Indymedia journalism
A radical way of making, selecting and sharing news?

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ABSTRACT

In this article we describe the factors behind the Indymedia news model and analyse how these can be understood as being different from or similar to the production of content in corporate news media organizations. Using a series of in-depth interviews with Indymedia activists in and from different countries, we compare and analyse our findings with the help of theories of journalism, public or civic journalism, open source journalism and the concept of open publishing online. Our main question is whether mainstream corporate news media may be able to incorporate the principles and ideas of the online alternative media model Indymedia stands for. The answer to this question seems to be: ‘no’. Even though we see that Indymedia editorial teams often face the same problems as the ones faced by corporate news media, the ways of solving such problems by Indymedia activists are based on a radically different interpretation of journalistic ideology.

KEY WORDS alternative media, Indymedia, internet, journalism, online journalism

Introduction

In this article we describe the factors of the Indymedia news model and analyse how these compare to the production of content in mainstream (traditional or corporate) news media organizations such as online newspapers. Using a series of in-depth interviews with Indymedia activists in and from different countries, we compare and analyse our findings with the help of theories of journalism, public or civic journalism,¹ so-called participatory or ‘open source’ journalism² and open publishing (which is the publishing model applied or professed by the many Independent Media Centres (IMCs) across the globe). We do not aim to discuss or describe at any length the communication strategies of (global) resistance groups. Groups of activists are known to
use various channels for communication and there is already a growing field of research in this area (Atton, 2001). The scholarly value of this explorative study lies in describing the structure and use of an interactive communication and information process on the World Wide Web, where every reader can be a writer, where the content production is public and can be acted upon before, during and after publication, and analysing in which ways this process connects with or can be connected to existing (commercial) news media in elective democracies (see also Deuze, 2002). The way we went about our research – participating in the process of website publication in an oppositional news outlet – and framing our findings in terms of ‘regular’ journalism, closely connects with Eliasoph’s (1988) participatory observation of news routines at an oppositional radio station in the USA. As Eliasoph found, the various ways in which Indymedia activists talk about news production show that the ‘traditional’ (or ideological) way of thinking journalistically does not necessarily exclude oppositional voices in the news. Indeed, it also makes those voices possible.

**Indymedia: an overview**

At the time of writing (winter 2002), there are more than 80 IMCs (or, in short, Indymedia) worldwide and millions of Indymedia web-pages are being viewed every day (see Hyde, 2002). The enormous popularity of this network has mainly to do with the particular features of the internet – seen here in terms of what Lessig (2001) has called an end-to-end (e2e) innovation commons. Its inherent democratic, chaotic, decentralized nature and freedom from official control has made the internet a strong medium for civil society (Dahlgren, 1996). Indymedia news is published on a website, which has possibilities for archiving and structuring incoming news in a way that traditional media (print, television and video) cannot (Pavlik, 2001). The potential for immediate interaction between users on the internet surpasses all other media where the information flow between the news-producer and news-user is limited to, for example, public polls and letters to the editor (Schultz, 2000). It also has an increased potential for (re)connecting media formats and forms of journalism with different types of community (Altheide and Snow, 1991; Ball-Rokeach and Gutierrez-Hoyt, 2001). These types of community have the potential to transcend ‘traditional’ media boundaries as defined by the modernist concept of the nation-state or as maintained through the dominance of national or international cross-media companies (Chadka and Kavoori, 2000; Kerr, 2001). However, when it comes to the subject of accessibility, it is still limited to a computer, a connection to the internet and the knowledge of how
to use it. This is also one of the reasons why many Indymedia also publish a
regular newsletter in print, produce videos and use radio as a news me-
dium.3

The political background behind setting up such a news network was to
give activists a space where they could express their concerns, show their
interests and discuss local and global issues.4 One example is the impact of the
World Trade Organization (WTO) on economic developments in Third World
countries. A second is the effect on the environment and the regulations of the
Kyoto protocol.5 A third, and perhaps the most influential, is to defend the
democratic right to protest.6

Several hundred media activists, many of whom have been working for
years to develop an active independent media through their own organiza-
tions, came together in late November 1999 in Seattle to create an IMC to
cover protests against the WTO. The Seattle IMC provided coverage of the
WTO through both a printed publication called The Blind Spot and the first
IMC website. While Indymedia is not a conscious mouthpiece of any particu-
lar point of view, many Indymedia organizers and people who post to the
Indymedia newswires are supporters of the so-called ‘anti-globalization’ (al-
ternative globalization, anti-corporatization) movement. Corporate media often
describe such oppositional voices as being ‘anti-globalization’, typecasting
demonstrators as being against the process of breaking down national borders
to create what liberal economists claim will be a more profitable world for all
(Hyde, 2002).

While people in local IMCs organize face to face, many IMC projects have
international involvement and discussion about them happens primarily
through email lists and, secondarily, through chat channels. The internet
contributes to breaking down the boundaries between local and global news
and local and global protests (Bardoel and Deuze, 2001). Although the IMCs
describe themselves as independent media, they are not independent in the
strictest sense of the word. Often the code and content of the news are made
and regulated by people that are, in one way or another, affiliated with many
movements providing their own content.7 Independent in the context of
Indymedia rather means being separated from commercial and corporate
interests, as the main premise of the Indymedia is a fundamental critique of
commercial, corporate mainstream (mass) news media organizations (Hyde,
2002).

The Indymedia newswire works on the principle of open publishing (OP),
an essential element of the Indymedia project that allows independent jour-
nalists and publications to publish the news they gather instantaneously on a
globally accessible website, built with open source code (the distinctions
between the internet’s layers of physical code and content are drawn from Lessig 2001. Malter (2001) writes in a formal IMC proposal document about the OP model:

Open publishing means that the process of creating news is transparent to the readers. They can contribute a story and see it instantly appear in the pool of stories publicly available. Those stories are filtered as little as possible to help the readers find the stories they want. Readers can see editorial decisions being made by others. They can see how to get involved and help make editorial decisions. If they can think of a better way for the software to help shape editorial decisions, they can copy the software because it is free and change it and start their own site. If they want to redistribute the news, they can, preferably on an open publishing site.

The view of a news-reader in an OP process is an interactive one; interactive as in having control over content (production, customization), as well as in communicating with content producers (King, 1998). The Indymedia newswire encourages people to ‘become the media’ by posting their own articles, analyses and information to the site. Anyone may publish on the newswire, from any computer that is connected to the internet, by clicking the ‘publish’ link on the www.indymedia.org homepage and following the instructions. In theory, OP can be seen as an innovative form of using and producing media. It allows for experiments with the concept of ‘news’ in an international non-profit networked setting, with its roots in volunteer and non-profit work. It empowers its users by giving them a public channel where group consensus manages content and where individuals provide, evaluate and comment upon news. It is also an example of how the internet can be used as a democratic medium or innovation commons where its users share control over the creation, publication and usage of content (Dahlgren, 1996; Bardoel and Deuze, 2001; Lessig, 2001).

During the 1999 protests, the IMC site in Seattle had an average of two and a half million viewers every two hours. This high figure doubled during the protests in Genoa in 2002. These are remarkable figures in times when many online news-providers are closing down or limiting their interactive services due to failing revenues and dwindling audiences. The IMC case suggests that the need and attention for news (from a variety of local and global perspectives) seems to be stronger than ever. One may ask why traditional media have not succeeded in offering this to their audiences? One possible strategy for them may be – and it is one which we explore in this article – that mainstream news media may be able to incorporate the principles and ideas of the online alternative media model the Indymedia claims to stand for into their own systems.
The claims made by IMCs correlate strongly with theories forwarded by such authors as Schudson (1995) and McChesney (1999) about how the media can or should improve democratically, as news organizations can be seen as ‘creating public knowledge’. More classical notions of journalism and its role in society – most notably social responsibility theories such as those proposed by the US Hutchins Commission of 1948 – are generally hesitant to acknowledge journalism as an active civic agent in society (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001). Pundits of the public or civic journalism movement – particularly US authors like Merritt (1995) and Rosen (1999) – challenge this notion. Merritt (1995), for example, talks about public journalism as a means for democracy, arguing, in particular, that it should seek to break away from the concept of ‘One Journalism’: the idea that the rules and conventions of journalism are (or should be) pervasive and inflexible. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001) see a failure by journalists to engage in public affairs and lament a lack of transparency in news-work. Merritt talks about an artificial journalistic context that is created in and driven from other places than the community itself. Such journalism cannot possibly take part in democratic deliberations because of its lack of public debate and the fact that not all citizens are allowed to take part in the process of news-making (Rosen, 1999). As defined by pundits, public journalism has two prime goals: the first is making news organizations listen more closely to their audiences; the second is making news organizations play more active roles in their communities. ‘Detachment is out; participation is in. Experts are no longer the quote-machines of choice; readers’ voices must be heard’ (Weichelt, 1995: 2). It seeks to include public life and citizens and is looking for ways for journalism to serve a purpose beyond, and not in place of, telling the news. In this sense, the commitment to news as voiced by Indymedia participants through the newswire can be seen as articulated to (a type of) mainstream journalism and Indymedia seen as a community news platform.

Public journalism does not remove control over the news from journalists themselves and nothing in public journalism removes power from the journalists or the corporations they work for (Schudson, 1999; Woodstock 2000). The notion of ‘us and them’ is still used to describe the difference between journalists and citizens. The ‘us’ are professional journalists while the ‘them’ are the concerned citizens telling their stories to these reporters and editors. The public journalist is, in other words, still the gate-keeper. The next step in moving journalism further into the arena of public life (as a civic actor) and into the realm of sharing control over the code and content of the news between users and producers would be the notion of participatory or open-
source journalism – where users share control over the news-gathering, selection and writing processes with producers (Preecs, 2000). This kind of journalism is based on ideas regarding open sourcing of software code, as used by computer programmers, and how it can and is being used by other groups and professionals (Moon, 1999). Open source is based on the notion that ideas should be shared without copyright (also known as ‘copyleft’), so that all interested parties can work with it and cooperatively improve the product, preferably without commercial interests. Open-source journalism, made possible by online communities, applies these principles to news stories by making them available for correction before final publication. Moon (1999) says some proclaim it to be the new journalism, perfecting all that is wrong with traditional journalism. It can be seen as ‘an advanced form of civic, public or communitarian journalism: involving the audience in the [manufacture of] news’ (Deuze, 2001). Our point is that the type of journalism offered through Indymedia websites worldwide can be traced back to traditional, ‘old school’ journalism, particularly as modernized in the 20th century (Hallin, 1992), as well as to a history of ‘alternative’ media as oppositional to mainstream news media (Eliasoph, 1988; Atton, 2001); and that it has a joint theoretical base in more recent innovative types of journalism both in ‘old’ media – public or civic journalism – and ‘new’ media – open-source journalism (Deuze, 2001, 2002). These considerations have been our ‘guiding lights’ while coding and interpreting the transcripts of the in-depth interviews with Indymedia activists.

**Positioning**

The data collection for this project started in February 2001 and lasted until March 2002. All in all, 12 in-depth interviews were held with Indymedia activists at different locations in Europe. The first author of this article decided to become an Indymedia reporter herself in the course of this project, particularly in order to be able to understand the process of open publishing better. She travelled to London for the ‘Reclaiming the Street’ Actions on May Day (1 May 2001) and took part in a meeting between European IMCs in Brussels (June 2001). After that she participated as a member of the Indymedia editorial and radio team in Gothenburg, Sweden (14–16 June 2001). She made her research intentions clear to the Indymedia volunteers involved and found that the activists were quite supportive of this form of ‘participatory research’. Furthermore, we want to position ourselves as supporters of the open-publishing model of journalism. The factors behind it have the potential to challenge how we use, interpret and study mass media and publics – and how we think
about journalism as a profession that ‘matters’ to the way in which we perceive
the world in which we live (Dixit, 1997). This is not so much a utopian or
dystopian view on the ‘hopes and horrors’ of computerization and the internet
(Kling, 1996), as it is an argument to see the (mixed) blessings of Indymedia as
more or less the logical next step in thinking about, learning and doing
journalism.

Method

We opted for qualitative research methods to grasp the rationale and views
behind open publishing. Through a series of 12 in-depth interviews, we in-
tended to explore a bandwidth of relationships between issues related to open
publishing and Indymedia activism, on the one hand, and journalism, on the
other. These relationships as retrieved from (transcripts of) interviews are
conceptualized here as the different and sometimes inconsistent ways in which
people give meaning to what they do (Silverman, 2001). During the coding of
the transcripts we based ourselves on work by discourse analysts Potter and
Wetherell (1987). By introducing the concept of interpretative repertoires,
they provide a way to include and understand inherent inconsistencies in the
ways in which people talk about their everyday work and life. Wetherell and
Potter (1988), in other words, offer a way to pattern the ‘regularity in the
variation’. The repertoires are seen as the range of ways in which participants
talked about (issues related to) journalism and Indymedia.

Analysis

The themes the informants talked about during the sessions seemed to be, in
the first phase of the analysis, often in contradiction with each other, giving
the impression of the whole system of open publishing as chaotic, of a system
without definite rules, determined by contradictions and meanings with
complex relationships to the daily practices of online publishing by the
various Indymedia. According to Wetherell and Potter (1987, 1988), this is
always the case when people talk and give meaning to events and experiences
in their everyday lives. In the second phase of our analysis, we thus proceeded
to allow for contradictory ways of talking about – and giving meaning to –
working as an Indymedia volunteer. In coding and selecting topics and
repertoires, two such distinct levels of ‘meaning attribution’ were found. First,
on a micro or individual level, we discuss the personal involvement of people
participating in the open-publishing system of Indymedia. On a second level,
four specific ways of discussing the issues at hand can be discerned (see Figure 1) and these function in varying relationships to each other.

On a vertical line, we positioned ‘ideology’ and ‘practice’ and on a horizontal line, ‘access’ and ‘process’. Ideology comprises normative values and ideas within the IMC structure, like the consensus of the collective and concerns regarding concepts such as truth and objectivity. Practice is where open publishing shows characteristics similar to mainstream news media operations regarding traditional values such as separating the newsroom from its publics and the importance of establishing and maintaining a brand identity. Another common feature is a recognized distinction between maintainers of (media) technology (as system administrators or software developers) and editors. Although they deal with common channels, we found several different views on the selection and production of news between these two groups. Practice, therefore, concerns the various ways in which (differing and self-similar) values intersect with the daily ‘work’ in setting up and maintaining the newswire. We deliberately put ideology and practice in a vertical, hence hierarchical relationship, as ideology can be seen as an ideal type for (most) activists, and practice functions as a way to cope with all the issues that come across in the day-to-day maintenance of an online open newswire. Access concerns issues such as public access to production and distribution of news, and deals further with overall themes like (the perceived necessity of) transparency and openness in news (production). It is common within media studies to discuss access in terms, for example, of (physical) access to information, knowledge or skills but in the context of this article we focus on access to (media) technologies and modes of producing code and
content. The fourth way of talking about Indymedia journalism we defined as process and this describes how decisions are made and by whom.

Ideology can be set against practice as we found that ideals of open publishing are often in conflict with, for example, handling ‘hate’ postings, or matching the plans of editorial teams with those of the technical staff, i.e. dilemmas similar to those of any newsroom. Access can be contrasted with process in roughly the same way, as the ideal of transparent access for everyone to the making and distributing of news via Indymedia networks sometimes stands in stark contrast with the reality of having to make ‘traditional’ editorial decisions in the day-to-day management of a news site. We could argue that ideology and access correlate with the ideal type of open publishing, whereas process and practice have features similar to everyday mainstream newsroom management and decision-making. The model suggests that the four identified overall repertoires particularly function as constantly negotiated themes for (thinking about, discussing) IMC decision-making. In other words, the model serves as a framework for understanding the ways in which Indymedia activists talk about, and give meaning to, their everyday experiences with IMCs and open publishing online, accepting that ideals and dilemmas faced by these journalists are similar to those faced by the CNNs of this world – but that such issues can have different meanings in different contexts (compare with Eliasoph, 1988).

Personal involvement

Everyone has their own personal reasons why they join an IMC and participate in an open-publishing structure. How do they see and define themselves in this process, and what are their reasons for joining? Volunteers working for Indymedia are generally called participants and communicate via the internet before, during and after demonstrations worldwide. In the eyes of Indymedia journalism, everyone can be a (potential) producer of news and comment on it as such:

On one hand I see myself as an activist. On the other hand I am the audience, and also a sort of a journalist. Perhaps not a professional one but I am always looking for stories for my own radio programme. I guess I was initially attracted to it because it is a practical form of protest. It is not a symbolic protest . . . It is, you know, actually productive. It is creating a new form of social institution which I think is kind of important.

Then I came out of that church, and I was immediately photographed and people were running around with a camera, video activists that had been beaten up. And that was kind of, for me, something like: How is this possible? I was so naive. I found it incredible that this was all recorded on video, and on audio. To me a whole new world opened up!
Ideology

Moving on to a ‘higher’ level of analysis, ideology describes the ideal-typical norms and values shared by people involved with the maintenance and management of Indymedia sites, like the structure of the collective, matters concerning truth and trust, and mutual agreements on the goals to be set. The ideology of an open-publishing network such as an IMC seems to be inherently normative, as it involves consensual ideals of how open publishing should work and how people should respond to it. As an ideological concept, this value system also serves to define the way in which Indymedia works as different (or differing) from, for example, corporate newswires.

One of the guidelines within the Indymedia network is the way in which decisions should be made. Hierarchy is seen as the ‘root of all evil’ and is often a concept used for describing the way in which mainstream corporate news media organizations work. When using an open-publishing method, the opinion of the collective is the most authoritative one. The collective is usually defined by the local group and one with a specific task, such as the editorial team, for example.

Yes, we do hide articles, and we have some inner collectively decided rules to hide them. Well, there are some hiding that goes automatically. That means, whoever sees them hides them, because it is a collective rule. . . . So, we have a 24 hours consensus rule. So, if no one says anything for 24 hours, that is a matter of fact.

Most Indymedia define their way of working as showing grass roots reports from the streets. A reader’s own individual narrative is considered to be of higher value and authenticity than a report from a distance.

This is one of the main advantages of open publishing. You get direct accounts. They do not have to be true, per se. That is a little bit beside the point, I believe. It is the truthfulness of the person saying it that matters. It is the very image of that person, reporting what he/she really believes. And that strikes some chord inside of most people.

These are topics that are often discussed in dominant definitions of news reporting. Are you, as a reporter, telling the truth or not? Truth is not seen as an absolute but as an infinite sampling of perspectives of a given situation.

Is it ‘the’ other perspective of another perspective? Because if you only have ‘the’ other, well, then you only have that and nothing else! (laughs)

I think open publishing is a very powerful tool against created truth. Because in some sense, media creates well, it does not create truth. It presents stories in a certain way and open publishing can be the very means of decentralizing this truth selling. So, it is not that easy to create truth anymore if this works as it is suppose to do.
One of the informants described the ideal interaction between users of the Indymedia newswire thus:

I think Indymedia news is a public place, a kind of agora renewal, you know what I mean? Eh . . . Everyone can post there, and if the postings are interesting enough people will comment on it, and will read it, and will find it eh . . . very near to their position. So, people will be involved in the things one is saying.

What is stressed here is an explicit understanding of alternative, activist media and open publishing as media featuring an active involvement of publics. This assumed involvement functions as a way to legitimize their (voluntary) work for Indymedia as opposed to the perceived stifling of those voices in corporate news media.

**Practice**

Practice is where open publishing shows characteristics similar to mainstream media regarding traditional media values. Examples are: having a good reputation as a news network, stressing the need for immediacy and an acknowledgement of a clear distinction between the audience (readers) and producers of news. Strictly speaking, there is no difference between users, producers and maintainers of an open-publishing system. Speaking of differences between readers of an article and an editorial team seems to be ‘not done’, even though most informants indeed articulate major differences between the editorial and technical teams and their audiences.

The name Indymedia is described as something crucial when explaining the success of the news network:

The brand Indymedia is something everyone can associate with . . . eh . . . the production of media material, both written, videos, sounds, anything, images, anything directly produced by people who is participating to the events. So, Indymedia is a brand that is associated with direct production and outer production of materials of one’s own fights. But, an authoritative one. This is the difference. . . . But it also a brand network. That is what they say. It is a brand, everyone knows about it.

When covering bigger events, many reporters participate in news-making, extending both the practice and reach of the ‘brand’ identity that Indymedia can be considered to be:

What usually happens during events, like the G8’s, you set up Indymedia centres, and loads of people who have never heard about Indymedia before, get their press cards and run around taking pictures, and do their stuff. Which is a very good thing. We cover these events very good. We have reporters on every street all over the city.

The technical infrastructure of open publishing by Indymedia depends very much on (volunteer) work from programmers and system administrators.
Without their effort the system would collapse. A distinction between the editorial and technical team becomes readily apparent in the interviews. Technology ‘runs the show’ and the people in it have a huge impact on the selection of news, as they maintain the administration of the whole network and develop new codes that make multimedia reporting possible. Participants working with the more technical side of Indymedia seem to see a clear distinction between themselves and the end-users of a newswire.

Well, it is . . . in the beginning there was a kind of editorial group indeed. Although was the word ‘editorial’ was kind of forbidden (laughs, coughs). But it is indeed simply an editorial team. Because the big shameful secret now about IMC is that the tech guys are running the show. And we have these editorial boards and these editorial policies and shit. And very few tech guys actually know what the editorial team has decided, and feels . . . feels like implementing it.

Selection of content is done daily. Controversial opinions (‘hate’ postings for example) are not always welcome, although these are strictly speaking not in conflict with editorial guidelines. These guidelines state that no racist, fascist, homophobic or sexist postings are allowed. In practice, it can be very difficult to define these topics. In general, when a critical article or comment encourages violence towards a specific group or person, it is discussed within an editorial group whether it should stay in the newswire or not, or whether it should be ‘hidden’ (published elsewhere on the site with an editorial disclaimer). Also, some articles are regarded as ‘non-news’ or as not relevant for Indymedia readers.

So there were both individual people and some public writings from movements supporting the opinions of candidates of some movements or people. So, we decided this was quarrel we were not interested in. And so we decided to hide it.

On the level of practice, we find that Indymedia journalists experience rather similar issues and problems to those of news professionals in media companies and newsrooms worldwide (Weaver, 1998). Selection of content is common practice for IMC editorial teams. It is important to note here that there is no single ‘global’ way of making editorial decisions for IMCs. The dilemmas faced and guidelines posted serve as either practical or theoretical domains in which each and every local Indymedia team or site seems to pick and choose their own route.

Access

Access primarily means access to news and its production and can be particularly translated into general issues such as transparency and openness. Open uplinks to the website are considered to be of crucial importance, as is personal
two-way communication between participants. Discussions about issues related to access involve engaged notions of ‘the public’, readers and public participation. Indymedia activists define the transparency of news production as a process whereby readers and users of the open newswires can see what decisions are made and in what ways these are made, as the decision-making process becomes visible and verifiable through public mailing lists and chat channels.

Also IRC is open for everyone to participate . . . . The only problem is, well, Indymedia is an internet medium, so if you do not have a connection to it, and do not easily work with it, it is a problem.

According to me there are two ways of seeing being open regarding Indymedia. It should be open for everyone, regardless what his or her contribution is, or what he or she wants to read. And there is a second thing regarding being open. Look, the decisions taken by the editorial team, meaning like the power, the powerful elite that can still make changes to the news and what actually pops up on the screen, their decisions have to be completely transparent. Everyone has to know what, which decisions they took, and if possible, also why they took them.

Indymedia is often referred to as a medium or channel for the so-called anti-globalization movement (Hyde, 2002). Globalization themes and issues can often be found in the many newswires. Local issues are closely connected to global events and are often integrated in discussions concerning effects of political and economic globalization:

I think that political scopes are widening so when you try to do something political, to have political interventions, some themes, some issues and so on, you cannot think of them but as European. Because at least, because all of the political interventions of state and so on, will be more and more coordinated on wider groups, wider blocs of states, and institutions that determine the global policies of the world. So, when you think about doing an intervention of digital rights you cannot just think of your own garden.

There are still certain (Indymedia) sites where they do not use open publishing. Those are countries where certain issues are very sensitive, for example in Colombia. I mean, I am an advocate of open publishing, but Colombia is one of those countries where things like that are very sensitive. Those are things like Indymedia, well, left-wing ideas in general actually. You have to be careful then.

Access to news and publishing is connected to the ideas behind the open-source movement where information is freely distributed and exchanged between communities (Preecs, 2000). The main software codes (Active, SF Active, MIR) used by Indymedia are based on the idea that news as well as its sources and production processes should be shared in order to obtain a fuller perspective on an issue or event. Editorial work has to be as transparent as possible to stimulate and activate public debate. We find that these ideals of
opening up the news production process closely connect with (recent) developments in the (predominantly US-based) civic journalism movement – for example, a 2001 survey among 512 US newspapers by the Campaign Study Group (2001) showed that at least seven out of 10 newspapers offer readers one or more avenues for publishing their own ideas (other than the traditional letters to the editor). The way in which these Indymedia activists discuss access, however, seems to open up further avenues of shared selection, creation and distribution of information – indeed taking the ideals of the public or civic journalism movement one step further.

It is the same [comparing it with free software] in that in both ways of collaboratively creating things. And doing in a way that people can get involved in the project without necessarily the full commitment. So they can just publish one story, or they can get involved in the core group, you know. They have that option and that is what free software is about, and open publishing is about, I guess. This ease of getting involved. This ease of seeing how it works. According to me there are two ways of seeing being open regarding Indymedia. It should be open for every random person, regardless what his or her contribution is, or what he or she wants to read. And there is a second thing regarding being open. Look, the decisions taken by the editorial meaning like the power, the powerful elite that can still make changes to the news and what actually pops up on the screen, their decisions have to be completely transparent. Everyone has to know what, which decisions they took, and if possible, also why they took them.

**Process**

Process deals with how decisions are made, how easy or difficult it is to be part of (and check) the news-making process. This repertoire varies according to the way in which a local IMC uses the open-publishing newswire structure. A core group, an editorial or technical team, determines it and it strongly correlates with their personal involvement with the issues at hand. Controlling content in an open-publishing newswire seems to be a paradox in itself. On the one hand, that control is solely up to the reader and user since everything can be published on the newswire. On the other hand – as we mentioned earlier – there is a strong selection regarding what kind of content can stay online on the very same newswire:

Maybe we will take the most meaningful comments, and photos and stuff, and put them into this special page. But, that is all we will do. It is not an alteration but a coordination of content, you know.

Open-publishing software enables readers to post and comment on articles where control over content is shifted from a selected group or person – the professional journalist or an editorial team – to the reader of news. Control of quality and ‘truth’ stays in the hand of the reader as well since every news item can be commented upon and argued about.
I think that Active, and in many ways IMC, because of Active, really embodies the vision of what publishing should be, and I think there are some core insights there about transparency, about the media, about really giving the people feedback and sense of control. You know, ideally we would like to be able to delete articles, but when we felt sort of cheesy. We sort of felt like ‘who are we to set up ourselves as censors?’ . . . But, to actually take people’s content off, just for the sake of presentation, seemed a bit much. I mean, the only way of doing it then is to like manually indicate, you know, have some person, or group of people who are like ‘Oh, we think this is a good article’.

I think people should be able to figure out by themselves whether it is a stupid article or not, and comment on it as such.

It is fascinating to observe the active negotiation going on here between the ideals of open publishing and enabling participation for all, typical ‘journalistic’ ideals of maintaining some kind of quality standard of information, and wanting to have editorial control over a published story and storytelling in general. It seems that Indymedia activists share at least some of the same insecurities regarding the dilemmas and promises of online publishing as their counterparts in mainstream news media and online journalism, in particular (Russel, 2001; Deuze and Dimoudi, 2002; Deuze and Paulussen, 2002).

Discussion

In this article, we have described the ideas behind the IMC news model and analysed how these can be understood as being different from or similar to the production of content in corporate news media organizations. On an ideological level, open publishing deals with issues of truth and objectivity and assumes a close and non-hierarchical relationship between reader and content, where each reader/user tells her or his own story of an event. This widens the scope of news, as there is no system of formal editorial guidelines on how an event should be reported. This informal system appears as an oppositional reading and producing of news, choosing a perspective other than that which is published in mainstream media. One clear example is taking a picture facing a police officer and not facing demonstrators. Whose side do you take when reporting an event? As proclaimed in Indymedia journalism: ‘Do not fear the media. Be the media’; likewise in alternative and community media: ‘Our Media, Not Theirs’ (see http://faculty.menlo.edu/~jhiggins/ourmedia/).

Looking at open publishing on a more practical level, there are certain similarities with mainstream news media, for example regarding the use of a brand name and identity as a kind of authoritative voice in news broadcasting. This attracts potential reporters to this voluntary news network. Immediacy in
reporting and working with the latest technologies when doing so are also traits similar to many modern national and international news broadcasters.

When considering access we see bigger differences between the types of journalism in IMCs and the way in which mainstream media corporations work. There is much (professed) transparency in how editorial and technological decisions are made, as these tend to be publicly accessible through open, web-based mailing lists and IRC channels. What mainstream media newspaper has a public mailing list where readers can see and participate in the decisions on what article will show up on the front page the next day? Access also concerns the ease of getting involved in Indymedia as a reader, reporter or commentator of news. Everyone can let her or his view be heard through the open newswires and moderating occurs by publics among themselves. Ideally, a critical opinion does not suffer the constraint of an editorial policy or a restricted view on what is understood as belonging to a supposed ‘authoritative voice’ of the interpretative community that journalism is or implicitly claims to be (Zelizer, 1993). However, IMC groups are making editorial decisions and news selection does take place. Importantly, Indymedia activists and users are free from concerns regarding the commercial interests of advertisers, sponsors or media companies.

In process we see the other side of the coin, as some kind of content selection does exist. Open publishing is not the same as free speech and discriminatory articles and postings are hidden or taken away by an editorial group – even though this practice may differ from IMC to IMC as most of the Indymedia sites have their own particular way of operationalizing the ideals and dilemmas recorded in our interviews. When defining what kind of content discriminates, an IMC editorial team inherently sets itself apart from (or above) the end-users of the newswire and, therefore, faces similar issues and problems as reporters and editors of mainstream corporate news media.

Finally, is it possible for corporate news media to incorporate the principles and ideas of the online alternative media model Indymedia stands for? At first glance, the answer to this question seems to be: ‘no’. The IMC model of news-making has some interesting features regarding shared control over content and code, a strong commitment to transparency and an almost completely non-hierarchical relationship with its users. Even though we have seen that these features often pose problems and questions very similar to those faced by corporate news professionals (especially now that an increasing number of news publications in the corporate sector seem to be exploring new ways to reconnect with their publics), the ways of solving such problems by Indymedia activists are based on different ways of coping with ideological or ideal-typical journalistic principles (like truth, ethics and inclusive storytelling). Yet the problems faced when publishing any kind of news online are
similar regardless of professional or activist ideology. This suggests that there is room for exchange and learning. Certainly Indymedia journalism is a radical way of sharing and selecting news. But it is not that much different from established forms of journalism in the kind of problems, issues and editorial discussions it faces in the practice of everyday publishing. In particular the participatory building-blocks of the IMC newswire – editorial mailing lists, chat, open publishing – offer new ways of looking at journalism’s function in fostering and amplifying public debate. Seen in this light, mainstream news media may look at Indymedia not through a limited lens of a political-economic anti-globalization channel but through the professional lens of a ‘competitor-colleague’ journalism which may yet prove to be the crucible for new ways of reconnecting journalism, news and media professionals with ideals of sharing access and participatory storytelling in journalism.

Notes

3 Many Indymedia use the internet as an audio streaming channel. This is particularly the case during bigger demonstrations. In Gothenburg, June 2001, a special studio was set up to broadcast live reports from the streets to a global audience. People could call in their reports via cellular phones or by using IRC chat channels. One example of such a report is ‘Radio Account of Swedish Elite Police Raid on Schillerska School’ by the IMC radio team. URL: http://sweden.indymedia.org/front.php3?article_id = 1422.
5 At a conference held from 1–11 December, 1997 in Kyoto, Japan, the parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change agreed to an historic protocol to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by harnessing the forces of the global marketplace to protect the environment.
6 The right to protest is protected under the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights; Article 20 asserts a right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association; Article 19 asserts the right to freedom of opinion and expression.
7 No corporation owns Indymedia, no government manages the organization and no single donor finaces the project. People involved with Indymedia have a wide variety of political and personal viewpoints. Anyone may participate in organizing and posting to Indymedia newswires. Many Indymedia organizers and people who post to the sites have political opinions that can be located along the left side of the political spectrum, yet each individual chooses his/her own level of involvement.
8 Where it says ‘I’ in this article, the authors refer to Sara Platon unless stated otherwise.
The Indymedia software started off with one version called ‘Active’. Other programmers developed it further and there are now two other programs called ‘SF Active’ and ‘MIR’. All three are available as free software to download from various locations on the internet.

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