purports to cover. In his analysis of the Tiananmen Square crisis of 1989 Wark argues that the media event appeared as 'a positive feedback loop' (22). The Beijing students' perceptions of Western accounts of their demands and motives became caught up in the students' own accounts of their own motives, their own demands: Western interpretations of what was happening in Beijing, Wark writes, 'fed back into the event itself via a global loop encompassing radio, telephone, and fax vectors. They impacted back on the further unfolding of the event itself' (22).

Bit 6 Both the telegraph and the satellite contributed to major shifts in the production, distribution and reception of news. And both made possible new types of media institution, from Western Union and Reuters to CNN. This is not to argue that technologies determine the nature of news or of news organisations, but rather that certain developments are made possible by both the adoption and the adaptation of new technologies. Institutional and cultural factors, of course, affect the nature of news, but technology also both enables and constrains. The medium might not be the message — but it does matter.

Bit 7 So with such precedents as those above in mind, what might be the key impacts of the Net on the nature of news? In an important analysis of the online news environment, Robert Burnett and P. David Marshall introduce the concept of 'informational news,' defined as 'the transformation of journalism and news in Web culture where there is a greater involvement of the user and news hierarchies are in flux' (206). News, they argue, has become 'a subset of a wider search for information by Web users' (206) and this 'has led to a shift in how we recontextualise news around a much larger search for information' (152).

Bit 8 In this analysis, audience members are transformed into researchers. These researchers become comfortable with getting their news from a broader range of sources, while at the same time searching for new ways to hierarchise those sources, to establish some as more legitimate than others. Adding to the complexity are Burnett and Marshall's observations that new media forms offer enhanced flexibility (with, for example, archival access to news databases, including audio and video, available 24 hours a day), and that online news fosters and caters for new global communities of interest (161-7).

Bit 9 When these phenomena are taken together, the result for Burnett and Marshall is 'a shifted boundary of what constitutes news' (167). But this concept of informational news is largely cast in terms of reception and consumption: the practices of the new informational news researchers are discussed in terms of information retrieval, not production — even newsgroups and Weblogs are considered as additional sources for information retrieval, rather than as new avenues for new kinds of journalists to develop and publish new kinds of news. Burnett and Marshall are, I believe,

right in their identification of changes to the nature of news, and their analysis is an important contribution. But what I want to emphasise in this article is that there is also a corresponding ongoing shift in the boundary of what constitutes newsmakers.

Bit 10 The Indymedia movement offers clear examples of this, in its spectacular growth and in its promotion of open publishing models. As a forum for non-professional journalists of all stripes, Indymedia's development is a vivid example of the shifting boundary around who gets to make the news. By now, many readers will perhaps be familiar with Indymedia to some degree. But it's worth briefly reviewing both the scope of the movement and the speed with which it's developed.

Bit 11 The first Indymedia Website was established for the Seattle demonstrations against the World Trade Organisation meeting in November 1999. Its key feature was offering news coverage supplied by anyone who wanted to contribute, using free software and ideas from the Australian activists who had created the Active network. As events in Seattle gathered pace, the nascent Indymedia drew a claimed 1.5 million hits; this success led to the site being refocused around several subsequent protests, before local collectives began to appear and form their own Indymedia centres. Within a year, this original Indymedia site was just one of a new network of more than 30. At the time of writing, a little over three years on from the movement's inception, there are more than 100 Indymedia centres around the world — there are both Israeli and Palestinian Indymedia; Indymedia is established in Mumbai, Jakarta and Buenos Aires; there are centres in Poland, Colombia and South Africa. By any measure, this is a remarkable achievement for a decentralised project run entirely by volunteers and donations. Like any other complex phenomenon, the story of this development can be told in many different ways, each adding a different dimension. Three are especially relevant here.

Bit 12 The first version would centre around the Active software developed by Sydney's Catalyst tech collective. This was devised to create the Active Sydney <http://www.sydney.active.org.au/> site, an online hub for Sydney activists to promote events from direct actions to screenings and seminars. Launched in January 1999, Active Sydney was to become a prototype for Indymedia — part events calendar, part meeting place, part street paper. For June of that year, the Active team revised the system for the J18 global day of action. Using this system, anyone could now upload a report, a video clip, a photo or an audio file, and see it instantly added to the emerging narrative of events. It was as easy as sending email. And it ran on open source code. With Catalyst members collaborating online with organisers in Seattle to establish the first site, this system became the basis for Indymedia. While the Active software is no longer the only platform used for Indymedia sites, it made a huge contribution to the movement's explosive growth (see Arnison, 2001; Meikle, 2002).

Bit 13 Another version of the story would place Indymedia within the long traditions of alternative media. John Downing's work is important here, and his definition of 'politically dissident media that offer radical alternatives to mainstream debate' is useful (240). To tell the Indymedia story from this perspective would be to highlight its independence and self-management, and the autonomy of each local editorial collective in running each Indymedia centre. It would be to emphasise Indymedia as a forum for viewpoints which are not usually expressed within the established media's consensus about what is and isn't news. And, perhaps most importantly, to tell the Indymedia story as one in the alternative media tradition would be to focus on the extent to which this movement fosters horizontal connections and open participation, in contrast to the vertical flows of the established broadcast and print media (Downing, 1995).

Bit 14 A third version would approach Indymedia as part of what cultural studies academic George McKay terms 'DiY Culture.' McKay defines this as 'a youth-centred and -directed cluster of interests and practices around green radicalism, direct action politics, new musical sounds and experiences' (2). For this version of the story, a useful analogy would be with punk — not with the music so much as with its DIY access principle ('here's three chords, now form a band'). DIY was the key to Richard Hell's much-misunderstood lyric 'I belong to the blank generation' — the idea of the blank was that you were supposed to fill it in for yourself, rather than sign up to someone else's agenda.

Bit 15 To consider Indymedia as part of this DIY spirit would be to see it as the expression of a blank generation in this fine original sense — not a vacant generation, but one prepared to offer their own self-definitions and to create their own media networks to do it. More than this, it would also be to place Indymedia within the frameworks of independent production and distribution which were the real impact of punk — independent record labels changed music more than any of their records, while photocopied zines opened up new possibilities for self-expression. Just as the real importance of punk wasn't in the individual songs, the importance of Indymedia isn't in this or that news story posted to this or that site. Instead, it's in its DIY ethos and its commitment to establishing new networks.

Bit 16 What these three versions of the Indymedia story share is that each highlights an emphasis on access and participation; each stresses new avenues and methods for new people to create news; each shifts the boundary of who gets to speak. And where these different stories intersect is in the concept of open publishing. This is the Net making possible a shift in the production of news, as well as in its reception. Matthew Arnison of Catalyst, who played a key role in developing the Active software, offers a working definition of open publishing which is worth quoting in full:

'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 can think of a better way for the software to help shape editorial decisions, they can copy the software because it is free and change it and start their own site. If they want to redistribute the news, they can, preferably on an open publishing site.' (Arnison, 2001)

Bit 17 Open publishing has undoubtedly been a big part of the appeal of Indymedia for its many contributors. In fact, one of Indymedia's slogans is 'everyone is a journalist.' If this is a provocation, who and what is it meant to provoke? Obviously, 'everyone' is not a journalist — at least not if journalists are seen as employees of news institutions and news businesses, employees with some kind of training in research methods and narrative construction. But to say that 'everyone is a journalist' is not to claim that everyone has such institutional affiliation, or that everyone has such training or expertise. Instead, the tactic here seems to be to inflate something out of all proportion in order to draw attention to the core smaller truth that may

otherwise go unnoticed. Specifically in this case, what authorises some to be story-tellers and not others? From this perspective, the slogan reads like a claim for difference, a claim that other kinds of expertise and other kinds of know-how also have valid claims on our attention, and that these too can make valid contributions to the more plural media environment made possible — but not guaranteed — by the Net. It's a claim that the licence to tell stories should be shared around.

Bit 18 But developments to this core element — open publishing — point both to an ongoing challenge for the Indymedia movement, and to a possible future which might enable a further significant shift in the nature of Net news. In March 2002, a proposal was circulated to remove the open publishing newswire from the front page of the main site at <http://www.indymedia.org/>, replacing this with features sourced from local sites around the world. While this was said to have the objective of promoting those local sites to a broader audience, it should also be seen as acknowledgement that Indymedia was struggling against limits to growth. One issue was the large number of items being posted to sites, which meant that even especially well-researched or significant stories would be replaced quickly on the front page; another issue was the persistent trolls and spam which plagued some Indymedia sites. In April 2002, after a voting process in which 15 Indymedia collectives from Brazil to Barcelona voted unanimously in favour of the reform, the open publishing newswire was taken off the front page. Many local Indymedia sites followed suit. Even the Sydney site, which, perhaps because of the history and involvement of the Catalyst group, promotes open publishing rather more than some other Indymedia sites, adopted a features-based front page in August 2002, stating that 'promoting certain issues above others' would make the site 'more effective.'

Bit 19 These developments might signal the eventual demise of the open publishing component. Indymedia might instead become 'professionalised,' with greater reliance on de facto staff reporters and more stringent editing, moving closer to existing alternative media outlets. But the new centrality of its news features might also open Indymedia up to a new level of involvement, because those features are given prominence in the site's central column and can remain on the front page for some weeks. This offers the potential for what Arnison terms 'automated open-editing'. This would involve creating the facility for audience members to contribute to sub-editing stories on an Indymedia site: they might, for instance, check facts or add sources; edit spelling, grammar or formatting; nominate a topic area within which a given story could be archived; or translate the story from one language or style to another (Arnison, 2001).

Bit 20 Open publishing is one phenomenon in which we can see the Net enabling changes to the nature of news and newsmakers. If open editing were also to work, then it would need to be as simple to operate as the original open publishing newswire. But if this were possible, then open editing might involve not only more new people in the development of informational news, but involve them in new ways, catering for a broader range of abilities and aptitudes than open publishing alone. Like earlier communication technologies, the Net could facilitate new types of media institution — ones built on an open model, which enable a new, more plural, news environment.

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Links

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<http://www.cat.org.au/maffew/cat/openpub.html>

<http://www.indymedia.org/>

<http://www.sydney.active.org.au/>

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