

**Transnational political activism and global fusion:**  
**Case study – Independent Media Centers**

## 1. Introduction

It is hard to speculate about the real birth date of the Internet but it is safe to say that the Internet came of age in the last decade of the twentieth century. Events such as the development of the World Wide Web in 1990, or the launch of Netscape, the first user-friendly browser, in 1994, are certainly critical moments in the life of the newest mass medium. The next potential developmental phase that may determine the future of the medium will debate the role the Internet will play in society.

At this juncture, two points of view dominate the discussion. On one side, some believe that the development of the Internet promotes pluralism and therefore enhances democracy. Furthermore, the Internet as a decentralized communication channel eradicates the economic conditions of oligopoly. Others, quite contrarily, believe that economic mergers of electronic corporations result in online media consolidation and cause oligopoly. This, in return, can potentially have a disastrous impact on democratic processes.

This study examines the emergence of the Independent Media Center (IMC) on the Internet, springing out of anti World Trade Organization (WTO) demonstrations in Seattle in 1999. The Independent Media Center responded to the perceived need for grassroots coverage of the demonstrations in Seattle and resulted in the creation of a global virtual network of over seventy IMCs all over the world. It is hardly surprising that the Internet serves as the venue for such projects, however it is interesting to look at this project in terms of previously mentioned debates over the role of the Internet in contemporary society.

## **2. The Internet and the future of society**

The Internet has come to play an important role in almost all aspects of our modern society. It influences the way we communicate with each other, it adds a new dimension to the learning process, and it brings together physically distant spaces into a virtual space just a click away from each other. However, it raises concern among some citizens who fear that this new phenomenon will become the venue for the struggle for the nature of the new world order.

If this is true then we need to pay close attention to these contesting viewpoints and examine them closely. There are several ways to refer to these contesting sides as they seem to come from the different philosophical perspectives – neoliberal democracy perspective versus political economy. Neoliberal democrats tend to believe in magical powers of the free-market as the only truly democratic policy-making mechanism. Political economists argue that all the institutions of such a system work toward the exclusive goal of maximizing the economic gains of the ruling class. It would be easy to stereotype the two sides and suggest that their viewpoints on the future of the Internet would correspond with their political beliefs. However, that would be to say that the two sides of the argument do not recognize the same things to be true. The contrary is true.

### **2.1. Optimistic viewpoint (neoliberal democrats)**

The Internet, unlike all other mass media, is the first truly decentralized technology, free of government or central power control. Much like within a market economy, this new system of mass communication free of control will facilitate the conditions for media pluralism. Inherent in this technology is the potential for individual liberation, plurality and democratic participation. This is why many rely on this potential

as “something of a last hope for democracy as we know it” (Gibson in Harris, 1995). Even the Marxists speak of “the potential of placing the means of electronic media production (and distribution) in the hands of the masses who, in theory at least, can be free to make of this power what they will” (Langham, 1996). The postmodernists borrowed the public sphere concept from Habermas (1989) in order to make sense of this potential. Virtual spaces may provide the best practical equivalent to the public sphere they argue. Here individuals are able to freely share their views with one another in a process that closely resembles the true participatory democracy. Political economists, such as McChesney, talk of the antimonopolistic bias of this technology that has the potential to undermine the monopoly power of corporate media giants (McChesney, 2001a). This potential, as they believe, will “slay the existing giant corporate media dinosaurs” (McChesney, 2001a).

## **2.2. Pessimistic viewpoint (political economists)**

Few would disagree with the theoretical hypothesis that “genuine democratic communication lies with a media system free from the control of either the dominant political or economic powers of the day” (Habermas and Meklejohn in McChesney, 1996). However,

“To think that because the technology is perceived and has some technical promise of pluralism and freedom that is therefore pluralistic and free is to engage in wishful thinking” (Barber, 2001).

When looking into the recent development of the Internet we may need to acknowledge that this process does not occur in a historical or temporal vacuum. It is happening, within the context of one, dominant, uncontested ideology – neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism is the set of “national and international policies that call for business domination of all social affairs” (McChesney, 2001c). Almost all the contemporary matters of interest within this system are shaped by the “magical power” of markets.

Therefore, political economists agree with their opponents regarding the Internet’s enormous potential to transform the traditional system of mass communication and facilitate democratic communication. However, what they disagree on is the fulfillment of this potential. Pessimists, led by Robert McChesney (1996), argue that not much of the potential has been fulfilled and that the Internet has not created the conditions for the viable diversity of media content providers. A very close and subordinate relationship between the development of the new technologies and capitalism/neoliberalism is to be blamed for this outcome. It originated with the Telecommunication Act of 1996, which made sure that the development of the Internet was going to be shaped by the market and not by public policy. Neoliberalistic influences on media deregulation have enabled corporations to start their colonization of virtual space.

McChesney believes that capitalism has quite successfully managed to limit the extent of democracies due to two factors. Firstly, “Concentration of media in so few hands is disastrous for the free market place of ideas” (McChesney, 2001a) since it permits a few people, the wealthy, to have power over political and economic decision-making. Such policies result in a high concentration of media sources that eventually reduce plurality of voices and views in the diverse marketplace of ideas. There is a necessary link between oligopoly and reduced diversity (Hesmondhalgh, 2001). This is in direct opposition to the Internet’s most valuable advantage.

In just two years between 1999 and 2001 we have seen dramatic consequences

of online consolidation and an obvious decrease of plurality on the Internet. The research firm, Jupiter Media Metrix, pointed out that the “total number of companies that control 60 percent of all minutes spent online in the US dwindled 87 percent, from 110 companies to 14.” (see table 1.)

<b>Media Metrix Total US Online Usage Minutes, and Number of Companies Controlling 50 Percent and 60 Percent of Minutes Online March 1999, March 2000, March 2001 at Home/Work Combined</b>			
	<b>Mar-99</b>	<b>Mar-00</b>	<b>Mar-01</b>
Total Minutes Spent Online (in billions)	50	73	107
Number of Companies Controlling 50% of all Minutes	11	7	4
Number of Companies Controlling 60% of all Minutes	110	40	14

(Table 1, Jupiter Media Matrix, 2001)

Secondly, “capitalism encourages culture that places a premium on commercial values and downplays communitarian ideals” (McChesney, 1996b). The audience is atomized, separated from one another, fragmented enough so that they don't enter the political arena and disturb the powerful (Chomsky, 1996) It is through this newly formed communication system that the big transnational firms approach the new markets. The content that is produced and served to audiences inevitably supports the values that keep the whole system ticking (McChesney, 2001a). The content of commercial media is produced with one objective – to attract the largest numbers of spectators that are then transferred to the commercial sponsors as numbers for financial reward. The content “suits perfectly the sort of depoliticised and inegalitarian society as exists in neoliberalism’s spawning ground, the United States” (McChesney, 2001a). Furthermore, global capitalism greatly enhances social inequality, since it strengthens class division,

emphasizes the role of consumer over the role of citizen, and is concerned only with profit maximization.

In conclusion, all of these comments clearly reaffirm that it seems unlikely that the best outcome for a democratic society will come out of the system that prioritizes profit maximization. Wilhelm comes to the similar conclusion to McChesney's in his book *Democracy in the Digital Age*. Wilhelm is rather skeptical that economic markets have any interest in the fair and non-discriminatory distribution of informational technology benefits throughout the society. He also suggests that the system does not create adequate conditions in which the information technology could be used for the advancement of democratic ideals (Wilhelm, 2000).

### **3. Methodology**

The primary information for this study has been collected through a series of interviews with activists and participators in the IMC. The interviews were conducted in IMC DC which was the Washington, D.C. outlet during the anti war demonstration in Washington on September 29 through October 1. Over four hours of material was captured on video in three days of participant observation. The interviewees consisted of activists from all over the United States and several international representatives from Italy, Israel, Germany, etc. Some of the activists asked to remain anonymous or that their real names not be used. Therefore, some interviewees will be mentioned in this study under their activist names or just their first names.

Secondary sources of information for this study has been the variety of information on the IMC web sites and two interviews with activists conducted by Bill Bullock and Theta Pavis.

#### 4. Case study - Independent Media Centers

The Independent Media Center started in Seattle in 1999 and is closely associated with the activists who, in an effort to promote their cause, decided to turn to alternative media channels instead of relying on mainstream media coverage. The original idea that launched the avalanche of IMCs all over the world was quite simple. In order to help cover the anti World Trade Organization demonstrations a few activists decided to set up a small media center, a news room, few blocks from where the demonstrations were taking place. The center was going to be open to all willing to participate. In the end, more than 500 people were given “little ID passes” and shared available technology to cover the demonstration and transfer that information to the world using the best features of communication over the Internet.

“The center acted as a clearinghouse of information for journalists, and provided up-to-the-minute reports, photos, audio and video footage through its website. Using the collected footage, the Seattle Independent Media Center ([seattle.indymedia.org](http://seattle.indymedia.org)) produced a series of five documentaries, uplinked every day to satellite and distributed throughout the United States to public access stations (Independent Media Center, 2002).

Even though it looks original, this idea to promote underrepresented views through media has a long history. Starting with the radical pamphlets of Thomas Paine, through the muckraking reporting of Upton Sinclair and Lincoln Steffens to the modern day use of community radios, alternative media have always been associated with political and social activism. The IMC project is an historical response and continuation of such efforts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The only difference is that the struggle of the activists



moved from a physical realm into cyberspace. One of the co-founders of the original Seattle IMC Sherri Herndon confirmed that the IMC

“comes from a long line of alternative media, out of long rich history of community video, print publications, radio projects, but because of globalization movement and because of digital culture and the rise of cheap digital media and telecommunication we have seen things come together.”

The IMC is essentially Thomas Paine going digital. One of the greatest strengths of the projects is basically its ability to capitalize on the digital advancements in technology. Only recently have digital audio and video cameras, cellular phones, even personal computers and its software become available to the general population thanks to mass production and some of the advantages of a globalized economy. It is under the umbrella of a neoliberalistically influenced macro-economy that these digital gadgets became the artifacts for mass consumption. In a way, thanks to some features and gadgets of a free market economy and mass production, the activists were able to capture and record the stories that tend to undermine the power of the very same economy. This almost looks like a Frankensteinian paradox in which the invention that has been created jeopardizes the existence and safety of the inventor. Still cameras, camcorders, and video cameras and other digital gadgets, including the Internet, which were facilitated by the developments in free market industry, ended up being used by the people who passionately try to diminish the impact of such industry.

Not only did the IMC exploit the digital technology but it took advantage of Internet, satellite and cable technologies. Jeff Perlstein, an IMC organizer, explained that during the protest every night video stories recorded throughout the day were uplinked to the satellite and went to 78 cable access stations so that the reports were available

through the conventional TV broadcast (Bullock, 2000). However, the main detail that gave the advantage to the IMC was the thorough use of all Internet potentials.

The power of the idea behind the IMC is the realization that the protest against capitalism, globalization, and corporate power needs to gain the support of an everyday citizen. It was of crucial importance that the need for such protest is communicated to the public directly. Jeff Perlstein emphasized the importance of direct communication of the idea to the public because it was impossible to expect “the same institutions that are owned by these corporations and the folks who sit on their boards to critically report on their actions” (Bullock, 2000).

At the turn of the century, the Internet is the only media channel not owned by the centralized power and had the capability reach the mass audience. The Internet seemed to be the only reasonable solution for the new activists and proved to be highly effective one. According to the original IMC web site in Seattle, the site logged more than 2 million hits during the WTO protest. Motivated by the success of the initial project, activists spread this effective idea first to other major U.S. metropolitan areas and later globally to the rest of the world. Now, the IMC is a network of over 70 centers that gets an estimated 400.000 page views a day (Pavis, 2002). Originally, none expected such growth. Sherri Herndon explains her surprise with the popularity of the project:

“We could not keep up with how it was going. It was self-organizing. It was happening organically. No one is in control of the phenomenon...because this is what we needed for so long.”

The main goal of the IMC, according to Blicero, an activist from Italy, is to

empower the people to produce their own piece of information and to get it to as many people as possible. Furthermore, the IMC aims to remain open as a uncensored outlet for all. The Italian IMC, organized for one of the anti globalization protests in Genoa, works under the slogan “Don’t hate the media – become the media.” Mark, an organizer of the IMC Washington, sees the IMC as the alternative media project aiming to provide other streams of information, from the grassroots, from the perspective of the street. He and Blicero passionately believe that sharing resources and know-how is the basic alternative to global capitalism, therefore they would like to see IMC sharing media resources.

Out in the streets, Jonathan Prince, wearing the IMC badge, praises the personal benefits and experiences he’s had with the IMC.

To be honest, I am learning as I am going along. I was inspired by the work of IMC from April 2000. Since then I bought myself a digital video and more recently digital still camera and I am learning what the most important thing to be documented [is] and then learning how things are edited and put online. And as soon as [the content] is uploaded the world can see what has happened less than a hour ago.

Jonathan is the best example of the profile of “journalist” that works for the IMC. An activist who is inexperienced, well equipped and willing to learn. The distinction between a journalist and an activist is quite vague. Some of the people working for the IMC have different takes on this problem than others. Zoe, from IMC D.C. says it is important that when she wears the IMC credentials she does not consider herself an activist. She admits to the difficulties of being within the crowd of protesters because she finds it hard to cover the event from as objective angle.

The IMC dealt with the issue of objectivity in their mission statement. Jeff Perlstein paraphrases the mission statement when he says “we are clear about acknowledging our bias and recognizing that all reporters have a bias no matter what they are doing, and all people as well, there is no such thing as objectivity.” (Bullock, 2000)

The IMC in 2002 is far from where it began in 1999. It is now a well-established network of media activists from all over the world who hold their meetings in cyberspace where they communicate globally. “Globalization from below” is an expression that has been used to describe the movement. In less than two years, it has gained a momentum and a deserved recognition by mainstream media, academicians and communication researchers. It has made enough of an impact for its name to be banned from CNN’s chat rooms for alleged advertising of their name. It went so far that it has become as well recognized as a brand name in the world of news sources. However, the IMC, in the words of Italian activist Blicero is a brand that belongs to no one and at the same time belongs to everyone. Jeff Perlstein argues that

“we [the IMC] are not trying to be the McDonald’s of independent media by any means. We want to help support other people in developing what makes sense of their communities, and their neighbors so we can move together towards creating a sustainable vision of our future that’s based on justice and social change.  
(Bullock, 2000)

## **5. Conclusions**

In conclusion, it is important to revisit the theoretical debate on the role of the Internet but now look at it through the prism of the IMC project. Based on the research and findings it would be safe to proclaim that the two sides in the debate over the future

of the Internet would find strong support for their contradicting viewpoints in the same project - the Independent Media Centers. The IMCs proved that it is possible to successfully perform on the edge of both arguments while taking the best of both and minimizing the negative consequences.

The IMC is essentially a movement, closely related to anti-globalization protests, that challenges the status quo and corporate power structure. In other words, the IMC stands against the values that neoliberalism relies upon for its growth that clearly support the political economy side of the debate. The IMC is a community of the people that are in an active quest for the alternative system of power sharing, the one that does not resemble the linear, hierarchical structure of market driven societies. Fundamentally, the IMC undermines the essence of neoliberal ideologies by denying its fundamental principles. It could be argued that the social activism of such groups have so far emerged as the only active political alternative against the powerful ideology of a globalized, transnational, free market economy. The IMC model of communication is a non-hierarchical system that is based on a plurality of opinions, the participation of all, and the creation of knowledge through dialogue. Therefore, it appears that the most prominent attributes of the Internet coincide with ideal aspirations of the IMC.

At the same time, the IMC owes a lot of its success to technological developments that were triggered due to the advancement and practical application of neoliberal ideology. The IMC benefits from the artifacts of mass production, the affordability of the technological equipment, and ultimately the ability to access the technologies and its best channel, the Internet. The work of IMCs would be impossible without digital camcorders and cameras to capture the events of the street. The radio streaming would be impossible

without cellular phones, video streaming would be impossible without successful software application such as Real Audio. None of it would ever be possible without the network of computers connected in the gigantic web of information called Internet. All of these contemporary improvements were the products of the marketplace of ideas, economy and free flowing capital.

Finally, it is gratifying to know that at least one project managed to capitalize on the benefits of two seemingly irreconcilable alternatives. The IMC took the best of both while working towards some of the most challenging but most righteous issues of the contemporary society.

To end on a hopeful note from an unlikely optimistic source:

So with the Internet, we have to wait and watch. Will corporate power be able to do what it wants? They'd like to turn it into a home shopping service and a way of addicting even more people, even more totally. Well, a lot of the public has different ideas. A struggle will take place and you can't predict the outcome. (Chomsky, 1996)

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