

From Indymedia UK to the United Kollektives

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This is a story of the pre-history of imc-uk with an outlook to the present decentralised countrywide structure of the United Kollektives as experienced by some but not all of the volunteers who 'were there'. The first phase of imc-uk was marked by the specifics of an imc located in the metropolitan geography of London, the richness of connectivity and inspiration, the lack of space, and the offline-practices of blagging and sharing. The second, post-decentralisation phase points to the process of building a larger network, using more cybertools than before, and allowing for localised reporting.

City of London, 18 June 1999. Soundsystems, puppets, colourful banners. Dancing crowds swinging in the glistening sunshine: Europe's Financial Centre # 1 has been taken over by a Carnival against Capitalism, cyberconnected to dozens of venues of a Global Street Party.

In the vicinity of Jack the Ripper near the old Clink prison on the south side of the river Thames: Backspace, an alternative internetcafe. Cables, dusty boxes, keyboards, dirty mugs. Projections of the party on the wall. A sound- and video studio run by various media collectives. Typing, coding, converting, uploading. This was the seed of indymedia uk.

The London J18 street party was coordinated by 'Reclaim the Streets'. Inspired by the Anti-Road Protest Camps and Free Party Culture of the early 90s, unauthorised streetparties evolved as a means to 'reclaim the commons of the city'. In late 1994, the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act declared civil protests and free parties criminal acts. Squatters, travellers, free party people and grassroots activists moved from the remote countryside to Britain's urban landscapes .

With the first Global Street Party in protest against the Birmingham G8, RTS contributed to the development of a globally synchronised and grassroots-mediated form of political articulation which has become the trade mark of the global movement.

After four years and 65 recorded 'Reclaim the Streets' parties, J18 was the first event with an explicitly anti-capitalist agenda. While corporate media had covered previous RTS parties sympathetically as environmental events, J18 was represented as a violent riot . The subsequent criminalisation led to a media strategy as a means of self-protection.

Based on the experience on J18, the Reclaim the Streets media group decided to go for a media outlet of their own, rather than lobbying with corporate media. The group soon became independent from Reclaim the Streets. N30, the 'Battle of Seattle' was reported on a basic, manually maintained website. On Mayday 2000, the indymedia brand crossed the Atlantic: the guerilla gardening event was reported under the name 'indymedia uk'. The fully fledged Open Publishing imc-uk site was ready for the S26 protests against the WMF/Worldbank conference in Prague (S26 2000).

Like many other imcs, we used an improved version of the free open source software 'active'. The 'active'-code was developed within the Australian activist community (Sydney). The acknowledgements for 'active' document an impressive collaboration both in virtual and physical space.

Imc in London - A virtual project in real space

From the beginning, the London based imc collective regarded indymedia as a project in both virtual and physical space. Open publishing allowed the streets to enter cyberspace, but it also brought technology to the streets. From the mission statement: 'Through this system of 'Direct Media', Indymedia erodes the dividing line between reporters and reported, between active producers and passive audience: people are enabled to speak for themselves'. Direct media = media as party, education, direct action, entertainment, empowerment. Film screenings, radio programs, printed materials and public access terminals created a presence outside the web.

Our internal process had an emphasis on face to face meetings in real space. Ironically, we never managed to find a room of our own. Fluid nomadism seems to suit the urban landscape better than settlement. Most community centres were closed down by the Thatcher government, and even public toilets and the pavement at the Southbank are privatised. So we embarked on a journey through the guts of London - an artists caff at King's x, a freezing-cold disused warehouse in the East End, a pub in Kentish Town, a friend's kitchen, the basement of a pub in trendy Hoxton, a squatted button-factory in Brixton, the People's Palace, until we finally arrived back at the bosom of the activist ghetto in a resource centre in a former synagogue in Whitechapel. The journey continues to take us physically to demos, free and commercial parties, conferences, festivals.

Blagging, sharing and the global commons

'blag' - (a) to carry out a robbery. (b) to scrounge, cadge, deceive or bamboozle, or the booty from such an activity. Has been in widespread use in both senses in underworld and police circles since the early 1950s.

Tony Thorne: Dictionary of Contemporary Slang, London 1999 (1990), p. 34.

While all indymedia sites are part of the claim for a global commons on the web, the people who run them locally are extending this claim to the material sphere, drawing on existing values and practices. If you have neither money nor the will to acquire it, how do you run a media centre in London, with its long history of Capitalism and its attitude of charging £2 for every breath you take? You learn to find the cracks in the smooth surface of urban consumerism. Emerged from the spirit of ravers, travellers, squatters and grassroots groups, the first imc-uk collective embraced an economy of non-monetary exchange of materials and support.

Blagging, bartering and sharing are much closer to our hearts than proper fundraising: an indymedia stall at a festival against free tickets, a few old computers from some company, connectivity for major reporting. When we use IT-equipment in our office jobs for indymedia tasks, we embrace a traditional working class tactic for re-distribution. Cameras, minidisk players, mikes, laptops are multiplied by sharing them - they are never idle, although the process to trace them can be tiring.

This practice tunes in with the free software philosophy - (free as in both 'free beer' and 'free speech'). Our metropolitan dwelling place suggests that resources and even knowledge are scarce and expensive. We try to treat them as plentiful, ever multiplying 'commons'. The commitment to non-hierarchical collaboration and the diy-philosophy is a vital element of this process. The synergy extends beyond the boundaries of the collective. Groups like deckspace, blag, or socialsoftware give technical support. Generator x provides a solar-powered truck as a mobile media centre for events like the Glastonbury Festival or the no-border demo at the refugee camp in Calais. Undercurrents and pirate tv collaborated in the streaming project. Slowly, indymedia became a presence in the alternative media scene - but the step out of London and into a more community-based structure took a long time.

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Indymedia uk was designed as an alternative news platform for all regions in the uk - a vision supported by experienced alternative media groups like Undercurrents, I-contact, pirate tv, squall and schnews. The news stories focussed on a UK-wide active audience. In contrast, imc-bristol was founded as a community news platform. We realised that a uk wide project would need a decentralised structure, both technically and socially. The worldwide anti-war protests in February 2003 became a catalyst for this process.

The long-delayed decision to work on a new codebase gained momentum. After three mad months and many irc sessions, a new website with pages for each local collective went live on 26 June 2003. Presently, the website is run by nine local collectives under the Mir code. Concepts for imc-reporting on a local scale are being developed. Each collective has a different story to tell - and our name changed to 'United Kollektives'.

The expansion of the project didn't come without flaws. The fallout of activist burn-out is considerable. Self-exploitation, over-ambitiousness, carelessness, lack of communication and exaggerated feelings of responsibility have lead to breakdowns, clashes, frustration and deep disappointment - but also to adrenalin highs and a steep learning curve.

Unlimited public-ness can be scary, but as a large network, imc uk relies even more than before on openness and transparency. We are learning to make confident use of publicly archived email lists, open-access collaboration tools and chatrooms. IT-tools are now vital to report major events. Information flows through an increasingly complex international dispatch system. The informal mode of self-organisation within a small collective is becoming more accountable to suit the needs of a large network.

Building consensus about editorial guidelines, mission statement and working practices is an ongoing process. IT-tools mean both exclusion and empowerment, hierarchies emerge in fluid as well as in static structures. Imc uk remains in the in-between space between diy-culture and professionalisation, open for both sides of the divide.

<http://docs.indymedia.org/view/Main/WebHome>