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## United yet Autonomous: Indymedia and the Struggle to Sustain a Radical Democratic Network

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## United yet Autonomous: Indymedia and the Struggle to Sustain a Radical Democratic Network

### Abstract

The past decade has witnessed an emergent form of activism increasingly defined by its reliance on internet strategies, network social structures and participatory practices. Internet strategies employed by many contemporary activists include websites, listservs and hyperlinked networks used for exchanging information, mobilizing both old and new constituencies, and coordinating collective action. Networks of organizations and individuals are formed both on and offline and decision-making within these groups is often made by consensus. Perhaps best characterizing this activism is its lack of hierarchy, epitomized by democratic communications, both within and between networked organizations. This article focuses on Indymedia, a prime institutional exemplar for the indicators mentioned above internet-based activism, network formation and participatory politics. Specifically, it addresses issues related to sustainability and political efficacy in radical democratic activist networks that are increasingly enabled by internet technologies.

### Keywords

cyberactivism, democratic theory, internet studies, political communication, social movements

### Disciplines

Communication | Political Science

### Comments

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## United yet autonomous: Indymedia and the struggle to sustain a radical democratic network

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In the fall of 2002, the Indymedia global network was in crisis. A \$50,000 Ford Foundation Grant solicited for an international network-wide IMC (Independent Media Center, i.e. Indymedia) conference had seemed imminent, but months of preparation came to naught when one member organization, the IMC in Argentina, exercised what amounted to a 'block' in the consensus process, thus bringing the money and the conference to a halt. Argentina IMC members considered Ford Foundation money tainted by historical ties. To accept the money, in their opinion, would irreparably compromise IMC principles.

### **Tensions in the network**

Argentina's veto set off raging debate across local and global IMC listservs. Some IMC activists thought the network should abandon normal consensus procedures and take the money, especially considering that for many organizations like the Seattle IMC, there was already a precedent for receiving foundation money. Others noted that the money was granted to only the Urbana-Champaign IMC, whose 501c3 non-profit status allows it to serve as a kind of bank for the entire network. Until this point, the fundraising activities of individual IMCs had never been subject to network blocks. The situation was further complicated, however, when other IMCs joined Argentina in solidarity to ensure that the network adhered to IMC consensus principles.

The failure to agree on taking foundation money signified a major identity crisis for the network. Many activists were adamant about remaining a radical organization and not, as one activist put it, 'becoming just another NGO'. However, accepting the grant may have gone a long way towards preventing this drift away from radical politics. Theoretically, the conference would strengthen IMC network ties by creating an opportunity for face-to-face deliberation in which IMC members, many from developing nations, could discuss ongoing process-related concerns of critical import for the sustainability of the network.

This apparent breakdown in the global network consensus procedure is a significant event for both scholars and activists for a number of reasons. It highlights the limitations of radical democracy – specifically, consensus decision-making – when elevated to the level of a large network. It also delineates tensions between the global network and local IMCs. Finally, it underscores a potential problem when no process is in place for dealing with network-wide decisions, especially around contentious issues such as accepting large sums of money. Such impasses may cast doubt on the IMC network's long-term sustainability – especially as they continue to gain scores of new member organizations each year. Yet, despite such formidable obstacles, the IMC network somehow continues to function and even flourish as a rapidly expanding global network.

The remainder of this article explores how radical democratic practices get negotiated at the global IMC network level, and whether it is sustainable and coherent in terms of the IMC's founding radical democratic principles, codified in what many IMC members consider to be their founding charter or constitution: the 'principles of unity'. By 'radical democratic' I mean those values based on radical egalitarianism as defined by inclusivity, plurality, diversity, openness, transparency and accountability. Within this democratic practice all hierarchical power structures

are contested and, when possible, leveled. Applying multiple qualitative methods to a case study of the Seattle IMC and global listserv data, I examine how IMC members negotiate radical democratic ideals at the network level and how they sustain this network.

### **Situating Indymedia**

The past decade has witnessed an emergent form of activism increasingly defined by its reliance on internet strategies (Castells, 1996), network social structures (Diani, 2003) and participatory practices (Polletta, 2002). Internet strategies employed by many contemporary activists include websites, listservs and hyperlinked networks used for exchanging information, mobilizing both old and new constituencies, and coordinating collective action (Melucci, 1996; Tarrow, 1998). Networks of organizations and individuals are formed both on and offline (Castells, 1996) and decision making within these groups is often made by consensus (Polletta, 2002). Perhaps best characterizing this activism is its lack of hierarchy (Gerlach, 2001), epitomized by democratic communications, both within and between networked organizations.

Indymedia is a prime institutional exemplar for the indicators mentioned above – internet-based activism, network formation and participatory politics. Yet, heretofore, scholars in the realm of social movement, democratic and digital media theory have largely overlooked these significant developments. What sets Indymedia apart, however, is its commitment to radical democratic practices, which they extend even to the global network level. Indeed, Indymedia practice embodies a particular strand of democratic theory, one that I situate within a larger theoretical context in the following.

### **Defining Indymedia**

Many stories can be told about the sudden rise of the Independent Media Center (IMC, popularly referred to as ‘Indymedia’). It is an interactive news website, a global network and a radically democratic organization. My research for this study focuses primarily on the last dimension: Indymedia as a global network. With a rapidly growing membership of approximately 5000 individuals and more than 150 groups that span over 50 countries across six continents, Indymedia is arguably one of the more significant developments to emerge from the internet in recent years. Yet practice has largely outrun researchers’ attempts to theorize Indymedia. In this study I treat Indymedia as an institutional exemplar of contemporary internet-based activism and foreground network-related characteristics.

Indymedia is a challenging subject to study. Transcending global/local and offline/online dichotomies, both the IMC web-based and organizational models are steadily replicated in an ever-expanding network. The Seattle IMC is a particularly apt site for a case study. The flagship Indymedia organization, the Seattle IMC, was created during the 1999 World Trade Organization (WTO) protests to provide noncorporate accounts of grassroots political events. As one node within this network, the Seattle IMC is held in special regard for being not only the first, but also one of the few IMCs that has, for most of its existence, maintained its own physical space for meetings, fundraisers and other community events.

Using multiple methods to triangulate data, including participant observations, open-ended interviews and analysis of email lists, I address questions related to network sustainability, radical democratic practice, internet-based activism and social movement organizations. I also discuss strengths and limitations of these organizational forms and propose strategies for making them more politically effective.

## Theoretical framework

New political forms, such as the radical democracy of Indymedia, require new theoretical models. Previous scholarship demonstrates how radical democratic principles structure Indymedia textual, technical and institutional constructions (Pickard, forthcoming). I build upon this argument by examining Indymedia's radical democratic practice in terms of network sustainability. Recent attempts by scholars to understand the emerging contours of internetworked activism have yielded mixed results (Langman and Morris, 2003). Numerous theorists have recognized the increasing prevalence of networks within social movements (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 2001; Bennett, 2003a, 2003b; Castells, 1996; Diani, 2003; Gerlach, 2001; Hardt and Negri, 2000; Melucci, 1996; Rheingold, 2002). But we have yet to see models of how radical democracy figures within these global movements, and how such practices may pose specific opportunities and challenges while structuring networks in interesting and surprising ways.

In developing a theoretical framework, I draw from the following three areas: social movement theory, network theory and internet studies. A wealth of literature falls under the rubric of 'social movement theory' and a similarly expansive corpus covers network analysis. While social movement theory has traditionally focused on activist organizations, in recent years network theory has been successfully adapted to tracing organizational activity on the web. The following literature review is by no means comprehensive and only addresses several theoretical models in each field that I have found useful in attempting to theorize Indymedia and its radical democratic politics.

### *The rise of networks*

Commentators from a wide range of disciplines have noted that in recent years society has become more network-based (Castells, 1996; Hardt and Negri, 2000). Similarly, leading theorists are beginning to recognize the prominence of networks in social movements (Diani, 2003; Gerlach, 2001). Although Keck and Sikkink (1998) remind us that activist networks are far from new, Castells (1996) makes it clear that such a pervasive 'networking logic' is gradually supplanting earlier, more linear and hierarchical paradigms, which allows for more democratic processes. Missing from many of these accounts, however, is a precise definition of what the term 'network' means. Castells does finally provide a basic definition at the end of his first *Network Society* volume:

A network is a set of interconnected nodes. A node is the point at which a curve intersects itself. What a node is . . . depends on the kind of concrete networks of which we speak. They are stock exchange markets . . . national councils of ministers . . . poppy fields, clandestine laboratories, secret landing strips, street gangs . . . television systems. . . Networks are open structures, able to expand without limits, integrating new nodes as long as they are able to communicate within the network, namely as long as they share the same communication codes. (1996: 470)

Echoing Castells' emphasis on communications being a critical piece of network operations, Keck and Sikkink (1998) define networks as essentially 'communicative structures'.

Podolny and Page (1998) argue that, unlike markets and hierarchies, network forms of organization are characterized by enduring relationships and exchanges based on trust, legitimacy and ethical behavior. These relationships are distinct in nature because there is no legitimate organizational authority reinforcing them, which is why the network structure dovetails so well with anarchic-leaning Indymedia activists. Radical democracy at the global network level is only made possible with this lack of an organizational command center. Further, Podolny and Page

claim that networks possess distinctive advantages over other organizational forms, such as a greater possibility for learning new skills, acquiring knowledge, gaining legitimacy and improving the management of resources. These assets make networks increasingly popular in business and government as well as activist and non-profit sectors.

### *Social movements as networks*

Typical of progressive global movement (PGM) organizations, Indymedia is made up of networks while also comprising part of a larger network. As essentially communicative structures, networks are convenient models by which we may understand social movements. Castells asserts, 'Networks are the fundamental stuff of which new organizations are and will be made' (1996: 168). Diani (1992) has also noted that social movements are often conceived as social networks of informal and formal organizations. In more recent work, Diani defines social movements as a 'highly heterogeneous network structure' (2003).

Although this is not necessarily a new idea – as demonstrated in the following description of Gerlach and Hine's work – Diani believes that 'recent scholarship points to the fact that interest in the relationship between social movements and social networks has grown both in the range of topics addressed, and the depth of research results' (2003: 1). Many of the authors in Diani and McAdam's book, *Social Movements and Networks* (2003), treat networks as a central feature of social movements.

For present purposes, I do not delve too deeply into social movement theory. However, Indymedia's most salient attributes, namely, its reliance on networks and radically democratic practice, falls outside explanatory models connected to political opportunity structures, resource mobilization and identity frames (Benford and Snow, 2000; Gamson, 2001; McAdam, 1982; McAdam et al., 2001; McCarthy and Zald, 1977; Tarrow, 1998, 1998). Nevertheless, there are some social movement theoretical models that are useful for understanding the global phenomenon of Indymedia.

Some of the earliest and best work supporting a research paradigm for understanding social movement organizations such as Indymedia was that of Gerlach and Hine, who stated: 'We have found that movement organization can be characterized as a network – decentralized, segmentary and reticulate' (1970: 33). In the late 1960s, Gerlach and Hine determined that the most common type of activist organization was a 'segmentary, polycephalous, and integrated network' (acronym: SPIN). Significantly, Gerlach (2001) adjusted his SPIN model to be less polycephalous (many-headed) and more polycentric (many-centered), indicating that contemporary social movements tended to be less leader-focused.

Considering that Indymedia is non-hierarchical and anti-leadership to an almost dogmatic level, the SPIN model is perhaps the best existing model that can be adopted to accurately describe Indymedia. However, the SPIN model fails to emphasize novel attributes of Indymedia, such as the focus on radical democracy and a reliance on the internet. With these theoretical adjustments, we can begin to make sense of Indymedia, both as an organization and a network.

Gerlach further explicates these theories (this time folding the 'integrated' category into the networked category) in his updated model: *segmentary* (composed of many diverse groups, which grow and die, divide and fuse, proliferate and contract); *polycentric* (having multiple, often temporary, and sometimes-competing leaders or centers of influence); *networked* (forming a loose, reticulate, integrated network with multiple linkages through travelers, overlapping membership, joint activities, common reading matter, and shared ideals and opponents) (2001: 289–90). Gerlach argues that this type of network organization is 'more adapted to the task of challenging and

changing society and culture than was a centralized organization' (2001: 290). The integrated principle, though no longer pronounced in this updated model, suggests a shift from ideology to personal identity relationships.

Thus, another advantage of SPIN models as embodied by Indymedia is that they are less bound by rigid ideological doctrines. In describing a 'horizontal structure of distributed activism' Bennett expands on this theme in the following:

The requirement for ideological coherence seems far weaker in global activist circles today. The integrative function is provided by personal ties, recognition of common threats, pragmatism about achieving goals, and the ease of finding associations and information through the Internet. Inclusiveness has become a strong meta-ideological theme. (2003a: 7)

Although the case of the Argentina IMC's veto runs counter to this description, according to Bennett (2003b), many of these fluid networks are held together by weak or thin ties based on particular narratives, such as opposition to an abusive corporation, but not reaching the level of ideological doctrine. On one level, a 'be the media' media democracy narrative holds Indymedia together. On another level, a larger metanarrative based on radical democracy and articulated in the principles of unity acts as a kind of network glue that binds Indymedia.

#### *Activist networks and the internet*

Although transnational activist networks existed long before the internet (Keck and Sikkink, 1998), there is accumulating evidence that the internet accelerates network and social movement formation on local and global levels (Castells, 1996). In discussing the 'networking logic' characteristic of contemporary society, Castells writes, 'This topological configuration, the network, can now be materially implemented, in all kinds of processes and organizations, by newly available information technologies. Without them the networking logic would be too cumbersome to implement' (1996: 62).

One obvious advantage afforded by internet usage is that it helps create network and movement coordination as evidenced by the wide use of email, online calendars, hyperlinking and other means of facilitating information flows between networked activist organizations. Wall (2003) shows how email lists help foster social movement identity formation. Downing (2001a) points out that such radical alternative media traditionally sustained social movements much as Indymedia does today. Castells (1996) argues that the networking logic of the internet dovetails with network formation offline. This confluence greatly aided social movement groups such as the Zapatistas, who continue to wage an indigenous rights struggle in southern Mexico during the mid to late 1990s (Cleaver, 1998; De Angelis, 2000).

In describing the ways in which the internet facilitates the formation of networks, Redden (2001), notes that the large convergences of people in global justice demonstrations against corporate power owe their scale to online organizing between geographically dispersed interest groups. In these cases, Redden argues 'the Internet is used as a kind of meta-connection between more traditional local-level organizational activities such as meetings, telephone trees, leafleting, and posting flyers and stickers' (2001: n. p.). Observing that the internet strengthens relationships between geographically dispersed and issue-based groups, Redden (2001) reinforces Sassen's (1998) argument that non-state and often low-financed groups are leveling the power game against state and corporate power.

Further, Sassen asserts that hacker culture instilled the telecommunications technology with ideals such as 'decentralization, openness, possibility of expansion, no hierarchy, no center,

no conditions for authoritarian or monopoly control' (1998: 177) – ideal conditions for network formation. Sassen also sees the internet as 'a space of distributed power', in which she believes 'Civil Society, from individuals to nongovernmental organizations, has engaged in a very energetic use of cyberspace from the bottom up' (1998: 192). Similar to what Appadurai and others have called 'globalization from below' (2000: 13), activists at the grassroots level are not only defying corporate power, but also actively globalizing their dissent, largely via internet technology. Indymedia is a prime example of such a grassroots global network.

The internet has been crucial in facilitating this process by linking transnational groups, providing affordable communications and also conveniently dovetailing with pre-existing anarchic ideals shared by many contemporary activist groups. Melucci, inspired by Gerlach and Hines, writes 'recent telecommunications and computing are more compatible with the "decentralized, segmentary and reticulate" structure . . . typical of more recent movements' (1996: 113). This type of PGM organizational network can be observed with the Zapatistas, the Direct Action Network (DAN) and Indymedia. Wall writes:

In the end, we can conclude that Seattle was not an anomaly, but rather the prototype for a global anti-corporate domination social movement that will increasingly rely on the Internet – for its benefit while also at its peril. While other media and even face-to-face organizing will remain vital, this new communication technology has and will continue to affect the face of social change in ways that we have yet to fully comprehend. (2002: 40)

Wall suggests that 'Just as [NGO networks] can ubiquitously spring to life with impassioned calls to action and reams of supporting data, they can mutate into some other cause in some other place in some other time. Or they can simply disappear' (2002: 41).

Some researchers have contended that this fluid and distributed online structure allows for multiple sites to work on the same issue in a way that is similar to a lilliputian or swarming strategy, allowing smaller entities to overcome corporate Goliaths with a multi-pronged attack (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1998; Brecher et al., 2000; Wall, 2002). Indymedia's repertoire relies on internet-based strategies, which enables activists with limited resources to inflict what Coopman (2004) has termed 'resource burn' against more powerful adversaries, such as corporate news organizations, in which these behemoths concede power to smaller foes after suffering unacceptable losses.

Renowned technology commentator Howard Rheingold (2002) refers to spontaneous networks created by digital media as 'Smart Mobs'. Like a school of fish, these self-organized groups of people, through their personal digital communications such as text messaging, are able to act in concert in surprising ways. Such phenomena have been credited with a regime change in the Philippines and WTO protests in Seattle. Rheingold says this is possible because the internet 'amplifies cooperation'. Pickard (2004) argues that this amplified cooperation process gives rise to new forms of democratic practice, ranging from radical to liberal models. Accumulating evidence indicates that non-hierarchical structures facilitated by digital media help create conditions conducive to network-formation and radical democratic practices.

### *Levels of Indymedia networks*

Within Indymedia there are at least three levels of networks: interpersonal networks consisting of individuals and working groups; organizational networks for each individual IMC consisting of allies; and the IMC-only network consisting of the 150-plus IMCs. In the following I explicate the latter two levels of networks and describe how they are reflected by hyperlinks.

*Global network.* Referred to as ‘IMC global’ or, in some process documents, ‘the network of Independent Media Centers (NIMC)’, the global network is clearly bounded by hyperlinks. Each IMC site connects to every other IMC site via links prominently featured on the left-hand column of each IMC home page. One umbrella site, [www.Indymedia.org](http://www.Indymedia.org), acts as a kind of central hub. Though it runs occasional global news features, most often it syndicates stories from local IMC sites and commands no prominence within the network except as a gateway to other specific IMC sites.

Ronfeldt and Arquilla (2001) offer a useful model for understanding the non-hierarchical structure of the IMC global network. They have put forth three basic models illustrating the geometry of different kinds of network structures: chain network (a linear connection of nodes), star or hub network (all nodes connect to a central hub), and an all-channel network (every node connects to every other node). The all-channel network is arguably most representative of many PGM networks, though rarely is it actualized to the remarkable degree of the Indymedia network. In theory, at least, the non-hierarchical relationship indicated by the all-channel network is meant to symbolize the radical egalitarianism championed by many IMC activists. Following the anarchic affinity model, which was designed to mediate between small and larger groups, each node consisting of a local IMC commands a significant degree of autonomy within the larger network.

*Sub-network.* Beyond linking to the other IMCs in the network, each IMC site also connects to a wide range of non-IMC websites. These relationships comprise smaller networks – one per local IMC – within the global network. I refer to these smaller networks as ‘sub-networks.’ Each IMC sub-network consists of hyperlinked connections to allies and, in some cases, adversaries. Further, each of these sub-networks is embedded in specific cultural contexts and diverse communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) that sometimes complicate efforts toward global network cohesion.

### **Induction of new IMCs and network growth**

An important part of network expansion – and arguably the most functional IMC global process – is the induction of new IMCs. Process-related documents concerning the new IMC process are linked to the Seattle IMC site. The overview of the network, its theory and practice is explained in the following:

The strength of the IMC as a concept comes directly from its organizational structure; namely, a decentralized network of autonomous collectives whose shared resources allow for the creation of a social and digital infrastructure that is independent of state and market forces. It is our intention as a media movement to build out this structure so that, on the one hand, we have local IMCs throughout the world that are autonomous in their decision making while, on the other hand, we are united in a network form of organization that allows for collaboration on a level previously reserved for state and corporate interests. The extent the network is effective in challenging abusive systems of power is directly related to our ability to create decentralized structures. It is our ability to be flexible and simultaneously united that has proven effective.

However, it cannot be understated that in order for collaboration to occur network wide, there needs to exist a set of guidelines and a process by which we all agree to work. Quite frankly, it is necessary to resist any efforts by a local collective, for example, that wishes to develop a non-participatory, top-down structure, or would like to create a corporation out of a local IMC. To this end, we have developed guidelines for network participation in the form of two crucial documents: the Principles of Unity and the Membership Criteria. These documents, in a sense, are a pact amongst media activists that allow for the network to exist. It is under these assumptions that we are united yet autonomous. (Indymedia, 1999–2005)

Guided by these principles of remaining ‘united yet autonomous’, new IMCs are inducted into the network according to a particular set of procedures. This new IMC process also happens to be one of the best examples of where global network consensus regularly occurs online, and indicates the functional aspect of the principles of unity since all new IMCs must agree to them before being accepted into the network. One reason for its success, however, is that relatively few people are currently involved with this process, making a kind of passive consensus more likely. Nevertheless, the constant tension negotiated between small groups and the centralizing power of the global network is a balancing act, and sometimes falters as in the case with the Ford Foundation grant.

### **Network sustainability**

In addressing necessary conditions for network formation and indicators of network strength and sustainability, Ronfeldt and Arquilla (2001) have determined five levels of organizational practice that must be satisfied and maintained: organizational level (the organizational design); narrative level (the story being told); doctrinal level (the collaborative strategies and methods); technological level (the information systems); and the social level (the personalities that assure loyalty and trust). Ronfeldt and Arquilla describe the ideal network in the following:

The strongest networks will be those in which the organizational design is sustained by a winning story and a well-defined doctrine, and in which all this is layered atop advanced communications systems and rests on strong personal and social ties at the base. (2001: 324)

They also note that the narrative level is especially crucial for the ‘all channels’ type of network such as Indymedia. Indymedia seems to satisfy all levels, but some may argue that the network begins to break down at the narrative and doctrinal levels, especially around issues related to differing interpretations of the principles of unity.

### **Related research**

Although some research has been done on the history and various aspects of the Indymedia communications model (Deuze, 2004; Downing, 2001b; Halleck, 2002; Jankowski, 2003; Kidd, 2003; Morris, 2004; Pickard, forthcoming), the web-based network aspect of Indymedia has yet to be carefully examined. Garrido and Pickard (2003) conducted a preliminary comparative analysis of different IMC sub-networks by exploring a rare opportunity afforded by Indymedia design – a uniform web-based structure constructed within multiple social/cultural/political contexts. Because each IMC website is relatively uniform, they ascribed significant social meaning to those differences borne out by a comparative hyperlink analysis, and found radical and reformist differences according to regional configurations.

Building on these earlier studies, I extend my focus to the network aspect of Indymedia, especially at the global level. Based on interviews with Indymedia activists, it is clear that a crucial document, the ‘Principles of Unity’, acts as a key text that binds the culturally disparate network together. However, according to core IMC members – and judging from global IMC listserv discussions – varying interpretations of this text generate a fair amount of controversy within the network, especially when network-wide decisions are being made. The ongoing tension between the assumed autonomy of each individual IMC and the centralizing codes – that all IMCs, at least in theory, support – seems to be constantly in play.

Though these principles are still cause for varying interpretations and ratifications, all IMCs must endorse the principles prior to being accepted into the network. The one major exception is the first 30–40 ‘legacy IMCs’ that were formed before the principles were codified, and some of these IMCs have since re-endorsed them.

## **Towards a model of Indymedia**

Indymedia provides us with an interesting case. Its SPIN principles and reliance on the internet are symptomatic of PGM tendencies. But the level to which it adheres to radical democratic principles and the ways in which they are manifest are idiosyncratic of Indymedia as an organization. In other words, Indymedia is a radical democratic organization made possible by adherence to SPIN principles. The potential for reaching this level of democratic organization is magnified by the internet’s amplification of cooperative capacities. Given what we think we know about activist trends, gleaned from work by Bennett (2003b), Gerlach (2001), Polletta (2002) and Tarrow (1998), among others, we can expect the following trends in contemporary activism: non-hierarchical, less ideologically rigid and network-based.

Indymedia implements radical democracy throughout each of the three major domains of Indymedia. We see evidence for this in their technological code (exemplified by open publishing), their network structure (exemplified by hyperlinks) and their organizational structure (exemplified by their consensus model). Beyond the scope of this article, but also an important component, is Indymedia’s function as a news organization.

Drawing from these themes, I propose four general research questions:

RQ1: How does Indymedia correspond to social movements trends?

RQ2: How are radical democratic principles manifest at the Indymedia global network level?

RQ3: What factors contribute to network growth?

RQ4: Can we begin to ascertain network sustainability?

In the following I employ multiple methods, including textual, hyperlink and participant observation analyses to trace various facets of Indymedia that all tell, I argue, similar stories of inclusivity, plurality, diversity, openness, transparency and accountability. By using these various levels of analysis, I try to explain the various mechanisms sustaining Indymedia as a viable democratic communications model.

Specifically, I am interested in the question of whether open participation and consensus model organizations are sustainable or coherent in terms of their founding principles. In this article I argue that not only are they sustainable and coherent, but these models explain how such internetworked activist coalitions become possible. This democratic openness, I argue, is the key to network growth. By moving the debate away from resource mobilization and contentious politics and focusing more on democratic communications, my argument challenges the notion upheld by some social movement theorists that social movement growth hinges primarily on brokerage and collective identity framing. In the case of Indymedia, it is this radical democratic discourse manifesting in democratic communication processes that serves as the organizational glue making the global network cohere.

## **Methods**

My data derives from interviews with core Seattle IMC members and participant observations. The latter began as an open-ended exploration initially guided by the question ‘What is

Indymedia?’ Following a description of the qualitative process by Ragin, the ‘interplay between evidence-based images and theoretical ideas expressed through analytic frames leads to a progressive refinement of both’ (1994: 102). Eventually, my theoretical frame narrowed to questions pertaining to Indymedia practice, especially with regards to radical democracy and sustainability issues at the level of the global network. It would be a fair assessment that most Seattle IMC members are primarily preoccupied with local concerns, but several are very engaged with global concerns. Speaking with these individuals and gathering information from the global process Indymedia listserv provided me with rich background data on issues pertaining to global network operations.

This part of my analysis is informed by extensive background information stemming from nearly three years of volunteering for and participant observation of the Seattle IMC. During this time, I participated in approximately 50 meetings and events, wrote several news stories for the newswire and received daily emails, usually several per day, from the general, media, media literacy and liaison IMC listservs. In addition to my extensive field notes, I draw from hundreds of archived listserv emails accessible via the Seattle IMC website.

In examining my interview and listserv data, my participant observations combined traditional offline methods (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Fetterman, 1998) focused on organizational practice with online methods (Wall, 2003) focused on listservs. Initially, my observations were guided by open-ended analytical frames and gradually evolved into more specific frames concerned with the radical democratic practices and process issues in general. I also discussed process-related issues with members outside of the Seattle IMC who were involved with the network-wide debate.

It must be noted that for both the Seattle IMC and the entire global Indymedia network pivotal events occurring after the period of my analysis (ending in the summer of 2003) are important subjects for analysis, but fall beyond the parameters of this present study. Likewise, I am careful not to over-generalize Seattle-specific observations to the entire Indymedia network. Each local IMC is situated in a particular social and cultural milieu that leads to significant differences in institutional norms. My analysis is deepened by my experiences over the last two years as a member of the Urbana-Champaign IMC based in Illinois. These experiences further sensitize me to what was idiosyncratic in the Seattle IMC and what is more symptomatic of principles and tensions shared by the global network. So as not to over-generalize from Seattle-specific viewpoints, I also examined emails from three major global lists – finance, communications and process – covering the months from September 2002 to June 2003. Specifically, I looked at the major themes of debate surrounding IMC identity as a global network.

## **Findings and discussion**

One surprising finding that emerged from interviewing several self-described ‘tech geeks’ about global network issues was what appeared to be a partial disconnect between website design and organizational ideology. For example, based on my interviews, there did not seem to be a particular ideological reason for why the principles of unity and other process-related issues are not rendered more salient on the Seattle IMC home website. As they are positioned now, it is difficult to locate them online. Despite this lack of clear causation, my comparative data for the global network indicate similar patterns across other IMC sites that may suggest underlying reasons for the absence of the principles of unity. A similar tension exists with regard to hyperlink relationships.

Although hyperlink patterns seem to indicate radical egalitarianism, the politics of maintaining the network are far messier than hyperlink relationships would suggest, as exemplified

by contention over money issues. Because the entire network has not officially ratified the principles of unity, the IMC has yet to codify a strict definition of consensus as their central identity. This status prompted one activist to say to me in an interview that Indymedia is a ‘network that is not a network’ or a ‘network that is struggling to become a network’. Further, this activist says that until there is some way to discipline rogue IMCs in the network, the network will forever remain vulnerable to identity crises that erupt around divergent interpretations of the meaning and significance of the principles of unity. Other observations suggest an ongoing struggle to find solutions for making network decisions involving money, as suggested by the following e-mail quote:

... as some of you might be aware, we do not have a principle of unity surrounding money and in our vast and diverse network of over 110 imcs around the world, we do not have consensus around money, fundraising or grants, let alone even a process for making that decision. (Seattle IMC general email list, 12 February 2002)

This member, along with several others, set up a ‘tactical media fund’ (TMF), which was positioned to accept grants from foundations such as the Open Society Institute (OSI). The following email sent from the same author to the IMC general email list on 28 January 2003 during the 2003 World Social Forum conference is worth looking at in full for insights into the TMF, the OSI grant and the implications for maintaining a large global network governed by radical democratic practices.

... i am in porto alegre with many many imc people and 100,000 other people from all over the world, primarily the south ... bringing together a global democracy movement in all its diversity. i think the challenges facing indymedia ... are a microcosm of this larger macro movement ... [questions pertaining to] tmf and osi do not rest in a vacuum, isolated from other larger network concerns. but rather, the concerns are also a direct result of some of indymedia’s ongoing global network issues of governance, decision-making, lack of process and structure. these are big challenges we face as a network and I would only hope that we would act in a respectful way as we move forward in discussion, locally and globally. so much of what we read on the global lists is inflammatory because people do not know all the details. we will need some education to get on the same page, we will need some trust and respect to engage in thoughtful dialogue and problem solving attitude and we will need to think outside the box for the network as a whole as we strive to figure out things as a social network. networks are new models of organizing in an international and globalized activist community and many other groups are facing similar challenges. we are not alone and we can really figure out many things if we want to and provide a model for other international networks who are struggling with these same questions. (sic; Seattle IMC general email list, 12 February 2002)

This email shows the important links between global network decision-making, the prospects of radical democracy on a large scale, and the importance of negotiating the politics of money matters in maintaining the network.

### **Sustainability issues**

A major problem with Indymedia network sustainability lies with interpreting the ‘Principles of Unity’. As noted before, for an ‘all channels’ network like Indymedia, the central narrative is especially important. According to Arquilla and Ronfeldt’s model, Indymedia network problems would occur at the narrative, but especially the doctrinal level. Because there are no principles dictating how money should be handled – or how any network-wide decisions should be made – there is often confusion and contention when such action is called for.

In the Seattle IMC there is also a recurring tension between radical and media democracy. Similarly, Garrido and Pickard’s (2003) hyperlink network analysis research indicates that the

Seattle IMC links most often to media democracy organizations. Thus, based on Garrido and Pickard's analysis of web page and hyperlink data, the Seattle IMC's focus on media democracy ties in with tensions in the larger global network, reflected in the following email from the general listserv.

. . . the imc is engaged in basically two, distinct yet closely tied, projects.

1) turn the existing corporate media model upside down, providing open access to both create news and read/view/listen to the news that others have created.

2) create a non-hierarchical model of organizing that attempts to operate as much as a direct democracy as possible: institutionalizing decentralization and distributing power among its participants . . . i would also assert that the second objective is perhaps the most central to the imc mission and is also the most difficult. we do not know how to run a truly democratic institution. we try modeling ourselves after other efforts in history: the Paris communes, the Spanish anarchists, the antinuclear affinity models of the 1970's. but as a movement, we are only just learning how to create accountable, non-hierarchical institutions that are democratic. this is practice for the real thing . . . prefigurative politics. moreover, democracy is not streamlined. it is not fast and efficient. We intentionally create checks on power and review plans ad infinitum, just to make sure that it is the will of the group. it would be far more 'efficient' to just have a nice polite little totalitarian dictatorship, benevolent or not, and simply follow orders. we would 'get alot more done.' but that would be ridiculous. go work with any other media organization and you can do that. no, our strength is in our commitment to democracy, and our perpetual attempts at refining this practice. a practice that we have consistently been denied for far too long . . . (sic; Seattle IMC general email list, 14 May 2003)

The above email, consistent with my other data, suggests an ongoing tension in the Seattle IMC between focusing on democratizing the media and radicalizing all organizational democratic practices. This also relates to a central dilemma and contradiction negotiated in many IMCs and noted in previous work (Pickard, forthcoming) dealing with the tension between inclusivity and effectiveness that arises during the selection of featured articles. In their mission to be a credible media democracy organization that can challenge corporate media, IMC radical politics may sometimes prevent – or at least distract – them from actualizing these goals. I take these tensions into consideration below as I assess network strengths.

### **Lessons from Indymedia**

The sudden rise of the Indymedia network is worthy of scholarly attention for what it portends. In many ways, Indymedia can be viewed as a radical democratic experiment at the vanguard, grappling with the furthest extensions of democratic logic. To the extent that Indymedia activists and others like them succeed or fail in elevating radical democratic principles to a global network level may have implications for large areas of global society that are fast becoming more networked-based. In the following I revisit my initial research questions.

*How does Indymedia correspond to social movement trends?*

Indymedia clearly embodies many of the SPIN attributes discussed earlier. The extent to which they are succeeding as a global network committed to radical democratic principles is inextricably connected to the nonhierarchical, networked based, leaderless model delineated by the SPIN model. Network expansion is facilitated by these attributes at both the local organizational level and the global network level.

*How are radical democratic principles manifest in Indymedia at the global network level?*

The same radical democratic logic that infuses Indymedia organizational and technical constructions also structures the Indymedia global network. Elevated to the level of a distributed global network, this unprecedented adherence to radical democratic principles is maintained via internet-enabled technologies such as hyperlinks, listservs, internet relay chat (IRC), wikis and online documents. Without these technologies, it is difficult to imagine the global Indymedia network functioning at all. On the local level, more traditional forms of organizing are imperative. Meetings based on radical democratic decision-making are the glue that holds these organizations together, but also the source of many tensions.

*What factors contribute to Indymedia network growth?*

Overall, democratic openness is the key to Indymedia network growth. Without open source capabilities, Indymedia websites could not be as easily replicated. Without radical egalitarianism guiding the formation of the network, marginalized communities would not subscribe to Indymedia's binding 'Principles of Unity'. Without the distributed nature of the network, decentralized decision-making, and the overall inclusivity encouraged by open meetings, Indymedia could simply not handle the breadth of diversity spanning across cultural, social and geographical spheres that it now contains.

*Can we begin to ascertain Indymedia sustainability?*

Indymedia sustainability, according to Ronfeldt and Arquilla's five levels, gives a mixed forecast. Organizationally, Indymedia is maintained by its emphasis on process; technologically, Indymedia is sustained by the internet; socially, Indymedia is sustained by tight-knit friendships and common interests in the form of progressive politics and a commitment to radical democracy. However, Indymedia is most challenged at the doctrinal and narrative levels, as suggested by the breakdown in network operations over issues involving money. These issues strike at the core of Indymedia identity. Different interpretations of the principles of unity may cause fissures in the collective narrative.

Another means of assessing sustainability is to examine the strengths and limitations afforded by radical democratic network structures and practices. In examining the radical democracy manifest in network-based strategies, we can begin to understand the strengths and limitations, successes and failures and ultimately, the viability of such radical democratic politics.

*Strengths and Limitations of Radical Democratic Networks*

The underlying network structure within social movements affords activist organizations new strengths and possibilities. Divergent groups are now better connected for coordinating their efforts. Eschle notes that:

The construction of connections within and between movements enables more adequate knowledge of the complex ways in which power operates and the development of broader solidarities, thus enabling power relations in society to be tackled more effectively on a variety of fronts. (2001: 141)

Although long meetings and endless debates can sometimes bog down organizational operations, in responding to a fast-changing political situation, networks make decisions far more quickly and creatively than any organization with a bureaucratic chain of command. Paul De Armond (2001) illustrated how the Direct Action Network (DAN), the organizational prototype for Indymedia, was able to prevail during the WTO protests because of their network-based communicative

structure comprised of cell phones and internet connections. This occurred in sharp contrast to other traditionally hierarchical groups, like the labor march, that were stymied by police. De Armond notes:

Institutions, such as corporate media, police, and the AFL-CIO, tend to depend on narrow communications – highly centralized and hierarchical. DAN's diffuse communications network allowed protestors to continuously adapt to changing conditions. The consultative form of decision-making enhanced the ability to coordinate large-scale actions. The police attempts to arrest ringleaders . . . were fruitless, since leadership and communication were widely shared throughout the network protest groups, and the communications network was continuously expanded and modified. (2001: 211)

De Armond testifies to the idea that radical democratic activist practices command strategic value beyond principled adherence to ethical codes that many activists champion.

Polletta argues that participatory democratic principles afford activists benefits in terms of increased solidarity, innovation and personal development (such as leadership skills) across a larger segment of the group compared to more hierarchical structures. Polletta explains:

In a decentralized organization, people can respond better to local conditions and can act quickly on decisions. ... Open discussion made it possible to solicit numerous proposals and insights. ... An experimental approach to decisionmaking often extended to a more general orientation to tactical choice that made for substantial innovation (2002: 211)

However, Polletta also notes that the participatory model becomes strained once membership expands beyond the small group level. Given the sheer enormity of the global IMC and its fast-paced growth, some of these strategic qualities may be diminished.

Facing these constraints, some Indymedia activists call for less of a purist approach and advocate for temporary hierarchies and less adherence to strict process, as indicated by a theme formally raised in Seattle IMC general meeting discussions during the spring of 2003 titled 'Process vs. Progress'. Decentralization in an activist network can allow for advantages but can also lead to institutional paralysis. Some IMCs may even try to recentralize the network by disciplining rogue IMCs not in compliance with the 'Principles of Unity'. We may see evidence for this strategic recentralization in the US-only IMC regional website launched shortly before the November 2004 presidential elections. Born from yet another identity-challenging, contentious discussion, this website, modeled after the syndication-based global site, holds no special prominence within the network. Yet, ideally it will help coordinate US-based IMCs into more directed political action and engagement with electoral strategies, including interventions into policy debates that may help actualize a more democratic media system.

Another persisting problem is power asymmetries within the network (north/south, reformist/radical) and lingering traditional hierarchies dominated by white North American men. Aided by the internet, Indymedia network sustainability may require constant process-laden meetings to make such radical democracy work. My future work will look at how the network changes over time as it responds to particular challenges. In the meantime, it is significant that, despite the formidable challenges facing it, and contrary to many theorists and activists' predictions, Indymedia is extending radical democratic practice to unprecedented levels.

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