

HOW

OPEN

the
politics
of open
publishing

by andrea
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IS OPEN?

“Media everywhere information nowhere!” is a little used, yet poignant, slogan cried out at large demos where the cameras and journalists of corporate media are omnipresent but in-depth coverage of social justice issues is not. Embodied in this slogan is the common belief among activists that the corporate-run mass media present obstacles to social justice movements. Although some groups have found ways to get their messages into the mainstream media, whether through the staging of media attention grabbing spectacles or the funnelling of resources into media relations, many groups experience media coverage that shows their actions through a distorted lens. For the 1999 protests against the World Trade Organization (WTO), activists in Seattle decided to flip this dynamic, crying out: “Don’t hate the media, be the media.” And with this summersault, the Independent Media Centre, Indymedia (IMC) was born.

What most think of now when they think of Indymedia is the network of websites, but the IMC actually started as a physical space for alternative and independent media-makers to gather during the protests in Seattle. The IMC website served as a newswire for protesters and independent journalists, accessible through the computers at the centre. The network of websites that it has become can trace its beginning to a chance encounter between an Australian media activist and one of the Seattle IMC organizers one month prior to the Seattle anti-WTO demonstrations. As documented by Scott Uzelman in his work on Indymedia Vancouver,¹ the activist from Australia convinced the web designers to adopt open source software designed by Community Activist Technology that would allow the public to upload content to the site. The software fit with the activists’ vision of the project because it allowed decentralized media production and content sharing. Whereas traditional website creation and maintenance requires a centralized webmaster or webmistress to upload and organize information, the open publishing software allowed users from any computer to upload, organize, and download the multimedia content.

On a practical level, open publishing² software permitted the decentralization of work among many media activists and independent journalists. On an ideological level, it allowed activists to move away from a centralized mass media model, where a few people decide what content is important, to a horizontal, decentralized model based on collaboration and reciprocity. Through the Indymedia project, the puzzle pieces of political ideas and of technology snapped into place. Everyone with internet access and basic skills was now able to contribute to the creation of news, whether they were based in Europe, South Africa, the U.S.A., or directly at the IMC. This new form of access to publishing was very new at the time, and represented a huge advancement in the way the internet was used, although, admittedly, the digital divide and literacy issues remain obstacles for much of the world's population.

The result was what has come to be known as open publishing, a practice in which the process of creating the content is transparent to the readers and that they too can get involved, either by writing articles, or by setting up their own site. All content is copyleft, meaning that anyone is free to take and use it for non-profit purposes so long as they give credit to the original author. In open publishing anyone can be a media manipulator. Also implicit is the principle of reciprocity—a concept which cyber-theorist Pierre Lévy sees as integral to virtual communities. According to Lévy, reciprocity in this context means that if we learn something from the information exchanged, we are expected to share information that could be of use to someone else.³ With open publishing, the historical divide between producer and consumer is narrowed, although, it must be acknowledged, never eliminated completely because of issues around access to technology and the knowledge needed to use it, which is one of the major critiques of Indymedia.

Indymedia collectives centre their work on the philosophy of open publishing as they seek to create a free information network, based on a democratic model of production and distribution, in which the content available is exchanged horizontally from user to user, media-producer to media-producer, activist to activist. The technology that enables open publishing was created within the open source software movement, which was founded on the value of equal access to free information. Once this technology was officially in the hands of media activists located in the global justice movement, it was then moulded and further developed to fit activists' needs and philosophies.

The point is that, although it may seem as though the software technology influenced the structure of the IMC, it is not the technology which determined what would be done, but rather the activists who formed and developed technology to fit their needs and values. It is therefore important to think about open publishing as a theory, or philosophy, which is put into practice, rather than as a technology that determines how the Indymedia network develops. The practice of open publishing can be seen, then, as reflecting the principles of the movement—democracy, reciprocity, free access to information, and collective action.



indymedia as an alternative space online

The Indymedia network provides a space online in which open publishing can be used to promote dialogue and communication instead of one-way dissemination. Within these carved out alternative spaces, activists can—to borrow the words of Andrew Wood and Andrew Smith—use “computer networks to construct discursive resistance to dominant forces—to build alternative paths, hiding places, impromptu monuments, and unauthorized meeting places online.”⁴ Every time someone publishes something on an Indymedia site, they are engaging in the active production of media and are also opening themselves up to feedback on their observations and analysis through the commentary function. They are participating in a space where some of the barriers to access with regards to media production are eliminated—a space where the politics of speech (i.e., whose voice is legitimate) found in mainstream society are challenged, along with the commodification of information, and state control of communication networks.

There are many benefits to these types of spaces that strive to embody the alternatives that they propose. This embodiment can be defined as activism that seeks to criticize the dominant social order or to engage with it, while also attempting to create something new. However, despite the accomplishments possible within these types of spaces, there can come a time when the problems associated with the structures of capitalism and patriarchy find their way inside.

When it comes to Indymedia, because it is a media space where people discuss global social justice issues, various forms of discrimination, such as sexism, racism, and homophobia, are often addressed. The intentions of the activists and groups linked with Indymedia are specifically not to ignore that inequality and oppression exist. What Indymedia activists have sought to do is to create a space where these issues can be discussed, uncovered, and where strategies and solutions can be presented. Open publishing seeks to give people equal access to a space for dialogue and information sharing.


Yet as the Indymedia network mushroomed into an expansive global network made up of close to 100 autonomous collectives, it became clear that inequality, homophobia, sexism, racism, anti-Semitism, and other forms of discrimination, as well as disrespect for the principles behind the project, had found their way onto the websites. Within the Indymedia collectives, which organize horizontally and make decisions through consensus, this manifests itself as power imbalances relating to gender, race, sexual orientation, class, and knowledge about technology. These have presented challenges on an organizational level. Another way that this manifests, which this chapter will explore, is the occurrence of postings to the newswire that reproduce systems of oppression.

the development of open publishing policies

The ideal of creating a media source that would be totally inclusive has had to endure tremendous tests. open publishing, the purest form of the idea, has become, in some instances, indymedia's greatest liability.

– Gal Beckerman⁵

Many Indymedia collectives, after experiencing abuses such as postings ranging from spam, to pornography and hate-mongering, decided to develop editorial policies for their sites. For most collectives, this took the form of a policy statement which outlined the collective's right to filter



the newswire's content and the guidelines used to do this. Some collectives, such as Québec Indymedia (CMAQ), have developed software that supports a validation process, where, once submitted, all articles go to a waiting place (which is accessible to all registered users) until they are validated by a member of the validation committee and published in the newswire.

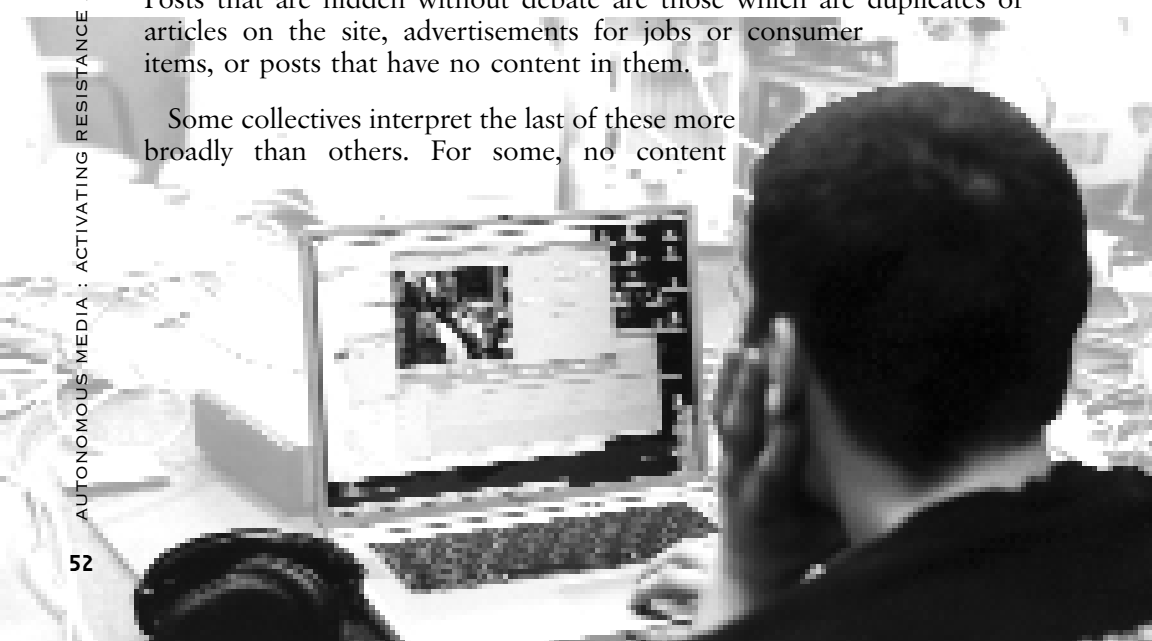
Most Indymedia collectives started out without editorial policies and a complete openness with regards to content. Because most of these collectives formed with a particular event in mind, such as covering the summits of the World Trade Organization or G8, their initial content revolved around coverage of these events. As well, the Indymedia Global "Principles of Unity" positions IMCs within movements struggling for the right to communicate and to share information. IMCs are also organized around the principle of human equality, and their principles of unity state that they shall not discriminate and that they are committed to building diversity within their localities. These strong statements, along with those associated within the philosophy of open publishing outlined above, situate Indymedia as a network and autonomous media project that operates with the goal of actively addressing inequality. The value of freedom of speech is also central to Indymedia. Yet the commitment to addressing

inequality and diverse oppressions as well as promoting participatory communication has presented some challenges to Indymedia collectives.

An article by Gal Beckerman in the *COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW* exposes some of these challenges. According to Beckerman, New York Indymedia developed editorial policies after their site was deluged with posts that had nothing to do with the struggles of the global justice movement—anti-Semitic rants, racist caricatures, and pornography all competed, democratically, for space on the wire. This is a story common to many IMCs. Many collectives do not develop editorial policies until a situation arises that threatens collective members' (or sometimes non-collective members') vision of what is acceptable on the newswire.

The editorial policies developed by Indymedia collectives are for the most part quite similar to one another in their inclusion of a section outlining the guiding principles of the policy. An example from Seattle Indymedia reads that the purpose of Seattle Indymedia is to provide an unmoderated, open-publishing newswire in accordance with established IMC policies and philosophy; to maintain the newswire and website as a community space, and a safe environment for users, especially members of disempowered or marginalized groups; to acknowledge that speech has the power to cause injury, but that instances of injurious speech should also be seen as opportunities for insurrectionary response; and, to preserve the quality of the website as a useful media resource. With these guiding principles in mind, the second half of the policy outlines that collectives reserve the right to reclassify material on the website, which may mean choosing to highlight it in the centre column, to bundle it together with several postings on the same topic, or to place it in a “hidden” folder. Posts that are hidden without debate are those which are duplicates of articles on the site, advertisements for jobs or consumer items, or posts that have no content in them.

Some collectives interpret the last of these more broadly than others. For some, no content



means literally a blank posting or only links to another site, whereas other collectives hide material that is devoid of comprehensible material (a bad resolution photo or a rant that has no obvious point). Most collectives agree that there shall be no editing whatsoever of a post, unless requested by the author.

These policies were all developed with much discussion and debate and are continuously placed under scrutiny. Central to the editorial policies of each collective is the principle of transparency. Measures that guarantee that the moderating process is transparent are central to Indymedia collectives because they are based on a critique of the news selection traditions of mainstream media. In order to be transparent, collective members engage in discussions over editorial listservs before removing a post, write statements as to why a post was hidden, and, if possible, send an email to the person who submitted the post explaining why it was moved or hidden. The editorial policy and all decisions made through it are always open to debate within collectives and from those not involved within the collective. For many collectives this process is one that involves personal reflection as well. The following question is often asked: Do I want to hide this post because I do not agree with its content or because it violates the editorial policy?

Many of the posts that Indymedia collectives decide to moderate are hidden either because they contain discriminatory, libellous content, or use language that encourages hate and violence. Although this may seem straightforward in terms of what content should not be on the site, in at least three cases, it is not.

First, Indymedia websites are supposed to be a space for dialogue on social problems. Racism and other behaviours exist in our society and some people believe that suppressing them will not make them disappear. Instead, why not use the “add comment” function on the site to spark a debate on the offensive posting as opposed to removing the posting from the newswire? Some collectives choose to leave this material on the main pages of the site in order to allow discussions to happen. This tactic seems to work if this type of content is only submitted occasionally, but in the cases of New York, Québec, and Paris Indymedia sites, among others, the amount of racist and/or sexist postings became so pervasive on their newswires that more vigilant filtering was required. Furthermore, the

principles of unity, as mentioned above, state that Indymedia collectives seek to address inequalities. If the newswire propagates sexist and racist points of view, can Indymedia be seen as promoting diversity and equality? This is a question that collectives have had to answer when determining whether it is necessary or desirable to narrow the content of the site.

Secondly, it is not always extremely clear whether a posting is, for example, sexist. With the case of Québec Indymedia, which involved an extensive flooding of their site with anti-feminist, sexist, and defamatory postings, the sexism found within the articles was at times subtle, yet present. This made editorial decisions difficult for the collective, partially because of the time-consuming process of moderating so many offensive postings. As well, the collective had to decide whether to block all postings from the offending individuals (who after countless requests would not stop posting many articles and comments, daily to the newswire). They decided instead that it was important to judge the posting as to whether it was unacceptable, regardless of who submitted it. The offending individual kept posting sexist and defamatory remarks, to the point that he was symbolically banned from Québec Indymedia's site, a step that was taken along with other strict editorial policy changes.



The metaphor of the slippery slope often comes up with Indymedia collectives with regards to moderating their sites. It is a metaphor that envelops the fear involved in making decisions as to what constitutes valid content—first a blatantly hateful article is hidden, then one that is less blatant, and so on, until the collectives are left making judgements on the nuances of texts. It also begs the question of the political orientation of the website—is it only a site for global justice activists and their points of view, or is it a democratic public space where all points of view are welcome? Is Indymedia responsible for promoting free speech at all costs? To whom are they accountable—those wishing to express hate-filled views or those who suffer the consequences of such views?

Lastly, in some cases there can be no debate as to whether a post is made completely inaccessible to the general public because of legal issues. In countries like Canada, it is illegal to publish hate speech, child pornography, or libellous material (Sections 318 and 319 of the Canadian

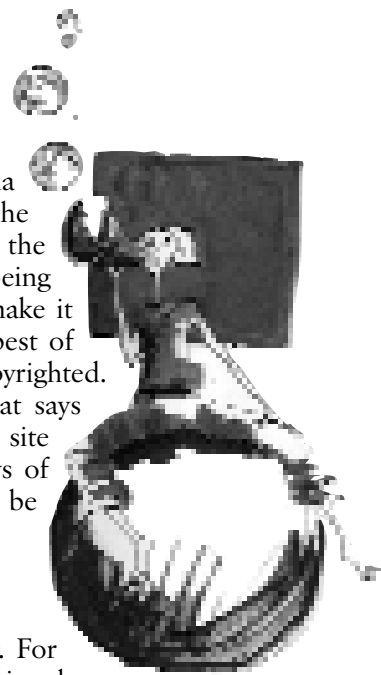
Criminal Code). Therefore collectives within Canada need to be vigilant about content on their site, for the sake of their member's legal protection. As well, the abundance of copyright laws and the many cases being waged for the protection of intellectual property make it necessary for collectives to screen content to the best of their abilities to ensure that the content is not copyrighted. Even though Indymedia sites have a disclaimer that says that they are not responsible for the content on the site and that it does not necessarily represent the views of the collective, collectives (in Canada at least) could be held legally responsible for illegal content.

rights, responsibility, and accountability

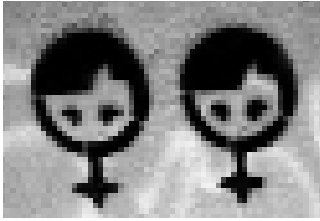
With the exercise of power, comes responsibility. For Indymedia collectives, the adoption of editorial policies also meant that they were creating a system where they would have the power to judge what is and what is not appropriate content for the site. Their discomfort in developing these policies is therefore understandable in that Indymedia was created to promote participatory communication and to provide a space for views that are otherwise not published. With the introduction of policies defining which points of view are acceptable also come new levels of responsibility. Those filtering the content on the site are now responsible for reading all postings, identifying problematic material, and engaging in a discussion with their editorial committees as to what to do with that material. There is also the need to make this process transparent, as discussed above.

The editorial policies have also brought the issue of accountability to the surface. Collective members become even more accountable to their collaborators (those who read and post to the site) after establishing editorial policies. On the one hand, those who post to the site have a right to know that their post was hidden and why. On the other hand, readers may want the right to see this rejected content (which is usually linked to the editorial policy) and may hold collective members accountable if inappropriate content makes it onto the site.

The second of these has occurred with Québec and Paris Indymedia, both of which have been chastised and pressured from social justice



groups regarding the content of their site. In the case of the large amount of sexist material being posted to the Québec site, there were not only the offending users to deal with, but also a small group of feminists who were putting extreme pressures on the collective. These individual feminists were upset by the publishing of anything coming from identified masculin-



ists (the term used to describe a specific anti-feminist, sexist movement), whether the material was blatantly sexist or not. They showed their frustration by using pressure tactics, such as a call for a boycott of the site to push Indymedia members to block all offending users from their site, make all hidden posts inaccessible to the public, and shut


down the comment function completely.

Similarly, last year, Paris Indymedia was declared “irresponsible” in a public letter written by an anarchist group (*Alternative libertaire*) because of some racist content on their site. This anarchist group suggests that open publishing is irresponsible because it allows racist and colonialist discourses on the site. They also make suggestions on how Paris Indymedia should deal with this issue.

As these two cases illustrate, there seems to be a transposition of the notion of responsibility with regards to content found in traditional media onto that found on Indymedia. When readers are upset about content found on the sites, they tend to blame the collectives behind the Indymedia and write a type of letter to the editor which includes a threat to end their subscription, so to speak. The involvement of collaborators in suggesting improvements to the site is not unwanted by Indymedia collectives, as their principles of unity state that they are open to anyone and that the editorial process is open to scrutiny. And just as some people criticize Indymedia for the content that remains in the newswire, there are also many critiques waged by those who feel that they have experienced censorship.

towards new conceptions of “open”

Even with editorial policies in place, the process of open publishing is never straightforward, but is instead a constant process of negotiation, with its triumphs and failures. As this chapter illustrates, the most significant



obstacle faced by Indymedia collectives in developing policies around open publishing is the balancing of strong values, such as openness and responsibility. The development of editorial policies, such as those outlined above, has placed Indymedia collectives in the role of mediator—a role that can be confining and limiting.

The strong point of this is that it forces collectives to take on this role actively and accountably. Whereas before the development of formal policy some collectives engaged in editing of the site in ways that may not have been so transparent, the editorial policies place these activities front and centre in a public document. It is therefore clear how each collective

defines open publishing and what their vision is on hate-filled material. On the down side, editorial policies have also loaded work onto the backs of already burdened volunteers. With accountability comes work. If an editorial policy states what types of material are not permitted on the site, it is up to the collectives to ensure that these policies are enacted. In some cases, this extra work load has limited collectives' abilities to take on more projects. The website that supports a movement thus becomes a liability in terms of resources (e.g., people's un-paid time).

Despite the difficulties in dealing with these challenges, the development of editorial policies has no doubt strengthened the Indymedia network. It has pushed the limits of open publishing, stimulated the development of new tools within open source software, and created an opportunity for collectives to better define their purpose and their vision of Indymedia. The need to push open publishing forward is not a liability, but a strength. As Robert McChesney, an American media theorist and political economist, says, "the Indymedia movement is not obliged to be a movement for every point of view under the sun. They need to make tough editorial decisions, and that's not something to be despondent about. The problem is not that you have to make decisions. The important thing is that you make them based on principles that are transparent."⁶

Indymedia has been placed under scrutiny, as the Québec and Paris examples show, pushing members to answer difficult questions about the practice of open publishing. In some cases, this has led to the development of new software tools that make the process more transparent, that allow the collaborators to get involved, and that decentralize the editorial process. In an article entitled *THREE PROPOSALS FOR OPEN PUBLISHING*, Dru Oja Jay outlines some possibilities, from "filters" to "rating systems," which allow users to rate content and thus take part in deciding which content should be highlighted on the site.⁷ Other non-Indymedia initiatives, such as the Creative Commons project, attempt to build on the concept of copyleft, creating a more complex and nuanced understanding of information owning and sharing. Yet other projects, such as the Indymedia Radio Network, build on ideas of open publishing using other media, thus breaking down technological barriers.



These are just a few of the possibilities in the future of open publishing. What is important at this point is that we move beyond the unquestioning celebration of Indymedia as a revolutionary example and into public debates about some of the issues that threaten its foundations as an autonomous medium. It is through these discussions that open publishing theory and practice will continue to provide insights as to what a democratic and participatory media environment looks like.

notes

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¹ Uzelman, Scott. (2002). *Catalyzing Participatory Communication: Independent Media Centre and the Politics of Direct Action*. Unpublished Master's thesis: Simon Fraser University. Published online at: <http://ender.indymedia.org/twiki/bin/view/vancouver/historyofvanimc> [accessed October 22, 2003].

² Matthew Arnison, one of the developers of IMC software, suggests a working definition of open publishing: "Open publishing means that the process of creating news is transparent to the readers. They can contribute a story and see it appear instantly in the pool of stories publicly available. Those stories are filtered as little as possible to help the readers find the stories they want. Readers can see editorial decisions being made by others. They can see how to get involved and help make editorial decisions. If they can think of a better way for the software to help shape editorial decisions, they can copy the software because it is free and change it and start their own site. If they want to redistribute the news, they can, preferably on an open publishing site." See: http://www.sarai.net/journal/02PDF/10infopol/10open_publishing.pdf

³ Lévy, Pierre. (2001). *Cyberculture*. (Translated by Robert Bononno) Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

⁴ Wood, Andrew F., & Matthew J. Smith. (2001). *Online Communication: Linking Technology, Identity, and Culture*. London, U.K.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

⁵ Beckerman, Gal. (2003). "Edging Away from Anarchy: Inside the Indymedia Collective, Passion vs. Pragmatism," *Columbia Journalism Review*, Issue 5. Published online at: <http://www.cjr.org/issues/2003/5/anarchy-beckerman.asp> [accessed October 22, 2003].

⁶ McChesney, Robert quoted in Becherman, Gal. (2003).

⁷ Jay, Dru Oja. (n.d.). "Three Proposals for Open Publishing." Published online at: http://dru.ca/imc/open_pub.html [accessed October 22, 2003].

web resources

Community Activist Technology: www.cat.org.au

Creative Commons: www.creativecommons.org

Indymedia: www.indymedia.org

Indymedia Radio Network: radio.indymedia.org

Zombie: zombie.lautre.net

