

Indymedia Germany A local node of the global Indymedia network

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Northern Germany was a cold and bleak place during the final days of March 2001. Winter had returned for a final appearance, it was snowing and definitely not the time to go for a spring holiday in the countryside. Yet despite the inhospitable conditions, more than 10,000 people were travelling to the Wendland region, south of Hamburg, to spend the next few days in tents and on the streets. Another large shipment of nuclear waste – called ‘Castor transport’ after the name of the waste containers – was on its way to the depository in the little town of Gorleben, and these shipments had long been a focal point for social movements in Germany and beyond to mobilise around, not just involving the large environmental movement, but a wide variety of groups opposing the nuclear industry and the consistent, and often violent, State support for its aims. A daunting task, considering that 20,000 police were deployed to make the train reach its destination by almost any means, and that mainstream media did its best to discredit the protesters as violent extremists.

This time something was different. Minute-by-minute breaking news of the events, as well as pictures and short films, were published on a website and could be accessed from any web-connected computer in the world, while reports were translated into other languages and published on a variety of sites. Locally, the people in the protest camps that were spread around Gorleben could read the latest reports in a regular ad-hoc newspaper and could contribute their own reports through a set of computers which had been set up for this purpose.

As Indymedia Germany was born between the snow, the police water cannons, and the hay of a countryside barn, people following the reporting locally as well as globally did not have to rely anymore on the notoriously negative reports of mainstream journalists who spent much of their week at police headquarters and portrayed the protests accordingly. Instead, people could immediately read about the details of the struggle as well as its encouraging successes.

This time there was room for reports on heavy-handed police tactics which have regularly caused serious injuries on the part of protesters, and there was a platform to expose misinformation spread strategically by police. On the computer screens and in the widely distributed print-outs a very different picture of the protests evolved than the one spread by TV channels and newspapers. Readers far away from the events learnt how a variety of people from all walks of life had come together to oppose what they regarded as brutal injustice and a state power gone out of control. And they could follow how for the first time the Castor train had to stop and to retreat temporarily due to popular resistance.

From the global economy to the local countryside

By choosing the name of Indymedia Germany, the new alternative media platform situated itself within a growing global network of Independent Media Centres. One of the many possible starting-points of this network was 18 June 1999 – a global day of action in the business and financial centres worldwide, which was to become one of the first major international events by the new anticapitalist movement. Media activists in London created the website J18.org to report on all the actions, protests and parties taking place around the globe that day. Making extensive use of recent communication technologies, such as mobile phones and digital cameras, as well as not-so-recent technologies, such as bike couriers, they offered near-live reporting on the J18 events in London and thereby presented one of the first examples of live-reporting on the web.

Six months later media activists in Seattle merged this concept with a programming code developed in Australia, which allowed everyone with a web connection to publish articles and thereby contribute to the content of a news website – and they called the site Indymedia.

As the movement against corporate globalisation diversified, so did Indymedia. Protests against a world bank meeting in Prague in September 2000 brought together not only street demonstrators and counter-conference participants, but also led to the development of a truly collective Indymedia operation by diverse media activists from around the globe. Among them were several people from Germany. Fascinated with what they had seen and been part of in Prague, they started regular meetings towards forming an Indymedia Germany. Individual media-manics met with established and experienced projects of counter-information, such the alternative ISP nadir (www.nadir.org). Several months later, Indymedia Germany had its coming-out party in the Wendland countryside.

Central - decentral

In an approach similar to that of most IMCs outside North America, the German project was conceptualised as a nation-wide IMC. Initially it was developed mainly by groups of people based in the two largest cities – Berlin and Hamburg – and a few individuals from other places. However additional Indymedia groups soon started to form in other cities, aiding a process towards a truly nation-wide network. The model of Indymedia Germany, as it continues to evolve, is thus one of decentral groups collaborating on the same central project, particularly the same central website.

This model differs somewhat from a decentralisation approach which can be observed elsewhere in Indymedia. New groups increasingly decide to operate within the confined locality of a town or a city, and in some cases city-based IMCs substitute country-based projects. For example, IMC France has been replaced by several local sites, and IMC UK has just finished a major decentralisation effort – although continuing to maintain a nation-wide portal site.

The general tendency is towards a multi-layered model with fairly autonomous groups operating their own websites at the local level and then cooperating at various sub-regional, regional, and supra-regional levels. Although there are ambitious new projects of developing regional IMCs, such as Indymedia Estrecho, which seeks to link the south of Spain with the northern tip of Africa, the current focus in Europe and elsewhere is on establishing IMCs at the lowest, the very local, level.

As both decentralisation of power and local autonomy are among the fundamental principles of both the recent globo-critical movement and the media projects that are part of it, this approach represents an essential structural basis for Indymedia. On the downside, it may lead to difficulties in collaboration between an increasing number of network nodes and to a lack of overview, context, and thematic focus.

Indymedia Germany has so far tried to combine the virtues of centrality and decentrality. It has kept one nation-wide website as a central platform for information sharing, but this platform is maintained in turns by local autonomous groups in several localities. Each local group has its own way of working and its own projects in addition to the website. The groups communicate via email, chat, and regular Germany-wide meetings. As such, the German network represents a miniature version of the global Indymedia network.

Media literacy and Open Publishing

'Know where the Castor is!' has been one of the slogans on German Indymedia flyers, referring to the detailed and up-to-the-minute reports during big actions, such as Castor transports. It hints at one of the pillars of Indymedia, which position the network solidly in a long tradition of alternative media: counter-information. However what makes the project distinct from most other alternative media is its radically participatory and interactive character. While most alternative media seek to empower the usually passive media consumer, Indymedia goes much further by actually enabling the consumers – readers, viewers, users – to produce the content of the medium in its entirety. The Indymedia Open Publishing System tears down the boundaries between producers and consumers, between senders and receivers, and represents a second pillar at least as significant as the first one.

The German network has consistently tried to further the potential of Open Publishing. Promoting articles by people who would not otherwise write any has been a central objective of those involved, as has been the attempt to use the site for developing media literacy. Extensive guides on the website give assistance in using media actively for publishing content, and Indymedia volunteers have given workshops on these issues on a variety of occasions, from activist camps to theatre festivals. The potential conflict between promoting non-professional work and maintaining a content style that is based on traditional journalist standards was resolved in favour of the former at a nation-wide meeting early on.

IMC Germany's very own version of Open Publishing, however, differs from the traditional Indymedia model. Whereas most Indymedia websites feature an Open Publishing newswire on the front page, articles posted to IMC Germany are published on a special Open Posting page (which is accessible via a link on the front page) before being cleared for the front page. This was done primarily to establish an additional filter to deal with fascist postings which are common in Germany and which the admin groups wanted to keep off the front page. Adding a new layer to the Indymedia Open Publishing system, this model represents a further development and qualification of Open Publishing. It reflects on some of the most pressing problems of open content systems, namely the susceptibility for abuse, spam and troll activity, and the risk of diminishing content quality.

However adding filters may also create back-door entries for censorship, compromises on the positive effect of seeing your own article immediately on the front page, and may lead to a departure from the original idea of Open Publishing. In fact, the German model has enjoyed particular interest by those new Indymedia groups most sceptical about Open Publishing and keen on filtering out a wider range of content types.

IMC Germany has tried to limit these risks by following a rigorous approach of filtering only according to structural instead of content-related criteria. Apart from a small group of unacceptable postings – racist, fascist, sexist, anti-semitic – all articles are immediately promoted to the front page, if they represent some original news or analysis.¹ To manifest the Open Publishing nature of the platform, the content-related administration groups changed their name early on from the usual expression 'editorial group' to 'moderation group', highlighting the role of Indymedia admin work as facilitating, structuring, and indeed 'moderating' incoming content, as opposed to the traditional editorial job of choosing and (re-)writing content. Even the middle column features, offering most Indymedias an area of editorial and journalist work, are in most cases promoted directly from the Open Publishing newswire.

IMC Germany's interpretation of Open Publishing taps into an ongoing debate on how to develop one of the central pillars of the IMC network, and thus affects the very nature of Indymedia. While compromising on the most direct way of Open Posting, the approach has offered an option to deal with spam and has generally raised the quality and readability of the site, while keeping a direct Open Posting section which is easily accessible to everyone from the front page. The further debate on this issue is likely not only to affect Indymedia but more generally the degree of interactivity and participation on the internet and in traditional media.

Successes and problems

During the now two and a half years of its existence, the Indymedia Germany website has become one of the sites in the Indymedia network which is most widely used. On a normal day, a new article is posted roughly every half an hour, and a new comment to an article every 10 minutes. It serves as the main platform for alternative reports in Germany and regularly features articles on important events and developments worldwide. As most Indymedias, the project has received the most attention where the deficiencies of the mainstream media have been most obvious – during large protests and convergences of social movements, such as during the NATO conferences in Munich each winter, or during Castor transports. Indymedia Germany has

portrayed a different, much more realistic picture of these movements and has been a platform for reports on police violence.

Even more significantly, it has exposed police misinformation which has been used, for example during Castor transports, to re-direct journalists away from potential trouble-spots and to discredit protesters. Indymedia served as a prime platform to expose lies about, for example, alleged acid attacks by protesters on police or acts of sabotage by protesters against a dike in the Wendland area. It has thus proven that it cannot only be the fastest but also a very reliable news channel.

Indymedia Germany's self-developed content management system – MIR – has become one of the favourite systems for new groups starting an IMC, as well as for existing IMCs willing to change to a more reliable and flexible system. MIR is now being further developed as an Open Source project by Indymedia programmers all over Europe. Beyond the website, which continues to be the main Indymedia platform, occasional print editions highlight specific reports, pirate film screenings bring Indymedia video reports from cyberspace out in the streets, and ongoing experiments with radio and video streaming are stretching the boundaries of what once seemed possible for alternative media.

Live Web TV coverage of the Munich NATO conference and the Berlin anti-war demonstration, both in early 2003, proved that high-quality alternative live reporting is now possible without the financial resources, the state-of-the-art equipment, and the hierarchical organisational structure of large media corporations. It has thus continued the spirit of the J18.org experiment, which set out to show that live reporting was now possible for every grassroots media activist.

Success with the users has brought about, rather than fame and fortune, a heavy work-load. Dozens, sometimes hundreds, of articles need to be screened and moderated every day, and on top of that the popularity of Indymedia has attracted a multitude of trolls and spammers, raising the necessary level of moderation even further. As all work is done voluntarily in people's spare time, the result is an increase in burn-out syndromes. Furthermore, the immediacy of the daily tasks leaves not enough time to discuss in depth issues around the long-term development of the project.

As an open network which offers a variety of possibilities for new groups and people to get involved, Indymedia distinguishes itself positively from the rather exclusive working practices of many other activist groups. However a high level of openness, paired with the characteristics and problems of virtual networks, has led to a certain degree of randomness and a lack of reliability in work processes. While Indymedia invites everyone to use the platform as a framework for their own projects – an approach which has given birth to many interesting side projects under the banner of Indymedia – the strategic development of that framework has become increasingly difficult.

Despite many attempts to move into other media platforms, Indymedia in Germany and most other regions has largely remained a web-based project. This circumstance has offered vast technical opportunities but also social difficulties. As in many other web-related projects, gender distribution is far from equal, with few women willing to get involved. This is due not only to the technical nature of the project but also to working practices which often have a tendency towards individual problem-solving rather than common processes.

Despite frequent debates about the need to address other communities outside the 'activist ghetto', and despite the high popularity of Indymedia Germany, the platform continues to be used mainly by the activist constituency. Equally, the hype of immediacy and the speed economy of news production continue to be criticised but at the same time continue to be amongst the main characteristics of Indymedia. IMC Germany has tried, with some success, to highlight in-depth background features alongside current news and has thereby achieved some balance in reporting.

Indymedia and alternative media²

The Indymedia network was born as the dot com and new economy boom approached its climax – and its subsequent decline. Notions of newness have surrounded Indymedia from the very beginning, and indeed, as I have mentioned, the concept of Indymedia has opened a whole set of new opportunities for alternative media. It has probably turned more media consumers into producers than ever before. It has shown that high-quality live-reporting can be done outside the corporate sphere, leading to not only more information from a larger variety of sources, but often enough more reliable information. It has combined different models of alternative media; it has tackled the problem of isolation by creating strong networks, both within Indymedia and with other alternative media, and it has gained unprecedented popularity.

On the other hand, it has increasingly become apparent just how grounded Indymedia is in traditions of alternative media, and just how important this background is for the future development of the project. Indymedia Germany was among the first nodes of the network to be created in close cooperation with an existing and experienced alternative media project and to put a strong emphasis on complementing the work of other existing groups.

Ongoing debates on Indymedia's decentralisation reflect the aim of alternative media to oppose concentration and centralisation of the corporate media as well as of the wider political-economic framework with horizontal, non-hierarchical working practices and with a structural framework based on diversity, autonomy and decentralisation. Equally, the Open Publishing system as Indymedia's most fundamental feature is based on a long tradition of attempts by alternative media to break down the barriers between the few active producers and the many passive consumers. Finally, the radical subjectivity implied in Open Publishing is a logical evolution of the alternative media approach to criticise journalist standards of allegedly objective reporting by focusing on subjective accounts.

At the same time, subjectivity has been one of the most widespread points of criticism launched at Indymedia. 'How do I know whether what I read on Indymedia is really true?' is one of the most common questions. And indeed, reading an open publishing newswire, it is not immediately obvious whether one should believe what one sees. Indymedia volunteers will answer by pointing to the comment function which can act as a regulatory and falsification tool, and to the different levels of highlighting stories (for example, middle column vs. newswire), which correspond with different levels of reliability.

But most crucially, they will ask: 'How do you know whether what you read in the newspaper or see on the TV news is true?' And they will say: 'Find out with your own eyes!' If Indymedia's subjectivity contributes to planting doubts in people's minds and to questioning what they are told about the world, then it has probably achieved far more than it could imagine.

Notes

1. By promoting pieces that have been written originally for Indymedia, and leaving mass mail-outs etc. on the Open Posting page, Indymedia Germany tries to encourage people to write their own accounts of events. For announcements and discussions the site refers to other more appropriate websites.
2. Here I refer to the third sector of media (community and non-profit media), or rather the part of it which is based in contestatory social movements and which focuses on their themes. This notion of 'alternative media' is closely related to others of 'radical media' (John Downing (2001): Radical media. London: Sage Publications) or 'tactical media' (Garcia/Lovink (1997): The ABC of Tactical Media. <http://www.next5minutes.org/article.jsp?articleid=1638>).