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Indymedia - Concatenations of Physical and Virtual Spaces

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Over the past few years, global movements have been continuously producing public spheres where the distinction between the "real" and the "virtual" is fading away. From encounters in the geographical space of large mobilisations and local preparation meetings on one hand, and the thicket of websites, webfora, email lists, chatrooms and wikis on the other, a new, hybrid communication space is emerging. The practices in this emerging communication space are by far exceeding the expectations attached to the concept of cyberspace as discussed with much fascination during the 80 and 90s. The fusion of virtual and physical spaces, body and technology turns out to be taken much more taken for granted, much more embedded in everyday life than anyone had imagined. So, what does this emerging communication space look like, what are its preconditions, in which situations does it open up and what constitutes its boundaries?

The Zapatistas evoked a spot-on vision when they declared their intention to "make a network of communication among all our

struggles and resistances" in August 1996. This "intercontinental network of alternative communication" would be directed against neoliberalism, it would be a medium by which distinct resistances would communicate with one another. It would search to "weave the channels so that words may travel all the roads that resist". It would not be an organizing structure, nor would it have a central head or decision maker, nor would it have a central command or hierarchies. This network, so the Zapatistas, are us, "all of us who speak and listen".[1]

This intention captures something that has never been articulated in this way:
An entity which is reminiscent of alternative counterinformation in being described as a network of communication, yet is neither newspaper nor radio programme, neither website nor email list. An entity which in its emphasis on horizontal, decentralised organising evokes a social movement, but without demanding a unified revolutionary program. An entity which, to the contrary, is focussing on the diversity of struggles all over the world. The Zapatista declaration describes a communication space where the many distinct resistances against what they have been calling neoliberalism would express their critiques and practices. The "intercontinental network of alternative communication" appears as a permanent continuation of the large encuentros called by the Zapatistas during the mid 90s: Gatherings of all those who responded to the invitation, spaces of exchange and communication without the pressing obligation to come up with unified results, unified declarations of intent - a public space, created by ongoing horizontal and decentralised exchange, open to participation for everybody. One year later, various alternative media projects in the US organised the "Freeing the Media" convergence in New York City. In a message to this gathering,

Subcommandante Marcos called again for the creation of an independent media network, this time referring more explicitely to traditional counterinformation: The network should tell the history of social struggle in the world and thereby confront the lies of corporate media with the truth of social struggles.[2]

The hybrid character of this communication space was recognisable as early as 2000, when Naomi Klein stated: "The movement, with its hubs and spokes and hotlinks, its emphasis on information rather than ideology, reflects the tool it uses - it is the internet come to life".[3]
The autonome a.f.r.i.k.a. gruppe turns this statement upside down and suggests that the movement itself is involved in the creation of the internet: "At a time where media representation is seen as a major resource (keyword "Information society"), the movement of the "people from Seattle" is creating its own infrastructure to represent itself."[4] The emerging communication structure is both a space of representation and a space of production. Simply by being used, this space is continuously being created. While being virtual, it simultaneously materialises in the protests in the streets as well as in the movement's local everyday lives. It differs from traditional alternative public spheres - may they be mediated through alternative, own, or sovereign media - in its realtime interactivity, in the use of both new and old communication channels, and in its global stretch.

Enter: Indymedia

A particularly well-known and at the same time paradigmatic example that took on the Zapatista inspiration is Indymedia, a

global network of alternative, open publishing news websites. When the first "Independent Media Center" or IMC was set up in 1999 to report about the protests against the WTO in Seattle, it almost came across as an implementation of the Zapatista calls. This perception intensifies when looking at the network of IMCs five years later: It has now grown to more than 150 websites on five continents (although the more active ones are concentrated in the Americas and Europe). According to Chris Shumway, the media activists who first attempted alternative reporting on a shared website at the occasion of the Democratic National Convention in Chicago 1996 were in fact inspired by the Zapatistas. But it took three more years until all the elements for a global, interactive network of communication had come together: alternative media-workers, functioning software, and the concept of open publishing. [5]

At first glance, an Independent Media Center or "Indymedia" is simply a website providing counterinformation, thus contributing to an alternative public sphere: Reports about local and global protests, calls for meetings and events as well as reports about them, topics like anti-racism, gender, militarism, social struggles, or biotechnology.
The mission statement of the first IMC, which has been partially adopted by many others, confirms this rather traditional counterinformation-based approach: "Indymedia is a collective of independent media organizations and hundreds of journalists offering grassroots, non-corporate coverage. Indymedia is a democratic media outlet for the creation of radical, accurate, and passionate tellings of truth"[6]. During all global mobilisations since Seattle, from the protests against the worldbank in Prague and the G8 summit in Genoa to the actions planned for the G8-summit in Scotland this year, "Independent Media Center" has also

denoted a physical space, something like an alternative Internetcafe near the protests, providing access to computers and the opportunity to upload audio-, image- and text documents.

Open Publishing is Free Software

The most outstanding feature of Indymedia websites is the system of Open Publishing: Everyone with access to the internet can upload documents, without login, without password, without any kind of authentification. On most Indymedia sites, these postings appear instantly on the startpage as part of the so-called "newswire". This creates the precondition to "make your own media" in true DIY fashion. Anything from simple text via photos and audio files up to videoclips can not only be produced, but also made accessible for a networked public. In the era of blogging and broadband connections, the technical possibility to upload various types of media seems self-evident. In 1999, this type of software had to be built from scratch. The first version of the Indymedia software, conveniently called "active", was originally developed for the local activist community in Sydney. On 18 June 1999, it was successfully tested on a global level to report about the global action day "Carnival against Capitalism", and eventually used for the first IMC in Seattle.

The emphasis on "do it yourself" is characteristic for Indymedia. In combination with "writing code", this approach has an additional, already established meaning. All Indymedia websites are running on "free software", i.e., everybody is free to examine the code of the programs, to use, copy, distribute and change them according to his or her own needs. Free software is protected by the GNU public licence, which ensures that the sourcecode remains freely

accessible and can therefore be further developed. Free software programs rely on the largely internet-based collaboration of countless individuals. The rapid improvement and growing distribution of the free software operating system Linux over the last three years points to the potential efficiency of this type of collaboration. Free software signifies a radically open invitation to participate, limited (besides access to the internet) only by the willingness to familiarise yourself with the respective topic and to accept certain rules as no smalltalk, be accurate, and "RTFM". This openness effectively activates a collective intelligence, which can theoretically extend all over the globe, and practically includes at least those geographical regions with access to the internet, and those social groups who are able to use this access.

Indymedia has largely adopted this approach.[7] For Matthew Arnison, one of the people who developed the "active" code for Indymedia, open publishing is nothing but the continuation of the free software mode of production: "Open Publishing is Free Software"[8]. The product is a public sphere connecting movements globally, emerging from complex collaborations involving reports in audio-, video-, image- and textformats as well as writing code and putting together hard- and software for servers and physical independent media centers. Technically, anything can be published on the indymedia newswires. Politically, this openness is limited. The "Principles of Unity" of the network state: "All IMCs (...) shall not discriminate, including discrimination based upon race, gender, age, class or sexual orientation". Postings that contravene this principle can be hidden from the newswires of the imc startpages.

Bodies and Acting in Virtual Space

The Indymedia websites with their protest reports from all over the world are only the surface of a complex network of communication. In spring 2003, it's digital part consisted of 600 to 700 email lists, a wiki[9] with more than 600 users on 2723 pages and an average of 70 chatrooms. In addition, there are countless face-to-face encounters at protests against G8, worldbank or WTO as well as the meetings of local indymedia collectives and various gatherings and conferences.

In the days of Seattle, Maurizio Lazzarato sensed the presence of "collective statement arrangements", expressed through bodies in real space as well as through messages in the virtual realm: "A combination of bodies (with their actions and passions) composed of individual and collective singularities" (...); and there is an arrangement of statements, a regime of statements formed from a multitude of statement regimes (...)." Lazzarato states that "the collective statement arrangements are not expressed solely through language, but also through the technological expression machines (Internet, telephone, television, etc.). Both arrangements are constructed in terms of the current relationships of power and desire."[10] The digital back office of indymedia is one of the places where such "collective statement arrangements" are being articulated.

Permanent communication in the digital backoffice of Indymedia can lead to weird displacements of virtual and physical space. At the recent UK-wide meeting of the imc collectives in Britain, a participant was heard saying: "Me is not happy about this". Typed into the text box of a chatroom, the sentence

/me is not happy about this
would appear in italics for all participants in the chat as:
xy *is not happy about this*

For the chat savvy reader, this has more or less the function of a stage direction, and can evoke similar feelings as an unhappy face. In face-to-face communications, such stage directions are actually unneccessary, because the body language is visible. That we are using them anyway shows how deeply engrained conventions from virtual space are in our physical being. The reactions of the chatting body to frequently used abbreviations like "brb" ("be right back") oder "lol" ("laughing out loud") can be very similar to their body language equivalent - disappointment (why is she leaving?), for example, or amusement.

After the protests against the G8 summit in Evian in 2003, a participant in the indymedia reporting posted some feedback, which shows how this virtual activity caused physical sensations:

"It was exciting, but at times, it was too much, even though we were more people than ever before. The fastness, the urge to do 10 things at a time, a lack of pre-structuring and priority setting pushed us to the limits - no teargas for the webheads, but exhaustion after days on end at the computer, completely forgetting about basic physical needs. It was matrix. One person stayed online for 36 hours. Direct media. The dynamics of 'being there' spread from the streets to the virtual world."[11]

During the reporting of large mobilisations, the indymedia back office is buzzing with activity. Consequently, the imc websites are at their liveliest when something is happening in the streets. News from the events in the streets are being passed on via SMS, telephone, radio- and videostreams, email and newswire postings;

then checked and confirmed within the chatrooms, summarised and publicised. Those who are in the streets, at blockades or in activist convergence villages are participating in this permanent stream of communication just as much as those who are in front of computers. In those moments, the internet is not anymore restricted to being a tool for communication: it demands presence, relentless like a physical space.[12]

What has been celebrated in the 90s as the potential of the internet for freefloating play of identities has translated itself into an everyday practice. In their communications in emails, wikis and chatrooms, many indymedia makers choose to use nicknames. Gender, age and background are not necessarily apparent. However, during intensive interactions, it does not take long to find out how certain nicknames are behaving, how these particular people work and communicate, what to expect and not to expect from them. To discover these things, it is not necessary to ask for the identities mentioned above - and sometimes, the first actual meeting from face to face comes as a big surprise.

Videos - a fresh incarnation of leaflets?

The permanent, worldwide communication generates a pool of reports in images, texts and sound. From this pool, a number of videos have emerged. Looking at the indymedia production "Showdown in Seattle", Hito Steierl has shown that these videos don't stand out for their experimental aesthetics. Stylistic devices used in traditional documentaries are not being questioned, political positions are represented in "an aesthetic form of concatenation, which takes over the organizational principles of its adversary unquestioningly"[13]. According to Steierl, the result of

this addition is a rather unspecified "voice of the people"[14]. There is no denying that the reference to "the truth" within indymedia ideology may appear naive at times, although some Imcs present themselves differently in their mission statements[15]: "While the mainstream media conceal their manifold biases and alignments, we clearly state our position. Indymedia UK does not attempt to take an objective and impartial standpoint: Indymedia UK clearly states its subjectivity". According to Steierl, "Showdown in Seattle" represents the process of media production in a way that is not fundamentally different from conventional information production in corporate media. However, although the production process in conventional and imc media may be comparable, a few clear differences should be mentioned. Physical Independent Media Centers usually get by with a minimal budget. There is no paid staff. Instead, volunteers are self-organising their own work. In such a self-organised environment, the approach to problem solving differs from the approach in a conventional newsroom.[16] In addition, the brutal police attack against the independent media center during the protests in Genoa 2001 has shown most clearly that IMCs are not a safe working environment. Both characteristics lead to Independent Media Centers being more than a space of production. Equally important is their function as a "hub" within the network of an emerging communication space, and as one position in the process of appropriating technology, especially free software. Since "Showdown in Seattle", dozens of Indymedia videos have been produced, sometimes respectlessly described as 'riot porn'. Often, it takes several months to publish them. The making of these videos allows for experiments with collective ways of video production. For example, "Red Zone", a video about the G8 protests in Genoa, was assembled by video activists from Italy, Ireland and the UK. This process was tedious and full of conflict,

and often hit the limits of unpaid, voluntary, non-hierarchical collaboration between groups with different political backgrounds and different aesthetic standards.

With regard to the fusion of digital and material space, activist videos are interesting for an additional reason. For years, media activists have been experimenting with internet based video streams in real time. They were mostly watched by only a few, using their own computers. These streams were closely connected to the digital side of the emerging network of communication. As video activism is growing within the global movements, a kind of decentralised video distribution emerged, creating an additional communication channel, an aditional cultural practice. While "Red Zone" was still distributed on video tapes, today's videos are often being downloaded straight from the web and burned to DVD or CD-Rom - often using the facilities at work. At the same time, a renaissance of cinema is detectable: Video screenings have become an integral part of the entertainment choices of the movement, at least in the west, both locally and during large mobilisations. Especially where the movement-multitude speaks many different languages, the moving images might have a function similar to the leaflets of earlier decades: Producing a shared platform, maybe even more, a reference for a shared identity. Sometimes, videos are turning into tools for protest, when, as seen in 2003 during the world summit on information society (WSIS) in Geneva, movies are being projected onto public buildings at nighttime. At this occasion, it was the World Information Property Organisation (WIPO) which ended up as a screen for a movie on intellectual property rights.

Limits of an integrated communication space

Does this mean that indymedia volunteers have arrived right in the middle of science fiction, technically mediated, immediately present, whereever the internet reaches?

Of course not. The first precondition for the emergence of a public space which is mediated both physically and digitally is a social network made up of real people and groups, a network where some basic political convictions can be taken for granted, where certain topics are known issues for debate, where a certain degree of trust exists.

In addition to this, it helps to use a wide variety of communication channels. Permanently accessible in virtual space, the social network keeps touching on the material space of everyday life. People are meeting in the web, but also at home or other physical spaces, and vice versa. Often, travel plans are being announced on mailing lists, with a view to face-to-face encounters. Some people know each other from previous occasions of collaborative cable plugging and similar activities.

Technical knowledge, hardware and software are important tools, but they are not sufficient to create this hybrid communication space. Being part of a network is crucial even at the stage of sourcing them. Many imc collectives are multiplying their cameras, minidiscs and laptobs by using them collaboratively.[17] Mutual support is being given when it comes to upgrading old computers with suitable software, additional memory and harddrives etc.

Although the communication space can be protected to some degree by decentralising the serverbase, encyption and using trusted service providers, information technology does not exist outside the hegemonic system. As the seizure of two UK-based indymedia servers just before the start of the European Social Forum in London 2004 shows, parts of the communication space can be taken off the net in no time at all.[18] The legal basis for this

incident remains unclear until today. Indymedia-activist Micah speculated shortly after the server seizure: "*So this is about Swiss police, on a French site, on a server in England, taken away by American federal police…* "[19]

As a result of frantic activity in the indymedia backoffice, a media group was established almost immediately, and most of the 20 imc websites affected by the server seizure could be fully or partly restored.

In the indymedia backoffice (mailing lists, wiki, irc), communication consists largely of pragmatic and and project oriented issues. It is when specific decisions are needed that the debates are becoming more political. For instance: Most local indymedia collectives are constantly engaged in a process of re-negotiating the commitment to open publishing versus the commitment not to tolerate any discrimination. In imc uk, such negotiations are taking place when volunteers decide which articles to keep in the "open publishing newswire", and which ones should be moved one click away and marked as "hidden". Where is the line between criticising Israel and antisemitism? At which point has a joke overstepped the line towards sexim? Which articles are being hidden as "non-news", which ones are being tolerated?

The communication space is also limited by the very openness that made it possible in the first place. Every mailing list is being chronologically archived. Every email, every page on the wiki is on the same systematic level of importance. There is no central space to archive important documents in a stable way. This points to a more general and at the same time central problem when moving around in the weird space of the Internet: The problem of orientation[20]. Within indymedia, orientation is most likely achieved by that type of knowledge that evolves through participation. Some texts are sticking out from the avalanche of

material because many links refer to them. However, the pool of indymedia texts remains complex and chaotic to an extend that even a research team conducting an extensive comparative study on five IMC case studies confused two cities with each other[21].

Preliminary Conclusions

One special thing about Independent Media Centers is their function for the communication space of the global social movements. Imc websites are at their liveliest when things are happening on the streets, even though the news value of often up-to-the minute reports during large mobilisations tends to decrease rapidly. At these occasions, the fusion of virtual and physical spaces, including the respective cultural practices, is most intensive. Perhaps this is Indymedia's most innovative contribution to a global alternative public sphere: "Weaving channels, so that the words may travel all the streets of resistance". Channels that are made of software and of the competent use of old and cheap hardware, of bandwidth and donated servers, of regularly maintained webpages. A public space emerges from the combination of protest, free software and an ideology of openness. This space can not be restricted to an overly hyped-up internet, nor can it be limited to an absolute preference for the streets. The event is becoming inseparable from its representation: "The signs, images and statements play a strategic role in this twofold becoming: they contribute to allowing the possible to emerge, and they contribute to its realization.".[22]

The hands-on, matter-of-course approach of media activists, software developers, protesters and others in embracing new technologies is a significant precondition for this process. They are

adopting technologies as their own, as part of their material everyday worlds as well as a means of communication across the globe, and without bothering much about the often implied separation of the "virtual" and the "real".[23]
This notion of "everywhere", when local events and activities are becoming global topics, corresponds to a with a statement of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, as pointed out by Gerald Raunig: "Empire can be attacked *everywhere*, in *every place*. This is one of the strongest statements in 'Empire': that there does not need to be a horizontal concatenation of the battles, in order to attack Empire. On the contrary: if the mechanisms of power function without a center and without central control, then it must also be possible to attack them from every place, from every local context".[24]

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[1] Quoted in: Ruggiero, Greg. *Microradio and Democracy: (Low) Power to the People*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999, p. 43.

[2] Online: http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol_2/contributors3/marcostext.html

[3] See Katharine Viner: "Hand-to-brand-combat" in: *The Guardian*, 23.9.2000.

[4] Autonome a.f.r.i.k.a gruppe: Stolpersteine auf der Datenautobahn. Politischer Aktivismus im Internet. In: Amann, Marc (Hg.): go. stop. act! Die Kunst des kreativen Straßenprotests. Frankfurt/M. 2005. Online: ak Nr. 490 / 17.12.2004, http://www.akweb.de/ak_s/ak490/06.htm

[5] Vlg. Chris Shumway: Participatory Media Networks: A New Model for Producing and Disseminating Progressive News and Information, 2001. Online: http://chris.shumway.tripod.com/pmn.htm

[6] Online: http://www.indymedia.org/en/static/about.shtml

[7] Mehr zu den Verbindungen zwischen Indymedia und der Free Software Bewegung bei Biella Coleman: Indymedia's Independence: From Activist Media to Free Software. Online: http://journal.planetwork.net/article.php?lab=coleman0704&page=1

[8] Matthew Arnison: Open Publishing is Free Software. Composed March 2001. Online: http://www.cat.org.au/maffew/cat/openpub.html

[9] Wikis are content management tools for collaborative use, where a website can easily be changed via a browser and without any knowledge of programming languages.

[10] Maurizio Lazzarato: Struggle, Event, Media. Online: republicart 2003, http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/1003/fr/en. Printed in: Gerald Raunig (Hg.): Bildräume und Raumbilder. Repräsentationskritik in Film und Aktivismus, Wien 2004, p. 175-184, here p. 176.

[11] http://docs.indymedia.org/view/Local/UkNetworkEvianSystems

[12] See Marion Hamm: A *r/c* tivism in Physical and Virtual Spaces. Online: republicart 2003, http://www.eipcp.net/

transversal/1203/hamm/en. Printed in: Gerald Raunig (Hg.): Bildräume und Raumbilder. Repräsentationskritik in Film und Aktivismus, Wien 2004, p. 34-44.

[13] Hito Steyerl: The Articulation of Protest. Online: http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/0303/steyerl/en

[14] Steierl translates "the voice of the people" als "Stimme des Volkes", which implies popularist and nationalist notions. However, the phrase also carries connotations to "the voice of the ordinary people".

[15] See Sara Platon and Mark Deuze: Indymedia journalism. A radical way of making, selecting and sharing news? In: Journalism 4 (2003), p.336-355, here p. 345.

[16] Platon and Deuze extensively describe the differences and similarities between the production of information within indymedia and in conventional journalism, see as qt. , p. 350

[17] See From Indymedia UK to the United Kollektives, In: Media Development 4 (2003), p. 27f. Online: http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2004/12/302894.html

[18] See Ahimsa Gone and Returned: Responses to the Seizure of Indymedia Harddrives, 09.11.04, Online:

http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2004/11/300886.html

[19] http://jebba.blagblagblag.org/index.php?p=107

[20] On orientation in the internet see: Stolpersteine auf der Datenautobahn, Frankfurt 2005

[21] Jankowski and Jansen are regarding IMC Oxford and IMC Uk as separate websites, although both share the same database. They date the launch of IMC Oxford several months after the launch of IMC UK. Since IMC Oxford only went life in June 2003 after the migration of the entire Imc Uk Website to a new codebase, it can be assumed that they are in fact referring to IMC Bristol, which went online in September 2001, separately from IMC UK. See Nicholas W. Jankowski , Marieke Jansen: Indymedia: Exploration of an Alternative Internet-based Source of Movement News. Conference Paper. 2003.

[22] See Maurizio Lazzarato: Struggle, Event, Media, p. 175

[23] See Marion Hamm, Michael Zaiser: com.une.farce und indymedia.uk - zwei Modi oppositioneller Netznutzung. In: Argument 238 (2001), p. 755-764.

[24] See Gerald Raunig: Here, There AND Anywhere. Online: http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/0303/raunig2/en