

# The Independent Media Center: A new model

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Since its birth in Seattle in late 1999 during demonstrations against the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Independent Media Center (IMC) Network has grown to over one hundred and ten autonomous centres in thirty-five countries. With half a million to two million page views a day, these multi-media sites provide an important source of counter information about struggles against corporate-led globalisation, as well as local, national and international campaigns for peace and social justice. Operating with very little cash, the Network sustains itself on volunteer labour and donations, and as importantly, news and information from its audience through 'open publishing.'

The IMC was not the first network of alternative media to counter the messaging of the dominant corporate and state media; nor to support the growing international opposition to the neo-liberal agenda promoted by the WTO and other multilateral agencies (Kidd, 2003). Neither was it the first to emphasize collectivist self-management, nor to work closely with social movements, or to produce information by and for those usually excluded by the dominant media (Downing, 2001, Atton, 2002).

However, the scope and scale of the IMC Network surpasses these earlier media projects, minimizing many of the enormous costs and difficulties of production and distribution via its global digital platform. The IMC operates simultaneously at local, regional and international levels, via multi-media on-line and through older media channels off-line. The Network has also created new forms of participatory media-making and reception. Its innovative Open Publishing format encourages 'people to become the media by posting their own articles, analyses and information to the site... from any computer that is connected to the Internet' (Indymedia. Global, 2003). Audiences can become their own news editors, using multiple networking and interactive options to select information from a wide diversity of news sources, resource links, and discussion opportunities from around the world.

Since my first encounter during the WTO protests in Seattle I have been impressed with the IMC. As a veteran of community video and radio, I argue that the IMC's networked resource of sophisticated technology and crews, its do-it-yourself (DIY) mode of media-making for news creators and readers, and its connection to a developing global social justice movement combine to create a new watershed of autonomous communications (Kidd, 2003). In this article, I review some of their successes and failures and the challenges they face.

Conjuncture of social forces and a convergence of technologies

The IMC was no accident, but the result of the historical conjuncture of an emerging global social movement, and two groups of skilled workers both operating with heritages of collective intelligence, and using the new digital technologies. Since its birth in the high-tech incubator of Seattle, home of Microsoft and others, the IMC has enlisted many young, talented techies from around the world who developed their expertise in the high-tech centres and in the peer to peer networks of the Open Source movement. With sophisticated problem-solving skills, and as importantly, an ethos of collaboration, they built a digital environment featuring free software and open source code, which, in large measure, spurred the Network's rapid growth as centres everywhere could quickly share the resource.<sup>1</sup> The global tech crew remains indispensable, sharing the support and improvement of sites and the network as a whole via cyberspace, and often from day jobs in the corporate world.

The Seattle IMC also drew on cross-generational and cross-craft collaboration between younger and older media activists and artists from community and micro-radio, independent video and access TV, 'zine makers and the independent press' (Halleck, 2001). This initial collaboration continues in the regional video, radio and print teams, as well as the features working group, which responsible for the web-site's global centre column. News producers have also taken advantage of the global distribution of consumer priced digital audio and video recorders, which are lighter, easier to use, and whose signals can be streamed instantaneously (where the bandwidth exists). As well, many centres combine the new media with older print, radio and video formats, the mainstream media for many working class and poorer communities, in both north and south.

Finally, the IMC Network grew out of the emerging global social justice movement. Many IMC centres took first breath in the counter-planning to meetings of global corporate capital such as the WTO in Seattle, the G8 in Genoa, and the Free Trade of the Americas (FTAA) in Quebec and Brazil. A key common understanding of this new movement, as Dee Dee Halleck has noted, was that the 'informational/entertainment oligarchy [w]as one of the pillars of global capital' which produced a passive consumer culture, and did not address issues that challenged the status quo. Part of the new movement's solution to the corporate oligarchy was to recognize the utility of alternative media and the importance of new ways of communicating (2002: 417).

### **Become the media**

The IMC Network, like many earlier alternative media, rejected the commercial media model, in which information is commodified and sold to passive audiences through the branded channels of corporate media. However, their approach was only one of two distinct media paradigms that emerged in Seattle. The other approach was best represented by the professional communicators of the international non-governmental organizations. They carefully trained a corps of communicators to speak back to power using a similar rational appeal, in formal meetings and press conferences (Wall, 2003, Uzelman, 2002).

In contrast, the IMC's approach paralleled the direct action in the streets. They not only wanted to publicize counter-information, but to change the relations of production and reception too (Uzelman, 2002). The goal was to create a very different kind of synergy between producers and audiences, as encapsulated in an early banner on the Italian site: 'Don't Hate the Media – Become the Media.' The IMC promoted a do-it-yourself approach for both media producers and audiences with a minimum of gate-keeping. Instead of passive consumers of information, audiences were encouraged to actively surf the site's unbounded riches of information, and act as their own news editors.

#### Growing pains

The IMC Network has grown very rapidly from the downtown Seattle shop-front in the midst of the anti-WTO mobilizations. As the wave of protests against corporate globalisation grew, so did the Network, as centres joined on their own, or with the boost of international support teams in hot spots such as Chiapas, Palestine, and Iraq. The rapid growth was also due to the dynamism of the model, which was very cheap and easily reproducible. Many centres share servers and the operating code, and the decentralized networked structure is designed so that each centre manages itself, after signing on to a common agreement with the Network, making central overhead costs minimal (Indymedia.Global. FAQ, p.6).

This astonishing pace of development has not been without growing pains. Like many of the precursor alternative media, the IMC Network continually deals with problems of sustainability, uneven and unequal distribution of resources around the globe, attacks from hostile governments and individuals, as well as the difficulties inherent in creating and sustaining a more democratic communications model in an increasingly enclosed corporate media environment.

The Network was initially propelled by the heady days of protest against corporate globalisation. The focus on days of action, dispersed around the globe, helped share the work among small, closely-knit teams working all-out for short periods. Yet this carnivalesque pace of production and dependence on individual volunteers is hard to sustain. As well, volunteers tend to represent young, white, professional class men, from countries of the North, and this remains a constant concern (Rinaldo, 2000, Angulo, 2003).<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless the Network continues to grow, and to sustain itself through reliance on volunteers, donated computer server space, and minimal cash donations.

The IMC's high visibility during mass protests has also made it more vulnerable to external threat. Centres have been raided by national and international security agencies in the US, Canada, Italy and Spain, and their web-sites spammed by hackers from State security forces, right-wing organizations and individuals. In advance of the meetings of the European Union in Barcelona, Spain, in 2002, the Spanish police announced they were tracking the IMC and other alternative information networks (Alzaga, 2002). IMC Netherlands was shut down by authorities temporarily because of a link to a German site which authorities there had closed for posting an article detailing methods for stopping trains carrying nuclear waste (Roving, 2002).

Remarkably, the Network continues to morph as a result of adding new people and centres with different approaches, changes within the social movements themselves, and, in response to shifting geo-politics. The IMC still features international coverage of major counter-meetings of the WTO. The Bush regime's war-making has provided another impetus as sites reported on the massive peace demonstrations around the world. Many of the centres and the global site also combine a protest focus with coverage of ongoing local, national, and international peace and social justice campaigns. Most provide links to other alternative and independent media 'in an effort to diversify content and promote alternative media as a whole' (Shumway, 2002,9). Several have also widened their representation to include activist groups outside the white-dominated global justice movement.

Although there are many difficulties coordinating efforts throughout the entire Network, other kinds of links have formed between project –based groups, or between specific regions. As well, the IMC Network has begun to play a role in the emerging international media democracy movement. Most recently, activists with IMC roots have become involved in media reform campaigns in North America, Europe and South Africa, and internationally in the lead-up to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS).

#### Strength in diversity

The tremendous power of the convergent and networked architecture shrunk the battles over resources, but by no means eliminated them. Telephone lines, computers, Internet access and volunteer expertise and time remain unequally distributed between rich and poor, and particularly between the northern Atlantic and everywhere else. As Luz Ruiz of Chiapas Media puts it, 'most people in Chiapas don't have access to water, let alone the Internet.' Nor do most poor people, and especially women, have the free time to volunteer (Ruiz, 2003).

However the Network's strength is its global reach into many different communities with a diversity of traditions of alternative media and social justice movement organizing, and there has been no shortage of resourcefulness in dealing with these challenges. For example, in Chiapas, as in many southern centres, the Internet is mostly used as a distribution conduit, with local production primarily via audiotapes and radio. In Brazil, the Internet is used primarily to gather and circulate news, which is then sent to a network of free and community radio stations. In Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, the local crews take video documentaries back out to the communities where they were produced to foster discussion. Many Brazilian Centres also distribute printed news-sheets that are photocopied and posted on walls all over the city, because of lack of funds for printed copies (Ortellado, 2003).

The Argentina IMC also works both on and off-line. Begun during the surge of organizing against the national government, and IMF policies, in 2001, the Buenos Aires collective coordinates shows of videos and photos, workshops on the Internet, and journalism and popular education with groups of workers, neighbourhood assemblies, and among the traditional left parties and independent political and cultural organizations (Boido, 2003).

### The commoner's burden<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the greatest challenge of the IMC has been to create a more accessible open and democratic communications model for the grassroots within the increasingly enclosed system of the corporate media. The IMC Network, as do all other alternative media, operate in an environment saturated with the mainstream prototypes of info-tainment, or state sponsored messaging, well-massaged in easy sound-bites. The global social justice movement and the IMC were formed partly in response to the impact of this growing corporate media presence. Nevertheless, it is still difficult to break the ties of those conventions of media use. Even if the digital access question was solved, most people still do not have the time to produce their own stories, nor to read Indymedia with the critical eye and self-motivated searching that the site demands.

The IMC's daring experiment has been to open the communications system through the rapid admission of new member groups, the sharing of the code and the development of Open Publishing architecture. This strategic decision has not been without consequences. Several sites, especially the global Israel and Palestine IMC's, have been systematically hacked and attacked, and there is a continuing plague of racist, right-wing or hate-filled commentaries throughout the Network. As well, while the rapid open-ended development has elicited a bounty of material, the quality is very uneven. Many of the stories are written by and for other activists, with little attempt to provide background information and context.

While the main plank of the strategy of openness remains, there have been some changes. Most local sites are now more closely monitored, with articles ranked. As well, a Newswire Working Group clears duplicate posts, commercial messages and moves posts to 'hidden articles' (Global.Media. 4). In response to the harassment, and also as a way to reinforce the global diversity and unity, the centre column now features stories selected from the entire Network. Each of these changes has elicited controversy, as many have argued against any new gate-keeping protocols. This trend towards selection, or at least ranking, of content, could lead to a professionalisation of news writing and editing, or to a much more peer to peer network, in which audiences are actively enlisted in ranking and curating stories (Meikle, 2002a). The question posed by Sheri Herndon of the original Seattle IMC, is whether the IMC crews should be editors or librarians? (Herndon, 2003).

### Conclusion

As the neoliberal project has fostered the extension of corporate media world-wide, it has also created conditions of radical possibility. In four short years, the IMC has grown a world-wide information Network that provides a vital resource for the global social justice movements amidst the encroaching global corporate enclosure of media. This qualitative shift from a praxis of media 'alternatives' grew from the collective intelligence of old and new media producers and artists, who shared their technologies and techniques. The IMC prefigures a form of 'autonomous communications,' which is not only independent of the ownership of global corporations and governments, but also of the logics and languages of the mainstream stenographers to power.<sup>4</sup>

The challenge of the global IMC is to develop a global communications commons by extending the Network throughout all the regions of the world and deeper into the communities. While protest-based news will continue to fire up both producers and viewers alike, the Network needs also to develop more long-term relations with ongoing social justice movements and communicators. This will necessarily require much more development of the Network through global decision-making as well as collaborative work among other constituencies on a local, regional and global basis.

## Notes

1. See Arnison, 2001 and Meikle, 2002a for a discussion of the importance of shared software Open Publishing. See Dyer-Witthford, 1999 and Kidd, 2003 for a discussion of the significance of the cooperative ethos of the open source movement.
2. There have been meetings among women in the Network, between regions of the South, and continuing discussions of extending the Network into communities of colour. (Personal interview with Sunny Angulo, San Francisco, 2003, Madison IMC, 2002).
3. In an earlier piece, I likened the IMC to a 'communications commons,' which is resisting the privatization of public airwaves and resources, creating a new commons regime in which unpaid workers share cyber and real territories, labour time and communications technologies and techniques (Kidd, 2003).
4. See Uzelman, Dyer-Witthford and Kidd for a longer discussion of 'autonomous communications.'

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