

15 why we need to reclaim the media



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On one level the phrase ‘the media’ simply refers to the various modern technologies for transmitting ideas to large populations, such as newspapers, television, magazines, radio and the new kid on the block, the internet. These are extremely useful tools. They allow people to know what’s happening in the world, form opinions and hence share some common (mis)understanding with strangers. This chapter examines the ideas behind what is variously described as alternative, independent or DIY media. This type of media can be differentiated from the mainstream not only through the points of view of those who produce it – although it typically carries a much more radical message—but more importantly by the model in which it operates, a model which aims to democratise the process of information production and distribution, a model which aims to allow anybody, regardless of colour, class, gender or how powerful they are, to tell their story and to distribute it to a wide audience. In describing the ideas which underlie this movement, the first question that must be addressed is why we need such media? What is wrong with the existing mainstream media that moves people to devote time and energy to creating alternatives?

what’s wrong with the mainstream model?

The liberal bias model

Sweeping criticisms of the mainstream media are ubiquitous and come from all sides of the political spectrum. Two key, yet differing, criticisms come from the ‘right’ and from alternative media advocates. Right-wing commentators frequently lambaste the ‘liberal bias’ of the mainstream media. The ‘Media Research Center’ is an organisation which describes itself as ‘America’s Media Watchdog’. It has an annual budget of \$6 million and a staff of 60, is mostly funded by corporate



donations, and describes its mission as 'documenting, exposing and neutralising liberal media bias.' The criticisms of such organisations are normally levelled at particular journalists or particular organisations whose reporting does not conform to the right-wing critic's world view. The implicit assumption is that the liberal media is a problem and the biases and prejudices of the individual journalist or her organisation are to blame. These critics tend to express themselves through campaigns to discredit the offending journalists. Thus, for example, Robert Fisk, the British *Independent's* Middle East correspondent, has been targeted to such an extent by internet critics who find his point of view to be repugnant that the term 'fisking' has entered common internet usage to describe the practice of rebutting an article in minute detail.

These types of criticisms of generalised media bias can be understood as attempts to narrow the range of viewpoints given expression in the mass media. They frequently manifest themselves as campaigns led by vociferous sections of the media, to impose particular points of view and a certain set of assumptions upon opinions expressed in the media.

The propaganda model

By contrast, the critique of the mainstream media that lies behind the alternative media movement rests on an analysis of our modern media at an institutional level. This analysis focuses on the powerful forces which influence the way in which information is conveyed to mass audiences, rather than to individuals. The book and film, *Manufacturing Consent*, by Noam Chomsky (1998) can probably be considered the most thorough exposition of this analysis. It provides a very detailed critique of how news is created and disseminated according to what Chomsky calls the 'propaganda model': a series of information filters which serve to tailor information to the needs of the powerful. Rather than describing these influences as filters, which block out certain information, it would be more accurate to describe them as forces which tend to push the points of view expressed across the entire industry in a particular direction. These forces are not omnipotent by any means, individuals or individual publications can ignore them and react against them, and their effect only becomes fully clear when looking at the media as a whole. They do not operate by issuing edicts, in the manner which the Communist Party used to instruct Pravda, the Soviet Union's state news agency, what to write, but their effect is to skew the overall media output in certain directions. They do not require any conspiracy to maintain them, since the forces are an inherent part of the industry's structure. Nor do they depend upon particular individuals for their operation, since there is no shortage of individuals who will be able to recognise the industry's requirements for a particular slant and fit themselves into the mould.

Chomsky and Herman's propaganda model presents, in great detail, a description of the various forces which operate to shape the output of the mainstream media, along with a wealth of empirical evidence to illustrate their effect. The media industry is dominated by enormous corporations and it is largely dependent for its revenue on advertising, much of which comes from other enormous corporations. It is dependent for much of its information on people in important political positions, many of whom have close relationships with these same corporations, and on PR agents and lobbyists, who are paid to disseminate the propaganda of these same corporations. The net result is that the media, as a whole, is enormously biased towards presenting a world view that is favourable to these corporations or, more specifically, to those who own the corporations (and their political supporters).

There are multiple techniques used to enforce and conceal this bias. Certain sources, drawn from the upper echelons of political and economic life, are automatically considered to be inherently trustworthy, while sources from groups that are in opposition to the powerful are presented as entirely unreliable. Public discussions on important issues are framed as being debates between two poles both of whose positions incorporate the basic bias towards the powerful, excluding the opinions of most of the population from consideration. So, for example, the current debate about Iran has focused on whether 'we' should force them to give up their 'inalienable right' to nuclear power development or whether 'we' should do it by launching a murderous imperial onslaught against them. The various standards and codes of conduct which define the ethics for the industry are themselves dominated by the powerful, and produce a notion of balance and objectivity which merely internalises the bias.

From this point of view the debate between liberal and conservative or left and right forms of mainstream media becomes an illusion. Virtually all mainstream media, liberal and conservative, are controlled by large corporations through advertising and ownership. The media reflects but a tiny slice of opinion and those opinions are limited to points of view which are compatible with the requirements of the powerful. The debates within it merely reflect the tactical differences between different sections of the ruling class and the vast majority of the population is excluded.

For all of these reasons and more, the alternative media movement has attempted to go far beyond the 'the wrong people with the wrong opinions' criticism of the mainstream media. It is an attempt to not only create media which includes a range of voices that are essentially excluded from the mainstream, but also to create alternative structures and even alternative institutions, which do not contain inherent imbalances towards the powerful within them. This movement, if we can call something so diverse a 'movement', is not remotely new.



a brief history of alternative media

Throughout history control over the means of mass communication has been a crucial means of exercising control over society. Technological advances have, from time to time, radically democratised access to mass communication, a democratisation whose echoes have been felt throughout society. In the Middle Ages in Europe the church was able to maintain a firm grip on the social order, largely through its monopolisation of written media. No other institution could compete with the church's network of monasteries and scribes. Only those works which met the church's approval were copied and distributed widely. The invention of the printing press finally broke this monopoly and, with time, this technology became available to wider strata in society. The revolutions that shook the world in the late eighteenth century were heavily indebted to the relatively widespread availability of printed tracts, such as Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* (1791), which were crucial in popularising republican ideas. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the workers' press flourished all around the world – a printing press was until fairly recently the first target acquisition of radical political groups. In many countries, the organised workers' movement could compete on an almost equal footing with the capitalist controlled media. For example, in 1930s Spain the anarcho-syndicalist CNT produced over 30 daily newspapers, including the national best-seller.

However, the second half of the twentieth century saw the precipitous decline of the once flourishing workers' press. On the one hand, the catastrophic pyrrhic victory of authoritarian socialism in Russia gave the world a perfect proof that just because the media might be anti-capitalist doesn't mean that it can't be worse. Pravda became a watchword for the political ruling class exercising total control over mass communication. The fortunes of the workers' press in the 'free world' were similarly poor. Although this reflected, to some extent, the declining fortunes of the workers' movement, that decline was also a consequence of changes in the economics and technology of how media was produced.

The victory of the corporations

New media technologies, such as television and radio, that were introduced in the twentieth century tended to be even more tightly controlled by governments and large corporations as they required greater capital investment. While radical organisations could make up for lack of resources for publishing newspapers through voluntary labour and distribution networks, the capital investment required to construct television networks was largely beyond them. The increasing size of media corporations and their increasing dependence on advertising revenue for income

slanted the field further still in favour of the corporations. Not only did publications which carried view points that were opposed to the views of the powerful attract less advertising, but advertisers organised boycotts against such publications. Writing recently on the fiftieth anniversary of the Suez crisis, *Guardian* editor Alan Rusbridger described the 'long-lasting and debilitating' effects of an advertising boycott against the *Observer* newspaper for having reported truthfully on how the crisis had been manufactured by the British and French governments as a pretext to invade Egypt. Thus by the 1980s, after several decades in which these trends had strengthened, most of the formerly flourishing alternative media had been worn down by commercial pressures, sold out or given up. It seemed as if the future of media would be one of ever larger conglomerates with ever stronger commercial and political imperatives driving their content. On the fringes, with miniscule resources, tiny circulations and no pretensions to challenge the mainstream, groups with alternative points of view would put out newspapers, fliers, pamphlets and DIY 'zines, and would limit their ambitions for mass communication to a small and dedicated following, and the occasional sympathetic voice in the mainstream.

Box 15.1 Concentration of Media Ownership in the USA

'For better or for worse, our company [The News Corporation Ltd.] is a reflection of my thinking, my character, my values' (Rupert Murdoch, speech to the Asia Society AustralAsia Centre, 8 November 1999).

Six transnational corporations (Disney, Viacom (including CBS), Time Warner, News Corporation, Bertlesman and General Electric) own more than 90 per cent of media holdings in the USA between them, as well as dominating several other markets. In 2005 they had combined revenues of \$295 billion and were valued at \$550 billion.

The Internet and Mass Communication

However, as technological advances in the early twentieth century were responsible to a certain extent for creating the barrier to entry which gave such an advantage to the corporations, the advances since the 1980s have had the opposite effect. Cheap personal computers, media production software, digital photography and recording equipment have between



them massively cut the amount of capital investment required to produce media that can aspire to compete with the corporations. Most importantly of all, widespread internet access has hugely reduced the cost of distributing media. In 1980 somebody who wanted to produce and edit a short film and distribute it to an audience around the world would have needed access to millions of dollars worth of equipment. Today the same task can be achieved with a cheap digital video camera and a standard internet-connected PC running inexpensive or free software.

In addition to its low financial barrier to entry and its transnational, geographical distance-collapsing nature, perhaps the most important development of the internet is a consequence of its fundamental communication paradigm. Traditional media facilitate 'few-to-many communication'. This means that a relatively small number of people produce the information, while a large number of people consume it and there is a clear division between the two. This model is favoured when there is a relatively high cost involved in producing and distributing the information. In the early years of the internet, this was the predominant model for websites, with sites being managed by individuals and small groups and passively consumed by viewers.

However, unlike a newspaper or a TV broadcast, there is virtually no cost involved in adding and distributing new information on the internet. There are few of the same constraints on the size and volume of the information distributed. This feature has facilitated the development of 'many-to-many communication' models, sources of information created by participatory, voluntary communities where the lines between consumer and producer are blurred. This type of community stretches back to the birth of the internet and has migrated through the various internet communication tools from Usenet newsgroups to email lists, bulletin boards, forums, community driven news sites and blogs on the World Wide Web.

Probably the most impressive child of the internet is the free software movement, a vast and nebulous community of computer programmers, spread all over the globe, who use a production model that is much closer to pure communism than to capitalism – the vast majority of work is voluntary and the products are given away for free. This community is responsible for much of the software that runs the internet itself and its creations have been crucial in the development of internet communities where information rather than software is the product. With the development of software tools to facilitate the creation and distribution of information by large groups of co-operating people, enormous repositories of information have been developed by ever growing communities. The increasing sophistication and ease of use of the tools has been closely followed by larger, more diverse and more sophisticated examples of community organisation.

the indymedia model

Although there are many interesting examples of alternative models for producing and distributing information on the internet, the remainder of this chapter will focus on the Indymedia network for a number of reasons. Firstly, the author has been involved in the network for the last five years as an editor of the Irish Indymedia website and as one of the developers of the oscaill content management system. Secondly, Indymedia is a project which was based upon a radical analysis of the failings of mainstream media and one that consciously attempted to come up with an alternative organisational model in order to avoid being influenced by the various forces which skew the output of mainstream media. Finally, it has always had ambitions to challenge the mainstream media's dominance and, unlike many internet-based projects, it has not generally contented itself with speaking to a niche audience.



Figure 15.1 Irish Indymedia website

Source: Indymedia Ireland.

Indymedia was born in Seattle in November 1999, during the now infamous protests against the World Trade Organisation and has remained heavily influenced by the radical libertarian ideas current in the global justice movement. It was initially composed of two basic elements, a physical media centre, where social justice activists who were protesting against the WTO could come together and share information, and a website, which anybody could publish stories on, and upload



video and audio segments to, as well as add comments to the stories and videos. It proved an instant success. Within a few days it had attracted over a million hits (which was a lot back in 1999) and the idea spread like wildfire. As the 'anti-globalisation' protest movement spread around the world, Indymedia sites followed in the footsteps of the protests. Groups all over the world came together to set up their own local version of the Indymedia site, based upon one of the freely distributed open source content management systems written by Indymedia activist programmers. Indymedia collectives branched out to establish radio stations, video production groups, newsletters and a wide variety of alternative media offerings.



Figure 15.2 Reclaim the media logo

Source: Indymedia Ireland.

Today, Indymedia has expanded to become a global network of open publishing news sites, with over 150 collectives of varying size in over 70 countries. 'Open publishing' means that all of the users of the site produce the news collectively, rather than it being a job of a small group. The members of each collective are responsible for enforcing basic editorial guidelines and choosing which articles to highlight as 'features'. The network of collectives agrees to a basic set of goals and principles as part of the process of joining. These network wide agreements amount to a statement of basic anarchist organisational principles – emphasising democracy, equality, accountability, openness and non-hierarchical structures. They also emphasise, in contrast to the mainstream media, the fact that they do not intend to present news in an objective or balanced manner. The network's basic 'about us' page declares that Indymedia should be about 'radical, passionate tellings of truth'. The idea is to promote accuracy rather than objectivity and to allow all sides to tell their own version of events, so that a richer and more nuanced picture can emerge from the whole. However, beyond the basic agreement of principles, the collectives are autonomous and have great lassitude to interpret the guidelines in different ways.

The Indymedia collective is held together by a collectively managed technical infrastructure which comprises hundreds of mailing lists, internet chat channels, occasional real world conferences and a variety of 'syndication' sites, which pool together news on an issue-by-issue or regional basis.

Although many people thought that the Indymedia principles of non-hierarchy, open publishing and consensus decision making would, by themselves, solve many of

Box 15.2 Different Approaches to Indymedia

Different Indymedia sites in different countries have taken markedly different paths over the years. For example, although they are close together Indymedia UK and Indymedia Ireland have some important differences:

- *Organisation: Indymedia UK is organised as a network of regional collectives spread around the UK. Each regional collective meets and makes decisions locally which affect their regional pages and local collectives. Network wide issues are decided on mailing lists and at occasional regional meetings. Indymedia Ireland is a single collective which makes almost all of its decisions on mailing lists.*
- *Editorial: Indymedia UK generally allows material to be cross-posted to their site as well as to other sites, while Indymedia Ireland only allows original content. Indymedia UK does not allow postings from explicitly hierarchical groups, while Indymedia Ireland allows postings from all political currents, including right-wing parties. The only limit on political content is a ban on discriminatory or hateful postings.*
- *Comment editing: Comments and articles that are against the guidelines on Indymedia UK are moved to a hidden page, while on the Irish site they are removed altogether and can only be viewed by subscribing to a special mailing list which records all editorial actions.*

the problems that beset the mainstream media, this turned out to be naïvely optimistic. The first and most immediate problem that most Indymedia collectives faced was to do with the thorny question of 'censorship'. Many inexperienced volunteers had imagined that if a news site allowed people to publish whatever they wanted without any censorship at all, this would eventually lead to the more coherent and better reasoned points of view eventually winning out. The early years of the Indymedia network saw fierce debates between the advocates of absolute free speech and those who advocated some form of content selection and removal. In



the end the argument was won not by arguments or reasoning but by reality. The cost of reproducing information on the internet is virtually zero and it is trivial for somebody with destructive intent to swamp an open communication channel with disruptive content. Sites which adopted a free speech absolutist position quickly found themselves engulfed with right-wing trolls, neo-Nazis, spam and anti-social lunatics. Collectives that tried to argue with these abusers rather than ban them eventually ran out of energy – there's only so many times that somebody will bother to refute the same stereotyped propaganda before they give up.

Thus, those who advocated some form of content filtering eventually won by default as genuine users stayed away from the rubbish filled newswires of the free speech sites and collective members eventually burnt out. Still, although there was a general acceptance about the need for some filtering of content on the newswires, there was no widespread agreement as to how such filtering should be carried out. As the project is fundamentally an attempt to organise media production without any inherent biases and without a hierarchy of individuals imposing their agendas on the public, the question of filtering information remains a contentious issue in Indymedia. Some sites adopted systems where users needed to register before they could post to the site. Others essentially decided to ban content with a right-wing angle, reasoning that such content had more than enough channels for distribution already. Others moved towards 'professionalisation' whereby skilled editorial volunteers or paid staff would verify the facts of submitted stories before publishing them to the prominent newswire. Others adopted increasingly strict guidelines defining the requirements for newsworthiness to enable material to be published on the site. Most sit somewhere in between, removing disruptive content and personalised abuse, but allowing input from all political points of view as long as they do not contain hate-speech, such as blatant racism, sexism or homophobia.

The other major problem that the Indymedia network has grappled with is the issue of collective decision making. The momentous early growth of the network and its firm commitment towards consensus decision making quickly created a situation where collective decisions became impossible to reach. Trying to get several hundred collectives, with dozens of different native languages, to unanimously agree on any particular decision is basically impossible. This has led to a situation where network wide decision making has become impractical and many collectives are, in practice, entirely autonomous with some only bearing a shallow resemblance to the stated aims and principles. For example, despite the fact that a large number of Indymedia volunteers have declared that the Belgian collective is controlled by the Stalinist-Maoist Belgian Workers, meaning it therefore does not conform to Indymedia principles, as

well as the lack of convincing refutations, moves to remove the Belgian Indymedia site from the network were repeatedly blocked in 2005.

The inherent looseness of the collective structures and the overall network has also caused several sites to fail to deal with the relative downturn in activity among the global anti-capitalist protest movement. Without permanent structures to support them, many sites have melted away as the energy of the small number of volunteers who sustained them has waned. However, the picture is not all bleak. A considerable number of Indymedia sites, particularly those from southern Europe and South America, have managed to broaden their audience and have continued to grow despite the relative decline of the summit protests which were once their core subject.

Going forward, there are a number of lessons that can be drawn from the evolution of Indymedia. We should not ignore its enormous success – starting from nothing with no resources and entirely dependent on volunteer labour, it managed to spread around the world and distribute alternative points of view on a mass scale. However, we should also not ignore the problems. The relative looseness of the organisation and the naïve belief that an open, unfiltered news service would be of much value caused an awful lot of time, energy and enthusiasm to be wasted. More structured co-ordination between collectives, with democratic, accountable and objectively applied editorial criteria on a variety of levels, could see the Indymedia network become greater than the sum of its parts and if it succeeded in that, the corporate media would have real problems.

Jumping hurdles

There are also a number of hurdles that the Indymedia network will meet in the coming years. For a start, there is always a danger that any movement can stagnate and settle into a comfortable niche. Alternative media projects, which rely upon volunteer labour, always have to deal with the fact that people run out of time and energy, and drift away. It is vital that Indymedia collectives continue to attract new members and seek out new audiences. The other side of the coin is that there is always a risk that a collective can lose its radical ethos and become incorporated back into the mainstream system. For example, many formerly radical community radio stations have, over time, become dependent on government, commercial or NGO funding which has inevitably eventually extinguished the radical ethos which marked them out. Turning away from the aspiration for open access and towards professionalisation also carries attendant risks – the project becomes the vehicle for the points of view of the members of the group



and although these points of view may be radical, the radically different model of information production is diluted.

Another potential hurdle is the issue of repression. For many activists and people involved in social movements across the world, their first port of call for reporting an action or event is Indymedia. The fact that you can self publish, access it 24 hours a day, find out news that you won't read in the papers, and comment on articles and events means that Indymedia has become a crucial and vital tool. Success breeds contempt and there are many instances of Indymedia sites, centres and journalists being deliberately targeted and attacked by the authorities. On 7 October 2004, the FBI seized some of Indymedia's servers, hosted by a US-based company. The servers in question were located in the UK and managed by the British arm of the company, but some 20, mainly European, Indymedia websites were affected, and several unrelated ones (including the website of a Linux distribution). No reasons were given at first by the FBI for the seizure. In June 2005 a member of Bristol Indymedia was arrested by police in the run up to the G8 summit in Scotland and charged with incitement to criminal damage after an anonymous person published news of an action involving property damage. The page had been promptly hidden by editors of Bristol Indymedia. Despite being advised by lawyers of the illegality of such action, the police still seized the server seeking access logs from the server operators. The incident ended several months later with no charges being brought by the police and the equipment was returned. Attacks on Indymedia journalists and Indymedia's centres have also occurred in the past. One of the most brutal was in 2001 during protests against the G8 in Genoa when police stormed the DIAZ school that was serving as an Indymedia centre at night. Video evidence by people that were able to hide and film the attack showed police brutally beating sleeping people. Twenty-nine Italian police officers have since been indicted for grievous bodily harm, planting evidence and wrongful arrest, and a further 48 officials have been charged with torturing activists and journalists that were arrested in the raid. The court case is still ongoing. In 2005, a US arms manufacturer, Edo, threatened Indymedia with libel action after a series of articles called the Edo (UK) company 'warmongers' for selling arms to Israel and the US forces. The company never saw the action through. The strong network of Indymedia and support it receives for its work means that for the most part incidents of repression against Indymedia are well documented, reported and challenged. Yet as Indymedia grows in success and becomes a well recognised and credible source of information, the possibility of facing law suits and further server seizures also increases.

towards a new media

Although this chapter has focused primarily on Indymedia, there are many other projects in other areas which share a lot of similarities with its goals and networks. For example, there are community radio stations, radical video production groups, alternative news print publications and even public access television stations scattered around the world which all aim to provide democratic access to the media. To provide a few very brief examples: 3CR is an entirely listener supported community radio station in Melbourne, Australia which provides space to a wide range of alternative and radical voices; Undercurrents is a UK based radical film production and distribution group which focuses on producing documentaries highlighting social justice issues and radical protest movements; and Schnews is a free weekly direct action news sheet from Brighton, UK, which has produced many highly acclaimed books, pamphlets and films in addition to their weekly news sheet. These are but a tiny sampling of the alternative media projects out there, but they are distinguished by the fact that they have all survived and thrived for over a decade, reached a wide audience and managed to retain their radical politics.

These projects show what is possible when people get together and put their ideas into practice. In the age of accessibility, the potential of creating our own media, shouting with our own voices, telling our own stories can be realised. We don't have to rely on the moguls to tell us about the world. We can get our stories from our neighbours and from other people in struggles all over the world. We have the power to describe the world as it is and we can put aside the ideological blinkers which power would put over our eyes. We don't have to hate the media, we can be the media.

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