

# Indymedia and the Enclosure of the Internet

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There has been controversy recently on the global imc-communication and imc-tech lists over the issue of a \$200,000 grant application sent to the Knight Foundation<sup>1</sup> by IMC Boston<sup>2</sup> to do Drupal<sup>3</sup> development work for Indymedia sites.

The grant application was blocked by IMC Rosario<sup>4</sup> in Argentina. As a working technical volunteer who has been building a new Indymedia website for the past year or so, I think this whole debate has raised some interesting issues related to code, corporate monopolies, and the dilemmas faced by a humble developer who's trying to help start a revolution.

## Some background

First, a little bit about me. I live in London, I'm a programmer for a living, and I have been involved with Indymedia since the autumn of 2000. Like many other people, I have been thinking about Indymedia's technical platforms.

## Some problems

I think that we are in bad shape when compared with the predominantly corporate-owned sites that political organizers are often turning to. People are generally not putting their videos on Indymedia anymore - those go onto Youtube. Photos are going into Flickr. There has been an explosion of good political content being published on the net, but it's not happening on our sites, because in many cases it's easier for people to register an account on Blogger.com and put it there instead. Political groups don't advertise their presence on Indymedia anymore, they set up a MySpace group. For that matter, most political people don't register email accounts with riseup.net<sup>5</sup> or aktivix.org<sup>6</sup> or one of the other activist-run email services, they get a Gmail or Hotmail account instead. This is a general problem and is much bigger than either Indymedia or left activism, but it's worth thinking about how we can respond to it.

One necessary response is education. Activists who would never consider eating meat or crossing a picket line think nothing of putting their entire communications infrastructure into the hands of Google, Yahoo, Microsoft, and Rupert Murdoch. There are enormous practical problems with respect to communications security, data ownership, privacy, censorship of content, and data mining by both corporations and law enforcement agencies. From what I can see everyone from the left-liberal NGOs and environmentalists, to the unions, and over into the extraparliamentary anarchist and communist groups all have the same attitude: there is no problem. Move along. Shut up about it, you're being a geek.

We need to be explaining these issues to people in a consistent and effective way. Perhaps explaining that it's like holding all your political meetings at McDonalds, and ensuring that the police come and film you while you do so, would be one approach to take.

Education alone will not solve the problem, though. We need to provide self-managed alternatives.

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1 <http://www.knightfoundation.org/>

2 <http://boston.indymedia.org/>

3 <http://drupal.org/>

4 <http://rosario.indymedia.org/>

5 <http://riseup.net/>

6 <http://aktivix.org/>

## David vs Goliath Redux

There are a few obvious problems here. The combined development budgets of Yahoo, Google, and Microsoft alone runs into billions of dollars a year, and they can basically deploy an army of coders to solve any problems they encounter. Although they are highly bureaucratized, they also have the luxury of billions more dollars with which they can buy hot young startup companies.

In contrast, we have a relatively few hard-working geeks and a wealth of code provided by the Free Software movement. While in the past this alone was enough to sustain us, I would like to suggest that we are in the middle of a monopolization process that has destroyed other forms of radical media in the past. This new stage will bring additional problems with it.

Basically, I think that we are facing related problems of undercapitalization and corporate monopolization.

I was recently doing some historical research regarding the labour press, which was very vibrant in the early part of the 20th century, and I ran across this analysis by Noam Chomsky:

The Daily Herald in England ... if I remember correctly [had] twice the subscriptions of the London Times, the Financial Times and the Guardian put together in the early 1960s, and in fact, the polls showed that it was more intensively read and more eagerly read by its subscribers, but it was a working class newspaper. It presented an alternative view of the world. Now it doesn't exist. The working class newspapers have become cheap tabloids, which are sex, sports, and so on, part of the decerebration of the masses. This [did not] happen by force. The police didn't come in and close them down. It happened by market pressures. Newspapers are corporations that sell a product, namely subscribers, to buyers, namely advertisers. So a newspaper or any journal is basically a corporation selling a product to other corporations. The way you sell them is by looking at the profile. If you want to have resources in this system, you are going to have to have advertiser support in capital. And that means for one thing you are going to have to adhere to their view of the world, but it also means that you are going to have to be oriented towards the wealthier readers with the normal advertising profiles that all of these guys run on. These factors are going to drive out an independent press. It happened in the United States a long time ago. It happened in England fairly recently and the effects are very striking....

In my opinion, a process that took perhaps 70 years to play itself out in the case of the print-based radical press of the late 19th and early 20th centuries is repeating itself much more rapidly in the case of radical internet media today. If this assessment is correct, our problems are much bigger than most of us think. We have already recognized that police seizures of our servers, and the arrest and killing of our journalists, are major problems. I think we are also going to have to contend with a less blatant but perhaps more powerful erosion of our ability present the news online in a way that's relevant to people using our sites. We are seeing the beginnings of this already.

A potential Indymedia contributor thinks: I can upload a video but nobody can see it conveniently in the page? I'll put it on Youtube. I can put up a text report but my friends aren't immediately notified via Twitter text messaging? Forget it, my Blogger account can do that. I can announce the existence of my new political group but I can't conveniently link all my articles together and have them accessible via an API<sup>7</sup> for reprocessing and filtering? I'm off to Facebook and Yahoo Pipes.

Note that in these examples, it's not merely the existence of a social networking effect and nice graphic design that people are looking for (although they want those too). They also want a huge amount of functionality and increasing interoperability with a host of corporate services which I

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7 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Api>

haven't noticed anyone analysing in a systematic and radical way. So it's not only the development budgets of the big media corporations we need to contend with, it's their control over services and de facto standards which are also going to be increasingly problematic for us.

Something as simple as putting a "Digg this" link on a page in an Indymedia CMS would probably cripple the Indymedia network globally by triggering a discussion about the relative merits of open content aggregation versus the support of capitalist business.

### **What are our options?**

One solution would be a short term approach. We are currently undercapitalized, let's write a grant application and inject some cash into the system. This may sound familiar given recent news headlines about the current worldwide economic crisis: it'll keep things running in the short term but if the problem is systemic, it's not going to do much in the longer term. Let's lay aside for the moment the tactical questions about whether Indymedia coders should be used as a cheap development resource for the Knight-Ridder newspaper chain, and whether an Indymedia group which can't set up a Drupal website in three years is likely to be handed \$200,000 to spearhead a big Drupal development project. The bigger question is, how long can we sustain ourselves with this approach? What kind of development process is it likely to lead to?

In the past year, I've probably put about a thousand hours of work into writing code for Indymedia. Taking foundation money from a media corporation runs right behind getting addicted to heroin as something I want to do, and I think it would have roughly the same effects on our development efforts. I'm sure everything would seem pretty great at first, with lots of development getting done, and everybody would be real happy. Then the money runs out, and suddenly we're no longer able to function. At that point, it all comes crashing down.

This is not to say that I oppose paying people for doing Indymedia coding work in all situations. For example, I would not be opposed to running some kind of donation drive, as zmag.org has, and paying people to do development out of that (also getting new equipment, etc). I can also see that an Indymedia code base could be a generally useful thing. It might be possible to design our code in such a way that it would be attractive for lots of people who need distributed websites to use the code in their normal commercial work. They could then contribute changes back to the codebase (this is one reason that Drupal and Zope have so many contributors). In both of these cases, we would at least have some control over the situation in a better way than we would if we were repeatedly applying for foundation grants.

My point is that we're in this situation for the long haul, and paying five or ten geeks for a year isn't going to get us out of it - the scale of the problem is much larger.? The intelligent use of freely available code, which leverages the work of thousands or tens of thousands of people, is one start.?

A better organization of our coding efforts (currently being attempted by the imc-cms group) can also go a long way towards helping the problem of undercapitalization. A network of a few dozen motivated and well-organized coders with the support of a larger community of politicized free software developers for whom monopolization is an issue of freedom, is sustainable over a period of years, and might actually be able to achieve something.? A small number of people paid out of grant funding will probably just lull us into a false sense of security. I think that the answer to the resource problem is political and social, not economic, because no matter how much grant money we can lay our hands on, it's always going to be a tiny fraction of what the corporate giants can blow on the purchase of a single startup company.

The other problem, the one of de facto standardization and monopolization by for-profit businesses, is a harder nut to crack. It is partly being addressed by the Free Software Foundation: the new Affero Gnu Public License<sup>8</sup> (AGPL) stipulates that a company like Google using AGPL code must make all of its modified AGPL source code publicly available, something that wasn't necessary under the older GPL version 2.

The AGPL is going to help level things out a bit by letting us see more corporate code from the Web 2.0 giants. It will not change the fact that most peoples' experience of the internet now happens inside the online equivalent of gated communities owned by the world's largest media corporations. Obviously, we are organizationally outside those gated communities (I say organizationally because I suspect that many Indymedia people do actually use corporate platforms like Facebook while regarding it as a sort of dirty secret). The question of how we interact with these heavily-defended enclaves on the internet is a crucial one, because they are where the majority of the world's online population live and work. If we want to change society, we need to deal with this, or we're no longer a group of radical media producers with advanced technical platforms (which we were in 2000-2003), we're the equivalent of a Geocities page - lost, lonely, and slightly crazy-looking. Maybe it's time to change the white text / black background of indymedia.org, by the way?

The problem is made worse by the fact that many free software libraries are actually being written to support corporate services. So, for example, within the coding environment I use (Ruby on Rails), there are 5 libraries which support Google Maps/Yahoo Maps/Geocoder.us/PostcodeAnywhere but none that support OpenStreetmap<sup>9</sup> (the only equivalent non-corporate service). As a radical coder, what's my move? I want to provide mapping services on the event calendar that I've written, so that people can easily find their way to events. Do I integrate with Google Maps (which would take 5 minutes), or do I integrate with OpenStreetmap (which would take several days and doesn't work nearly as well as Google Maps)? This is only a small example but it gives an idea of the practical side of the monopolization in services which I'm trying to illustrate.

I think that at this point it might be necessary to bring these concerns to both the Free Software movement and also to make an effort to bring it to the wider public, starting with our own users. The Free Software Foundation<sup>10</sup> people are an intelligent bunch, and often overlap with people in our own milieu. While some of them probably see "the internet" (as opposed to the code that runs it) as a politics-free place, I suspect that many of them are concerned with the uses of their code. Having put two decades worth of work into enlarging the boundaries of software freedom, I doubt that they are enthusiastic about having it used to trap computer users inside an interlocking set of corporate monopolies which happen to run free software.

Besides alliance-forming and awareness-raising, we also need to concentrate on building our alternatives. Anyone interested in this should take a look at the activities of the Indymedia CMS group, there's an email list for this at: <http://lists.indymedia.org/mailman/listinfo/imc-cms>

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8 <http://www.affero.org/oagpl.html>

9 <http://www.openstreetmap.org/>

10 <http://www.fsf.org/>