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The INDYMEDIA phenomenon: space-place-democracy and the new Independent Media Centers

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The INDYMEDIA phenomenon: space-place-democracy and the new Independent Media Centers

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Le phénomène INDYMEDIA: espace-location-démocratie et les nouveaux Centres des Médias Indépendants

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La naissance et croissante diffusion mondiale de ces Centres (IMCs), ayant leur début avec les manifestations contra l'OMC à Seattle en 1999, mais maintenant réparties assez largement en Europe, les Amériques et autre part, présentent un cas aussi innovateur que passionnant de l'utilisation des TCI pour, simultanément, transcender les limitations de l'espace et concentrer les mouvements anti-globalisatrices dans une location spécifique de contestation, et à la même fois pour en faire un moment clef de démocratie globale. La présentation va se concentrer sur ces trois aspects du phénomène, les illustrant en partie des événements au Québec en avril 2001 autour de la conférence de la ZLEA. La flexibilité de cette utilisation des TCI correspond d'une manière très importante à la mobilité du capital transnational et à l'espace des 'flows' théorisé par Manuel Castells.

The INDYMEDIA phenomenon: space-place-democracy and the new Independent Media Centers

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The birth and growing global diffusion of these Centers (IMCs), which started with the anti-WTO demonstrations in Seattle in 1999, but are now spread quite widely across Europe, the Americas and elsewhere, present an instance as innovative as it is fascinating of the use of ICTs to – simultaneously – transcend space limitations and concentrate anti-globalization movements in a specific contestatory site, and at the same time to turn this into a key moment for global democracy. The presentation will focus on these three aspects of the phenomenon, illustrating them in part from the events in Québec City in April 2001 around the FTAA conference. The flexibility of this use of ICTs corresponds in a very important way to the mobility of transnational capital and to the space of flows theorized by Manuel Castells.

Introduction

I will begin by offering a brief overview of the “Indymedia” – Independent Media Center¹ – phenomenon from its beginning in November 1999 up to the July 2001 protests in Genova, Italy. I will then offer some commentary on what I believe to be the considerable interest and importance of these centers as a case study in the applications of ICTs within the ongoing struggle against capitalist forms of globalization. I say “capitalist” forms because other forms of globalization from below – e.g. human rights solidarity actions, student exchanges, translations of literature and drama, the development of multiple versions of the English language, international environmentalist fronts – are to be welcomed, whereas Structural Adjustment Policies and the rapacity of international lending institutions have to be rejected, resisted and replaced with pro-human priorities.

Beginning with Seattle, there were as of June 2002 some eighty Independent Media Centers operating, predominantly in the USA (31), Canada (9), Europe (16), and Latin America (6). The “First World” bias is evident in this early phase, but already by the date mentioned the IMCs in Argentina, Brazil, India, Israel and Palestine were very active (Downing, forthcoming). There is also intensive attention in the IMC webpages I have studied to issues of development and international political economy, as well as frequent coverage of issues important to labor migrants, refugees and people of color.

Independent Media Centers take shape

In the build-up to the Seattle WTO confrontations at the very tail of the last century, radical media of many kinds were enormously important. For mainstream journalists, it often seemed as though the oppositionists had materialized out of nowhere. But as *Seattle Weekly* reporter Geov Parrish (1999a) noted in a feature dated September 11th 1999, the preparations had begun long before with a plethora of groups, from U.S. steelworkers who had booked 1000 rooms in metro area hotels, to 700 international

groups who had signed on to the umbrella group Citizens' Trade Campaign, to farmers', religious, ecological and peace organizations.²

The frequent stress in both sympathetic and unsympathetic accounts of the Seattle protests on the use of ICTs to liaise beforehand, to mobilize and record protest at the time, and in subsequent months to diffuse radical perspectives on the protests, tended to ascribe to ICTs a quasi-magical effectiveness. (The fetishism of communications technologies implicit in the ascription of their unique causal role in the Nazis' rise to power is a much older but parallel case in point.)

Nonetheless, the capacity to stream audio and video ferried to the IMC site from a mass of independent media activists ranging the streets of Seattle, and to edit together this material later into documentaries,³ had considerable impact at the time and in the months and years that followed. Webcasting this material simultaneously with the events was equally a powerful use of digital technology to convey the reality of the protestors' challenge. But side by side, it is vital to emphasize the relatively unexceptional character of the media operation. It was socially and technically new to some onlookers, but the film and photo movements of the 1920s and 1930s in Germany and the USA,⁴ to name only two, were equally committed to getting *inside* political movements and protest demonstrations, rather than shooting them from behind police lines as all too typically do mainstream journalists, thereby very frequently positioning themselves and their audiences among and with the forces of the State, rather than among and with those protesting. (Given the frequently repressive character of police control strategies, one can understand the reluctance of editors to insist their reporters position themselves at points where the police might attack them too.)

In other words, these uses of ICTs as radical media (Downing 2001) or citizens' media (Rodríguez 2001) were extremely constructive in the process of helping build a contestatory movement. In their deployment, we see a fusion of the old and the new. Webcasting, harnessed to these ends and on this scale, was new. The use of email to link

together individuals and groups in the months before the Seattle confrontation was intensive, but had been a characteristic of the PeaceNet network and many other progressive U.S. networks for a decade or more, a number of them housed in the Institute for Global Communication (Downing 1989; Ford & Gil 2001). The editing together of segments from different videotapes shot by a variety of politicized videographers was a practice that had already been deployed by the Deep Dish Satellite TV project in the 1980s, for example in coverage of the AIDS crisis, of the protests against the 1990-91 Gulf War, and other topics (Stein 2001). The *ongoing* use of the website to maintain both information sources and hyperlinks was a familiar pattern, but its utilization to promote a continued dialogue reflecting on political lessons learned and reviewing future strategies was both novel and extremely important for the contribution of political memory to the development of fresh political strategies.

Not that computer bulletin boards and other forms of chatroom were new, or new to the Left. The novelty was the combination of the technology with a reflection on organizational strategies and organizing's pitfalls. This promised gradually to reinstate a collective memory of accumulated political movement experience largely blotted out in the USA over the previous 50 years by McCarthyism, post-World War II affluence, the spontaneism⁵ of much of the student opposition against the war in South East Asia, and the ossification of many labor unions and reduction of their permanent staff. Recreating a body of shared experience and insight on organizing strategies and tactics was a decisively new contribution enabled by ICTs.

In Québec City in April 2001 at the Summit of the Americas meeting, the authorities spent approximately \$30 million on repressing 50-80,000 protesters. A ten-foot-high metal fence was built around the locale where the heads of state were meeting in order to keep the protestors out. Levels of police violence were extremely high, with teargas cylinders at several hundred degrees Celsius being used directly as projectiles, quite often at point-blank range, along with so-called "rubber" bullets (i.e. steel

projectiles lightly coated with rubber). It is crucial to realize that the vast majority of demonstrators came totally committed to peaceful protest, and that the widely-demonized “Black Bloc” that attacked physical property did not attack people.

The violence was from the State, in support of those behind the ten-foot fence, and the Riot Act was arbitrarily, without judicial sanction, invoked against the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms that would otherwise have rendered this police repression unconstitutional. (Simultaneously with this FTAA confrontation another one took place in São Paulo, where levels of police violence were also extremely high: 100 were injured, 30 were violently beaten in a police station...and the police commander received a decoration for his services.)

In Genova in July 2001, 100,000 people, of many different political persuasions, turned out to protest the G8 meeting and policies. They brought with them a whole series of varied alternative ideas for global economic development. Their ideas were met by 20,000 armed police, armored cars, and the usual technology of repression. One demonstrator was shot dead, many others seriously injured. At twenty past midnight on the Saturday morning the police raided the Italy IMC⁶ press office in Genova, and a school building opposite that was temporarily housing the demonstration’s Convergence Center, using the standard excuse of hunting down terrorists. They violently attacked those inside for 45 minutes, leaving blood all over the floor and walls. Twenty or more individuals were carried out later on stretchers and taken to hospital. They took away audio minidisks, videotapes, and computer hard drives belonging to movement lawyers which had contained all their transcripts of their reports on the demonstration. They then smashed three computers. They also forced Radio Gap, a movement micro-radio station which had set up in the school, to stop broadcasting for a while. Only when an Italian parliamentary deputy of the Left eventually arrived and told them they had no legal right to enter the building did they leave.

The episode demonstrates again rather clearly the degree to which the powers that be instruct their police forces how dangerous non-violent protest and peaceful counter-hegemonic communication are. Of course, this may be paranoia on their part. Perhaps the protestors who use ICTs to mobilize communication and provide information sources are just the crowd of blinkered and confused idiots that organs such as *The Economist* or the *Wall Street Journal* or the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* present them as being, in which case this carefully targeted repression was simply Italianate excess, Mediterranean over-enthusiasm...but that would hardly explain chilly Québec City as well.

Place, space, democracy and the IMCs

Having drawn this brief picture of the Independent Media Center global movement, I wish in the remainder of this presentation to focus on some conceptual issues it raises that I consider to be of considerable importance. These are the connections between place, space and democracy in the era of transnational corporate power.

None of these three terms has exactly a plain and consensual meaning. David Harvey (1993: 4) has noted that “Place has to be one of the most multi-layered and multi-purpose words in our language.” Agnew (1993: 263) has usefully proposed we differentiate between “*locale*, the settings in which social relations are constituted...; *location*, the effects upon the locales of social and economic processes operating at wider scales; and *sense of place*, the local ‘structure of feeling’.” “Space” is one of the current buzzwords, along with others such as “identity,” “public sphere,” and “technologies of power,” and is thereby loaded down with a mass of discursive imprecision. Castells’ (1996: 376ff.) all-too-often cited term “the space of flows” is a case in point, where the term is simultaneously deployed to denote category of communication and displacement. For now, I simply wish to harness one of the core assertions in Lefebvre’s (1991) argument, namely that space is not a raw geological fact but is socially produced and organized, and the ongoing sphere of struggles between social classes. Last but hardly

least, “democracy” is claimed by everyone from Jerry Springer to Vladimir Putin. More need hardly be said on its potential vacuity.

I propose here to attach myself to Agnew’s approach, to Lefebvre’s, to Soja’s (1989) definition of space as in a constantly evolving dialectical relationship with time and history, and to a processual and social-movement-based (if you like, anarchistic), rather than formal, definition of democracy. With these as very general perspectives, let us examine the spatial dimensions of IMCs in the struggle for democracy on what is currently a would-be TNC planet.

There have been a number of commentators over the past decade who have claimed that the Internet, like other electronic communication technologies, serves to cancel out space and condense time. Those influenced by the Canadian communication theories of Innis and McLuhan have been particularly prone to do so, seeing digital technologies as a new species of communicative prosthesis. I would like to propose that at least in the case of ICT use by IMCs, this interpretation is insufficient. It lacks recognition of the signal importance of locale and space *in conjunction with* the time- and physical-space-bending potential of ICTs.

In a number of situations, Québec City and Genova being obvious examples, closing off access to the locale in which the powers that be were meeting by means of a fence or other barricade had both a physical and a symbolic spatial dimension. The protestors wanted to reclaim the streets as public sphere, the powers that be wanted to seal themselves off, a very tangible high-profile denial of the possibility of dialogue or even argument.

The second point to establish is the way in which IMCs have sprung up initially in virtually every case as a result of a particular protest in a *particular locale* against corporate power and its abuses. From Seattle (the WTO) to Washington DC (the World Bank) to Windsor, Ontario (the Organization of American States) to Québec City (the FTAA) to Genova (G8), with numerous other sites along the way, it has been a traditional

street demonstration that has constituted the fundamental expression of opposition. That demonstration has consisted generally of a coalition of local and regional groups with quite different interests and priorities – “Teamsters and Turtles” as the Seattle slogan had it, i.e. traditional unions and environmentalists – whose preparation for the protest typically relied in significant measure upon ICTs to mobilize activists.⁸ So there is a combination of locale and telecommunication. The locale has never, obviously, been chosen by the movements, but by the powers that be, whose leading players drift around the planet from choice venue to choice venue, oiled in their sacred deliberations on our behalf by the best efforts of chefs, cellars and hookers worldwide.

These leading players do need to meet bodily. As the protests have dogged their footsteps wherever they have done so, so their planning has had to begin considering how to meet without this incredible nuisance of demonstrations, massed police presence, security obsessions, and the consequent focus of global attention on their necessarily private work behind the iconostasis. Doha, Qatar, was the solution for one meeting, a remote mountain in the Canadian province of Alberta was mooted as another.

Yet they have to worry about more than simply the demonstration at the time, with its inevitable quota of human rights violations by police and jails, even including fatalities. For these quite soon become ingrained in the definition of corporate power in the minds of many who would never dream of demonstrating at this point in time, or are somewhere else inaccessible to the demonstrations. This happens through people picking information from alternative Web sources or having it copied to them by friends and associates with similar concerns. The Independent Media Centers and their multiple hyperlinks, plus the hyperlinks of environmentalist, human rights, labor, feminist, religious and community groups to the IMCs, are a primary node in this counter-hegemonic process.

Not only that, but their exposés of the organization of repressive violence by state after state *in place after place* in response to the demonstrators – a violence typically

wreaked on any and all demonstrators, however non-violent – offer to strip away notions of a government of and for the people. The fictions of a state of law for the entire public are subverted in favor of recognizing uniformed lawlessness.

Thus it is the afterlife of these events - whether via Web hyperlinks or in video documentaries or newspaper and magazine feature articles (even the dismissive ones), which accumulate, chapter by chapter, wherever they have one of their meetings, and that are available not only wherever English can be read, but also increasingly in some of the other major global languages, such as French and Spanish – it is this accumulating afterlife which rightly disturbs the TNC and trade regime oligarchs. Just after the overdue collapse of the Soviet system and the headlong rush to a cut-throat capitalism in the PRC had assured them they really were the only game in town, and could relax, just after the bruited “end of history,” up rear the new anti-global capitalism movements.

The IMCs, based in locale after locale, and part of the communicative core of those movements, tend to develop on two scales simultaneously, focusing upon local and regional issues which cue into a “sense of place,” but also upon the global parameters of those issues, both in their effect upon the IMC’s own locale, and in their international repercussions (intellectual property rights and agricultural seed patents, for example). Not only these, but also upon each new locale where TNC power is being contested, from Australia to the Czech Republic.

Thus a multi-centered network has been evolving that enables communication and information to circulate and be acted upon with almost the same levels of diffusion as the TNCs have. We have no corresponding global counter-agency beholden in any way to the publics of the world’s nations, providing citizens across the planet – at least those with access to the four or five European languages currently used internationally – with this access to information, and opportunity to debate it, except the IMCs. They represent a tremendous contribution, even if in their infancy, to expanding democracy internationally.

Hitherto, the main international institutions with some counter-hegemonic remit have been labor unions, but they have all too often suffered from a very limited and strictly economic definition of their options and strategies, as well as from bureaucratic hardening of the arteries. Thus the opportunity to share information, to open up an international public sphere, has been very restricted. Technically the old communist and socialist parties might have fulfilled this role in the previous century, but the former concentrated all too often on diplomatic tasks for Moscow or Beijing, and the latter were so desperate to conquer the electoral middle in a hurry that it became easier and easier to pull them over further and further to the right (Blair, González, Schröder). Thus the Socialist International, though still existing, does so as a cartoon dinosaur.

Conclusion

The need for international democratic action, therefore, has been vast. The IMCs far from alone in seeking to meet it. But they have so far fulfilled their roles in innovative and stimulating global ways which in some measure will almost certainly persist, even if in other forms yet to be developed. Their application of the potential of ICTs is one of the better stories of the new millennium. But the founding moments of most of them are in particular locales, and it is the structure of feeling in those locales which fundamentally maintains them in action. Pure globalism and unalloyed digitization would not.

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¹ Information on the IMCs in this paper is drawn from www.indymedia.org and its hyperlinks.

² Indeed it is arguable that the pivotal moment had been two years previously when April 1998 demonstrations in Canada, fed by very active public debate for over a year beforehand in *Maclean's*, *Canadian Forum* and elsewhere, tipped the scales and forced the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) into cold storage. The MAI planning documents were a major instance of global neo-liberal policy that many around the world saw as subverting national autonomy in vital economic, cultural and political matters.

³ Such as *Showdown In Seattle* (Indymedia, 2000) and *This Is What Democracy Looks Like* (Big Noise Productions, 2000), which traveled the length and breadth of the USA and Canada, and quite widely in other European and anglophone countries. Further examples were *Breaking The Bank*, a Paper Tiger TV documentary on Washington DC protest of April 2000, *The Autumn of Praha*, the Belgian IMC documentary on the Prague confrontation, and *It didn't start in Seattle, it won't end in Québec/Não começou em Seattle, não vai terminar em Québec*, at the time of the dual Québec City and São Paulo protests against the Free Trade Association of the Americas first summit in April 2001.

⁴ William Alexander, *Film On The Left*, Princeton University Press, 1981; Armand Mattelart & Seth Siegelau, eds., *Communication and Class Struggle*, vol.2, International General, Bagnolet and New York, 1983, 174-81.

⁵ I.e. not spontaneity itself, but its unreflective cult.

⁶ Founded in Bologna in June 2000 at the time of protests against a meeting there of the OCSE.

⁷ The term draws directly on Raymond Williams (1977: 128-35).

⁸ This is not to downplay the contributions of individuals coming from much further afield and even internationally in Seattle and to subsequent demonstration locales, but the vast majority of demonstrators were from the city and region.