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Parrhesia: An Old Word and a New Way of Making News

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Abstract

It is argued that the Independent Media Center can be better understood as a case

parrhesia, as described by Foucault. Included are an overview of the Independent Media

Center, an exploration of the meaning of parrhesia, and empirical evidence suggesting

reasons to consider the former an example of the latter. Implicit are critiques of

contemporary mass media, proprietary knowledge, and hierarchical society.

Parrhesia: An Old Word and a New Way of Making News

The forces of corporate globalization suffered two setbacks in Seattle, Washington in the final week of November, 1999. Tens of thousands of demonstrators mobilized to protest the World Trade Organization (WTO) ministerial and temporarily stalled negotiations for a new round of trade agreements. Perhaps more serious damage was done to the free-trade agenda six days earlier, when media activists launched Indymedia.org.

In the following paper, I will give a brief description of the electronic incarnations of the Independent Media Center (IMC or Indymedia) network. The Independent Media Center has been compared to a Habermasian public sphere. However, I will suggest a different approach and then give a short overview of the word *parrhesia*. The purpose of this qualitative study will be to describe the Independent Media Center network in terms of *parrhesia* in the hopes of providing a better framework to understand this experiment in cyber-publishing.

Methods

I have relied on qualitative methods in developing this paper.   I think it would be fair to say my primary intention for doing so was probably not so much to "draw attention to the overtly political nature of the research" (Uzelman, 2002, p. 2), or because I feel "engaged forms of research... provide the best strategy" (Jankowski and Jansen, 2003, p. 34) for studying Indymedia. Rather, I chose this approach for the sake of convenience and to hopefully makes some small steps toward finding "better... frameworks of analysis" (p. 34). My conclusions are be based on participant observation, personal interviews with

Indymedia activists, results from a survey conducted via e-mail, in addition to material

available on, or one or two hyperlinks from, Indymedia sites. Beyond reading materials

on the IMC websites, my participation with Indymedia began in the lead-up to the

September 2000 International Monetary Fund and World Bank meetings and concurrent

protests and counter-summit in Prague, Czech Republic. I served not only as poster of

media, but also swept and mopped the "brick and mortar" media center, greeted

journalists as they arrived from all corners of Europe, and helped dispatch media crews to

breaking news events as protesters met, rallied, marched, and clashed with police forces.

I was also involved with organizing the Prague Independent Media Center's coverage of

the November 2002 summit of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the

Czech Republic. Later that winter, I joined the Idaho Independent Media Center's

editorial collective and since then have been partly responsible for determining which

open newswire postings are placed on the more prominent center column as feature

stories. As of this writing, I still serve as a member of Idaho Indymedia's editorial

collective. For this paper, I also personally interviewed two of the founders of the Idaho

IMC, and a former volunteer with the Prague collective who, though no longer active in

the "backstage" operations of the Independent Media Center network, is still an active

"frontstage" participant, frequenting the sites for information, occasionally posting

material to the newswires, and commenting on materials others have posted. In addition

to drawing material from these experiences, I sent a survey with 10 open-ended questions

[see Appendix] to multiple IMC mailing lists on every continent. As of this writing I

have received 4 responses. In dealing with the completed surveys, I decided to edit

obvious typographical, spelling, syntax, and punctuation errors, however I have not altered the names they requested be used, and perhaps curiously, none of them were capitalized.

<div align="center">Indymedia</div>

The website for the Seattle Independent Media Center "created new forms of participatory media-making" (Kidd, 2003, para. 3) through it's radical organizational structure and deceptively simple open publishing capabilities. Uzelman identified this open publishing system as Indymedia's foundation, which does not rely on centralized production centers to provide audiences with content, but instead encourages the audience members (wherever they may be) to make the media that will be published on the site (2002).

Having turned out to be perhaps Independent Media Center's most revolutionary feature, open publishing was not part of the original Indymedia plan. Suspecting that "corporate mass media would not present critical analysis of the WTO or an accurate picture of the resistance movement, if they even attempted to cover it at all" (Shumway, 2002, 3.1.2), media activists had been planning an independent media center for six months leading up to the WTO meetings (Morris). Initially, activists envisioned a media center where media activists using video, audio, print, and photos could produce stories that would describe the reality of corporate globalization in ways the corporate media would not (Shumway, 2002). The Seattle activists had a range of outlets, a daily newspaper, a satellite television program, radio, and a website so that producers *at the center* could upload their stories onto the Internet. Just weeks before the "Battle of

Seattle," thanks to a chance meeting with an Australian software programmer, the techies

developing the website realized they could run the Linux-based *Active* software to make a

website where anyone with Internet access could post media. With this open publishing

system, as Scott Nelson with the Vancouver IMC explained, "anyone can post their

content, and boom, it's the next item on Indymedia's newswire" (Groves, para. 10).

However, this isn't the only way Indymedia differs from traditional news and

information outlets. Janowski and Jansen listed several additional features common to

Indymedia including "collective ownership and management...,transformation of

copyright & use regulations..., redefinition of news...,transformation of conventional

codes of news production...,limited editorial restriction...,involvement of non-

professionals... [and an] emphasis on movement-based news, demonstrations, and

protests" (2003, p. 10). In addition they note that, though Indymedia is certainly not the

first group to use media to spread the voice of protest,

> one particular feature distinguishes it from all previous initiatives: Indymedia is
>
> the first form of alternative media able to operate in a truly global manner. In a
>
> way never before realized, this alternative medium is able to connect voices of
>
> dissent across continents. At the same time, Indymedia are grounded in the
>
> specific contexts – political, cultural, and geographic – of those enaged in such
>
> dissent. (2003, 2)

Five years after the launch of the Seattle website, and now Indymedia.org has

links to more than 140 local, regional, or national Independent Media Centers on five

continents. Over the course of five years, that translates to an average of one new IMC

every twelve days! Though details like color scheme, logos, and other incidentals vary,

most Indymedia sites have a similar layout.

When one visits the typical Indymedia site, one finds a banner spanning the top of

the page with a logo and imagery politically relevant to that region. Below the banner are

three columns. On the left is the most static column. It generally features various links to

special coverage areas of the site, hyperlinks to other indymedia sites around on five

continents, informative links about Indymedia, and a basic search engine for that site. To

facilitate involvement, there is a link to hundreds of mailing lists where all kinds

Indymedia business is conducted: topics ranging from the presentation of the global site,

handling of IMC finances, legal issues, to discussion of gender issues within the network.

The least static of the columns is the right one, which is typically the open

publishing newswire (though some sites have recently been opting to move the open

newswire from the more prominent front page). Just above the newswire is typically a

"publish" hyperlink. By following this link,

> visitors to the site are allowed to follow a form-based submission process that
>
> allows them to upload articles, images, audio, or multimedia into the newswire.
>
> On most Indymedia sites, articles are published in the newswire automatically and
>
> immediately and are displayed in reverse chronological order. (Hill, 2003, para.
>
> 20)

Ideally, the newswire column is left alone by the site's editorial collective. Anyone who visits the page is able to post most anything in this column. However, when something is published in duplicate, when advertising is posted, or when hate messages turn up, the collective has a process to remove offending posts from the newswire. All stories on this column can be commented on by the readership and the author.

The center column is under the direct control of the editorial collective, who have passwords that enable them to add media to the center, or "features," column. Generally center column stories are not reposted material from other media outlets, but are original Indymedia stories that have been published in the newswire and found to be especially relevant to the site's readership. Since feature stories are usually based on newswire postings, they also link to a page where readers can comment on the article.

In maintaining this global media network, IMCs operate under what is essentially a federation of collectives. According to joel from the Profane Existence collective in Minneapolis;

> collectives are groups of people who band together as complete equals, with no leaders or bosses... and function according to several key anarchist principles: direct democracy, full participation of all collective members, equality, autonomy, mutual aid, and resolute opposition to hierarchy and domination. (joel, 1997, p. 84)

The various local Indymedia collectives have the autonomy to make decisions at the local level, provided they agree to work under some "principles of unity" that are meant to

insure the network remains democratic and free from corporate and state control (New

IMC working group).

No description of Indymedia could be complete without addressing the technology

behind the site. While the website originated in the Microsoft's hometown, the software

would not enrich Mr. Gates. Coleman notes that the technological tools enabling

Indymedia's radical functionality were developed by hackers collaborating in the Free and

Open Source Software (FOSS) movement (2004). IMC geek Matthew Arnison explains

these copyright free (a.k.a copyleft) programs as being

> a gift to humanity. If you have a piece of free software, you can give it to someone
>
> else for free. You can charge for free software, but once someone else has a copy,
>
> they can give away as manycopies as they like. So free software often comes at no
>
> charge. Let's call it free beer. (2001 para. 3)

Not only did the software have the practical advantage of being much cheaper than

copyrighted alternatives, it also fit well with Indymedia's open publishing philosophy:

> They're both (r)evolutionary responses to the privatisation of information by
>
> multinational monopolies. For software it's Microsoft. For publishing it's CNN.
>
> For both software and publishing it's AOL Time Warner. (Arnison, Para 2)

FOSS has a variety of products that have proven a hit not only among anti-

Microsoft crowd, but also in the wider technology world, as demonstrated Walt

Mossburg's September 16, 2004 Personal Technology column in the Wall Street Journal

where he suggested "dumping Microsoft's Internet Explorer Web browser" (Mossberg, para. 14) in favor of the more secure open source Mozilla Firefox. Not bad for hackers.

Parrhesia

Throughout the course of any proper liberal education, students will undoubtedly encounter several concepts with roots in ancient Greece. In Philosophy they will consider the word *arete* (roughly translated as virtue). In Political Science the meaning of *democracy* cannot be ignored. Unfortunately, if my formal education is to serve as any sort of guide, students will not spend any time discussing the Greek word *parrhesia*. Fortunately, there are bookstores.

In Michel Foucault's *Fearless Speech*, one can find more than eight score pages devoted to discussing the genealogy of this fascinating word. He traced its first appearance to Euripides in the 5th century B.C.E. and found it throughout ancient Greek writings for more than a millennium. For this paper it should suffice to ignore a large measure of the word's evolution, and focus rather on its basic meaning. Foucault informed us that *parrhesia* "is ordinarily translated into English by *free speech* (2001, p. 11), though it seems we should be leery of suspecting such a translation to be adequate if we wish to fully understand the word.

For Foucault, the meaning of *parrhesia* had five component concepts; frankness, truth, danger, criticism, and duty. In being frank, a *parrhesiastes* (one using *parrhesia*) did not rely on rhetorical or persuasive devices, which could mask the speaker's actual beliefs. Instead one endeavored to be totally sincere, acting "on other people's minds by showing them as directly as possible what he actually [believed]" (2001, p. 12).

In this interpretation, the second condition for *parrhesia*, truth, may lead us away from the Greek meaning if we think truth is reached *a posteriori*, through experience. With *parrhesia*, "there is always an exact coincidence between belief and truth" (Foucault, 2001, p. 14). Of course we moderns then would be tempted to ask how the potential *parrhesiastes* knows whether those beliefs were actually true. Foucault believed this question "is a particularly modern one... foreign to the Greeks" (p. 15). The evidence that one spoke truth was simply that she possessed "certain *moral* qualities" (p. 15). Of those qualities, perhaps the most important was courage.

Parrhesia only happened when it was dangerous to sincerely speak the truth. Saying that water boils at 100 degrees and freezes at zero, even though the speaker may sincerely believe it to be a truthful statement, would not count as *parrhesia*. However, telling one's boss, teacher, or ruler that he is unreasonable might. "The *parrhesiastes* is someone who takes a risk" (Foucault, 2001, p. 16). Without the courage to face this kind of danger, one will not engage in *parrhesia*.

The concept of criticism is also key to this kind of truth-telling. Foucault says critique follows this basic structure: "This is the way you behave, but that is the way you ought to behave" (2001, p. 17). Here, remembering that risk must be involved, one must be in a certain relationship to the criticized. A judge admonishing a convict will not qualify as *parrhesia*. "The *parrhesiastes* is always less powerful than the one with whom [she] speaks" (p. 18).

In Foucault's analysis, the final aspect here is that of duty. One is always free (and perhaps most wise) to heed mother's advice and not being able to say anything nice,

resolve to say nothing at all. Wisdom, however, is not at question here. The

pahrresiastes will say something, not from spite or under some kind of duress (eg.

torture), but because for him "telling the truth is regarded as a duty" (2001, 19).

Some other authors (Shumway, 2002; Morris, in press) have likened Indymedia to

a kind of Habermasian public sphere for the 21st century. There certainly appears to be

some reason for doing so. The open publishing newswire provides access to debate to

anyone with an internet connection. The comment function that accompanies each

newswire posting encourages debate to emerge around posted stories.

However, there are some of reasons to question this likening as well. For

example, Compton reminds us that

> Habermas's conception of the public sphere, adopted as it is from the bourgeois
>
> liberal model, associates membership in the public with the ability to abstract
>
> oneself from individual circumstances through the use of reason. From the
>
> beginning members of the liberal public sphere had to first leave their individual
>
> interests behind. (2000, p. 458)

Yet, it seems that rather than encouraging posters to leave their individual concerns

offline, Indymedia encourages the oppressed to bring their life experiences into the center

of the debate (especially for many in the global South and East where the effects of IMF

structural adjustments and World Bank debt are often the source of great individual

concern). Indeed, Janowski and Jansen argue that "Indymedia are grounded in the

specific contexts... of those engaged in... dissent" (2003, p. 2).

In addition, it is unclear that one could maintain that Indymedia is a bastion to

reason, at least of the Habermasian kind: "Rational discourse is a process that ensures the inclusion of all those affected and the equal consideration of all interests at play" (Habermas, 2001, p. 34).   Indymedia is arguably not willing to give "equal consideration" to capitalists' interests to maximize profit.   Furthermore, a content analysis of five IMC's found reason to suggest that "there are different cultures of discourse reflected on Indymedia sites and that the conventional modernist model of rational discourse is not well represented" (Janowski and Jansen, 2003, p. 33).

Finally, in describing the Habermasian public sphere, DeLuca and Peeples argued that the "public sphere mediates between civil society and the state, with the expression of public opinion working to both *legitimate* [italics added] and check the power of the state" (2002, p. 126).   Yet Uzelman reminds us that "a current of anti-authoritarianism also runs through the network both at the local and international level.   In this regard, some Indymedia collectives explicitly identify themselves as being anarchist as do many IMC volunteers in the larger network" (2002, p. 20).

This is not to say that self-identified anarchists could not engage in activities that legitimate state power, in fact long-time "wobbly" organizer, troubadour, and anarchist Utah Phillips said recently that he had registered and was planning to vote in the 2004 elections (Crane, 2004).   It is merely to suggest that some features of the network (eg. the organizing structure) may have exactly the opposite intentions, if not effect.

Now perhaps it would be appropriate to discuss Indymedia's in terms of to *parhessia*.   I will follow the same pattern as above; beginning with frankness, continuing to truth, danger, critique, and concluding with duty.

Frankness

It is my contention that the functionality of Indymedia is designed to promote a type of sincerity not common in forms of pre-existing mass media. Indymedia journalists certainly have license not often found in traditional press, where "the prudent, career-minded reporter may not pursue a story if it is critical of another company in the corporate family" (Hyde, 2002, para. 7). A similar example occurred locally last year when the *Idaho Statesman* refused to publish a story by Kelly McConnell, a regular writer of a consumer advice column for the *Statesman* (Sewell, 2003), because the columnist suggested readers join in an experiment called "Buy Nothing Day," where people try not to buy anything on the day after Thanksgiving. Statesman editors found that to be inappropriate. Independent Media Centers allow, and encourage, such advocacy. They provide "an outlet for scores of disaffected and disenfranchised groups by reporting differing versions of the news than the mainstream press" (Hyde, 2002, para. 24).

In addition to facilitating the publication of far left of center media, as many "alternative" publications and productions do, Indymedia allows people to bypass the reporter altogether. Uzelman described the unique aim of the IMC:

> Instead of acting as a collective of independent journalists working to tell stories which are marginalized, ridiculed, or ignored altogether in the mainstream media, the goal is to facilitate the production of media content *by* the people living these stories. (2002, p. 21)

As noted earlier, Indymedia's open publishing function allows enables users to upload text, images (still or motion), and audio onto the website. This participatory

aspect "allows people to express themselves creatively" (Uzelman, 2002, p. 100), what is more "it also opens up some amazingly passionate storytelling" (Lownethal, 2004, para. 6).

Participants in my survey identified this passion and sincerity at Indymedia as being an important distinguishing characteristic of the Indymedia initiative. One founder of Austin Indymedia, eric paulus, wrote that "it is truly the voice of those without a voice," and he valued the "perspectives from people actually fighting in the struggle, not from those we are struggling against" (paulus, personal communication, November, 9 2004). In contrasting Indymedia with mainstream, corporate media, an Indymedia videographer who asked to be called anonymous indydrone, argued that freedom from economic incentives allows Indymedia posters to be more frank. "They do it for the money, we do it from the heart. They lie to protect the status quo, we tell the truth" (anonymous indydrone, personal communication, November 11, 2004). This media activist maintains that this sincerity helps offset corporate media's financial advantages:

> It's the people's media. We have more resources than they do. This sounds
> weird, because we have no money, no corporate underwriters, no sponsors. (For
> good reason.) But... we have millions more eyes than they do, and we have the
> spirit and soul the corporate media does not.

Others agreed that a certain of frankness is found in the Indysphere. Marty Orr, one of the founders of the Idaho Independent Media Center, pointed to the ability to bypass reporters and editors as an important feature in Indymedia."It's an opportunity for people to publish without a gatekeeper. Even [Idaho] Statesman op-eds are limited. [At

Indymedia] you can say things the way you want to say things" (Orr, personal communication, November 11, 2004). He continued by saying that Indymedia is place where "people get a chance to speak their minds... it's like a chalkboard in the mens' room" in a bar. Orr also pointed out that the site allows for anonymous postings, and argued that this feature facilitates whistle-blowing.

Marty Camberlango first visited Indymedia shortly after its inception because he "had a lot of friends" (personal communication, November 11, 2004) at the anti-WTO demonstrations in Seattle. He found that IMCs provide a perspective on protests seldom found in mainstream press, saying they serve as "a voice for protestors during protests. If you want to know what's going on at a protest... unmediated by a journalist or anchorperson..., you go to Indymedia."

<div align="center">Truth</div>

The nature of truth has long been a subject of dispute. Fortunately the conception of truth we are approaching here is an ancient one that predates much of those disputes. Here, here we will be using the concept of truth as it applied to the ancient Greeks, as described in Foucault's genealogy of parrhesia addressed earlier. Generally speaking, at Indymedia the authority of experts, scientists, leaders, etc, is no guarantor of truth. Uzelman claims Indymedia is opposed to mainstream media, partially on the grounds that mainstream journalists wrongly ground their claims to objectivity and nuetrality by using the views of an elite class "authorized knowers" such as officials from government, business, military, and academic spheres (Uzelman, 2002).

It's been noted that Indymedia is making a case that "other kinds of expertise and

other kinds of know-how also have valid claims on our attention" (Meikle, 2003, para.

18).   Platon and Dueze found that "Most Indymedia define their way of working as

showing grass roots reports from the streets. A reader's own individual narrative is

considered to be of higher value and authenticity than a report from a distance" (2003, p.

346).

Survey participants generally contended that while Indymedia makes no claim on

objectivity, it's more truthful than the mainstream press, which does strive for objectivity.

As one IMC volunteer argued, "they hide behind a pretend mantle of 'objectivity,' which

is a lie. We're clear about the fact that there is no objectivity, that it is up to every person

to evaluate the truth for themselves – but they must be given access to all voices, not just

corporate mouthpieces" (anonymous indydrone, personal communication, November 11,

2004). Another IMCista (as volunteers sometimes refer to themselves) had an interesting

suggestion for readers concerned about Indymedia biases: "If anyone perceives a lack of

objectivity they should post it to the newswire and start posting what they perceive as

objective" (mp, personal communication, November, 9, 2004). However mp conceded

that objectivity "is a difficult thing to deal with, especially in the context of politically hot

or sensitive stuff" but called it "a challenge... based on value conflicts and tensions,

which are always good to understand oneself, the people around you and the world

better". A volunteer with London, Indymedia, ana pena, agreed that "no-one follows the

'objectivity' standard, so at least indymedia writers are honest" (a. pena, personal

communication, November 12, 2004). However pena wrote that the radical newsmakers

have the advantage when it comes to telling the truth:

We don't buy or sell the content! We do not accept adverts or finance from companies, therefore we are completely independent to tell whatever we think is the truth. Another thing is that we do not pretend we are objective or asseptic: we do have a political angle, we do state that we are biased, and we are, before a media project, a political project.

As a regular reader of Indymedia sites, Camberlango seems to believe that truth is contingent on one's vantage point when he says the various Indymedia sites "tell you what's going on from the perspective of people who believe in social justice" (M. Camberlango, personal communication, November 11, 2004). Yet he argues that the IMC's do a better job than standard media outlets saying Indymedia provides "a clearer picture of reality than traditional news or information."

Another Idaho Independent Media center founder Jeremy Maxand, cited the failings of traditional media in Seattle at the WTO protests as a major factor in getting involved in the Indymedia movement. "It became clear that 2 stories were being told, the story from the streets, and the story from the corporate lens – the media" (J. Maxand, personal communication, November 11, 2004). He didn't much worry that Indymedia may be seen as biased: "If Fox News is fair and balanced, who wants to be balanced?"

In the Indysphere, it seems, truth may not be sought in the same style as it is in the mass media that frequently strives for nuetrality, yet it remains fundamental to the Indymedia vision, as "a place where people can put what they think is important.., moral, right, and true" (Maxand, personal communication, November 11, 2004).

Danger

According to Foucault, the criterion the ancient Greeks used to determine whether truth was being told was the speaker's relationship to danger (2001). While IMC sites attempts to allow individuals visiting and posting to remain anonymous, the Independent Media Center Network has certainly faced its fair share of intimidation. Many sites have been the target of attack by hackers (Kidd, 2003). Recently, a hacker succesfully, though temporarily, shutdown the Washington D.C., IMC and reportedly attempted to get others as well, including Idaho's site. And while IMC geeks have found that some of these attacks have originated on state computers, state agents have also interfered with the media activists in the world that exists outside cyberspace (Uzelman, 2002). Most recently, FBI officials in London seized Indymedia servers that ran more than a dozen IMC sites (IMC: FBI and other legal breaking news, October 28, 2004). I personally witnessed police systematically stopping volunteers and demanding identification as they entered or left the IMC workspace in Prague during the 2000 IMF and World Bank meetings. Certainly the most drastic intimidation faced by IMC volunteers took place during the July 2001, Group of 8 (G8) meetings and protests in Genoa, Italy, when Italian riot police raided an IMC workspace, wrecking equipment, confiscating data, and arresting volunteers. In addition they attacked activists (including Indymedia activists) who were sleeping in a school across the street from the IMC. (Uzelman, 2002). 72 people were injured. At a later inquiry a "senior officer, Pietro Troiani, reportedly admitted under questioning that two petrol bombs allegedly found at the school were planted by police to justify the raid" (Genoa police "admit fabrication," 2003).

Critique

Indymedia's open publishing function not only allows for users to engage in critique, but, operating under the assumption that actions speak louder than words, I will argue here that the Independent Media Center Network itself acts as a critique largely, though not exclusively, aimed at the corporate media. Noted linguist and political observer Noam Chomsky maintains mass media are intricately involved in the capitalist system.

> What are the elite media, the agenda setting ones? The New York Times and
> CBS, for example. Well, first of all, they are major, very profitable, corporations,
> Furthermore, most of them are either linked to, or outright owned by much bigger
> corporations, like General Electric, Westinghouse, and so on. They are way up at
> the top of the power structure of the private economy which is a very tyrannical
> structure. Corporations are basically tyrannies, hierarchic, controlled from above.
> If you don't like what they are doing you get out. The major media are just part of
> that system. (Chomsky, 1997)

If corporations sell widgets, then Chomsky would argue that the widgets for the mass media are the people who read, watch, or listen to those media.

> You have to sell a product to a market, and the market is, of course, advertisers
> (that is, other businesses). Whether it is television or newspapers, or whatever,
> they are selling audiences. Corporations sell audiences to other corporations, In
> the case of the elite media, it's big business. (Chomsky, 1997)

> If one accepts Chomsky's argument that the mass media are primarily involved in

the capitalist pursuits of buying and selling, she should not be too surprised if it turns out

that mass media do a poor job in critically reporting on the major institutions of

international capitalism. In a study of media reports before and after Seattle meeting of

the WTO in 1999, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) gathering and protest the

following April in Washington, D.C., and the November 2001 IMF meetings in Doha,

Qatar, DeLuca and Peeples found some very suggestive results:

> In the Seattle and Washington, D.C. cases preliminary coverage was modest.
>
> When violence broke out in Seattle, coverage escalated. When dramatic violence
>
> did not occur in DC, coverage disappeared. In Qatar, where violence was ruled
>
> out *a priori* by the choice of venue, television coverage was nonexistent. Clearly...
>
> without such violence or its threat, TV news coverage quickly evaporated. (140-1)

There appears to be good reason to suspect that the mass media are poorly suited

at reporting critically on the capitalist economic system–they are too entwined in it. Here

is where the critique Indymedia embodies can be heard the loudest.

> So steeped have the media become in their business perspectives, they are
>
> incapable of speaking, or even reporting, a language critical of the corporate
>
> giants now in control of their news organizations. Journalists appear curiously
>
> unaware that those corporations do not always act in the interests of their viewers.
>
> They have forgotten what democracy looks like. (Halleck, Kovel, and Korytko,
>
> 2002)

If mainstream journalists "have forgotten what democracy looks like," Indymedia

activists are offering a refresher course. According to mp, Indymedia's nonhierachical,

"horizontal architecture of organization... and its detachment from have-to-make-profit corporations" (mp, personal communication, November 9, 2004) help set Indymedia apart from mainstream media. The IMC initiative, for pena, "is not only a media project, but a rehearsal, in a way, of the way we want to live after capitalism" (a. pena, personal communication, November 12, 2004).   To that end IMC's not only share resources at the global level, but demand democratic decision making at the local level. "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 " (New IMC working group, 2004).

It appears that Indymedia, "by creating spaces where people can speak for themselves and by creating democratically run collectives to facilitate the dissemination of new technologies of communication and the knowledge to use them, works towards disrupting the notion that 'communication is functionally equivalent to any other consumerist practice'" (Uzelman, 2002 87). Quite a critique.

<p align="center">Duty</p>

The choice to join the Indymedia network is entirely voluntary. No one is compelled to join or to continue volunteering. Yet the network continues to expand. At the risk of sounding like a sappy patriot, it seems clear that Indymedia activists are motivated by a sense of duty towards truth, democracy, and justice.

For example, a founder of the old UK IMC justified volunteering with a concern that people would remain ignorant of unreported truths without projects like Indymedia:

I have always wanted to communicate to people the things that do not get told in

mainstream media, although at the time we still didn't call it like that. But I was always worried that so many realities did not get reported, therefore people would not know about them... (pena, personal communication, November 12, 2004).

Jeremy Maxand said that the Idaho IMC was founded out of a concern of how democracy is to be represented and understood: "We realized we needed some kind of community reaction to the corporate domination of the media and of how we communicate our democracy" (Maxand, personal communication, November 11, 2004). For Maxand apparently Idaho Indymedia was realized out of a duty to help realize American society's highest ideal.

Duty is apparent in anonymous indydrone's survey reply as well. For anonymous indydrone, telling the truth was a matter of ecological and social responsibility: Letting the mass media alone handle reporting our social truths has real and dire consequences effects for mother earth and human lives.

I care about the world, and the story is everything. The corporate media is a mind-sucking device that paralyzes and poisons. Watch it for awhile; you'll see that anyone who cares about the environment is an "eco-terrorist" (when in fact, the real eco-terrorists are those who are destroying the planet, not those trying to save it.) You will see that anyone who dissents against the genocidal policies of the U.S. Govt is a fringe element, either violent or a crackpot.... Yet, Look how they dropped the ball with respect to war in Afghanistan and Iraq..., how many people have died because they simply allowed it to happen? We're humans. Everything we know, everything we do, is a result of the stories we tell as a

culture. Those who control the story control the world, and fascist corporate

America has taken control of the story. It's time for us to take it back.

(anonymous indydrone, personal communication, November 11, 2004)

Discussion

It has not been my intention to devalue the conception of the public sphere. Nor

have I wanted to suggest that Indymedia intiatives have not made valuable contributions

towards developing a public sphere in cyberspace, indeed I think they have. I do not

believe that Indymedia itself comprises such a sphere. My argument has been that the

Independent Media Centers (in their electronic forms) are better understood as an

example of *parrhesia*: a sincere, true and risky critique born of duty.

If critique follows the form, "You have been doing this, you should be doing

that," we can see that Indymedia's critique is not terribly complex. Much of our

corporate and state media tend to be hierarchical, proprietaristic and profit-driven, and

overly dependent on experts for content. The Indymedia model seeks to demonstrate that

media making can be democratic, ought (and need) not be beholden to corporate monies,

and can be accomplished by the general public (if the tools are made available). I also

think Indymedia could be said to make parallel critiques about the production of

knowledge in our information society and, through its radical management structure,

about decision making in this global village.

This is certainly not the end of what could be said about the IMC phenomenon.

Here I have barely mentioned the technological achievements (especially from the Open

Source programming movement) that have made the explosive growth of Indymedia

possible. Certainly Indymedia could benefit from study into ways to protect itself from

the kinds of harassment explemplified in the recent seizure of its servers in the U.K. It

would also be of great value to be able to evaluate the influence Indymedia has had in

helping shape the debate on economic globalization.

As I noted near the outset, I would not be considering the full genealogical

development of *parrhesia*. For example, I neglected to address the perjorative

connotations that came to be associated with *parrhesia* (Foucault, 2001). Perhaps

exploring those aspects of the word's meaning in the context Indymedia might lead to

new explanations of, and suggestions for handling, some of the more problematic

developments (Munson, 2002, Anderberg 2004) in the Indysphere.

It has not been my intention to fully explicate Indymedia. That may never be

done. I have merely tried to demonstrate that the relatively new Indymedia phenomenon

can be understood in terms of a rather old idea.

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Appendix

Hello,

My name is Alex Neiwirth. In addition to being a member of the idaho.indymedia collective, I am a student of Communication at Boise State University in Boise, Idaho. As part of my studies I am writing a paper on the Indymedia movement. If you could spare a few minutes, I would greatly appreciate answers to some questions concerning Indymedia's accomplishments, challenges, and potentials. Please feel free to skip any question. Please send your replies to me at alexneiwirth@yahoo.com. Thank you very kindly. (Apologies for English only message.)

1. By what name would you like me to refer to you if I quote you in my paper?

2. Please describe your relationship with the Indymedia network.

3. Why did you get involved with the IMC movement?

4. What sets Indymedia apart from mainstream media?

5. What sets Indymedia apart from other alternative media?

6. Where do you see the greatest potential in Indymedia?

7. What do you see as the biggest shortcoming or flaw with Indymedia?

8. Indymedia writers do not always follow journalistic standards such as "objectivity," do you see this as a problem?

9. What do you see as Indymedia's (global or a local) greatest accomplishment(s)?

10. Indymedia is five years old. How might it look five years from now?

Thankyou,

Alex