
‘Autonomy online’: Indymedia and practices of alter-globalisation

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Abstract. The paper examines Australian Indymedia collectives as a means to improve understanding of the practices of alter-globalisation movements. Two key issues are explored. The first concerns the politics of the alter-globalisation movements—what they demand and how they practise their aims. The second concerns the potential of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to provide a space within which to build a radical politics. Several dilemmas facing Indymedia and alter-globalisation movements emerge from this analysis. First, there remain many limitations of using ICTs as a space for the constitution of a radical politics. Second, Indymedia collectives have had success in aligning their aims to their practices; however, informal hierarchies did form around editorial decisions and technical skills. Third, there is continued potential for these movements to appear exclusive. In this respect, simply being ‘open’ is not enough to widen these spaces of resistance. Fourth, there is the continued importance of structure to strengthen the ability of groups to operate non-hierarchically. Despite these dilemmas, many of the alter-globalisation movements’ practices are proving workable. It is the ability of participants to acknowledge these dilemmas and to continue to be reflexive about their practices that is one of the greatest strengths of these emerging movements.

Introduction

This paper focuses upon the practices and innovations of the alternative media network Indymedia. Indymedia can be seen as one of the projects attempting to implement some of the ideals and principles of autonomous groups: collective, non-hierarchical, egalitarian, inclusive organising, and often based around practising consensus. The aim of this paper is to examine Australian Indymedia collectives to improve understanding of the practices of alter-globalisation movements. Through this analysis we are able to comprehend more clearly the achievements and weaknesses of such movements and, most importantly, to examine *why* some of these practices remain problematic. This enables us to speak more broadly about the fissures of opportunity and tension within the movements.

Beyond this specificity are two broader issues. The first concerns the politics of the alter-globalisation movements: the political possibilities they offer and propose. The issue concerns not only what changes they ask for (or perhaps demand), but, importantly, how politics itself is *practised*. Many of the movements’ demands are for diversity, grassroots inclusion, or participatory democracy. If the movements can themselves practise such political processes it strengthens their claim for a broader critique of global political organisational forms.

The second issue concerns the politics of information communication technologies (ICTs). From the early utopian theorists (such as Rheingold, 1994) to current-day advocates (see, for example, Kahn and Kellner, 2005), ICTs have been viewed as providing a space unencumbered by traditional political resource and legislative limitations. Consequently, the possibility has arisen of using virtual space as an arena within which to build a radical politics (Atton, 2003a, see also Pickerill, 2006). This is most clearly illustrated by examples from the Zapatistas’ (Castells, 1996; Froehling, 1999) and environmentalists’ (Pickerill, 2003) employment of ICTs to subvert political,

financial, and labour limitations on their campaigning. For example, ICT “use has opened up opportunities, a temporary space of resistance, which has enabled environmental movements to move in a new direction typified by global grassroots solidarities, multi-issue campaigns and anti-hierarchical forms of organising” (Pickerill, 2003, page 170). However, as much as cyberspace has offered opportunities to ‘level the playing field’ in politics, it remains a problematic terrain for many activists. Campaigners have to negotiate issues of unequal access, the need for technical expertise (and the hierarchies around knowledge that can accompany it), and the risks of repression by the state or corporate bodies. Thus, an examination of Indymedia, an ostensibly online network, enables us to explore further the role of ICTs in constituting a radical politics.

Indymedia, which emerged around the protests against the World Trade Organisation protests in Seattle in 1999, is an attempt by media activists to offer new forms of alternative media using the Internet and to widen the possibilities for those online to participate openly in its construction (Smith, 2001). Alternative media has historically attempted to pose a challenge to more mainstream media forms. It has been used as an avenue for the expression of radical ideas or actions, to criticise other media coverage, or as a way in which to produce media without using hierarchical editorial structures (Atton, 2001). Indymedia is structured around the premise that media production and consumption should be a many-to-many process, in contrast to the traditional ‘representative’ one-to-many media approach. Thus, at the same time as globally publicising ‘local’ grassroots events, Indymedia offers a far broader challenge. The global mainstream media hegemony has often facilitated the myth of corporate globalisation as being all pervasive and inevitable (Herman and Chomsky, 1995). Indymedia seeks to contest this media hegemony and thus challenge one of the ways in which corporate globalisation seeks legitimacy. In so doing, Indymedia is a project of resistance seeking to reclaim material and virtual spaces.

Indymedia has gained international prominence as a global network of online independent news collectives (Halleck, 2004; Mamadouh, 2004). Over 130 websites are now operating worldwide (from the USA to India and the Philippines, to name a few), most with associated collectives and many of them running from dedicated offices, media labs, info-shops, or social centres (Atton, 2003b; Hyde, 2002; Kingsnorth, 2004). They are run entirely by volunteers and any city or country can apply to set up their own Indymedia website (Meikle, 2003). Through the use of open publishing any user is able to contribute content (be it text, graphics, audio, or video) and discussion to a site immediately, with only minimal moderation (Arnison, 2001).

Indymedia transgresses both material and virtual spaces, constituting primarily an online space while maintaining a material presence at protest locations and through place-based collectives. Indymedia is a product of the anticapitalist protests that coalesced out of a multitude of social justice and environment movements in the 1990s and, in particular, out of a collaboration and integration of earlier media and activist networks (Kidd, 2003a). In an era of increasing commodification of the Internet (Simpson, 2004) and resistance to global governance and corporate hegemony, Indymedia is both a challenge to attempts to enclose the Internet and an example of grassroots globalisation. Consequently, it provides a useful case through which to explore how spaces of resistance are constructed and negotiated. In particular, Indymedia was founded on the principles of ‘openness’. Not only are stories exchanged and narratives constructed, but open systems are created, tested, and practised as alternatives to the existing systems. In this sense, Indymedia participants are attempting to construct an autonomous space based not on the principles of “the triumph of the individual” (Castells, 2001, page 133) but on the success of the open source movement

in redefining the importance of sharing, creating, and interacting for free and for the benefit of all. Moreover, it is explicitly an ongoing experiment that is only a “beginning of an answer” (Kingsnorth, 2004, page 159) to the hegemony of corporate globalisation and cultural enclosure.

The assertions made here are based upon analysis of Indymedia collectives in Australia. It is appropriate to focus on Indymedia in this instance as it has had an iconic role within the movement since the Seattle protests, a visible presence at many of the major protest events, and it was Australians, specifically from the Catalyst collective in Sydney who designed the Active software underpinning Indymedia (first used during the Global Day of Action on 18 June 1999). Australia was chosen as the focus of the research to enable comprehensive analysis of one section of the global network. However, while this facilitates microlevel analysis of the network functions, the delineation of a national boundary does limit the ability to ‘follow through’ Indymedia as a global network. Thus, the internal workings of Australian collectives become the focus of the research rather than a broader understanding of the global Indymedia network.

Methodologically, there is a need to “look in rich empirical detail at the complex ways in which ICT technologies are being used in real ways ... in the real world” (Graham, 2004, page 11). Consequently I conducted in-depth interviews with eighteen participants (in some cases, pseudonyms have been used) of Adelaide, Brisbane, Melbourne, and Sydney Indymedia collectives, as well as those involved in Octapod in Newcastle and Tasmadia in Tasmania (both independent media projects). I also participated in several of the collectives’ meetings and public access e-mail lists between July 2001 and January 2003.

My personal politics played an important role in this research. At times, I have been more an activist than an academic, and at others more an academic than an activist. My involvement in these movements facilitated access to interviewees while I remained overt about my status as an academic. Thus, I am not speaking from ‘within’ or ‘without’ these movements, but perpetually from between: a precarious positionality but one which acknowledges the subjectivity of this form of research (see also Fuller, 1999; Pain, 2003).

The complexity of my research position further illuminates the complexity of the sources used in this research. Activists, journalists, and academics have all published on alter-globalisation movements and Indymedia. Many of these sources are critically analysed here. It should not be assumed that academia is afforded a privileged position of critique. Much of the critique of Indymedia (and by association the movement) comes from those closely engaged in movement projects—both in nonacademic literature and evident from the interviews included here. Similarly, my personal ties to parts of the alter-globalisation movement do not diminish my ability to be critically reflexive; rather, my desire to see such projects as Indymedia succeed is precisely why I am able to view Indymedia critically. Such an approach not only facilitates our detailed understandings of the interrelationships between resistance, place, and material and virtual spaces, but begins to practise geography as a potentially action-orientated (yet still discursive) collaborative and engaged project (Cloke, 2002). To this end, several earlier versions of this paper have been distributed to interviewees and on the Indymedia network lists more broadly, for comment and use.

The politics of autonomy: aspirations and practices of alter-globalisation movements

Alter-globalisation actions have received significant attention, both academic and nonacademic (see, for example, Callinicos, 2003; Chesters and Welsh, 2001; Cockburn et al, 2000; Featherstone, 2003; Kingsnorth, 2004; Routledge, 2003; Schalit, 2002).

The majority of this has focused on mass demonstrations at summit meetings, (world) social forums, or smaller scale actions. Few of these works, however, have sought to unpack the constitution or everyday practices of those involved, a necessity if we are to comprehend more clearly the achievements and weaknesses of such movements.

The term 'alter-globalisation' is used here as a broad umbrella to include those groups, networks, and organisations that have been labelled anticapitalist or anticorporate, or those involved in the global social justice movement, grassroots transnational movements, or the global resistance movement. 'Alter-globalisation' is preferred as a term for its positive connotations that the movement is building transnational linkages and solidarity networks, rather than simply opposing existing political and financial structures. However, it is acknowledged that no one term can encapsulate the heterogeneity of the movements' participants and that the concept of 'globalisation' is itself a contested discursive construction. Given the breadth of this movement it is important to note that Indymedia is most closely aligned with the emerging autonomous and prefigurative wing rather than with those more committed to socialist and trade union politics. Thus, examinations of Indymedia as a network, project, and experiment in alter-globalisation practices are carried out with the acknowledgement of the porosity of any movement's boundaries and the incorporation within the Indymedia network of many who might prefer different ideological labels. Importantly, part of the definitional problems when examining the movement of movements is that, although there are general tenets of agreement transnationally (principally an opposition to neoliberalism), there are also numerous particularities, due partly to the emphasis on local struggles and participatory approaches. Thus, while Indymedia is explicitly grounded within the alter-globalisation movements it obviously cannot be taken as representative *of* the movements. These definitional issues will be returned to later.

Given these caveats, it is still possible to identify here five relevant tenets of the emerging autonomous wing of alter-globalisation movements that reflect the ideals and that motivate practices. These tenets are not discrete, but rather build and interlink with each other. First is a commitment to praxis: the enactment of theoretical ideas into practice or a prefigurative politics, which "means acting now as you want to act in the future" (Jordan, 2002, page 73). This is reflected in the do-it-yourself (McKay, 1998) and 'If not you, then who?' (Seel, 1997) attitude, where responsibility is placed upon the individual to take action for social (and environmental) change, rather than appealing for action from the state or regulatory body. Moreover, this approach seeks to recast the idea of revolution from that of an intense moment of transformation to a revolution of the everyday (Vaneigem, 1979). This stresses the importance of examining our everyday acts as potential points of complicity with existing processes and thus as arenas for change. It is this emphasis on praxis which has necessitated the empirical analysis of Indymedia in order to further understand alter-globalisation movements.

Second is a quest for autonomy. Although this concept has historically been contested and variously reinterpreted by different groups (such as totalitarians), alter-globalisation movements are using the idea of autonomy to strive for self-legislation and local control over decisions: a form of self-determination (Lovink and Schneider, 2002; Starr and Adams, 2003). This is a more vague reading of the term than that proposed within political geography, where local autonomy is taken to refer to "the ability of local governments to have an independent impact on the well-being of their citizens" (Wolman and Goldsmith, 1990, page 426; see also Brown, 1992; Clark, 1984). Rather, activists' interpretation treats autonomy as a power relation primarily concerned with participation in decision making; thus, "autonomy is not a discrete commodity that is possessed or not possessed, by individuals or localities" (DeFilippis, 2004, page 24). In this reading the transformation of a particular locality as being

autonomous is less important than a more fluid understanding of what autonomy might mean in practice.

Understandings of personal autonomy tend to relate to individual freedom to make uninhibited choices regardless of others' needs, such as consumer choices and existential desires. However, it is also a collective project whereby there is "an ethic of responsibility and reciprocity that comes through recognition that others desire and are capable of autonomy too" (Notes from Nowhere, 2003, page 110). Thus, not only is autonomy a power relation but the quest for it requires constant negotiation between autonomous tendencies, centralising powers, and the respect of others' needs. In practice, autonomy involves asserting the ability to make decisions through participatory practices, to subvert existing legislation if necessary, to create spaces free from outside influence or "creating spaces for freedom" (Notes from Nowhere, 2003, page 107), and to cooperate and rely upon each other rather than on external provision (for example, through mutual aid) (Bey, 1991). Practical examples include squatting, social centres, and protest camps (for further discussion see Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006).

Third is a commitment to openness. These are attempts to encourage inclusive practices (such as structures which welcome newcomers and support volunteers), to espouse openness in terms of sharing ideas, content, and images, and to seek to build networks connecting disparate groups. On a practical level, for example, this involves utilising concepts such as 'copyleft'—whereby material may be copied, distributed, and displayed for free as long as it is not used for commercial purposes. It has been necessary to adopt copyleft rather than simply making material 'free' to enforce this notion of sharing upon those who might try and profit from activists' volunteer labour, in order to "protect software or content as public goods" (Mamadouh, 2004, page 485).

Fourth, building on this commitment to openness and thus the expansion of the movements' ideas and participants are attempts to practise nonhierarchical organising and build decentralised networks. These egalitarian forms of structure include efforts to practise consensus decision making (whereby, as far as possible, decisions are made only with the agreement of all present), direct democracy (where everyone has a say on every issue), or through 'spokescouncils' (the meeting point of all, or representatives of, many autonomous groups who then express the view of their group and seek to agree by consensus) (Butler and Rothstein, 1988). The underlying ethos of such an approach is to avoid any elites holding power, oppressing others' voices and thus choices, and to avoid the assumptions made when speaking *for* others. Thus, important to these processes is the use of facilitators who seek to ensure everyone has an opportunity to speak. These processes have been practised on a large scale by People's Global Action but are not unproblematic as will be explored below (Routledge, 2003). These forms of nonhierarchical organising give rise to decentralised networks. If there are no leaders, no central decision points, and no approval committees, then groups and individuals are able to make links with whomsoever they choose. In a movement of autonomous groups of loosely linked affiliations and with a lack of formal agreement between participants, the importance of networks becomes crucial.

Consequently, and finally, the key to the maintenance of both these decentralised networks, and the strength of maintaining a diverse and worldwide movement, is the importance of solidarity. This is the ability to make links between disparate campaigns to support others through symbolic actions, the sharing of resources and skills, or actually visiting and joining in different struggles. Examples include the role of European activists as international observers in Chiapas communities in support of the Zapatistas, or the global publishing and support of the Narmada dam struggles in India. Here there is an emphasis on the importance of local struggles and on that

action taking place in a local area. This is most clear in the emphasis on autonomy. However, there is also recognition that local struggles fit into a broader global context and that solidarity across struggles strengthens the claims made by those engaged at the local level and facilitates the creation of “new identities as part of an ongoing contestation of unequal geographies of power” (Featherstone, 2005, page 268), preventing the reduction of the alter-globalisation struggles to a division between local or global resistance.

While these five tenets are visible in the alter-globalisation movements, they remain problematic. These are not fixed ideals but have emerged through experimentation, negotiation, and sharing between movements. There remain many frictions and differences between groups and participants of the movements. Moreover, tensions exist between attempts to build autonomous alternatives while continuing to engage with the realpolitik of activists’ existence in a capitalist society. Consequently, it can be difficult to marry the demands of operating in inclusive ways with expanding numbers of participants and consensus decision making at the same time as providing solidarity for other movements. Additionally, there are obvious inequalities between groups within the movement especially in terms of resources. This is a reason why so much effort is put into participatory and inclusive processes, because alter-globalisation movements are diverse and socially complex. This heterogeneity is part of the movements’ strengths but also challenges activists’ ability to have a defined identity or a strong sense of commonality, as Gilbert suggests when discussing the future of the movement:

“We are everywhere? We’re not, you know—but we could be. And if we’re going to be, then we have to acknowledge what a scary thought that really is: for once ‘we’ are everywhere then there will be nothing to define ourselves against, and so ‘we’ will be nowhere. If we really want to make the world a better place than that’s what we have to want. But learning to want it will take courage, the courage to accept the risk to our identities which real change always poses” (Gilbert, quoted in *Notes from Nowhere*, 2003, pages 510–511).

Each of these tenets will now be explored in relation to the practices of Indymedia collectives in Australia. Understandings of praxis are explored through examining the practices of Indymedia collectives in relation to the quest for autonomy, openness, and connectivity, decentralised networks, and finally the importance of solidarity.

Australian Indymedia: autonomy in praxis

If autonomy is a power relation and quest for ‘freedom’, it can be a difficult concept to pinpoint in practice. However, there are several tendencies within the Australian Indymedia collectives which confirm the importance of autonomy to the projects and their attempts to practise autonomy. First, Indymedia is an experiment in creating a media space free from the power elites who control much of the mainstream media and in this way it seeks to be autonomous from existing power structures and to create a space for the free (both financially and metaphorically) creation of news. This is a reaction against attempts at cultural enclosure and an attempt to reclaim both material and virtual spaces at local and global scales. Thus, its founding aims and construction are imbued with the quest for autonomy.

Second, each Indymedia is autonomous and based upon the principle that it is run by a collective that anyone can join. In addition to using open source code, the Indymedia collectives operate with transparent and open management (including in many cases running open, public, and free Internet labs). This is to ensure that there are multiple spaces through which newcomers can become involved in the collective, and thus in the decision-making process. At an individual level, too, there are elements

of autonomy in that participants are rarely directed by others to undertake certain tasks. As Anderson (2004) notes in relation to environmental direct action, “the ethos of individual autonomy inherent within this structure ... encourages an innovative and highly dynamic movement” (page 114).

Third, each Indymedia collective is able to operate separately from the global structure and from others. As the number of Indymedia collectives proliferates, others within the global network have also pushed for more decentralisation. Apart from a few discussion lists and processes, Indymedia’s global network is essentially composed of autonomous regional units that rarely interact on a global level. When global decisions are required, increasingly only representatives (in the form of spokescouncils) from the regional collectives participate: “they are integrally related, yet remain unique; they are symbiotic, yet function to their own rhythms and needs; there is self-determination at all levels, local to global, yet there is always a link” (Herndon, quoted by Nogueira, 2002, page 295). Eventually, despite communication between the collectives and attempts at designing a global charter, each Indymedia site is likely to take a different form, as each has adjusted aspects and chosen disparate paths of development. Eventually, this emphasis on autonomy could result in a fragmentation of Indymedia as an understandable and replicated concept, thereby diminishing the appeal of a worldwide commonality in independent media format.

This in itself is not necessarily problematic. The disintegration of older models and the continued reinvention of new formats (such as the use of Wikis) are important elements of the alter-globalisation movements’ continued existence. The ability to adapt, change, and move on in response to new circumstances is vital if the movement is to expand and incorporate new participants. This reflects a broader tension within the movement—how to balance the celebration of cultural diversity and autonomy with finding (and maintaining) a thread of commonality strong enough to weave some sense of (and space for) global solidarity. This is not simply about accommodating difference, but about drawing strength from such diversity of skills, approaches, and resourcefulness. In other words, it is about creating enough commonality to let the smaller differences go.

Openness

Unlike many other alternative media projects, Indymedia has situated its core premise around being ‘open’. In practical terms, this ‘openness’ manifests itself in five ways: in its code, management, contributions, access, and use. First, Indymedia is deliberately based upon the use of open source software rather than upon the use of corporately designed and owned products (Langlois, 2004). This is a form of code that is free to use, copy, and improve (Arnison, 2001; Moody, 2002). Indymedia is “a community project that’s written by everyone together and the way to keep that flowing and moving forward and working as a community of equal individuals is make the code open source” (John, Sydney Indymedia).

Second, all the groups made efforts to make the processes of the collective transparent. Thus, they all had regular open face-to-face meetings and ran e-mail discussion lists that were publicly accessible. For example, in Adelaide, decision making took place in both of these forums, even though some members were not as keen on regular meetings: “It’s Indymedia policy to have regular open meetings ... whether it’s easy or not, it depends on what sort of things you’re dealing with. Some things I find easier to deal with by email or by telephone—less time consuming” (Dan, Adelaide Indymedia). However, open meetings were seen as being core to maintaining Indymedia’s participatory principle.

Third, Indymedia advanced the notion of open publishing—the collective creation of a string of contributions that as a whole formed a rapidly evolving online magazine with minimal editorial interference (Langlois, 2004):

“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 Readers can see editorial decisions being made by others. They can see how to get involved and help make editorial decisions” (Anon, 2002).

Indymedia placed particular emphasis upon opening up the spaces of production to enable lateral access to all and to put into practice the slogan ‘Everyone is a witness. Everyone is a journalist’. Thus, it was intended that there be as few filters as possible between the reader and the news as it occurred and for upload to be immediate. This was ensured by the multiplicity of formats—enabling rapid upload of audio, visual, or textual news direct from actions—and the ability to add comments instantly to postings that facilitated debate about versions of each story. Content is thus a mix of firsthand accounts, links to other news sources, pictures, analysis, and audio links. This mixture allows the subjectiveness of news to be more explicit, with an acknowledgment that all news is infused with the opinions of the provider. Furthermore, all contributions were anonymous; authors could attach their details if they wished, but the database was so designed that the source of the posting could not be traced. There was also a conscious effort to erode any distinction between being a journalist and being an activist: “there is no distinction, we don’t ‘cover’ events, we set up the conditions for people to cover them themselves” (Nik, Melbourne Indymedia).

Fourth, while opening the space to contribute was an important process, Indymedia still relied upon users having access to the Internet, so a number of projects were run to open up spaces of access. Sydney, Newcastle, and Melbourne have all run media labs (though the Melbourne version, Spacestation, closed in June 2003 due to lack of funding and volunteers, reflecting the transitory nature of such projects). These were relatively permanent spaces offering open access to online computers and the sharing of skills. Effort was also made to provide temporary Indymedia access points on-site at protests; for example, a fully equipped desert.indymedia truck was used during the Woomera 2002 protests on location in South Australia (Pickerill, 2004). At this protest, the PIMP (Phone IndyMedia Patch) system was also trialled. This enabled anyone with a telephone to upload stories direct to Indymedia: “You dial the PIMP number ... leaving a message after the tone. This message is then turned into an MP3 file, automatically uploaded to Indymedia” (Nik, Melbourne Indymedia).

For those without Internet access, a monthly activist newspaper, *The Paper*, was distributed as hard copy across the city. This began as “just a hard copy of the Indymedia website” (Marni, *The Paper*, Melbourne), although it eventually evolved into an edited noninteractive production. In Sydney, *Indymedia on Air* begun as a project to share Indymedia stories with a radio audience, but likewise eventually covered stories “which have got nothing to do with Indymedia” (Hugh, Sydney Indymedia). Finally, Indymedia also used the principles of copyleft to ensure that all contributions could be used openly, rejecting the idea that information and ideas can be owned.

Indymedia has utilised the capabilities of the Internet to provide an open space in a number of different ways. However, there are limits to this openness, and the extent of this openness is also causing problems for the media network. Despite attempts to provide various points of access to Indymedia and to share skills, there remained technical and cultural barriers for some potential users. Sharing the technical knowledge of how to administrate Indymedia or even edit the code was limited to the Catalyst

collective in Sydney: “they had a week of workshops teaching people everything from how to design basic websites, to doing multimedia, to administrating server systems” (Ben, Octapod). But in Melbourne skill sharing was more informal and limited to the more basic elements of how to upload to the site. Alex (Melbourne Indymedia) suggested this was typical of all forms of activism:

“I think whatever form of activism you’re involved in ... there are always, always, bottlenecks of information ... people’s identity is so bound up with their activism that sometimes you don’t necessarily want to skillshare.”

Even when these skills were shared, in order to preserve some basic security, access to the core software and databases was controlled via administration privileges: “we wouldn’t want heaps and heaps of people with access ... it’s potentially troublesome, someone could just delete everything” (Ben, Octapod).

More significant, however, were the cultural and social barriers to understanding the value of Indymedia. In this sense, ‘openness’ itself was not necessarily enough to encourage participation from other cultural groups or subcultures. Reaching beyond the activist community could be difficult because “we have our own language and our own discourse and our own acronyms” (Alex, Melbourne Indymedia). As Adam (Melbourne Indymedia) remarked, “Indymedia, it’s only people that go there and people who are interested in it. You have to find it first ... it still has that problem of reach.” This was most marked in Australia by collectives’ relationships with indigenous groups. While all interviewees supported aboriginal rights and had taken part in protests to that effect, most admitted that there was relatively little overlap between indigenous groups and Indymedia:

“we’ve never made a concerted effort to hit the indigenous population of Newcastle, because we wouldn’t get them in here unless we made a concerted effort ... I can understand why we don’t get a whole lot of those people in here just off their own bat, because they sort of exist in different subcultures to us and they don’t know we exist ... it’s sort of like understanding the way indigenous people work together. It’s quite a different framework from us a lot of the time” (Ben, Octapod).

When indigenous groups were approached, things did not always run smoothly. For example, during the Olympics in Sydney there was an aboriginal tent embassy, which Indymedia approached for participation: “some of the aboriginal people actually got quite defensive ... about our involvement, afraid that we were like other media organisations, there to use and abuse them” (Hugh, Sydney Indymedia). Those interviewees most concerned about this lack of interaction preferred to help on indigenous-led projects when possible. However, there remained a linguistic barrier. The Australian Indymedia sites operated only in English and the removal of a Spanish posting from the Sydney site caused contention within the collective.

An emphasis on openness has also created a fragility in the Indymedia system. It is vulnerable to attack from users or security forces. It is possible to damage the site by posting repeatedly or inappropriately, because the software is designed to immediately upload all stories: “it’s very trusting software ... it’s kind of the point” (Adam, Melbourne Indymedia), but few have attacked Australian sites. However, some sites such as Israel and Palestine IMCs (Independent Media Centres) “have been systematically hacked” (Kidd, 2003b, page 233). The biggest issue for many collectives has been how to protect the Indymedia sites from the undesirable ‘other’: those who continually contribute racist, sexist, homophobic, or far-right postings to disrupt the site rather than to engage in debate, but to which any reaction raises quandaries of censorship. Critics have suggested “the problems with the IMC’s vague politics ... has allowed an international network of right wingers and racists to abuse and disrupt the

IMC websites, which has harmed the IMC's functionality and reputation in ways that may not be fixable" (Chuck0, 2002).

The popularity of the Indymedia model as a way in which to publicise certain information has also attracted the attention of the state. During the anti-G8 demonstrations in Genoa in July 2001, the Italian police raided the schools housing Indymedia in a particularly violent manner: "The police entered ... and they beat people ... they left blood on the walls, on the windows, a pool of it on every spot where people had been" (Brian, 2001, page 21). Three other European IMCs (Switzerland, Norway, and the Netherlands) were also temporarily shut down after disputes about the legality of certain content (Kidd, 2003b). In Australia the New South Wales Police Minister, Michael Costa, attempted to force the Australian Broadcasting Authority to shut down the Melbourne Indymedia website, claiming it was 'antidemocratic' (Blisset, 2002). While the effectiveness of Indymedia's challenge to existing systems could be gauged by the severity of these crackdowns, they have also raised issues as to how to protect those who work in such centres and how to ensure the continued running of each site. The main response thus far has been to publicly advertise any attempts at oppression and to increase the number of computer servers hosting Indymedia sites.

Nonhierarchical organising and decentralised networks

Indymedia is based upon structures designed to ensure the smooth running of the network and to prevent power hierarchies developing. Many interviewees felt that the collectives operated well without evolving into oligarchies: "there's no hierarchy ... there's just a space for everyone to do their own thing" (Barry, Brisbane Indymedia). However, there are two vital components involved in encouraging newcomers to participate in the Indymedia network. The first is to generate the motivation and to trigger individuals into believing they should be involved. The media labs were partly meant to fulfil this role by making visible the practices and people of Indymedia, so outsiders could see that "they're just like me, I can do that" (Nik, Melbourne Indymedia). Once interest has been triggered, however, collectives have to be welcoming to sustain this participation. This second component was harder to achieve. As Colene (Sydney Indymedia) explained, "you have to really deal with your own feelings of ownership of the site, because when you've been working on it for a long time you start to think it's *our* Indymedia site, when it's not, it's everybody's. We just happen to be the people who are maintaining it at this time." Thus, as Alex (Melbourne Indymedia) suggests, some of the collectives needed to be more reflective about the potential for exclusion:

"because of the urgency that drives activism people don't often think that there's space for new people to do things because we don't have time for people to make mistakes or learn ... [but] if I have power and access then my responsibility is to help someone else gain that space as well or use that space to create more spaces."

Once involved, participants of collectives sought to make decisions using consensus to ensure that all viewpoints were considered. Brisbane Indymedia collective strives "to make decisions in the most consensual, transparent and accountable manner" (Anon, 2003a). Much of the collectives' communications were via e-mail lists. Consequently, Melbourne Indymedia collective attempted to untangle the process of online decision making by using a form of modified consensus. It used a structure whereby if consensus was not reached then the proposal could be resolved by a vote of 75% in favour, or the proposal could be moved for discussion in a face-to-face meeting (Anon, 2003b).

For other collectives, the problems of consensus decision making online were tempered by the use of regular face-to-face meetings as a space to resolve any conflict. In Sydney:

“the theory is we can make [decisions] on the email lists but they just never seem to quite happen ... there’s all sorts of dynamics that happen with email ... mostly the big decisions are made in meetings by whoever’s there ... that’s often how decisions get made with activist groups ... things sometimes just happen and things aren’t very clear” (Colene, Sydney Indymedia).

Thus, face-to-face interaction was deemed integral to the decision-making process, as “you need to ground email ... it’s better not to organise a group via email ... it’s a networking device and I think in a lot of ways it’s no substitute” (Nik, Melbourne Indymedia).

However, following a structure of consensus decision making is not necessarily enough to prevent cliques of control developing around some tasks. As Indymedia grew, the number of postings multiplied. Some felt that well-researched and valuable contributions were getting lost in the quantity of postings. Thus, the features column was adopted to frame and utilise more of the existing (quality) content. On most sites the open publishing newswire has now been restricted to one side of the screen. The central column contains edited features written by members of the collective. These often contain a summary of a particular topic or an event, with links to newswire contributions.

These developments increased the importance of the editorial collectives. Increasingly, they were under pressure to edit postings to the newswire and to choose and write items for the features column. The most common form of fact checking that occurred on the Indymedia sites was undertaken by other participants and contributors in the form of comments posted after each newswire submission. In this way, the original post is not edited but is corrected or countered by others as they visit the site. More controversially, some posts are edited or removed because they are deemed inappropriate for the newswire. Each of the Australian collectives dealt with this issue differently and thus the level of editorial interference varied. Melbourne Indymedia had the most specific editorial policy. This enabled the collective to hide some posts from the front page (though they were still available elsewhere on the website) if they were deemed to “promote racism, fascism, xenophobia, homophobia, sexism etc or any other form of discrimination” (Anon, 2003b) and if they incited violence or were “obviously incorrect” or “devoid of content”.

In contrast, Sydney Indymedia had no formal editorial policy, but reflected the range of opinions within the collective on the issue on its website. This included those who thought an explicit policy was necessary and those who believed that it was inappropriate to silence views by editing postings. For example, John (Sydney Indymedia) believed “the only rule should be that there is no editing”. In practice, collective members have edited the site. Hugh (Sydney Indymedia) has been involved in “dumping stuff off Indymedia that is inappropriate and our protocols aren’t always perfectly clear about that.”

For most of the collectives, the extent of any editorial practice remains under debate even where policy has been agreed upon, and reflects a broader schism within Indymedia and the alter-globalisation movements about the right of others to free speech. Herndon (of Seattle Indymedia) believes it comes down to whether Indymedia collectives should be editors or librarians: categorising unedited content into themes (quoted by Kidd, 2004). There is a concern that any interference can be construed as a form of censorship. By excluding those postings that are fascist or employ another form of discrimination, the collectives are delineating Indymedia as intolerant of far-right

views and as an explicitly left-wing project. While few interviewees were under any illusions that this confirmed Indymedia's role as an explicitly alter-globalisation project rather than a broader participatory media project, there remained concerns that the accountability of the Indymedia network was hard to define: "how do you define who can take it down and then who are they accountable to ... how do you define what is not the right content for the website?" (Alex, Melbourne Indymedia). The way in which the editorial collectives operate and editorial decisions are made is crucial to the integrity of Indymedia as a nonhierarchical project. As the features column becomes a valuable component of each site, the propensity for a collective to abuse its power increases. Concern that as a result of these changes the editorial collectives might begin to hold a power which is antithetical to the ideals of open publishing has resulted in experiments with the use of 'open editing' (Meikle, 2003). This would involve readers being able to "logon to Indymedia and help with sub-editing, translation, summarising, and highlighting stories" (Arnison, 2003).

The Australian Indymedia collectives are part of the broader, and ever-expanding, global Indymedia network. At this transnational level there are a number of operational details which have required the involvement of Australian activists. Inevitably, as the network grew so did the global discussion lists, until the process became unmanageable and dominated by certain individuals, which skewed the cultural diversity of the network. It also led to bottlenecks in decision making, especially in the process of approving new Indymedia websites and their associated collectives: "there's this whole bureaucracy to go through to become part of Indymedia which just seems so ridiculously counter ... it does seem like Indymedia's become an institution unto itself" (Alex, Melbourne Indymedia).

In response, several Australian activists argued for the decentralisation of the Indymedia network. Marni (*The Paper* Melbourne) commented that she was "a bit disillusioned with the way ... Americans are controlling the process and the way that it's functioning ... it would be better if it actually became a little bit more decentralised or autonomous" and Paul (Sydney Indymedia) confirmed that "a lot of people just within Sydney didn't think there was any need for a global decision-making network": "Things that are generated in the region are always going to be more appropriate for that region. On the global list there's people wanting to have a whole control of how Indymedia should be ... [but] it should come in different forms and flavours appropriately for the area" (John, Sydney Indymedia).

In practice, the Australian collectives set up Adelaide, Jakarta, and Brisbane Indymedia informally on the indymedia.org.au domain before they went through the global process, because they felt a frustration with processes "having to go through a single global hub" (Ben, Octapod) in order to get formal approval of new Indymedia sites. The Australians then went a step further by creating Oceania (<http://oceania.indymedia.org>), a regional syndication website of Indymedia collectives in the Pacific Region, incorporating Indonesia, Philippines, New Zealand, and Australia. This compiled postings from all the separate sites in the region, but, more importantly, brought those in the region closer together. Thus, Indymedia was used to delineate new regional affiliations determined by the participants rather than by historical national boundaries. Thus, whilst there may be centralising tendencies within the global Indymedia network, Australian collectives were determined to operate in a decentralised network that enabled them to make the strongest links with activists in the Pacific rather than North America or Europe.

Local autonomy, global solidarity

This decentralisation of the global network and the Australian collectives' emphasis upon solidifying regional links within the Pacific, illustrates the importance of both local action and a broader sense of solidarity with other campaigns in the movement. Indymedia was designed to assert the importance of locality, of place-based collectives, and of place-rooted grassroots action. Fundamentally, the whole premise of the network was based upon enabling contributors to testify directly from their grassroots level rather than to suffer mediation of their ideas and struggles via more centralised media. This emphasis upon local action was protected through the importance placed upon autonomous practices. Collectives' autonomy was further ensured through open practices that potentially enabled new participants to wield equal power in the decision making of the collective.

As a result, there was a predominance of local or national stories on each of the Australian Indymedia sites. At times, Australian struggles were linked into global issues, but often only through the context of a local perspective on that issue. Jankowski and Jansen (2003) identified a sharp distinction between those Indymedia collectives running 'national' sites (such as UK IMC) and those more local (such as Oxford, or in this case Melbourne) in the geographic orientation of postings. National sites were highly international in their content, whereas local sites were focused predominantly on stories of national interest. In Australia there was no 'national' site and Oceania only amalgamated stories from these city-based websites rather than creating new regional-level stories. For Australia, then, Indymedia has remained focused on the importance of local action and local autonomy.

In addition to this focus on local issues there was a reticence by many in the collectives to engage in the global decision making of the Indymedia network. Involvement in defining a global charter was abandoned by Australian collectives. Australians distanced themselves from such debates and instead sought to reconstitute Indymedia at a decentralised regional level. Solidarity with other elements of the alter-globalisation movement was expressed by maintaining the format of the Indymedia sites to reflect the general design intentions of others in the global network. The Australian sites did not significantly deviate from the trends set by the global Indymedia site or other sites worldwide. The creation of Oceania was also partly to improve supportive links with the numerous campaigns in Indonesia and the Philippines, which the Australian (and international) media often ignore. Members of the collectives visited Jakarta to help set up Indymedia sites. Thus, while disengaging from global Indymedia politics, the Australian collectives were at the same time expressing solidarity with other campaigns.

These forms of solidarity—of engaging with some groups, but not all parts, of the movement—reflect the utility of the autonomy model. Autonomous practices enable collectives to move forward with their chosen actions and networks uninhibited by bureaucracy or the need for approval from others in the network. While some within Indymedia, and within the alter-globalisation movements more broadly, believe there is a need for a more rigid set of agreed goals and processes, others such as these interviewees in Australia suggest that such an approach would prove counterproductive by potentially limiting the diversity and heterogeneity of the movement, which are currently its strengths. This is perhaps especially so for Australasians, who despite cultural links to Europe can appear isolated from some of the more vocal movement debates occurring in other continents.

This relates to the difficult definitional question for the movement. When asked what underpinned the aims of Indymedia in Australia, Colene (Sydney Indymedia) stated that "our kind of philosophy ... [is] that that lefty anarchist gift economy idea should extend to all parts of the project." This is a very vague assertion of the

importance of sharing, openness, and mutual aid. While it leaves open the possibility of widening the movement to include others, it also restricts the motivating potential that a strong vision might provide and reduces the possibility of being able to make concrete demands for change (Brand and Wissen, 2005). Thus, Indymedia reflects a broader tension. The celebration of autonomy and local uniqueness could eventually lead to a fragmentation of the network and the question thus becomes: how strong does the thread of commonality need to be in order to weave some sense of (and space for) global solidarity?

Conclusions

This exploration of the practices of one element of the alter-globalisation movements has identified a number of dilemmas for those involved. First, the limitations of using ICTs as a space for the constitution of a radical politics. ICTs offer many opportunities that have been utilised by Indymedia: in particular, open publishing, continued communication between dispersed participants, and of course the global projection of the material online. Yet the usefulness of these attributes is diminished by the problems encountered online: the threats from user disruption, the need to make decisions face-to-face in order to move beyond increasingly complex consensus decision-making structures online, and the related necessity for editorial collectives to make decisions on content and features. Lessons have been learnt from the Indymedia model, and more participatory forms of website construction are increasingly being adopted by those in the alter-globalisation movements—for example, Wikis are being used by many involved in European social forums and by the Sydney Indymedia collective. These enable any user to edit, format, and create new webpages without the need for editorial approval.

Perhaps more important is the issue of resonance. If Indymedia sites are concerned with local grassroots actions and participatory production processes, who is the audience? While the Indymedia model was explicitly designed to overcome distinctions between ‘contributors’ and ‘readers’, this does not result in a broad socially mixed audience (Downing, 2003a). The Indymedia format is slightly chaotic and thus tends to appear “like the journalistic version of a group conversation” (Kingsnorth, 2004, page 159). A result of the open publishing ethic, this is both an achievement and a challenge for the readership. The possibility of Indymedia directly affecting public opinion is limited given this format, but Indymedia’s role, both symbolically and materially, in aiding the constitution of alter-globalisation movements is harder to measure.

The second dilemma concerns the ability of the Indymedia collectives to match their aims with their practices: the commitment to autonomy, openness, nonhierarchical and decentralised networks, and solidarity with other campaigns. The Australian collectives asserted their autonomy particularly in the creation of decentralised networks. Openness was also a strong theme, especially efforts to provide access and new ways in which to upload data to the websites. However, there is a conflict emerging between the commitment of these movements to openness and the need for security. So far, openness has been protected by appeals to the wider community for the support of free media and free speech. Additionally, as in other movements such as environmental direct action in the UK, it is precisely Indymedia’s ability to have a gradual but continuous reconfiguration of its aims and form that ensures its significance and survival (Anderson, 2004). This fluidity and the reflexivity of the participants enables the network to evolve, adapt, and improve in response to challenges and new ideas. Despite these successes in aligning aims to practice (and thus praxis), informal

hierarchies did form around editorial decisions and technical skills. This can be overcome only through continued reflexive practice by those involved.

The third dilemma concerns reach. The Australian case and the experiences of the collectives serve as a timely reminder of the continued problematic of inclusion of ‘the other’ (Downing, 2003b). Not only have Australians had to face the irrelevance of a project such as Indymedia to indigenous groups in Australia, but the whole experience of Australia as being marginalised from the Indymedia debates occurring in North America and Europe illustrates the continued potential for these movements to appear exclusive. In this respect, simply being ‘open’ is not enough to widen these spaces of resistance.

Fourth is the importance of structure. The points at which the informal hierarchies became most problematic were in the decision-making process, where “things sometimes just happen and things aren’t very clear” (Colene, Sydney Indymedia). It is here that visible structures are necessary to ensure accountability and clarity and to strengthen the ability of groups to operate nonhierarchically.

Finally, these movements are concerned with more than resistance; they are also concerned with concerted efforts to create new spaces and to operate in different ways from formal politics: “it’s not enough to slow the rate of destruction. We have to increase the rate of creation” (Herndon, Seattle IMC, quoted by Beckerman, 2003). Consequently, we are able to use this exploration of Indymedia to further the understanding of the significance of alter-globalisation movements: in other words, to understand what these practices offer as a critique of existing social and political systems. It is here, in the everyday practices of these Australian Indymedia collectives, that hope lies. It is clear that these are not unproblematic aims or processes, but on the whole they are workable. They have a tangibility, many moments of innovation, and yet more moments of negotiation. In understanding the internal dynamics of global activist networks, this paper has highlighted participants’ commitment to autonomous ideals coupled with an acknowledgement that significant tensions remain in the continuing constructions of resistances to corporate globalisation. It is the ability of participants to acknowledge these dilemmas and to continue to be reflexive about their practices that is one of the greatest strengths of these emerging movements. Moreover, such experiences speak of broader possibilities for the sustainability of transnational grassroots solidarities using ICTs as a key communication network.

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