

# Is this what media democracy looks like?

Aliza Dichter

When activists and independent journalists created a Website to challenge the media, could it become a model of the democratic media they were calling for? Aliza Dichter, one of the original founders and the former editor of MediaChannel.org, shares her reflections.

In November of 1999, tens of thousands of protesters marched in the streets to shut down the meeting of the World Trade Organization in Seattle and hundreds of volunteer journalists converged at the new Independent Media Center to chronicle the events in real time, documenting what the corporate media would not: the demands of the protesters, the violence of the police, the rallying cry, 'this is what democracy looks like!' In New York City, seven journalists and Web producers working for the new nonprofit MediaChannel.org were covering the story-behind-the-story: the critiques of corporate media's coverage of this historic battle over globalisation and the creation of the Independent Media Center as a powerful alternative.

We had launched MediaChannel just a few months earlier, going online in August of 1999 with a beta-test version of our new Website. MediaChannel.org was designed to be a portal, an Internet home for organizations and people around the world who shared a vision of media free from corporate and government manipulation, media representing diverse cultures and speaking truth to power. Our goal was to support this vision by creating an online space to bring together analyses of media problems with examples and proposals for solutions. The Seattle story was perfect for us, and we covered it with an aggregation model that would become our hallmark: summaries and links to relevant articles from around the world brought together with original commentary under an introduction highlighting the big themes.

We saw MediaChannel as many things at once, a source for original news and commentary about the media, a portal site for access to a wide range of media-related resources on the Web, a distribution platform for independent content about media and an interactive hub to connect a global network of media practitioners, activists, policymakers and educators. Our audience would include journalists, activists and educators already engaged with media issues as well as members of the general public seeking to learn more.

As media critics, we wanted to avoid the failings we had seen elsewhere. MediaChannel would feature diverse viewpoints, marginalized voices and global perspectives. Coverage of issues would include links and materials offering tools for getting involved in those issues. We would be responsive to our readers, providing means for them to contact the editors and to post their comments directly to the site. And we would be stringently noncommercial, seeking to survive on philanthropic funding as a non-for-profit project dedicated to advancing press freedom, access to

technology and independent media as an integral part of movements for social change.

We were nothing if not ambitious.

### **Gateway versus gatekeeper**

MediaChannel was created as a 'gateway' to articles about media criticism, media reform and media activism from all over the world and all over the Web. Through our directory of affiliated organizations and lists of links, users could access hundreds of sites about media around the world. Through our daily news pages, weekly magazines and aggregate Issue Guides, users would be alerted to timely, provocative, profound and inspirational features selected from our affiliates.

The Independent Media Centers (IMCs), born during the 'battle of Seattle' and now existing in more than 120 locations worldwide, have established themselves as fundamentally democratic and participatory. The open publishing software allows any visitor to the site to upload text, photographs or video. Each Center designs its own editorial process for which items are highlighted on the site, some creating open editorial collaboratives where anyone can join and vote on postings, others using consensus to develop editorial guidelines.

MediaChannel uses a more traditional, deliberative and hierarchical process, relying on staff editors to determine which material is featured on the site. We sought to balance this 'gatekeeper' role by providing other ways for people to interact directly with the site, including an online forum where readers could post their uncensored comments. But even with editors selecting the items to feature on the Website, MediaChannel faced a tricky question of credibility. How could we guarantee the accuracy of the information featured on our affiliated sites? This is a core challenge for participatory or decentralized media projects, and a common concern from traditional journalists and educators about the Internet: who is responsible for the credibility of the information, how is trust formed?

For the editors at MediaChannel, frequently critiquing such 'trustworthy' outlets as the BBC and The New York Times, could we establish new standards of responsible journalism that did not subscribe to elite notions of authority? Our solution was to try to provide a range of sources, to offer several perspectives on the issue and to hold to the notion asserted so well by American journalist Walter Lippmann, 'The theory of a free press is that truth will emerge from free discussion, not that it will be presented perfectly and instantly in any one account.' Philosophically, this perspective served us well, though it could be treated with scepticism by potential funders who wanted to know how we assessed the validity of reports from our vast network of more than 1,000 affiliated sites. For any alternative media outlet, it is a clear mandate: we must be very sure to articulate our principles and build our organizations to stand by them. What makes a network?

From the beginning, MediaChannel.org was designed as a network. Working in partnership with OneWorld.net, we had drawn from their model of linking together social-change organizations to cross-promote each other's content and issues. Our Website was built onto OneWorld's system, through which groups could give permission for us to index their site and link to their content. Clearly the interest was high: at current count the MediaChannel network includes more than 1,070 groups from around the world (including WACC).

But what does it mean to be a network? In the media model, it often means a top-down system where affiliates (such as broadcast stations) feature programming from the parent organization and can occasionally distribute their own content by passing it up and then out to the network. In civil society, concerns about transparency and accountability play a much greater role. Civil society networks often imply some control by the members, a coordinating body that is representative of the stakeholders and designed to serve their needs. MediaChannel was somewhere in the middle. A civil-society organization, MediaChannel sought to serve the goals and needs of our affiliated groups. But as an independent body, we made the decisions internally about how to serve those needs. As we often discovered, being in the middle is sometimes the best of both worlds and sometimes it is nowhere at all.

Because the site continue to be embedded within OneWorld.net's technology, actual usage figures have been difficult to attain. It appears that the site receives upwards of 10,000 visitors per month and the free email newsletters have more than 8,000 subscribers. But for a project designed to effect change in the media system, it is less important to have sheer numbers than to reach particular sectors. The dedicated audience has included the journalists, activists and educators we sought to target, and each of these represents a sphere of influence. The BBC's Director of News, Richard Sambrook, called the site 'invaluable,' and media scholar and historian Robert McChesney has said 'I don't know what I would do without it.'

In 2000, Malaysian human-rights activists launched a media reform group and created their own media-monitoring site based directly on the design and framework of MediaChannel and incorporating some of its content. As for the 'general public' -- we received letters of thanks every day from individual readers who were grateful for a place to turn with their increasing mistrust and disappointment with mainstream media. For MediaChannel editors, sending off our work into cyberspace daily with no audience to actually see or feel, this feedback was vital.

### **Flash-forward to 2003: Journalism or activism?**

This Fall marks the fourth anniversary of MediaChannel, an achievement in its own right as hundreds of other nonprofit Internet sites have closed their doors. In that time the staff has swelled and shrunk, and the funding pressures have only increased. Over the years we did struggle with the challenges of trying to be so much at once. Could we serve as a library, seeking to provide access to a vast array of research, proposals and perspectives while also becoming a trusted news source, with editors ensuring unique and useful coverage, sifting through the information overload to bring the gems to our readers? Visitors would use the site in different ways if they wanted a library, where they could seek information or browse through organized, comprehensive categories, than if they wanted a media outlet to provide timely, relevant coverage.

We wanted to serve the members of our network but had no mechanism for them to inform us of their needs or feedback. With little money to spend on technology development we couldn't resolve internal debates over the different pulls of these two types of structures by creating two sites at once. We faced challenges for our content as well: intending to attract both specialists and members of the general public, as well as a global audience, meant that our editors had to avoid culturally specific references as well as jargon used in the field of media reform but still keep the writing fresh and engaging.

For example, when the U.S. Federal Communications Commission (FCC) launched a review of media ownership rules in 2002, generating major concern among civil society groups, MediaChannel was well poised to cover the story in great depth, becoming a clearinghouse for ongoing news coverage along with commentaries, proposals and tools for getting involved. But should the editors have focused on gathering and providing the materials, contacts and research that organizers needed to build civic engagement with the issue or was it our role to be an information source for an interested public?

In addition, our international audience meant that if we made reference to government agencies, figures or laws, we would need to explain them each time. With a small staff and limited time, how should we prioritise that issue which was hugely important for our U.S. readers but of only peripheral interest to international readers? We had set our sights on being many things to many different groups and found we could not address them all at once.

Perhaps the biggest challenge was this: were we journalists or were we organizers? Our evolving mission in many ways seemed to imply the latter: we were seeking to advance a global movement to democratise the world's media systems and reduce the control of multinational corporations and propagandising governments. We wanted to strengthen the work of activists who were working to change media organizations from inside and out. But our methods were those of media-makers: we were offering news and commentary about the media and our audience was eager for more. When the violence of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent 'war on terrorism' increased public concern about government propaganda, censorship and surveillance, they sought information from MediaChannel, our Web traffic soaring as we increased our coverage on these topics.

In early 2003 some of that tension found its own resolution. When the much-reduced staff faced another salary hiatus due to funding shortfalls (we had been forced by financial realities to put the site on hold once before, for three and a half months in the summer of 2002), three of us chose to move on from MediaChannel in order to focus our work more explicitly on the needs of media activists and movement-building. MediaChannel would shift to plant itself more firmly in the sphere of journalism, merging with its sister company, the Globalvision News Network, to focus specifically on providing high-quality news and commentary.

Over the years, one of the most popular features of MediaChannel has remained the daily media criticism column by Executive Editor Danny Schechter. For all our attempts at using new technology to create a hybrid form of alternative media, to balance the goals of library, network, information hub, it turns out that what is attracting the most loyal audience is at core very human: insights and perspectives compiled by a media personality who helps readers feel connected and legitimized in their complaints and suspicions about the global media.

Did MediaChannel become a model of democratic media? As an access point for lists and links to other Web sites focused on media issues, MediaChannel remains unparalleled. As a source for international news and commentary about the media, it is unique in its commitment to the public interest and social justice. As for the form and structures that reflect its values, this alternative media source is perhaps still finding ways to put its vision of media democracy into practice -- to adapt the famous Ghandi quote-- 'to be the media change we wish to see in the world.'

### **Links**

[www.indymedia.org](http://www.indymedia.org)

[www.mediachannel.org](http://www.mediachannel.org)

Aliza Dichter was the Senior Editor and Education Coordinator of MediaChannel. She is currently Director of Programs for the Center for International Media Action, a new nonprofit organization providing tools and services to strengthen connections between grassroots organizers, public-interest advocates, activists and researchers focused on media policy and social justice. This article represents her perspectives of the development of MediaChannel and not necessarily the views of the current staff.