

Assessing the Radical Democracy of Indymedia: Discursive, Technical, and Institutional Constructions

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This study examines the radical democratic principles manifest in Indymedia's discursive, technical, and institutional practices. By focusing on a case study of the Seattle Independent Media Center and contextualizing it within theories and critiques of radical democracy, this article fleshes out strengths, weaknesses, and recurring tensions endemic to Indymedia's internet-based activism. These findings have important implications for alternative media making and radical politics in general.

Keywords: Alternative Media; Cyberactivism; Democratic Theory; Independent Media Centers; Indymedia; Networks; Radical Democracy; Social Movements

Independent media centers (IMCs, popularly referred to as “Indymedia”) are simultaneously interactive grassroots news websites, nodes within a rapidly expanding global network, and activist institutions deeply rooted in the social movements for global justice and media democracy. Thus, Indymedia is an institutional exemplar of the internet-mediated activism increasingly prevalent among progressive global movements. Many stories can be told about the sudden rise of the independent media center. However, in my view and in the view of many activists, Indymedia's most important innovation is its actualization of radical democracy.

Even casual observers will note that Indymedia puts forth a radical vision for media democracy. Indymedia's celebrated slogan, “be the media,” suggests that media production and telling of stories is something to which all people should have access.

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However, Indymedia's radical democratic practice extends beyond website content and mission statements to encompass institutional practices, use of internet technology, and global network operations. To be more specific, Indymedia's radical democratic practice entails an active renegotiation of all power relationships by democratizing the media (exemplified by an interactive web-based interface), leveling power hierarchies (exemplified by consensus-based decision-making), and countering proprietary logic (exemplified by open-source software). Inherent in these practices are significant strengths, weaknesses, and recurrent tensions, which I trace in the following case study of the Seattle Independent Media Center.¹ I focus on how Indymedia activists, through institutional practices and the amplifying effects of internet technology, are actualizing radical democratic principles.

A Brief History of Indymedia

On November 24, 1999 (to herald the protests against the World Trade Organization), the first Indymedia news story was posted by "Maffew & Manse" to the prototype IMC website:

The resistance is global The web dramatically alters the balance between multinational and activist media. With just a bit of coding and some cheap equipment, we can setup a live automated website that rivals the corporates'. Prepare to be swamped by the tide of activist media makers on the ground in Seattle and around the world, telling the real story behind the World Trade Agreement. (<http://seattle.indymedia.org/en/1999/11/2.shtml>)

Created by media democracy activists who gathered in a downtown Seattle storefront during the weeks leading up to the WTO protests, the IMC was fashioned as a grassroots news organization to provide non-corporate accounts of street-level events. Over 400 journalists, many of them donning IMC press passes, joined a 50,000-person throng of global justice protestors and produced various media for the IMC website and their newspaper, *The Blindspot*. Indymedia journalists broke stories on police brutality and the use of rubber bullets on demonstrators at pointblank range. The site, Indymedia.org (it became seattle.indymedia.org), registered over 1 million hits by the end of the week. The open source code structuring the original IMC site made it an easily replicated model. Within the first year, 24 new IMCs emerged around the world in places like Quebec City, Prague, and Washington, DC, often in conjunction with large global justice protests against neoliberal institutions such as the IMF and World Bank or the G8. As of April 2005, Indymedia comprises a network of over 150 sites in 50 countries across six continents. Despite an overall uniformity in website architecture and political ethos across Indymedia sites, there are significant differences among individual IMCs including but not limited to cultural particulars regarding editorial policy, membership criteria, and the size and location of the IMC.

The Seattle IMC is also a physical space in an urban setting; its Indymedia members meet on a regular basis to create news content, plan fundraisers, deal with administrative issues, and other activities.² As a community resource rich in news and

information production, it produces email lists, video, audio, and print media. Although most Seattle IMC activists are essentially left-of-center, they are ideologically diverse. Counted among their membership are all manner of liberal democrats, progressives, anarchists, Green Party members, civil libertarians, and socialists. Most are ideologically united by a radical participatory ideal of media democracy, which aims to politicize media-related issues in terms of diversity and justice in media representation, while simultaneously widening accessibility to the means of media production. As one activist put it: “Indymedia goes to where the silences are.” More broadly, as clearly manifest in the Indymedia central code, a document called “the principles of unity,” Indymedia activists are united by their adherence to principles of radical democracy.

Previous Scholarship

While a scattered few book chapters have begun to look seriously at Indymedia, few studies, in-depth, look at the linkages between Indymedia’s radical democratic logic and specific technical and institutional practices. The first component of Indymedia that scholars often note is its news production and open newswire, which allows anyone with internet access to post a news story to the website (Jankowski & Jansen, 2003; Platon & Deuze, 2003). Although this is a significant development on multiple levels, I share the view of many Indymedia activists that the most salient features of Indymedia lie with its radical democratic practices that include—but are not limited to—the technical innovation of open publishing and Indymedia’s capacity as a news organization.

Several scholars have started to historicize Indymedia. Downing (2003), the radical media theorist, historicizes Indymedia by locating it in socialist and anarchist traditions of radical media whose roots go back to the Spanish Civil War and the 1968 Paris uprising. Media activist and scholar Halleck (2002) looks at Indymedia based on her experiences in the media democracy movement, going back at least to the early 1980s. Likewise, Morris (2004), who approaches its organizational practices from a sociological perspective, places Indymedia firmly within the media democracy movement. Kidd (2003) likens Indymedia to reclaiming a metaphorical commons originally lost at the dawn of capitalism. I have studied the sustainability of Indymedia as a social movement and global network (2006).

Meanwhile, a small but growing body of literature regarding cyberactivism (McCaughey & Ayers, 2003; Meikle, 2003) and alternative media (Atton, 2002; Hamilton, 2000) has emerged in recent years, with several good collections tracing the intersections of alternative media, internet activism, and social movements (Couldry & Curran, 2003; Opel & Pompper, 2003; Van De Donk, Loader, Nixon, Rucht, & Dahlgren, 2004). Scholars have long pointed out the importance of participatory media in giving voice to marginalized groups, including women (Steiner, 1992) and citizens of the global south (Rodriguez, 2001). Much of the above literature helps bring into focus both the larger contexts within which these media are produced and the institutional practices buttressing technological innovations and

news content, though much more work needs to be done to understand the relationships between organizational and political practices, technological innovations and news production.

Atton (2002) asserts that any attempt to understand experimental media should foreground institutional practices that are inextricably linked to front-end media production. Likewise, the innovative technology of Indymedia cannot be fully understood without accounting for the underlying institutional structure. Using the Seattle IMC as a case study, I attempt to illustrate these linkages and demonstrate how radical democratic principles are consistently manifest across Indymedia practices. In tracing these principles, my analysis focuses on Indymedia's discursive, technical, and institutional constructions while drawing heavily from democratic theory.

Democratic Theory

I situate Indymedia practice within a body of theory and praxis best described as "radical democracy." This framework draws from several threads of radical democratic theory. Broadly speaking, democratic theory in the United States and Europe has undergone a quiet sea change over the last few decades. With Marxist class analysis having fallen out of favor (Hauptmann, 2001), much scholarly attention in the 1990s focused on liberal democratic theory categorized under rubrics such as the political liberalism of Rawls (1993) and the deliberative democracy of Habermas (1989). These foci have led to scholarship centered on deliberative forums, public spheres, and efforts towards revitalizing civic engagement (Gastil, 2000).

Contemporaneously, oppositional models based on more radical theories and practices have emerged. These models are inspired by a focus on participatory politics (Polletta, 2002), post-structuralist conceptions of power (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), and concerns about global social justice (Della Porta, 2004). Unlike traditional Marxism, these models conceive power and resistance in ways that refuse to privilege the contestation of certain power hierarchies (such as class) over others (gender, race, and sexuality). While many activists adhering to these radical democratic models are adamantly opposed to corporate capitalism, they are loath to subscribe to what they often see as another totalizing grand narrative and instead favor radically non-hierarchical and decentralized structures—hallmarks of radical democracy.

Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) conception of radical democracy consists of celebrating difference in political subjectivities and identity formations; focusing on discursive formations of power; and distrusting civil society's ability and commitment to advance democratic practices. Two books titled *Radical Democracy*, both published in 1996, similarly call for a more radical project that breaks from liberal values of rational deliberation, enlightened self-interest, individuality, and private property to confront power in all of its complex and subtle guises (Lummis, 1996; Trend, 1996). Lummis (1996) equates radical democracy with a radically empowered people contesting all forms of centralized power. His conception is similar to Barber's "Strong Democracy" which has citizens actively involved with all levels of political

decision-making. These analyses trace the failures of democracy to the failures of liberalism and its general uneasiness with participatory democracy. In Trend's edited volume, Aronowitz (1996) argues that radical democracy should replace stigmatized socialism as the political program of the left. Fraser, also critical of a lukewarm liberalism that leaves status quo inequities intact, advances a radical modification to Habermas's original formulation that allows for multiple overlapping public spheres, especially for marginal groups, which she refers to as "subaltern public spheres" (Fraser, 1992). Clearly, as I will illustrate below, Indymedia activists exhibit a politics that attempts, and achieves with varying degrees of success, putting radical democratic theory into practice.

Indymedia's democratic project embodies elements from these various positions on radical democratic theory. Aiming to empower marginalized voices, Indymedia goes beyond advocating greater voice in policymaking or a seat at the table. It seeks active re-appropriation and redistribution of space, technology, and other resources to democratize society and thus would level all hierarchies. Thus, much of the structure defining Indymedia as an institution can be described as anarchic (Epstein, 2001) or as "radical participatory democracy" (Polletta, 2002). My use of "radical democracy" indicates an expansive version of participatory democracy that seeks to equalize power hierarchies, correct structural inequities in all institutions, and counter proprietary logic. Such radical democratic practices as Indymedia's consensus decision-making and open internet technology are invested with values of inclusiveness, diversity, openness, co-operation, transparency, and collective decision-making.

Research Questions and Methods

In order to trace democratic values manifest in Indymedia technical and institutional practice and to identify tensions endemic to this infrequently explored terrain, I ask: How are radical democratic values expressed discursively, technically, and institutionally in Indymedia? What are the recurring tensions in Indymedia's radical democratic practices? The primary case study for most of my analysis is the Seattle Independent Media Center (see <http://www.seattle.indymedia.org>). Although occasionally I reference more recent events, my analysis is primarily focused on the Seattle IMC up until August 2003, when I moved from Seattle, thus bringing my participant observations to an end.

The Seattle IMC and the entire global Indymedia network are not static but continue to evolve. Pivotal events since then fall beyond the scope of this study. I do not over-generalize my observations to the entire Indymedia network, since each local IMC is situated in particular social and cultural milieus that lead to significant differences in institutional norms. That said, my analysis is deepened by my experiences over the last two years as a member of the Urbana-Champaign (IL) IMC. 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.

These cautions notwithstanding, there is a remarkable degree of uniformity based on the common architecture of all IMC websites and the shared narrative manifest in the “principles of unity,” a central document that acts as a kind of constitution or charter that some members have described as “network glue.” Also binding the network are the global IMC listservs upon which network-wide debates unfold. Therefore, I can generalize to Indymedia as a whole when discussing institutional practice around consensus decision-making, internet technology, and the guiding principles of radical democracy, and regarding how these issues are negotiated throughout the network. Finally, because the Seattle IMC was the first Indymedia institution, it influenced the entire network in profound ways, albeit much less so as the network evolves. The operations of the Seattle IMC illuminate common tensions experienced by other individual IMCs within the network.

Following Atton’s (2002) call for case studies that combine ethnography with close textual and organizational readings, I strive to present a holistic view of Indymedia’s multi-dimensionality by isolating key components while showing how they are interrelated and consistently inscribed with radical democratic values. First I inductively analyze Indymedia discourse by fleshing out recurring themes from documents linked to their website. Then I use these themes as indices for examining radical democratic values in Indymedia’s technical and institutional fields and highlight general consonance and linkages. Finally, I sketch recurring pressure points and tensions by facing off critiques of participatory models with my observations of Indymedia practice.

My approach to an institutional analysis of Indymedia is informed by extensive background information stemming from nearly three years of volunteering for and participant observation of the Seattle IMC beginning in October 2000. During this time I kept detailed field notes from general and tasked-focused meetings, wrote news stories for the Seattle IMC newswire, and volunteered for occasional events. My data also include email I received daily from the general, media, media literacy, and liaison IMC listservs (archived online); I closely examined approximately 600 of these, particularly those dealing with process-related issues. I interviewed ten active, veteran IMC members, in addition to conducting scores of informative conversations and email exchanges. Following the example set by Gastil’s study of the institutional practices of a small co-op (1993), I recorded participant observations regarding the strengths and weaknesses in the IMC’s participatory model. I also gauged the degree to which institutional practices remain consonant with IMC rhetoric, which entailed noting recurrent disjunctures, tensions, and the familiar cleavages where these processes often break down—what Polletta (2002) calls “pressure points.”

My analysis of IMC technology (as exemplified by the Seattle IMC) focuses primarily on the IMC web interface, wiki pages, and underlying software. Inspired by Flanagan, Maynard, Farinola, and Metzger’s (2000) adaptation of Feenberg’s (1995) technical code model, I examine the social codes manifest in Indymedia’s distinctive internet technology by teasing out the underlying values. Similarly, given my interest in how Indymedia applies internet technology towards radical democratic ends, I look specifically at the extent to which Indymedia’s technical design encourages

collective non-hierarchical participation. Previous literature shows how interfaces—from MUDs to personal websites—are not neutral; they are socially, politically, and technically constructed (Kolko, 2000; Reid, 1998). The maintenance of user interactivity, the selection of hyperlinks, and the organization of content are all political decisions; they help determine what actions can take place on the website, who is linked to, and what information is available (Preece, 2000). Examining such strategic choices sheds light on how IMC social values are embodied by applications of internet technology.

Discursive Constructions

Recurring themes of radical participatory democracy, democratizing the media, and countering corporate power emerge from Indymedia documents linked to all IMC websites. Themes of media democracy and anti-corporate power are invoked in the mission statement on the main page: “Indymedia is a collective of independent media institutions and hundreds of journalists offering grassroots, non-corporate, non-commercial coverage of important social and political issues in Seattle and worldwide.” Indymedia’s anti-corporate stance is evidenced by a rare content restriction (one of several editorial controls discussed below) that under no circumstances may any advertisements or corporate promotions be posted. Community empowerment through media production is also a strong theme. For example, the FAQ page states that Indymedia is “committed to using media production and distribution as a tool for promoting social and economic justice.” Elsewhere on the FAQ page, IMC activists claim that Indymedia “encourages people to become the media by posting their own articles, analysis and information to the site.” Under “What is Indymedia” the IMC is defined as “a democratic media outlet for the creation of radical, accurate, and passionate tellings of truth.”

Principles of Unity

The “principles of unity” document is the clearest articulation of network-wide goals, ideals, and policies. It continues to be controversial, however, because some individual IMCs tend to resist central authority imposed upon them by the larger network. Initially drawn up during the second year of Indymedia’s existence by a small, dedicated core of Indymedia activists, the principles of unity codify the radical democratic mission of Indymedia, acting as a kind of unofficial constitution. The network as a whole has yet to ratify formally the ten principles of unity as a binding document. Nevertheless, to be accepted into the network, all new IMCs must demonstrate adherence to these principles; the induction process is initiated by filling out a form and submitting it to the New IMC email list for global network consensus.

The first principle establishes that all IMCs are “based upon principles of equality, decentralization and local autonomy.” The second principle emphasizes openness: “All IMCs consider open exchange of and open access to information a prerequisite to the building of a more free and just society.” The fourth principle says that all IMCs

must allow individuals, groups, and institutions to express their views via open publishing on IMC websites. Principle five declares that all IMCs must remain not-for-profit, thus barring any commercial enterprises from using the newswire. Perhaps the most defining principle is number six, which mandates consensus-based decision-making, Indymedia's signature institutional practice:

All IMCs recognize the importance of process to social change and are committed to the development of non-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian relationships, from interpersonal relationships to group dynamics. Therefore, [all IMCs] shall organize themselves collectively and be committed to the principle of consensus decision-making and the development of a direct, participatory democratic process that is transparent to its membership. (<http://docs.indymedia.org/view/Global/PrinciplesOfUnity>)

Although many members consider these principles central to Indymedia identity, how they are interpreted and implemented remains a contentious topic at meetings and on various local and global email lists. Different renderings of consensus decision-making (defined in the sixth principle) have led to competing visions of Indymedia process. For example, some IMC activists have advocated for "consensus minus one," to avoid letting individuals derail the process. Even a form of majoritarian voting has been seriously discussed in some cases. These variations are increasing, given the growing number of newly admitted IMCs from a multitude of specific socio-political contexts.

Technical Constructions

With its user-driven news production, collective editing, and open source practices, Indymedia has been in the vanguard of implementing technical strategies that engender and amplify democratic processes. As an innovative web-based communications model, Indymedia utilizes a special type of "open-publishing" software allowing anyone with internet access to "be the media" by posting their own news stories for immediate upload onto the website as part of the newswire. Combining such democratic rhetoric with straightforward instructions for the IMC newswire facilitates public participation and decentralized news production.

Open Source

The ninth principle of unity states, "All IMCs shall be committed to the use of free source code, whenever possible, in order to develop the digital infrastructure, and to increase the independence of the network by not relying on proprietary software." The Seattle IMC accordingly relies on open source software for many of its functions. Open source software is typically protected under "copyleft" restrictions, which reverses copyright law by granting permission to run, modify, and distribute the program as long as no new restrictions are added. This provides a general public license to users of software; protected under copyleft, software remains free and de-privatized (Stallman, 1999). In addition, open source has a strategic dimension:

When multiple programmers contribute, software can be written more quickly, efficiently, and creatively. To encourage these democratic, non-proprietary practices, IMC software must remain widely accessible and have limited restrictions on user innovations. These technological attributes have benefited Indymedia: Individual IMCs develop and adopt new generations of the original IMC code, such as when Seattle upgraded from Active to Mir. These improved models make it easier to replicate, update, and modify the IMC website; they usually run on the open source Linux, allowing activists to distribute information easily through shared calendars, group listings, and multimedia news discussions.

Open Publishing

Open source and open publishing are similar technological applications implemented by Indymedia to promote radical democratic values such as de-privatizing technology, increasing and decentralizing participation in news production, and leveling bureaucratic hierarchies. Open publishing guidelines allow users to contribute original content or to comment on other postings. Arnison (2001) defines open publishing as a process of creating news that is transparent to readers:

They can contribute a story and see it instantly appear in the pool of stories publicly available. . . . 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. (¶ 26)

Open publishing allows information to be corrected and supplemented faster and more efficiently. As described on a web page linked to the IMC site, open publishing is “an essential element of the Indymedia project that allows independent journalists and publications to publish the news they gather instantaneously on a globally accessible web site.” (<http://docs.indymedia.org/view/Global/FrequentlyAskedQuestionEn#newswire>) Lawson and Gleason suggest:

The content produced by open publishing makes browsing indymedia sites a mixed bag of thoughtful analyses, activist dispatches, on-the-street news items, rants, and reprinted media from unknown publications or institutions. Without a central editorial authority dispatching reports (or fact checking stories), readers are obliged to think critically as they are reading—to allow a story to provoke further research, further reading, and—perhaps—further writing. (2002, p. 12)

Sheri Herndon (2003), a core member involved with the Seattle IMC since its nascence, says:

[Openness] has been a guiding principle with strong roots in that first IMC and openness is one of the core principles that gets at the heart of our success and our uniqueness. When we speak of open publishing, it is not just a technological phenomenon; it is a philosophical underpinning that forms a foundation of policy and praxis. (¶ 2)

Wikis and Twikis

The growing prevalence of wikis in individual IMCs—indeed, now increasingly prevalent across the internet—takes Indymedia’s radical democratic logic even further. Wikis are web-based, open documents that allow multiple people to write into and change the content of a web page. Wiki web pages, or “topics,” function as “collective blackboards.” The homepage for twikis (a version of wikis emphasizing tracked editing) describes the underlying concept of “radical egalitarianism” since everyone can collaborate on content. *Wiki wiki* means “quick” in Hawaiian and the software’s advantages include immediate and uncomplicated web editing. Wiki pages have a very simple markup that can be edited merely by using a web browser. Each edit creates a new version; since it leaves footprints or traces, mistakes and inappropriate edits are easy to correct. Some wiki pages require passwords while others do not.

Increasingly, IMCs are moving important policy discussions to wiki pages to create what some users have called “living documents,” such as the “The Indymedia Documentation Project” (<http://docs.indymedia.org/>). In Seattle, notes from general meetings are being posted in wikis for others to add details that the note-taker left out. Wikis render documents more collaborative, organic, and fluid. An email to the general listserv extolled wikis in the following way: “The burden of maintaining quality is higher than a normal web site, but the opportunity for equal participation increases the number of eyeballs and keyboards attending to the task at hand.” Some IMC activists—especially self-defined “tech geeks” (members of the technology working group)—say the wiki is perfect for non-hierarchical institutions such as the IMC. But several less tech-savvy activists whom I interviewed say wikis have mixed results. Some feel that introducing such a new tech-heavy tool—despite being user-friendly—has alienated many people who were just becoming comfortable with web-based organizing. Familiar tech-related barriers present themselves with wikis, such as lack of access, expertise, and confidence. Nevertheless, the values underlying such technical code are clearly related to a commitment to radical democracy based on egalitarianism, openness, and transparency.

Flanagin et al. (2000) assert that all technical codes have social and ideological values written into them. Accordingly, it is clear that IMC rhetoric and technical design are remarkably consonant along radical democratic lines, though not without their ongoing tensions, especially those regarding structural inequities. For example, Indymedia’s technocentric means of communication seems to privilege white North American males, a recurring grievance and one addressed throughout the network. Flanagin et al. suggest that users’ behavior serves as the best indicator of underlying social and cultural norms in technology. Clearly, those using the IMC web page interface are following radical democratic procedures by providing the majority of the site’s content. Indeed, the slogan “be the media” seems indicative of the design features and underlying values of the IMC site. However, these technological applications demand certain institutional practices to sustain them.

Institutional Constructions

IMCs' commitment to grassroots organizing is exemplified by dependence on volunteer labor, which also makes them more prone to activist fatigue. Many Seattle IMC members hold full-time jobs. Notable exceptions to such volunteerism are occasional paid interns, albeit usually IMC members. Questions involving money—how it is raised and spent—are debated in meetings and on email lists.

Network-wide Decision-making

For any institution, decision-making is one of the most central and fragile processes—not least because it entails negotiating power. Many IMCs face a low-level, but constant, tension between the global network and the local or regional IMC. Based on the anarchic, radically democratic ethic guiding Indymedia, each IMC is an autonomous node within the network, united only by a uniform design, hyperlink connections, and a shared commitment to the principles of unity. For the few decisions being made that affect the entire network, such as the handling of large sums of money, the large distributed network of autonomous collectives must somehow come to consensus despite cultural and international differences.

Spokes Council Model

The Seattle IMC follows a spokes council model that was first perfected during the 1999 WTO protests by the Direct Action Network (DAN), a loose coalition of hundreds of activist groups. The spokes council model has its roots in the anarchic affinity model, an institutional structure initiated by anarcho-syndicalists during the Spanish Civil War, and is characterized by small groups loosely coordinated via temporary representatives chosen by group consensus. The spokes council model allows for mediation between autonomous working/affinity groups, or nodes within the network, and the larger institutional body. This model is seen at work both at the local IMC collective and the global network—the latter based on the notion that sustainability for large networks like Indymedia depends on this less bureaucratic and more collectivist system. Accordingly, Seattle's IMC institutional structure is based on a non-hierarchical collective comprising nearly a dozen smaller volunteer collectives, or working groups, including editorial, finance, liaison, spokes council, media, space, and tech. These collectives meet separately with varying degrees of regularity. Some groups are relatively inactive while new ad hoc groups may spring up spontaneously to face a particular challenge. Several groups maintain their own listservs and wiki pages.

In theory, representatives from each working group are empowered by the general Seattle IMC collective to become “spokes” within the “spokes council,” which acts as an organizing and coordinating body authorized to take action when decisions need to be made more rapidly. The Seattle IMC collective as a whole may also delegate additional projects or responsibilities to the spokes council. A core group is

appointed by the general collective to serve limited terms. This raises potential problems with hierarchy formation, so there is a frequent turnover of positions. Although consensus for spokes nominations is usually a smooth process, Polletta (2002) identifies the potential challenge for a token leadership position as a common pressure point where the consensus process may falter, especially since often no default voting procedure is in place.

Open Meetings

The Seattle IMC is one of the privileged IMCs that maintains a physical site where members meet on a regular basis. In addition to the working group meetings, bi-monthly general meetings are held to decide policy. In Seattle, these meetings are open to anyone. They are usually long and sometimes contentious. Meeting topics range from the philosophical, such as the meaning of the “principles of unity,” to the banal, such as toilet-cleaning duty. As with most IMC communications, many issues discussed during general meetings are negotiated as much—if not more—online, though face-to-face meetings are considered vital, especially for airing out tensions that may build up during computer-mediated communications. Online discussions take place at the local level on any number of working group or general membership listservs. Several listservs are dedicated to global-level discussions, such as “Process,” “Communications,” “Finance,” and “New IMC.” These network-wide discussions also sometimes occur during real-time online chats via a program called Internet Relay Chat (IRC). The IRC serves as a kind of meeting place for representatives from far-flung IMCs to gather at designated times. However, the utility of IRC for making global network-wide decisions has been limited thus far.

Consensus-based Decision-making

The most exemplary of Indymedia’s radical democratic institutional codes is an adherence to a consensus-based decision-making model. All IMCs utilize some form of consensus decision-making, which is codified in IMC documents. The success of consensus decision-making is based on institutional memory, constant reflexivity concerning process, and strong interpersonal relationships founded on trust. The Seattle IMC describes its consensus process in a website-linked document titled “Detailed Description of Consensus Decision Making,” which is part of an online publication, *On Conflict and Consensus*, published by members of the Consensus Network (Butler & Rothstein, 1987; see <http://www.consensus.net>). This online resource occasionally is referred to on the general listserv and during meetings. It addresses efficiency, leadership, discussion, and equality; it suggests that proposals be considered and, if necessary, reworked by the group to reach the best decision for the community as a whole.

For activist groups like Indymedia, consensus is understood to mean that everyone feels that his or her input was considered in the decision-making process (Polletta, 2002). The Seattle IMC’s meetings allow for several levels of consensus

and ways to register dissent without derailing the process, including “reservations” (have concerns), “non-support” or a state of “non-disagreement” (the person sees no need for the decision), or “stand aside” (it may be a mistake but a person can live with it). Making a “block” indicates that the person feels the decision goes against fundamental IMC principles. This stops any affirmative decision, discussed below.

Consensus in IMC practice

Typically, at a Seattle IMC meeting somewhere between one and two dozen members sit in a circle. People are asked to volunteer to facilitate for that meeting, take minutes, and convene the next meeting. Some consensus-based groups also have a designated “vibes watcher” to check for unspoken feelings within the group or to note if certain people (especially men over women) are dominating the conversation. At the Seattle IMC, the facilitator, with the timekeeper’s help, takes on these duties. The facilitator is also responsible for overseeing “stacking,” a practice that allows an orderly progression of people voicing opinions, and discourages others from speaking out of turn. Consensus is sought each time proposals are put forth, discussed, and possibly amended. IMC members display consent by wiggling their fingers in the air, or “twinkling”—a hand motion purportedly adopted from DAN activists, who probably learned it from Quaker meetings (Polletta, 2002). Proposals pass unless someone withholds his or her consent with a block.

The block is a rare, but important, event. Reserved for when members feel that fundamental IMC principles are being defied, the block forces open discussion of the group’s implicit rules and values. Occasionally, however, some members think the blocking privilege is being abused, especially when infrequent attendees show up to meetings and begin blocking proposals. Over the course of several general meetings during the winter of 2002, for example, an argument erupted regarding the perceived elitism of the word “culture” to describe a facet of the Seattle IMC membership criteria. An individual who was not very active in the IMC said the word was too elitist and began blocking all moves towards consensus around the proposal, which was aimed at adopting sorely needed membership rules. This episode spurred an internal education campaign in the Seattle IMC: A descriptive flowchart was prominently displayed during meetings to help discourage capricious blocking.

Some IMC activists have noted that failures of consensus often result from lack of education about a process that is neither intuitive nor in tune with much of Western socialization (Riismandel, 2002). Adding to the complexity are gray areas in membership criteria. In the Seattle IMC, a member is defined as someone who attends three consecutive general meetings, belongs to a working group, and volunteers eight hours per month. Despite explicit membership rules, by this strict definition only a few most dedicated IMC activists would qualify as members, given inconsistent volunteerism. In any case, many members who fade in and out of involvement with the Seattle IMC believe they retain blocking privileges.

Strengths and Limitations of Indymedia's Radical Democracy

The remarkable degree to which Indymedia discourse, technology, and institutional structure are consonant with radical democratic ideals is nearly equaled by the significant tensions in sustaining such participatory practices, especially consensus decision-making. Some theorists see consensus as critical to ideal democratic practice. Cohen (1997, p. 75) writes, "Ideal deliberation aims to arrive at a rationally motivated consensus—to find reasons that are persuasive to all who are committed to acting on the results of a free and reasoned assessment of alternatives by equals." However, some democratic theorists are quick to note the drawbacks of consensus-based decision-making, not least because the idea of "equal" is problematic (Young, 2000). Gastil (1993) also notes typical drawbacks in small group democracy, such as long meetings, unequal involvement and commitment, cliques, differences in skills and styles, and personality conflicts—tensions constantly negotiated within the Seattle IMC. For Indymedia in general and the Seattle IMC in particular these tensions may act as barriers to actualizing radical democracy. I organize these systemic problems in the following section according to three "tyrannies."

The Tyranny of Structurelessness

Hauptmann (2001) suggests that radical participatory democracy was tried but failed during the 1960s and that deliberative democrats should distance themselves from such a position because it is inherently flawed. Some theorists reach back to Michels' (1915) "iron law of oligarchy" to argue that radical organizations—especially larger groups—tend to become more bureaucratic and conservative over time. With this bureaucratization, idealistic and democratic institutions often come to be dominated by a small group of people. The formation of such an elite group, Michel argues, inevitably leads to oligarchy. Clearly, there is evidence of this developing in the Seattle IMC, where over time the most active members accrue respectability that translates to more de facto power within the collective.

Polletta acknowledges these oligarchic tendencies, but argues that increasingly activists are adapting sophisticated tactics to offset them. She convincingly argues that contemporary activists are more reflexive than in past eras by constantly re-examining their internal structures and processes, as evidenced by the institutionalizing of a "vibes watcher" in some radical democratic groups. Such reflexivity renders implicit power relationships more explicit, and helps bring into focus structural power inequities associated with class, race, and gender arrangements that persist even in seemingly non-hierarchical practices like consensus-based decision-making. Further evidence of corrective measures is the intense focus on process-related issues during and after meetings—to the point of what Polletta characterizes as "fetishizing process," which has its own set of drawbacks, such as excessively long meetings. In fact, some activists have decried being "processed to death." In the spring of 2003 a "process v. progress" theme animated debate during IMC meetings and across the general email list several activists argued for less attention to procedure and more

concern with concrete actions such as media making. This core tension is an ongoing debate in many Indymedia circles.

In another important critique, Bookchin (1994) argues that consensus dissuades the creative process of “dissensus” since it tends to pressure dissenters into silence. Allowing that consensus may be an appropriate form of decision-making in small groups of people familiar with one another, Bookchin argues that consensus is less successful with larger groups because consensus-based groups gravitate towards the least controversial. Therefore, he believes that such a process creates a pull towards mediocrity with the lowest common intellectual denominator prevailing, and permits an unintentional, but insidious, authoritarianism.

This position echoes what Freeman (1972) called “the tyranny of structurelessness.” In her classic critique on consensus, Freeman argues that when devotion to structurelessness reaches the level of dogma, it ceases being a progressive force. Freeman charges that within the power vacuum of structurelessness, “informal elites” arise that, when combined with the myth of non-hierarchy, can create an anti-democratic space. In this scenario, structurelessness masks power. Freeman also argues that unstructured groups are rendered politically impotent by their inability to accomplish the simplest of tasks. She offers a list of strategies that she claims are both democratic and effective: delegating discrete tasks to specific people by democratic procedures; requiring those with authority to be responsible to the entire group; distributing authority; rotating tasks; allocating tasks in a rational way so that task and individual are not mismatched; and providing equal access to information and other crucial resources.

Many Indymedia activists I have spoken with argue that the strength of the consensus model rests on the fact that it *is* structured, as demonstrated by the complex flow chart placed in view of the membership during each general meeting. Further, many of Freeman’s proposed strategies are already implemented by the IMC, such as mandating that all spokes positions operate on a rotating schedule, empowering certain groups and individuals to operate in ad hoc fashion beyond consensus, and relying on rational self-selection, although the latter may lead to informal reputation hierarchies by which the most socially outgoing and confident people, not to mention those with the luxury of time on their hands, take on a majority of tasks and begin to wield a certain amount of power.

The Tyranny of Ideology

It is incorrect to assume that Indymedia activists always strictly adhere to new “grand narratives” of participatory politics. Many activists argue for a less purist approach. In describing today’s increasingly hybridized activism, Polletta (2002) suggests, “No one believes any longer that decisions can be made by strict consensus. Activists are more comfortable with rules, less hostile to power, and more attuned to inequalities concealed in informal relations” (p. 202). Similarly, many Indymedia activists are increasingly flexible and pragmatic about rules, so they can adapt quickly to new situations through ad hoc procedures.

Nevertheless, allowing codified processes to become rigid and unyielding to special situations and diversity of opinions is a potential peril symptomatic of the Indymedia model. A failure to reach consensus on accepting a Ford Foundation Grant in the fall of 2002 was a spectacular example of how ideological obeisance may lead to institutional paralysis in the Indymedia network (Pickard, in press). The money, which had been earmarked for funding a desperately needed international IMC conference, was turned down due to perceived corporate connections. Additionally, some Indymedia activists, in particular members of the Argentina IMC, were alarmed by what they saw as North American IMCs dominating the network decision process. Though such instances may evidence how an ideological pull towards strict consensus leads to inaction, proliferating evidence suggests that Indymedia activists are more comfortable with this constant friction—indeed, even regard such tensions as a positive force—and thus privilege pragmatic concerns over ideological purity.

The Tyranny of the Editor

Radical openness causes similar tensions on the technology side of Indymedia, especially regarding editorial processes and the relationship between the open published newswire and featured articles. The featured articles section takes up the center of any IMC homepage, whereas the open publishing newswire—though still a significant component on the right hand side of the IMC site—is only allotted about one third the website space given to the featured articles. Unlike the newswire where anyone with internet access can post news stories, featured articles go through an editorial selection process, suggesting the existence of a hierarchical value system based on subjective criteria contrary to IMC’s “be the media” mission.

Editorial policy is not specifically prescribed in the principles of unity and is one of the most important decisions left largely up to individual IMCs. Addressing this tension between the radically democratic newswire and the editorially selected featured articles, Jonathan Lawson of the Seattle IMC editorial collective explained the selection process as follows:

A member comes up with an idea, usually referencing one or more articles from the IMC newswire [or] significant stories published by other media sites or institutions. The member composes the feature, which then goes through an approval process by the editorial collective as a whole. In selecting features, we look for stories that strike us as particularly prominent (this is, of course, subjective for each member), pithy, well-written, etc. . . . We generally attempt to gauge the credibility of items we feature. We also take seriously requests for features which come from outside our circle, and are constantly inviting other people to join our group. (personal communication, March 13, 2002)

For the sake of transparency, editorial management of the Seattle IMC newswire is limited to “hiding” inappropriate posts, such as duplicates, hate speech, and advertisements. These posts are moved to a specific location on the site with an explanation for why they were hidden. Further, editorial working group meetings are open; anyone can participate and give input to all editorial processes.

As an institution, Indymedia is torn between aspiring to become a credible news institution able to challenge corporate mainstream representations, and wanting to be inclusive so as not to repel large numbers of people who may not be able—due to lack of privilege and education—to produce content according to mainstream news quality standards. This openness has also led to common abuse of the newswire by hate groups such as neo-nazis, which, in turn, has led to significant consternation and rife among IMC activists trying to decide how to deal with the problem. This tension has often led to conflict between those advocating for a pure radical democratic approach by leaving the newswire unmanaged, and others who advocate a more pragmatic approach (Beckerman, 2003).

In keeping with a democratizing agenda, some IMC activists have advocated for technological solutions to help lessen the central role of human editorial control. For example, some IMC members have discussed reputation schemes, by which individual users rate news stories, thus allowing a general consensus to emerge around the perceived quality of a contribution and contributor. However, as one Seattle IMC activist put it, “reputation schemes are controversial as hell,” and may even worsen the tendency towards elitism by introducing elements of competition and potential for abusing power. As individuals accrue higher reputation “points,” they may not always use that power towards egalitarian ends. Another possibility is using a syndication model similar to the umbrella IMC site’s model, which automatically draws content from local sites. However, some Seattle IMC members say this would be another way of privileging certain kinds of content, thus reifying the very power structures they aim to upset. Therefore, an easy technical fix proves elusive as the perennial tensions endemic to Indymedia practice—between quality and equity, and participation and elitism—map onto Indymedia uses of internet technology.

Conclusion

Radical democratic values structure the technological and institutional processes of Indymedia in complex and, in some cases, unprecedented ways. Some tensions plaguing Indymedia have been present in radical politics since 17th-century England, when revolutionary groups like the Diggers and Levelers threatened the propertied class with an effusion of radically egalitarian ideas (Hill, 1972). Nonetheless, negotiating these tensions with new technologies such as the internet brings to the fore new power configurations, new strengths, and new weaknesses. Ranging from editorial decisions about open-published news stories to coordinating a vast global network, Internet operations combined with Indymedia activists’ adherence to their principles of unity have unleashed new opportunities and challenges in the push for radical democracy. These efforts reflect Indymedia’s modeling according to a vision that prefigures a more ideal society. IMC activists actively try to redefine relationships instead of replicating the power inequities, structural biases, and systemic failures that they organize against. Yet anti-democratic tendencies persist and are sometimes even exacerbated by the very processes used to counteract them. Mansbridge’s (1983)

study of how consensus decision-making reproduces gender hierarchies supports the notion that some tensions remain or are even worsened.

Another often-overlooked aspect of these radical democratic practices is their strategic value. Traditionally, social scientists have treated these prefigurative politics as high-principled, but strategically disadvantageous (Polletta, 2002). Indymedia activists demonstrate what Polletta described: Radical democratic practice encourages innovation, solidarity, and dispersion of leadership skills. Further, maintaining a decentralized, non-hierarchical structure makes groups like Indymedia more resistant to state repression (De Armond, 2001). For example, no state can arrest the “leader” of Indymedia, nor can they sue or close down the entire network. This resilience was demonstrated in the fall of 2004 when, for reasons that were hidden from the public, authorities seized two IMC servers in London, taking down over a dozen IMC sites. Yet no arrests were made and within days the sites were back up online.

The leveling role of the internet is a significant new development in the evolving repertoire of radical political groups. The internet amplifies Indymedia activists’ potential for radical democracy by democratizing media production, increasing non-hierarchical communications, and redistributing power to facilitate coordinated, co-operative action. Indeed, considering that internet communications—ranging from email lists and easily uploaded news stories to collective online documents and even a shared website architecture—enable operation of these institutional structures, in the case of Indymedia the technology and institutional structure are mutually constitutive. Undoing one would disable the other. In other words, the radical openness of Indymedia’s technology is predicated on a radical democratic institutional structure; this structure could not exist without internet communications, especially on the global network level. Although face-to-face interaction remains crucial on the local level, the Indymedia network continues to function by consensus—a consensus reached amongst thousands of actors who will never meet in person. Important questions remain regarding the often-passive nature of this consensus; we should interrogate whether silence on an email list can constitute participatory democracy. Nevertheless, building on notions from earlier projects for participatory democracy and pluralistic egalitarianism, today’s Indymedia activists are succeeding in actualizing radical democratic in unprecedented ways, especially as they elevate such logic to the global network level. Whether this model is sustainable remains an important question.

Notes

- [1] Henceforth I reserve “Indymedia” for the global network in general. I refer to the “Seattle IMC” when I am talking about it specifically.
- [2] In the late fall and early winter of 2003–2004 the Seattle IMC went through a tumultuous period. It temporarily closed down, in part due to financial problems with maintaining a large space in downtown Seattle. It has since reopened a space in Seattle but no longer in the central downtown area.

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