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## **From Indymedia to Indyjournalism – how Indymedia is evolving.**

*From its humble beginnings as an open message board system, through its evolution as a network of multimedia rich news portals, its clashes with police, the FBI, and its contribution of software, newsroom models, revolutionary newsroom practice and independent media, Indymedia has been at the forefront of the new media revolution. One particularly important development is the emergence of a hybrid model of journalism. However Indymedia has fallen into disrepair and disrepute – this paper looks at possibilities for repair, revision and relaunch.*

Indymedia is probably best thought of as a glorious mess, a haphazard adhococracy that epitomizes the strengths and weaknesses of anarchist projects – passionate, creative and inclusive, while simultaneously confused, unfocused and prone to infighting. While the Indymedia *network* has in many cases fallen into a mess of backbiting, political and personal disputes and organizational paralysis, the Indymedia model and ideals live on in numerous independent media projects. This paper looks these projects and how they have incorporated the ideas and ideals of the Indymedia model. It will also look at how Indymedia should incorporate some of the developments in other independent media projects so as to reclaim its position as a credible source.

### **A Brief note about the term ‘Citizen Media’**

The term ‘citizen media’ is often used to describe user-produced media. While it is commonly used, I will not be using it in this essay. As Sasha Costanza-Chock notes in an email to the IMC-Video email list entitled “Please stop using the term ‘citizen video!’”

*OK, I don't have time to write a long post about this right now, I will do so later. But coming through the largest wave of street mobilizations in US history, which was the immigrant rights marches in the spring of 2006, when millions of non - citizens marched for their rights to be treated as human beings no matter what their status in the eyes of the state, it really makes me angry to hear people supposedly on the left talk so much about 'citizen journalism.' I recognize that some people argue there's another conception of citizenship that isn't based on the nation-state, but the reality is that the dominant (hegemonic) use of the term refers to the rights granted individuals based on their legal status as recognized by a nation-state, with non-'citizens' denied those rights.*

*So, can we please, please stop using the term 'citizen journalism?' Try any one of the many alternatives: grassroots. people's. bottom-up. horizontal.*

*decentralized. independent. social movement. indy. whatever. just, not 'citizen.'*

## **Successes of the Indymedia Model**

Before I start criticizing Indymedia, I'll point out the many successes of the Indymedia project.

Indymedia was one of the first news sites to champion web only content as opposed to the shovelware of early news websites. This can be seen in everything from cnet.com to slate.com.

Indymedia was one of the first sites to use alternate licensing for content, which can be seen in everything from the Wikipedia (Open source licensing) to the Creative Commons movement.

Indymedia was one of the first open publishing websites – and definitely the first one devoted to user-generated content. Now we have Blogger – which supports open publishing and user-generated content, and sites like Flickr, Myspace, Livejournal and Typepad, all of which are devoted to supporting user created content.

Indymedia was also an early adopter of feedback mechanisms such as commenting and forums which are now offered by many present day platforms such as Blogger.

Indymedia also succeeded in showing that the corporate media have a conflict of interest when it comes to globalisation and corporate issues, and that they are prone to believing authority figures over ordinary people. It also showed the power that participatory media projects have, to contradict, criticize and correct the mainstream media, long before Pajamas Media went after Dan Rather.

## **Failures of Indymedia:**

In my view, as an academic and as an ex-Indymedia volunteer, Indymedia's greatest achievements were as a model, as an idea and as a platform. I think its greatest failing was as a network, which I will briefly explain here.

The widespread appeal and accessibility of Indymedia was a major contributor to its failure as a network. From the beginning Indymedia groups were designed to be open and inclusive, drawing numerous activists, media makers and interested parties. Often these people were sympathetic to at least anarchistic organizing principles, if not anarchistic ideals.

This led to the creation of bulky collectives. As with many progressive organizations, Indymedia collectives tend to use consensus decision-making – a process which works well in small groups who meet face-to-face, but fares poorly in an online environment.

Communicating in an online environment often leads to flared tempers and ‘email rage’. When dealing with political and personal issues, this can be exacerbated. A tendency to escalate local conflicts to the global collective makes this tension even worse.

When working in collectives, a lack of rules (or a lack of well-defined, explicit rules) allows dominant personalities to direct the group. The anti-authoritarian politics of anarchist groups can often manifest in an opposition to rules of any kind – a problem Freeman identifies in her landmark essay ‘The Tyranny of Structurelessness.’ This opposition to rules, and simplistic formulation of anarchistic politics, can create a situation where dominant people will alienate other members.

*Contrary to what we would like to believe, there is no such thing as a 'structureless' group. Any group of people of whatever nature coming together for any length of time, for any purpose, will inevitably structure itself in some fashion. The structure may be flexible, it may vary over time, it may evenly or unevenly distribute tasks, power and resources over the members of the group. But it will be formed regardless of the abilities, personalities and intentions of the people involved. The very fact that we are individuals with different talents, predispositions and backgrounds makes this inevitable. Only if we refused to relate or interact on any basis whatsoever could we approximate 'structurelessness' and that is not the nature of a human group.*

*... This hegemony can easily be established because the idea of 'structurelessness' does not prevent the formation of informal structures, but only formal ones. Similarly, 'laissez-faire' philosophy did not prevent the economically powerful from establishing control over wages, prices and distribution of goods; it only prevented the government from doing so. Thus 'structurelessness' becomes a way of masking power, and within the women's movement it is usually most strongly advocated by those who are the most powerful (whether they are conscious of their power or not). The rules of how decisions are made are known only to a few and awareness of power is curtailed by those who know the rules, as long as the structure of the group is informal. Those who do not know the rules and are not chosen for initiation must remain in confusion, or suffer from paranoid delusions that something is happening of which they are not quite aware.*

Indymedia collectives are also prone to what some activists refer to as the ‘F\*\*\*wit factor’ – when the ideal of openness and accessibility leads to collectives allowing disruptive and damaged people to remain at the expense of other members. The debate over this problem often falls back to a long running debate within anarchistic politics – where the line between ‘safe’ space and regulated space is. This is worsened when a collective includes people who are unfamiliar with anarchist politics. These people may have joined out of a desire for a space to speak their mind. The perceived irony of joining a group committed to open publication and open media and then finding themselves unable to speak their mind as they are used to may then lead them to leave.

## Failures of Indymedia Websites

*Perhaps it's useful to ask what constitutes effective communication. By any remotely sane definition, both telling and receiving are necessary. But the burden to communicate effectively belongs to the active party--the teller--not the audience. This is as true in one-on-one settings as it is in mass media. But the Indymedia mission doesn't mention audience. Instead it's all about the creation and the telling. Maybe this is, in part, where the problem lies. With the focus placed so strongly on the "tellings of the truth," the reader/watcher/listener is left to fend for herself. And if we have so little respect or concern for our audience, what on earth are we doing working in a medium based entirely in communication?*

*It's also a question of intent. I want my work to contribute to social change. And I sometimes end up a perfectionist, knowing that the better my work is, the greater an impact it will have. People don't read sloppy, unedited, or disorganized stories; they don't look at bad photographs or videos. And so the potential to have an impact is greatly diminished. This isn't a philosophical question about whether trees make sounds when falling in forests. Simply put, an unread article changes nothing.*

Whitney identifies some of the problems of the Indymedia websites in her article 'What's the Matter with Indymedia?'

The failures of Indymedia extend beyond the problem of readability and quality. Numerous Indymedia sites have to contend with racist spam, trolling, poorly written articles and a tendency to treat the newswire as a place for press releases, reposting of uncontextualised articles from other publications, porn and legally actionable material (ranging from libel to death threats).

While members of the Indymedia movement have posited the idea of open editing this has mostly manifested in the creation of features columns on the front pages of Indymedia sites and the creation of aggregator sites like Oceania Indymedia . While this has allowed for a more pleasant reading experience, it does not address any of the problems listed above – it simply hides them.

## Indymedia and Blogger.com

Indymedia's early role as an open bulletin board filled an important niche. At the time, there were very few news websites that weren't related to existing newspapers, and the free publishing systems that existed (Geocities, Angelfire) did not lend themselves to regular updates. The Active software created a system where people with only a

rudimentary understanding of html could upload their stories, without needing to FTP them to the server, rename files, etc.

The open publishing system worked well, particularly during the events that individual Indymedia sites were often created to cover. It was not long however before it became obvious that this openness was a liability afterward, where Indymedia sites became sites of flamewars, racist commentary, advertising and porn. Regular posters developed the habit of posting articles to the newswires of every available Indymedia – undermining the necessity of having geographical sites in the first place.

This ideal of open publishing has been incorporated by numerous ‘citizen journalism’ publications. The problem of dealing with garbage has been dealt with in various ways. Kuro5hin uses a member voting procedure to siphon out garbage. This means that all members of the site get to read the new articles, but only the popular ones get on the front page. Slashdot uses a similar system, which relies on member voting and a few superusers.

Indymedia has tried to deal with garbage in a number of ways – ranging from the introduction of a features section on the front page, to the hiding of objectionable content, to the outright deletion of illegal material. However, these measures have never really dealt with the core problem.

Indymedia has long supported the ideals of open source software and applied them to publishing. As outlined in Matthew Arnison’s article ‘Open Publishing is the Same as Free Software’

*Open publishing is the same as free software.*

*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.*

*Free software is 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 many copies as they like. So, free software often comes at no charge. Let's call it free beer. But this alone is not free software. Free software is also free as in free speech, not just free beer.*

I argue that in line with the ideals of open source software, Indymedia should simply allow other people access to their software (many Indymedia’s now run Drupal, in any case) if they want to publish their own versions – and not worry so much about the torrents of criticism that are unleashed every time they decide to incorporate some explicit guidelines for Indymedia.

The space for an unedited, unrestricted, uncensored newswire exists outside of Indymedia – any number of blog sites – blogger/livejournal/xanga/myspace etc all allow for this

open publishing format. Therefore, it's not necessary for Indymedia to continue supporting the publication of garbage in the name of free speech.

## So then what's the point?

*A working definition of Open Publishing (OP).*

*Open publishing means that the process of creating news is transparent to the readers. They can contribute a story and see it instantly appear in the pool of stories publicly available. Those stories are filtered as little as possible to help the readers find the stories they want. Readers can see editorial decisions being made by others. They can see how to get involved and help make editorial decisions. If they can think of a better way for the software to help shape editorial decisions, they can copy the software because it is free and change it and start their own site. If they want to redistribute the news, they can, preferably on an open publishing site.*

We can see that earlier notion of open publishing is incomplete. As we can see, 'open publishing means that the *process* of creating news is transparent to the readers.' (emphasis mine). This *doesn't* mean that content can't be edited; though in practice most Indymedia sites have avoided editing as much as possible. The incorporation of open editing is not a new idea – Active software author Matthew Arnison raised the idea in 2002:

*As Indymedia grows it is drifting away from open publishing. The reason is simple. The Active software gave us open story contribution, along with support for text, pictures, sound and video. This was enough to smash a major bottleneck for activist media coverage of major events, and it also worked OK in between while the audience was relatively small. But open publishing is about more than just open posting. It's also about open editing.*

*As the audience grows, open posting attracts more and more contributions. Well beyond the ability of most readers to sift through. So the front page has become a kind of crude manual open editing, where a collective of people find the best stories and bunch the links up into a summary of that issue. You could also think of it as a collective weblog. But there are still too many stories coming in for a single collective to deal with, so it creates another bottleneck.*

However, Arnison's idea of open editing is fairly simplistic. He rejects the user ratings systems the Slashdot and Kuro5hin use; on the basis they are too slow for a fast moving site like Indymedia. While this is true, particularly during large protests and fast moving events, the concern over the imposition of hierarchical control and lack of anonymity for volunteers would also make this idea unworkable.

Arnison suggests:

*One proposal for Indymedia open editing relies on a mutation of weblogs. Users would be able to create highlights pages, updating them with the stories they are most interested in. They could choose a topic, or not, or have several different collections, and maybe share their highlights selection with a team of people. Indymedia would then survey all the highlights pages every hour, and then build its front page based on whatever people are highlighting at the time. A bit like news.google.com, except Google surveys all the media websites on the net.*

*We could also allow people to link their own blogs into Indymedia's front page decisions, we could make it semi-manual, so a collective reviews the software's choices, especially when the system was starting up. And it could expand even more into pages gathering highlights on a particular topic.*

*It's basically about two things. Making weblogs even easier to create and use so that people can quickly use them for this kind of open editing. And gathering the links from all those weblogs onto the front pages of Indymedia.*

However, this is not really open *editing*. If anything, it's simply user collation. In any case, this idea has been tried – both on the front pages of Indymedia.org and local sites, and the creation of collation sites like oceania.indymedia.org. While these are interesting and make the navigation of Indymedia easier, they don't address the underlying problems of unregulated open publishing. Maybe what we need is open editing system like Wikinews.

## **Indymedia and Wikinews**

Wikinews is iterative, but not in the same way that Indymedia is. Indymedia's iterations are formed by the posted articles and the following comments. Therefore for readers to appreciate the iterative nature of the article, they need to read the original article, then the following comments. In this model, any reader reads the *earliest* version of the article first, then any corrections and clarifications. This procedure can be time consuming, and discouraging. It means that any racist comments, errors of fact have to read and then corrected. The iterative model of Wikinews is different – when a reader first reads an article, they are reading the *latest* and therefore *best* version of that article that exists at

that point. They can go back and read the debate, previous versions, errors and comments if they wish – but this is optional.

Does this go against the Indymedia ethos? Well, let's look.

*Open publishing means that the process of creating news is transparent to the readers.*

Well, that's no problem. The creation of stories on Wikinews is simple, possibly even more transparent than Indymedia.

*They can contribute a story and see it instantly appear in the pool of stories publicly available.*

This is also fine. All stories that are created are instantly linked on the front page of Wikinews – they may appear as 'disputed', but that does not change the fact they are accessible.

*Those stories are filtered as little as possible to help the readers find the stories they want.*

All stories are filtered – into geographical groups, disputed articles and topic areas. This is quite similar to the way Indymedia currently works, and is in line with the suggestions made by Arnison.

This point is worth developing though. Given the problem identified earlier – that of submitters posting the same story to numerous sites – this model can provide a more elegant solution. An article relevant to Australia is simply tagged as an Australian article. An article relevant to Australia and America can be tagged with both terms. This prevents the need for cross posting, and also reduces the need for hundreds of geographically based websites hosting the same content. It's also very Web 2.0™

Adopting this model might make Indymedia more vulnerable to government intervention, if all the content is hosted on one server. However, adopting this model doesn't rule out having multiple international mirrors of the site.

*Readers can see editorial decisions being made by others.*

This is also possible with the Wikinews model. In fact, it makes editorial decisions transparent in a way that Indymedia never was. As Arnison notes, even Indymedia as it stood in 2001 didn't meet all his criteria for open publishing – the adoption of this model may bring Indymedia even closer to its ideal.

*They can see how to get involved and help make editorial decisions.*

This is also obvious with the Wikinews model.

*If they can think of a better way for the software to help shape editorial decisions, they can copy the software because it is free and change it and start their own site. If they want to redistribute the news, they can, preferably on an open publishing site.*

Wikinews uses open source software called MediaWiki, released under a GNU Public License which allows forking, allowing anyone to create their own version of the site.

So we can see that using the Wikinews model would not go against the principles of open publishing or open editing, possibly even supporting them more than the current system. What problems might the Wikinews model pose for Indymedia?

## **Wikinews and the NPOV**

Wikinews insists on the NPOV or Neutral Point of View doctrine:

*This Neutral Point of View (or NPOV) doctrine clearly sets Wikinews apart from virtually all of the other collaborative online news sites and blogs we have discussed here, then – where the other sites are often clearly partisan and reflect the views of their enthusiast communities, critiquing the first tier of mainstream news media and adding multiple alternative perspectives, Wikinews, while also encouraging a more multiperspectival coverage of the news, aims to synthesise these multiple perspectives in a more inclusive and unbiased way than is offered by the mainstream media.*

*Indeed, as Yeomans reports, for Wikinews adherence to the NPOV doctrine has been elevated almost to the point of turning into an ideology.*

....

*As a result, even beyond the published articles themselves it is notable that very little discussion of the news takes place, despite the ready availability of article talk pages. Where such pages are used, this is done mainly to discuss potential offences against the NPOV doctrine or note errors or potential extensions to the story. This is a significant departure from the standards set by other collaborative online news sites such as Slashdot, where communal commentary and discussion far outweighs the news stories themselves, and as Wikinews administrator Dan Grey (a.k.a. 'Dan100') puts it, "it's deliberate - opinion or commentary is banned. There are enough blogs already" (Grey 2005, comment on snurb.info).*

Clearly, this won't work with Indymedia. However, the solution is simple – don't adopt it.

## **Conclusions**

As can be seen above, there's no reason Indymedia can't adopt the use of a centralized Wikinews style system as a replacement for the numerous Indymedia websites that exist. If anything, the Wikinews system may in fact fulfill the ideals of open publishing *and* open editing better than the existing system.

It would also bring Indymedia into the realm of knowledge creation and "the creation of radical, accurate, and passionate tellings of the truth."

## **Bibliography**