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"A Gang of Leftists with a Website: The Indymedia Movement"

By *Jon R. Pike*

Introduction

In October, 2003, the St. Louis local collective of the Independent Media Center Movement held a fundraising party. A local columnist described the IMC as 'a gang of leftists with a web site announcing various political gripes and protests' (Kerman). The party was a huge success, thanks in part to the columnist—his inaccurate depiction of the local IMC notwithstanding. This collective is a local manifestation of what Fontes calls the first 'alternative mass medium' (14) made possible by the confluence of punk and anarchist ethics, emerging computer cultures and a vigorous anti-corporate global movement. The St. Louis IMC collective had all of these elements, which helped grow a pre-existing local radical infrastructure. This, in turn, helped bring about another branch of a movement that came into being less than five years ago.

Origins of the Independent Media Center Movement

The Independent Media Center movement was founded during the 1999 World Trade Organization protests in Seattle by activists with computer and media production skills who were sympathetic to the demonstrations (Indymedia FAQ's). Their purpose was to provide an ongoing on-line account of the protests. This movement's roots went back to the 1996 Democratic National Convention in Chicago . One of the organisers of the 'Countermedia' website who followed protesters at this convention was radical attorney, Jeff Perlstein, a Seattle resident, who helped organise the first IMC web site (Rinaldo 2000).

This movement grew up with anti-globalisation. Those opposed to conglomerates obtaining control over worldwide markets would include those who viewed with alarm the rise of such mega-media conglomerates as Disney/ABC and Time/Warner-AOL. Critics, such as McChesney, have long noted that not only do these economic arrangements allow a corporate agenda to dominate media content, it also 'encourages a weak political culture that makes depoliticisation, apathy and selfishness rational choices for the citizenry' (7). These entities dominate the discourse on issues by controlling messages. Schiller used the example of CNN's domination of news during the first Gulf War to illustrate the potential consequences of a few global, corporate media enterprises dominating the discourse by controlling the information that the world receives (113).

Over 100 local IMC Collectives in more than 40 countries have sprung up since 1999. Some have branched out from the web and into radio, video, and print (Pavis). In addition to the local pages there is a 'Global' page which features news from other local web sites, displays of original material for the site, and links articles from the other local sites into a common feature story. Global is not a portal site to the other IMC web pages. All the pages, including Global, stand alone and link to each other.

Literature Review and Theoretical Perspectives

That all of the local units are autonomous cells within a larger framework seems to justify an organisational cultural study. Each unit within the IMC framework makes its own financial and editorial decisions within a framework. Kidd calls this framework 'networked consensus': 'International meetings are held on-line [and include] a wide-array of discussion groups that range from general discussions to finances, to translation to technical issues' (77). These cells are all organised as a network of collectives, which individually and together act with other activist networks and collectives. As these networks form, the collectives work out issues as basic as their primary mission. A founder of the Vancouver IMC collective, Uzelman wrote of a debate in the movement over facilitation versus production—facilitating communication between movements and producing media that supports this facilitation (2002). Uzelman seems to come down on the side of the latter position. He argues that the texts produced by the various IMCs, whether web, print or video, not only give people the skills to use and share, 'they also, I think most importantly, provide a good example of what is possible' (22). People learn how to create media and how to share that media to the world outside of the collective, not only to persuade others to a certain viewpoint but also to seize the controls of media production.

Douglas Morris, a member of the Chicago collective, elaborates on the inherent conflict between IMC local and the Global network: 'At a level of principle, there is a resistance to large collective processes, especially by youth in the network' (12). He characterises this as a conflict between 'globalizers' and 'localisers'. Morris talks of conflict in the IMC organisation over the role of 'Longtime facilitators [who] may be gradually forming an inner circle, with a culture of understandings about what works best' (6). Those who come into the network as activists bring their own best practices, and these may rub up against those who are already a part of the network.

The perspective of critical scholars who have written about activist media networks can be applied to Indymedia as well. Marks took a page from anarchist Hakim Bey's notion of the *Temporary Autonomous Zone* (2004), a conceptual space where people are free from hierarchy and regulation, and applied it to media. Media that operate in such a zone fight against a tendency of the corporate and state media not to disclose information that runs counter to their assumptions. According to Atton, activist media take advantage of the new possibilities offered by computer media to 'investigate the poor information disclosure [of the established media and] create possibilities for radical coalition building' (Atton 35). Atton tied this specifically to the loose networks that can be formed with computer media, which activists may have that work against and do away with hierarchy (141). What has been missing from these analyses is—who does Indymedia and why? The following two sections provide a theoretical framework to examine those questions.

Paulo Freire and Critical Pedagogy

The radical Brazilian educator Paulo Freire developed a critique of education while working on a reform of adult literacy programs in his native Brazil . He characterised the educational system he encountered as the 'banking' system of education, wherein all played their roles accordingly: 'Education thus becomes an act of depositing,' said Freire, 'in which students are depositories and the teacher is the depositor' (83). Students under this system are passive receptacles in which they are 'filled' with education. Freire looked at this system as the educators instilling in their students knowledge that was valuable to the educators, but not necessarily valuable to students. Students and teachers under a Freirean model both take responsibility for determining what constitutes education that will be beneficial to their success in life. This process should have two-steps.

The first step is what Freire called conscientisation. This occurs when people realise that they are not objects, waiting to be filled up with education, but subjects who recognise that they take an active role in their education. That role he said, 'was not only to be in the world, but to engage in relations with the world—that through acts of creation and recreation, we make cultural reality and thereby add to the natural world, that which we did not make' (Friere and Macedo 82).

Education under the Freirean model is therefore inherently radical in that it prepares people to change their world. In order for people to transform their world something needs to be added to conscientisation. This is 'praxis'. Praxis is the work that people engage in that transforms their world. Literacy under this model is an inherently political act. Only people who see themselves as creating their education can truly be educated.

It is simple to extend a Freirean model to mass media. The consumer makes selections from a menu they had no role in creating and thus gives mute assent to the system, while believing that he or she has choices. These consumers learn from media constructed polls what the majority of their fellow consumers think and then vote for candidates that present themselves best via these same media and promise to deliver best on what these polls have decided is what they want. Perhaps most importantly, these media educate people by 'making deposits' on what to think about. Freire recognised the role that mass media play in separating people from their world and turning them into objects: 'man is maneuvered by the mass media to the point where he believes nothing he has not heard on the radio, seen on television or read in the newspapers' (34). People, under this paradigm, says Freire, have no way of engaging the world, because other interests have control of that engagement and make their 'deposits'.

Melucci and the Democratisation of Everyday Life

Melucci, in his observations of social movements, offers a way in which people can meaningfully liberate themselves from media bent on objectifying them that is possible to construct in the present world. He called this, 'democratization of everyday life': 'Democracy in complex societies requires conditions which enable individuals and social groups to affirm themselves and to be recognized for what they are or wish to be' (*Nomads* 172). These conditions can be met in 'social spaces' where individuals and collective organisations can begin to practice this democratised type of society. Activists can press for the completion of their perfect world, in these spaces, while at the same time living as much as possible within that social space. They can also acknowledge that there is a here and now that does not meet their conditions for a perfect society. He further argued that these movements build what he calls 'hidden networks' (*Strange*). A network like this 'allows multiple membership; is part-time with respect to both the life course and to the amount of time it absorbs; and requires the personal commitment and affective solidarity of those who belong to it' (127). People can belong to these types of networks while belonging to other organisations and to the degree which their lives allow them. They also form these networks out of their own personal feelings towards the networks and towards the people in them.

These networks have two modes. The first, latency, is 'a sort of underground laboratory for antagonism and innovation' (127). This is where a network like Indymedia network can work out all of the kinks. People can come into it and people can go out of it. The other mode by which such movements operate is mobilisation. The IMC movement uses the media of computers, print, video and radio to make these very connections. This is a movement that is literally and figuratively a medium. Lastly, by its very existence Indymedia proclaims an alternative model for media. This movement is a network of individuals making media in a completely democratic environment that is not driven by the logic of the market for its existence.

Ethnographic Techniques and Mass Media

The IMC movement is centred around certain core beliefs concerning the production of a specific text: the IMC local web pages. In order for an Independent Media Center to carry the name, it must develop a mission statement, show a home community, develop a web presence, and subscribe to the Principles of Unity (Indymedia *Principles*). The locals pledge to use consensus-based decision-making in running the collective and provide 'open posting' on the site where anyone can post video, audio, text and pictures. These principles combined with the view of the world that appears on Indymedia websites gives a picture of non-sectarian leftism. In writing for the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Beckerman confirmed Indymedia as a place where various causes

from 'environmental extremism', advocacy for fair trade, anarchism, to solidarity with Palestinians receive prominent play (9). It would be appropriate to call the IMC movement a community. Wong has studied grass roots media operations ethnographically to engage their 'negotiations of form and audiences' (25), as well as their confrontational stances toward authority and privileged media. Wong regards the people who engage in these types of media projects as worthy subjects of ethnographic investigation and sees value in examining who they are and what challenges they face. Halleck certainly did not shy away from using the word 'community' in describing this movement. In fact, she says that community was formed when the first Indymedia went online with its news of the WTO protests in Seattle .

My two-year study of the St. Louis IMC engaged ethnographic techniques. I collected on-line meeting notes, posted to the St. Louis IMC list-servs and web sites. These were supplemented with my own notes. The collective was aware of my intentions as I announced them at the first meeting I attended. I contributed to the work of the collective. I wrote and edited stories for the web site and helped with other organisational tasks. About nine months into the project, I sat down with several members of the collective and conducted interviews. I also collected issues of the *Confluence* newspaper, which existed a few years before the St. Louis IMC web site, but shares personnel and stories with the IMC. I highlighted articles to demonstrate the existence of some of the institutions that have been built to support this community.

Interviews with the Collective

The St. Louis IMC started among a group of friends. The St. Louis group coalesced around a particular event: the U.S. presidential debate held at Washington University. Only Bush and Gore were allowed in the debate and there was plenty of corporate funding for the debate. Some of the people who were involved in protesting the debate had heard about the IMC movement, and decided they wanted one too. Andy Jones was present near the creation of the St. Louis IMC. He began his work in radical media in St. Louis by contributing to the *Confluence.* One of the things he said he liked about a media source like the IMC is that people can make a personal connection to it, by making posts to articles or contributing items to the news wire. He related an anecdote about some Washington University students who got a great turnout for some anti-globalisation events 'because they posted word about it on the calendar. I'm always running into people and when I tell them I'm involved in Indymedia, they know what we're about' (Personal communication. 19 Mar. 2002). Andy and his partner, Art Friederich live in an apartment above the building that is used by the IMC. Andy and Art made radical media production a real part of their lives as they have moved into a building shared by several community organizations—they are the face of the radical media organisation housed there.

Another person present at the creation of the St. Louis IMC was Mark Bohnert. Mark came in to the IMC as the most experienced in the radical media movement, although his experience was not of a commercial or professional nature. Mark helped start the *Confluence* back in 1995. He was instrumental in starting and maintaining co-operative organisations in south St. Louis, including a bakery and housing. 'All my work comes from wanting to undermine social relations,' says Mark, 'where one person tells another person what to do and one person manipulates another' (Personal communication. 4 Nov. 2003). Though Mark was present when the idea of starting an IMC was first flagged, he decided to mainly stay with the *Confluence* . Mark says that while a newspaper is a lower technology level, it really has the potential to get in the hands of a lot of people who do not have the Internet. The *Confluence* and the IMC are somewhat joined at the hip and the same people are often involved in both organisations.

Mark sometimes expresses ambivalence about where he is doing the most good. He says he has thoughts that he actually creates more change with the bakery: 'It's a successful worker-owned co-operative. There's no boss' (Personal communication. 4 Nov. 2003). Another reason why Mark thinks that the bakery is an effective change agent is because of the bakery's relation to the world in which it resides: 'We're very out and open about being anarchists, we donate our product to

various causes and we put political messages on our bread labels'. Mark has had these doubts as the *Confluence* has gained more success. Since 1995, the paper's circulation has increased from 2,000 to 10,000 and is distributed free in about 150 locations. Mark does however, think that radical media in the area has had its impact. He sees more radical activity, year-by-year:

> There's definitely more people doing things. Five or six years ago, I just knew a handful of anarchists in the area, now I know a few dozen. There's new things happening all the time. There's an anarcha-feminist group that just started and movements against police brutality that's rooted in radical concepts.

Mark says he hopes that the radical media projects continue to help feed radicalism in the area and to feed off it. The *Confluence* , the IMC and possibly the local 'zine movement will certainly be working more closely together as these projects will be sharing space in a building.

One of the newer members of the St. Louis IMC, at this time, really helped re-spark the Collective. Liz, who only wanted to be identified by her first name, grew up in suburban Chicago and went to Barnard College before transferring to Washington University . She says she was not particularly politically active until September 11 and then got involved in activism related to U.S. foreign policy in the Mid-east and Palestinian issues. She majored in history and did a senior thesis on Emma Goldman. She was working at the Washington University Medical School and plans on entering medical school.

She has served as the local liaison to the financial list-serv, which decides how to spend the money that Global has, largely from donations. This money has not sat well with all of the locals. At an early IMC meeting I attended, it was proposed that Global simply give about $500 to all of the active locals. Liz has always kept us aware of what people are proposing to spend this money on, even though there really has not been much discussion within our local about any of these proposals.

Because Liz did the majority of her job behind a computer, she often found the time to work on the features page, whether it is writing abstracts for the features or locating links and graphics to go with features. Besides learning how to write features and to develop some technical skills in working with the front page, Liz says she has found the process by which IMCs conduct their business to be liberating: 'At every meeting I've ever attended, there's always somebody in charge,' says Liz (Personal communication, 3 Nov. 2002). 'There's always a person who takes notes every single time, there's a president and it's hierarchical'. According to Liz, such operations work against people contributing: 'You're not really supposed to say anything and you're supposed to go through this initiation first and it's really intimidating'. Liz says she has tried to take the non-authoritarian model into other activist organisations with Communists, Maoists, Muslims, and others who may have a more authoritarian persuasion. But she says she took the initiative, went into a meeting and said, 'I'm going to be a facilitator. I realize that was somewhat authoritarian of me, but I still think it was helpful'. In this particular case, Liz took what she had learned in the IMC experience to try to transform other activist experiences with which she was involved.

Documents from the Community

I would have to characterise the St. Louis IMC as predominantly 'DIY' (Do-It-Yourself)-Anarchist in its orientation. They tend to be people who have decided to opt out as much as they can from the capitalist cycle of production-and-consumption and deal with the political system in terms of protest actions. There is a great emphasis on people not buying goods and services from each other, but living co-operatively.

The closest thing I was able to find concerning a manifesto for the St. Louis brand of anarchism was the forward to a collection of writings from mid-west anarchists and anti-authoritarians, called *Passionate and Dangerous* (1998). Its preface, by Mark Bohnert, reads: 'The anarchists herein

are working with unique idealistic collectives with local slants to them depending on regional circumstance' (1). Mark describes living as an anti-authoritarian in the Mid-west as 'backwards and lonely', but says there are 'oases'. These are, 'building blocks for day-to-day survival and greater outreach—such as the multitudes of housing cooperatives anti-authoritarians have been starting' (1). These 'building blocks' were made possible by capital and people fleeing and leaving behind 'low-rent housing and land prices that are accessible to money-less anarchists/activists to create autonomous zones and foundations for greater political activity' (1). According to Mark, anti-authoritarians in St. Louis have been laying the groundwork to do political work and take root in cities that have more or less been left to them by the flight of people and capital.

Besides media enterprises, this community has a number of other collectives called 'anti-businesses'. There is the bakery of which Mark Bohnert spoke. There is also a web design collective started by people who either were or still are part of the IMC. Another example is 3ms pedals and Commonsound Collective. Dann Green, who was the first tech guru for the St. Louis IMC when I joined, works with a collective that produces musical effects pedals that he describes as 'a collective of people and businesses (and anti-businesses) who are into using, making, designing, selling and dreaming of innovative, crazy experimental audio equipment' (*3M vs 3ms* 3). St. Louis is home to a core of people who have learned to do away with the distinctions in a capitalist society in which people are producers or designers, or consumers. Taking up media that deliberately blur these distinctions would simply have been par for the course for them.

One of those new ways to live is to find alternatives to either renting or home owning. People in this community promote these alternatives like Community Land Trusts, 'a non-profit organization that safeguards land and provides permanently affordable access to land, homes, and workplaces for current and future low-and-moderate income residents' (Bohnert and Cruce 3). As these alternatives are designed to help people escape the cycle of consumerism by living as simply as possible, part of such a community's mission would be learning how to provide such basic amenities as housing and employment.

People in this community came together to provide a space for their activism. The project came to be known as the Community Arts and Media Project (CAMP). The building is a shared residential/commercial structure and was originally designed for six activist organisations to provide what one activist characterised as an 'antidote' to the divisions of isolated grassroots projects. This activist wrote that the mission of this organisation and, by extension, the building, would be to 'provide local organizations a place to conduct business and share the space and tools needed to contribute educational opportunities and resources to the larger community' (Mack 6). Some of the original six dropped out, but there has been an active search to bring in other tenants. In a corner office on the ground floor of the building will be the 'media' offices of the Community Arts and Media Project—the IMC office, the *Confluence* office and a 'zine library. The people who want to work and live in this space also perform services for the residents of the neighbourhood. One of these projects is a bike workshop. Bikes are an important of St. Louis ' radical community. They actively promote and use bikes as an alternative to using cars and fuel. According to the latest online brochure for the CAMP project (Community Arts and Media Projects), people associated with this project are soliciting used and broken bikes for neighbourhood kids to fix up, with supervision, and take home. The space is growing as a place for this community to be involved in the projects that give their lives meaning.

Conclusions, Discussion, and the Future

My immersion into this community helped me understand how new social movements and Freire's critical pedagogy came together in the St. Louis radical community and its Independent Media Center collective. Both on the local and global levels, Indymedia is a 'hidden network'. The *Confluence*, the Indymedia collective in St. Louis , and the CAMP project are social spaces in which a community comes together to express its identity affective solidarity.

These collectives were established among groups of friends, and when people came into the networks, including me, we developed bonds with each other. Almost all of the people I encountered in this environment participate in multiple memberships in these groups. A good example is Mark Bohnert, who was involved in the *Confluence*, Indymedia, a bakery and cooperative housing. When any of these projects became more important he was allowed by the community to do so.

Indymedia also demonstrates latency. During my involvement with this group, the St. Louis Indymedia collective went through periods of activity which waxed and waned. There were times when very few meetings were held and it was hard to get anyone involved with the site. There were also periods of intense activity. To illustrate, the collective worked on and posted 12 feature articles to its site in April, 2002. The following month, there was only two. The collective allowed for the individual needs of its members to come and go and contribute as they could. Still, this group persists into its third year at the time of writing in June, 2004. When I wanted to get involved with the group that posted articles to the Global page, I was not sure how much I could contribute because of some unsettled aspects of my personal life. I was told by regular contributor, Josh Breitbart, that I could contribute as much, or as little time as I could. The network was allowing latency for me. When radicals all over the world mobilised against the Iraq war, this list-serv mobilised to catch up with all the activity. I contributed quite a bit to the list-serve at that time, as I was part of the mobilisation effort.

The work of Indymedia also fits the concepts of critical pedagogy developed by Freire. At both local and global levels, Indymedia workers have decided that they will construct media reality. There seems to be an inherent understanding within this movement of Cohen's famous observation that while the media do not tell us what to think, they tell us what to think about (13). This observation can be applied to Freire's concept of the 'banking system of education'. Instead of being passive consumers of media and letting media make 'deposits' in them, local and global members decided to create media, which means they have already experienced their conscientisation and put into practice their praxis.

In St. Louis , Indymedia grew and continues to exist within a series of Melucci's networks. It took root because of the existence of an already existing radical community that had some experience making its own communication media and was not satisfied with accepting messages about how people should live. They entered into their own praxis to create institutions that were acceptable to how they wanted to live. The movement came along at an opportune time so that this network could connect with other like-minded networks.

The line of research I embarked upon argues for a cultural perspective. While such qualitative study does not have a goal of generalisation, as researchers to look at other collectives and networks of people who create radical and oppositional media, we can put together motives and begin to understand them at the individual, collective and network level. Indymedia and other such networks will continue to grow and they will encounter the world outside themselves. There is already evidence of this. Typing the word 'Indymedia' into both *Yahoo!* and *Google News* demonstrates that these news sites occasionally harvest Indymedia for news. According to Owens and Palmer, while the first generation of anti-authoritarians went to the Internet to promote their causes, they remained largely invisible to the public (342). Their visibility is growing. As this movement negotiates its new boundaries with the world, researchers will have new opportunities. The greatest hurdle for studying this movement so far is the absence of efforts to gauge its audience. It is one thing to talk about the people and texts in this movement and quite another to examine who uses these texts. This is imperative, because as Downing suggests, the audiences of alternative and radical media 'have the right to have media activists listen to and engage their experiences, their dreams and their nightmares, and not simply to be communicated *at*' (633). When we bring together the texts, the producers and the users, we will truly be able to talk about sites such as Indymedia as more than a gang of leftists with a web site.

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