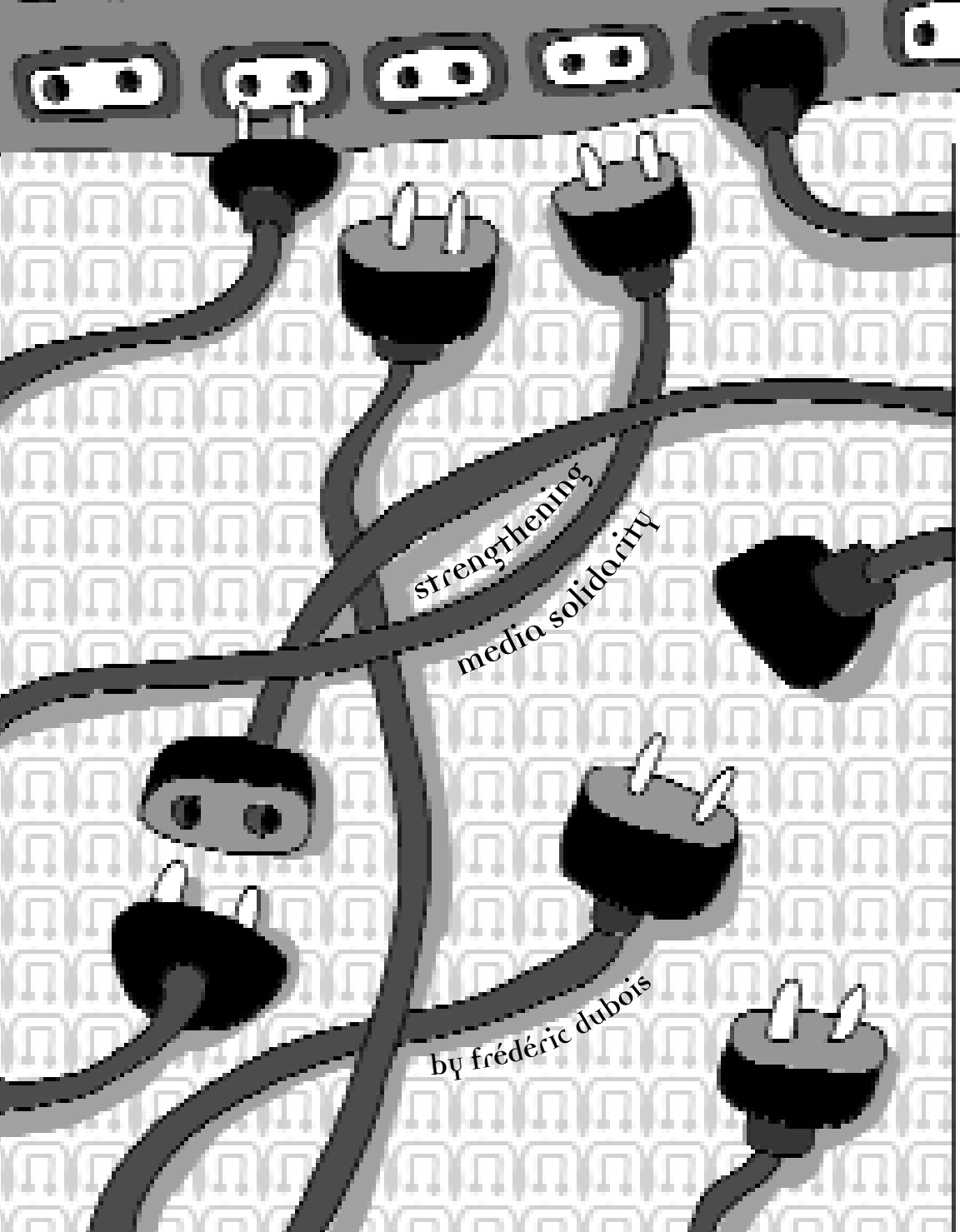# NETWORKERS

strengthening media solidarity

by frédéric dubois

In January of 2003, twenty women and men of different ages and backgrounds sat down together at a Montréal community centre, drank coffee, and exchanged a couple of polite words and nervous smiles. Then the meeting started. A bit chaotic at first, the discussion quickly turned to tactics. "We need to fight Québecor Media," I recorded one as saying in reference to Québec's biggest media empire. "Let's define what alternative media is so that we can act as a group," another insisted. Some shared their experiences as long-time media activists. Others simply voiced the needs of their radio station, news website, or print publication.

We later moved onto more fundamental questions such as: What unites us? What is it that we have in common? What is the course of action? The people who attended this very first encounter of what has become *Le réseau des médias alternatifs* (RMA—The Québec Alternative Media Network) were of different stripes. There were members from Indymedia Québec and Indymedia Montréal, *l'itinéraire* (a street newspaper), *le monde* (a Montréal working-class neighbourhood paper), *le couac* (a colourful satirical monthly), three community radio stations, plus a couple of curious onlookers.

Hopes ran high that day for our new media network, which was to be based on solidarity and a common desire to distribute alternative information and news. In the two years since that first meeting, many new members have joined, coordinated projects have been launched, and exchanges between media members have flourished.

a multitude of networks

Autonomous media networks are rooted in the struggle against media monopolies. Many anti-establishment media networks exist. There are in fact as many types of networks as there are types of autonomous and alternative media. In building solidarity, some network-minded media activists

have focused on ideology. Others have built platforms for advocacy. Still others constitute content-exchange networks.

The approach a network takes influences the way it is organized, its composition, and the tools its members use to advance its cause. The Grassroots Radio Coalition in the United States, for example–which brings together thirty-two radio stations–is driven by a desire to support community radio that is ideologically leftist or radically left of centre. The way the network is organized is also influenced by these values. As its website states, "there are no dues, no hierarchy, and no bylaws."[1] Since 1996, the Coalition's main tactics for maintaining cohesion have been its annual conference and its listservs for internal communication, which help to keep the loose coalition of radio activists informed. In contrast, the Pacifica network, an older and more established project, puts the emphasis on content. The Pacifica Foundation was spearheaded over 50 years ago by KPFA, Pacifica's founding station in Berkeley, California. It unites five sister radio stations and numerous affiliates. Exchanges in content are crucial, as demonstrated by the DEMOCRACY NOW program, a popular daily show composed of interviews and research from all affiliates, broadcasted across the network. Pacifica is also a respected and established listener-sponsored alternative news source. As a network, it works first and foremost to offer informed alternative viewpoints. Every station depends on the four others for its content, although the majority of programming is created by its local communities.

Deep Dish TV also makes content exchange a priority. Self-described as the "first national [grassroots] satellite network [...] linking local-access producers and programmers, independent video makers, activists, and other individuals who support the idea and reality of a progressive television net-work,"[2] Deep Dish TV has been around for sixteen years. This group is, technically speaking, an autonomous media network with more than 200 cable systems in the U.S. exchanging locally-produced television. The New York central office works as a point of redistribution for activist content rather than as a forum for community TV stations. Because of this, links between stations in the network tend to be weak.

In Québec, advocacy within media networks has been, historically, strong. Many traditional networks have taken very tough stances against the government. Rights and funding guarantees have been won through

advocacy, to the point where the Québec government decided in 1995 to grant 4% of its advertisement expenditures to community media; either TV, radio, or print. In this French-speaking province, the 48-member *Fédération des télévisions communautaires autonomes du Québec* (FEDETVC - Québec Federation of Autonomous Community Television) was created in 1996. Perceiving the increase in corporate control over community television services as a negative development, the members came together to advance a stronger voice for non-profit organizations, to seek more funding for small TV systems, and to create a space for experience sharing. Content exchange is almost non-existent however, since the mandates of community TV stations in Québec are limited to local programming. The FEDETVC is a good example of an advocacy-based network, with its strong ties of solidarity between autonomous stations. FEDETVC is connected with its members, involving all of them at each step in developing confrontational actions and reports to push forward their agenda.

one step away from isolation and two steps towards autonomy

Networks are important for autonomous media. Media activists involved with blogs, open-publishing sites, independent TV stations, pirate radios, and video collectives all need to network to combat isolation. Because of their subject specialization, many alternative or autonomous media have limited audiences of people who are used to consuming a certain type of alternative discourse. This leads to information ghettos, from which it is difficult to escape.

One of the current challenges for media activists is to not "preach to the converted" but to create pathways through which the ideas and discourses developed within autonomous spaces can find their way to a more diverse audience. This challenge is further complicated by the fact that media activists do not want to water-down their discourse in order to please a wider public, and they are often overprotective of their collective identity. Thinking outside a media ghetto is a challenge because the struggles involved in changing thought patterns are time-consuming, and people involved in a particular media are often focused on specific social issues rather than on the reform of media structures. This is where media activists need to position media politics as a crucial component of social politics. Media activists and groups are also often isolated from each

other, divided by diverging tactics, strategies, ideology, or by competition among them.

One solution to this isolation is the creation of autonomous media networks, within which distances between groups can be lessened. Narrowing geographic and ideological divides, as well as the competitiveness that exists within communities of autonomous media must be accomplished without losing respect of differences. A coordinated solidarity between groups is fundamental for uniting media organizations with different histories, expectations, political orientations, and audiences. The creation of networks brings together media activists, opens up information ghettos, and helps information flow to a wider audience. The ultimate goal is too encourage newly found audiences to start participating within a newly discovered autonomous media project. Autonomous media practitioners must recognize that a movement in favour of networking can strengthen a collective's identity in relation to the others and promote its autonomy.
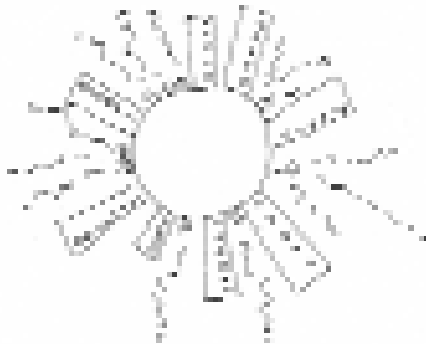
The word "networking" means, literally, working to create a net. Friendly ties between media activists or web link exchanges do not suffice, although they can contribute to the net. Campaigns and ad-hoc coalitions are other important net-type structures, although they are usually impermanent endeavours.[3] What is needed is the establishment of sustainable, flexible structures that facilitate a permanent flow of communication between otherwise isolated autonomous media sources. Well designed and well implemented networks tend to increase autonomy and reduce

isolation by offering media outlets the means to prevent becoming inbred circles of activists. Networks are an important step in the creation of an ideal model of communication, in which all people can easily access, produce, and distribute information.

Networks also foster a true sense of community, creating solidarity between media organizations that are fighting similar battles, using similar survival tactics. Autonomous media networks—which can be intangible horizontal communication flows between autonomous media sources— should be formed for the benefit of all members. The idea is to avoid adding new layers of bureaucracy for activists, such as those found in more formal networks where volunteerism means additional work. Although not exactly a guarantee for survival, a network is definitely a strategy developed to preserve autonomy while encouraging sustainability.

building a network

What is a well-designed network? No single recipe exists but there are some underlying principles that can serve as a guide to network building. Autonomous media activists facing obstacles, such as a lack of volunteers or financial resources, need to determine three things before building their network. They must first identify concrete objectives. They must then define what tools are needed to attain those objectives, and, finally, they need to agree on an organizational framework.

The basic principle behind the Québec Alternative Media Network (RMA), for example, is to bring alternative and subversive news closer to the public. This self-centred objective is one that every small-scale media outlet dreams of but a network's foundation can go beyond this initial objective. The formation of solidarity and confidence among media activists is helpful for envisioning a sustainable project. All of the RMA's media lacked participants, infrastructure, resources, and money, so the service exchanges became a concrete way of expressing and practicing solidarity. This would motivate, inspire and, most evidently, help media outlets meet their mutual goals through cooperation. Networks pursuing more specific goals—such as advocacy, financial cooperation, or the promotion of its members to new communities—should acknowledge these commitments from the beginning.

When the RMA was set up, those involved in writing the founding charter had two objectives in addition to bringing alternate news closer to the general public and building inter-media solidarity. They were to document practices and support alternative media start-ups. As media activists, we are not necessarily aware of the history of alternative media in our communities. Some might be knowledgeable of an obscure Marxist-Leninist paper or community radio station in the 1970s but wider knowledge is important. There is a tendency to ignore the alternative media that existed outside urban centres, or how alternative media supported, and were supported by, social movements in earlier struggles. This ignorance—as to what media networks existed before, how they evolved, how they were organized, or why they disappeared—results in mistakes being repeated. To better understand and write about our own history and leave a trail for others to follow, documentation needs to be retained as a cornerstone of any network project.

The RMA objective of supporting alternative media start-ups, although noble, ultimately failed. Immature networks should not necessarily include the initiation of new media projects as a fundamental goal. It may add unwanted strain to assist others rather than focus on self-sustaining the members of the network.

Overall, network builders should at least consider the development of a larger audience and solidarity as good starting points and as their smallest common denominators. Objectives can be added but it's worth noting that too many can be as detrimental as too few.

media networks in practice

Following a period of discussion and agreement on major collective desires, the time comes to put a network into operation. Here, computer literacy of media activists needs to be considered, as do questions of access to technology. The challenge lies in introducing adequate technology to serve the needs defined by the objectives. For example, Deep Dish TV has satellite dishes and a budget for video cassettes and video editing equipment. The FEDETVC uses an e-mail listserv, faxes, and the like. Those who are more connected online might employ a wiki—an online text-based documentation tool—an intranet, or free software tools to ensure maximum participation and archiving at limited costs.

Technology issues may seem obvious but they are often overlooked by net-workers. In fact, many networks have lost members because of what has later been recognized as the alienation of non-technophiles. Those who do not check their email daily, or are less computer literate, tend to be marginalized from major network developments. This digital divide needs to be acknowledged and actively resolved. The choice of tools determines the culture that will develop within a network. As a knowledge-exchange forum, the Grassroots Radio Coalition values its annual conference much more than any computer-mediated tool. Face-to-face encounters remain crucial to any network design and should be balanced with and complemented by communication tools.

Along with the selection of tools come matters of process. Democracy and leadership are especially important. Should decision-making be consensus-based? Should there be a coordinating team or leaders? Most autonomous media are committed to resisting the formation of hierarchical structures, since they are often already in confrontation with vertically-structured organizations such as mainstream media and government. In his pivotal essay on alternative media and the idea of a federation of alternative media projects that he termed: "FAMAS,"[4] Michael Albert argues that the issue of organizing horizontally, even beyond autonomous ventures, is critical.

The choice of procedures and working methods vary widely, according to the nature of a network. For example, the arrival of a paid worker in an otherwise volunteer-driven atmosphere can completely shift the functioning of any network. Moreover, the organizational framework calls into consideration the crucial aspect of participation. What volunteer will sit through long hours in front of a screen, call-up other media outlets, and keep plodding once the initial excitement has faded? Participation is the mainstay on which networks rely for their survival, especially within networks built on ideals of diversity or among those insisting on building true synergy between complementary media organizations.

Participation can't be predicted but it can be valued and encouraged. Media activists need to look at themselves in the mirror. They will most likely see heavy pockets hanging under their eyes. Many media activists, patiently sitting through network meetings already put in volunteer time for their respective media, probably while working somewhere else to pay

the bills. A word of advice to the tired people out there is to try and develop a rotating system in which media activists participate for a certain amount of time before passing on the torch to others. This would ensure a smoother ride for the network as well as basic accountability.

the greying institution, and the young radicals

Knowledge of how former networks functioned, such as AMECQ, along with experiences with decentralized networks, like Indymedia or the Grassroots Radio Coalition in the U.S., can help media activists uncover the many options available to them. the Québec Community Print Media Association (AMECQ) is a typical example of what can go wrong. It became a top-heavy institution, which curtailed autonomy and limited a vital component of autonomous media: creativity. Working full time in a stuffy office with others to "protect the interests of the community" is an unattractive prospect for today's network activists.

AMECQ has four staff members and forms a progressive coalition of print media. Its main goals are to search for advertisers for its members, report on the community press scene, and publish documentation of members' practices. The network has other projects, such as training workshops and conferences–with food, awards, and wine. These advantages may have appeal but its orientation and working methods resemble those of a corporate monolith. Members participate during annual conferences, while the rest of the year, the administration team decides the direction of the network. The disconnection between headquarters and its membership is too vast. This type of agenda-setting is typically the way of mainstream media.

Central to autonomous media net-working is the issue of participation. The principle of having all members participate, rather than having a centralized administration, must be pursued from the beginning.

Discussions on autonomous media networks and their ability to foster participation are bound to include Indymedia. When media activists in Seattle set up the first Independent Media Centre (IMC) in 1999, they couldn't have realized it would instigate a worldwide network of media activists. It is important to point out that Indymedia has spearheaded communication and dissemination efforts of emerging global justice movements. In the past 30 years, participants in expansive and diverse social movements have used the open-publishing platform of Indymedia

to such an extent that there are more than 100 IMCs around the world. IMCs are considered radical media by activists, essentially because of the anti-hierarchical and open ways in which they operate. Academics, like John Downing, have analyzed IMC's radicalness, as expressed in his book, RADICAL MEDIA.[5]

IMCs are interconnected through listservs. These email lists are essential to the network because they are the point of entry for every local chapter. Setting-up a new IMC requires that a local media activist collective present a proposal to the global IMC, which is then circulated on the listservs. Decisions are made, virtual meetings are held, and conflicts are resolved on the web. But Indymedia is also about offering support on the streets. Technology, money, and resource people can be allocated by the network to IMCs temporarily set-up to cover an event, direct action, or demonstration.

Among the many attractive elements of Indymedia, two are of particular importance: the handling of new technology, and the way in which the network is organized. Technologically, Indymedia can be considered avant-garde. It has incorporated open-source software to offer a platform of news publication open to the public. This includes the publication of photo, audio, text, and video content. Although IMCs are web-based, they incorporate all the media genres and formats onto a single platform. This gateway exemplifies the Indymedia ideal where anyone can rush to their keyboards to seek and produce the news. Although this has not quite materialized, Indymedia at least offers a technological tool that measures up to its utopian ideal.[6]

In terms of organization, Indymedia revives a principle of equality among participants. All IMCs in the network are autonomous and can decide to opt out of network decision-making by not contributing input to the many email discussion lists. Although Indymedia provides a framework for homogeneous practices, it gives all members an opportunity to adapt and evolve on their own terms. There is no central command centre and consensus-based decision-making is a fundamental element to all IMCs.

While this model—which promotes the concept of equality and decentralization—has been extremely successful in reawakening a wave of
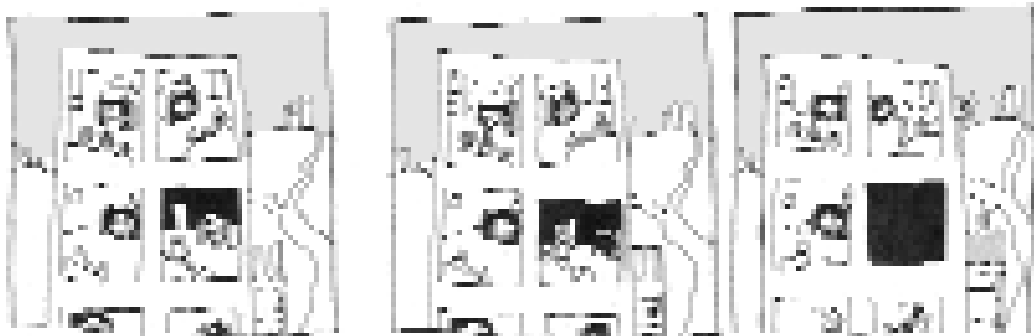
media activism, it has also had its problems. New projects are sometimes dismissed simply because one person in the IMC collective doesn't feel comfortable with it. On other occasions, never-ending meetings become the norm because of paralyzing adherence to Indymedia rules on consensus-based democracy. If everyone talks for an equal amount of time—no one has more than two opportunities to speak and votes are called on every detail—everyone will leave feeling unproductive.

the RMA as a variation on the theme

In adopting a variation of the Indymedia model, The Québec Alternative Media Network's (RMA) members decided to integrate many of INDYMEDIA's trailblazing technologies—such as open source content-management systems, open publishing-like procedures, listservs and an intranet—while adapting them to their particular needs.

The idea of developing a web portal, with access to each media, was adopted right away. In one of the first meetings, some media activists were already pushing for the network to devote all its available resources, energy, and time to its creation. After collective deliberation, money was scrounged to pay a skilled media activist to build the website. Today, the RMA uses its web space as a tool for internal and external communication. It is designed to include an intranet in which a service exchange can be managed. Participating media are invited to post their needs on the electronic billboard where others can answer by putting forward an exchange proposal. RMA members wanted a multimedia experience that would have people from different types of media, providing a higher quality of services to exchange. If a photographer associated with one media could be "exchanged" for some radio air time, the network would have proven its usefulness. In addition, a reference section lists the history of emails sent.

An interactive calendar of events lists all the happenings in the network on the public side of the web portal. Syndicated news and radio streaming are accessible on the front page, as well as links to each media's website. This provides the public with a vast array of different media productions to choose from. The main advantage of having such a diversity of news in
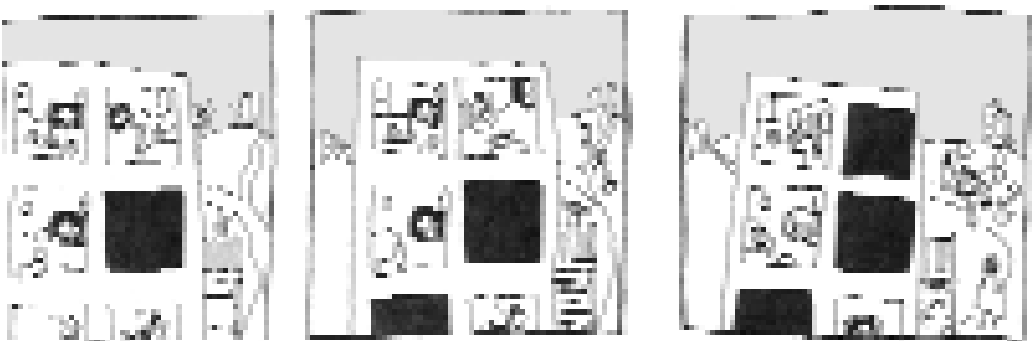
one place is to present a plurality of voices. Even though people might not use the portal to screen the daily news, this heterogeneous space's existence is a direct challenge to the concentration of information sources, and potentially removing autonomous media projects from information ghettos. The portal also serves as an electronic archive, documenting the practices of the network.

When the portal was created, all members were aware that viewers might not identify with all of its content. News, coming from a street newspaper, feminist website, anarchist magazine, or video collective, is not all necessarily of interest to the same audience. This may be seen as an obstacle, but it is also an opportunity for each media outlet to reach new publics. The portal provided an unprecedented view of the alternative media scene in Québec.

Organizationally, the RMA chose a less formal way of making decisions. Although the founding members recognized the benefits of consensus-based democracy, as practiced by those in the Indymedia network, they knew they wanted to move away from the ideal. Every media organization would have one representative attending RMA meetings and participating in a nonconsensus-based—and rather vague—decision-making process. This passive democracy actually limited frustratingly long procedures and allowed for the emergence of natural leaders.

Although RMA members aspire to a model that gives everyone enough space to voice concerns and propose ideas, no specific anti-discrimination measures were designed. Instead, this experiment enables most involved media activists to lead the network without marginalizing other members. Leaders are designated organically as the network evolves and are encouraged to inspire less active members. The centralization of power in the hands of one particular alternative media has not happened, due to the fluid nature of volunteer involvement. Leaders come and go, which in the end balances out inequalities that could arise. The RMA therefore commits to decentralization, while accepting different levels of knowledge, skills, and contribution.

After two years of relentless effort, the RMA is now a 25-member regional network with a web portal, email lists, and an emerging service exchange platform among alternative media sources. The fact that alternative media producers had something in common, helped them to get to know

one another, learn about their respective difficulties, and to overcome them through cooperation.

when the reality sinks in

Although the RMA is a success story in terms of wiring together heterogeneous grassroots media projects, it has encountered its share of limitations. One is that the web portal is not a media unto itself. Although some alternative media gain new publics via the RMA, it has become apparent that the "one-stop window" needs its own identity. It also became clear that the portal needs to be promoted outside internet-based media.

While the exchange in services is successful on a bilateral basis, much remains to be done to get media practitioners from different sectors or regions to build multilateral projects together. Since the RMA was established, a small number of new media projects have started up and others have ended. Yet, the RMA remains a symbol and a strong motivator that can inspire new projects to emerge.

Regarding the documentation of media practices, the RMA has made progress. The curious can easily find valuable information on participating media contributors to get an idea of what alternative and autonomous media looks like today. One way for the RMA to systematically record its own history would be to collaborate directly on university research projects, thereby committing less time and resources to the documentation of the alternative media scene.

The lack of resources, and the diversity of themes and perspectives, in various autonomous media remain impediments to community building and represent limitations on networks. It is crucial to counteract these deficiencies by regularly organizing conferences, workshops, and cultural events where the network's identity can be reaffirmed with face-to-face encounters.

networking the networks

Pinpointing shortcomings and underlining the revolutionary potential of this new type of network can contribute to constructing more durable and adaptable autonomous media sources. If many networks, such as Indymedia or the RMA, have proven resilient to authority, it's because

they have managed to pursue networking in a respectful way, based on media autonomy.

Without further effort to coordinate or launch networks, autonomous media will continue swimming in circles. Whether permanent or temporary, autonomous media networks have the potential to stand against the corporate news organizations that shape world consciousness on a daily basis. But small fish need solidarity to fool the sharks.

Small fish of different species, colours, and origins can in fact provide a true participatory alternative only when they communicate with each other in a decentralized manner. Autonomous media might never, as a well-disseminated image by Dutch artist M.C. Escher depicts, all swim in the same direction and at the same speed with enough discipline to form a battalion capable of biting the shark's tail. They will probably continue swimming in all directions, at their own speed, pursuing their autonomous agendas. The only difference today is that with renewed conscience about the importance of networking, they have the chance to become visible and active in as many waters and streams as there are autonomous media. By upsetting, influencing or bypassing the mainstream, autonomous media networks will reach wider publics from multiple communities. This is what the RMA and many other networks are pursuing—a cooperative environment with common goals that is respectful of differences.

Once networks graduate from their initiation phase, they will need to seek allies for building ever larger networks in collaboration with social movements, academics, media educators, communication unions, and independent journalists—locally, regionally, and internationally. Networking networks is what will contribute to building a communication counter-power. Networkers unite!

notes

* Some ideas in this essay have been developed in Sénécal, Michel & Frédéric Dubois. (forthcoming 2005). *Converging Media, Diverging Politics: A Political Economy of News in the United States and Canada*. Skinner, David et al. (eds). Lanham, U.K.: Lexington Books.

[1] Grassroots Radio Coalition. Published online at:
http://www.grradio.org/about/index.html [accessed February 12, 2005].

[2] Deep Dish TV. Published online at: http://www.deepdishtv.org/pages/aboutus.html [accessed March 20, 2005].

[3] A very effective temporary autonomous media collaboration is the annual Homelessness Marathon, which is organized by both campus/community radio station CKUT and street newspaper *l'Itinéraire*. In subzero temperatures, a one-night studio is installed on a Montréal sidewalk. 27 community radio stations–nationwide–produce segments and rebroadcast the bilingual Marathon. Homeless people, social and housing activists, and people from various communities across Canada, via the toll-free telephone number, discuss housing issues. A third RMA member, Les Lucioles, has produced a short video of the event, addressing issues of homelessness and media cross-polination. Apart from being a successful example of participatory communication, it also shows the benefits of coordinated actions. For more information, visit:
http://www.ckut.ca/homeless.html

[4] Albert, Michael. (n.d.). "What Makes Alternative Media Alternative." *Z Magazine*. Published online at: http://www.zmag.org/whatmakesalti.htm [accessed February 12, 2005].

[5] Downing, John. (2001). Radical Media: Rebellious Communication and Social Movements. Thousand Oaks, CA, U.S.: Sage.

[6] For more information on Indymedia, read: Sénécal, Michel & Frédéric Dubois. (2005). "The Alternative Media Movement in Québec's Mediascape," *Converging Media, Diverging Politics: A political Economy of News Media in the United States and Canada*, David Skinner et al. (eds.). Lanham, U.K.: Lexington Books.

web resources

AMECQ: www.amecq.ca
Deep Dish TV: www.deepdishtv.org
Democracy Now: www.democracynow.org
FEDETVC: www.fedetvc.qc.ca
Grassroots Radio Coalition: www.grradio.org
Indymedia: indymedia.org
Nadir: www.nadir.org
Pacifica: www.pacifica.org
RMA: reseaumedia.info
Tactical Media Network: www.waag.org/tmn