

of collectives can be slow and painful. Different political attitudes and preferences need to be bridged, local needs taken into consideration. Also, Indymedia UK never lived outside existing historical political power-structures. For instance, it was important for the Scottish collective to have an autonomous platform - being hosted on indymedia UK was an intermediary solution rather than a permanent one.

Maybe motivation to put time into a project is connected to strong sociability amongst collectives, regular exchange and communication both online and face to face. It is hard to try out mad experiments in a large network. For these and certainly many other reasons, several regional groups in Indymedia UK decided to start their own platforms running on a variety of code-bases.

What would we win if we'd control facebook today? A platform where all users own their data? Would we want to spend our time on providing a huge platform for everybody, in addition to day-jobs, activist and other commitments? Is it an either / or decision? Is there another way? What would it mean to break the power of facebook & Co? When I read about the software summit in Whitechapel, I got a sense that we can start small, once again. Many politically aware people are developing alternatives to corporate social networks. Small, carefully coded projects with a painstakingly detailed awareness of specific needs might eventually shift the cultural construction of the internet in a way that makes corporate data-mining sites look stupid and outdated.

To comment or debate this article go to: <https://london.indymedia.org.uk/articles/4773>

Other articles linked to this are: Software Summit in Whitechapel
<https://london.indymedia.org.uk/articles/4762>

Sites mentioned: www.riseup.net / <http://crabgrass.riseup.net/> / www.aktivix.org

Remember: indymedia code was written to protect your security, this is what sets it apart from other internet platforms.

Indymedia is a global network of sites there for you to bypass the corporate media. Use it, support it.

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Three essays written and posted to Indymedia London covering social networking, activist media, your data security its relation to the commodification of the internet.

- (1) Indymedia and the Enclosure of the Internet (yoss)
- (2) Corporate Social Networking... How Cool is That? (maqui)
- (3) Non-Corporate Social Networks (ionnek)

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Indymedia and the Enclosure of the Internet

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 by IMC Boston to do Drupal development work for Indymedia sites.

The grant application was blocked by IMC Rosario 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 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 or aktivix.org 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.

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 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 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 (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 (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 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>

To comment or debate this article go to: <https://london.indymedia.org.uk/articles/203>

Corporate Social Networking... How Cool Is That!

Sparkled from some articles posted to Indymedia London recently about Non Corporate Social Networks and a report from the Software Summit that took place in Whitechapel, as well as an audio interview to Eben Moglen of the Free Software Foundation also published to this site not long ago, I share below some of the reasons why I think corporate social nut-workin is so cool!

"To try to own knowledge, to try to control whether people are allowed to use it, or to try to stop other people from sharing it, is sabotage." – Richard Stallman, 1986.

Desktops, laptops, notebooks, mobile phones, blackberries, I-phones, the list of available devices that allows us to be 'connected' in real time seems to increase by the minute. To be constantly 'available' online seems to be a primary preoccupation for most people these days, and the big corporations obviously know about this. Google, Yahoo, Microsoft, Apple ... they all compete 'to help us being in touch'. To be there, to be on the ball, and to make sure we know 'what's going on' even before it has actually happened. We don't need to worry any more, they tell us, we'll never be isolated again. It is very easy, we only need to go down to our nearest shopping mall or high street, buy the latest gadget, join one of the platforms they offer us and bingo!, we can immediately become someone with a voice and big presence in the web. Set up a Facebook profile and create your own page there, create your Twitter account, put your media in Youtube, Flickr or Myspace, and who knows, before your switch your device off to re-charge it you may even have tens, hundreds or thousands of followers. Not bad eh? You have now become your own DIY celebrity.

It sounds cool and an easy enough thing to do, doesn't it? But, of course, there's always a catch. Governments – with the aid of the big buck corporations of course – seem to have had enough of the free for all, open, democratic and horizontal space the web once was, and with excuses such as 'organised crime', 'terrorism' and 'piracy' they clearly now seem bound to enclose the internet once and for all. Legislation that clearly attacks your privacy is being introduced everywhere, and the beauty of being able to freely share knowledge and data with others is also increasingly being treated as illegitimate and 'theft', and thus punishable as a crime. Obviously governments and global institutions of governance can't do this on their own. They don't even control the internet. But corporations do, and they are increasingly becoming the web's police force. Your internet service provider is now required by law to log and keep your internet

usage for a long period of time, and if they don't like the way you use the connection they 'offer' you they can just legally switch you off. Like an over zealous school teacher that expels you from the class for being too naughty, your ISP can now expel you from the internet for downloading too much data from 'illegal' sources, or for sharing too much content with your peers.

But hey, I don't do anything wrong myself you may think. I am ok. I just use my Facebook and Twitter accounts for very innocuous things. I have a Youtube channel under my name and some Flickr pages too, but these are only for my holiday and party snaps. It doesn't really matter, they can survey me as much as they like, because there's nothing there that may interest them. Well, sorry, you are wrong. There's a lot that interests them in your data. As innocuous you think it may be, it is still data, and this is the prime resource these corporations make big bucks with. Without you putting your videos, photos, texts, audio on these corporate platforms, and without you networking in there or even organising your events – thus legitimising their existence – they would not have the raw material necessary to exist, expand and conquer.

All data you put up in Facebook, Flickr, Myspace, Twitter .. you name it! immediately becomes private property of big business, and thus marketable as capital's commodities. They make the bucks, not you, and that's the primary reason why they are so keen in offering you the possibility to be endlessly connected. Ok, you can argue that this is nothing new as, for example, they already own your labour force anyway. You already have got to work so you can pay your bills, so what's the story then? Well, one could argue that the story goes like this: your data is not only becoming property of private corporations, but more importantly, increasingly YOU also do! Getting hold of your privacy is one of their main interests. Knowing who you talk to, who are your friends and networks, what do you actually do with them, what are your interests and how do you go about experiencing them, is something they take as raw and primary material to then package it and sell it back to you. Yes, but still, you may argue, I am not doing anything wrong so it doesn't really matter what they do with my data, besides there's nothing I can do about it, is there?. Ok, put it this way: would you want to install a video camera in your bedroom recording all you do in there, or wire your home with microphones so your everyday life gets recorded and put in databases that, by the way, are totally beyond your control? No? You wouldn't? Why not? You are not doing anything wrong, are you?

Like most things in life, at the end of the day it is down to us to decide what kind of relationship we want to have with the current state of affairs, and what do we do to try to retain as much control of our lives as we can. And the internet is not a different reality. You ultimately have the choice to continue in the hands of big corporations because it is convenient and easier to do, or, alternatively, you may want to consider to be more careful with what web platforms you use for your everyday communications. The choices are out there for us to embrace. We just need to want to do so.

To comment or debate this article go to: <https://london.indymedia.org.uk/articles/4787>

Non-corporate social networks

I read a summary of the software summit in Whitechapel, sounded like a phantastic meeting! Then I came across an article in the New York Times about some students coding a distributed alternative to facebook. So I thought I'd make a list of non-corporate social networks and discuss them in relation to corporate platforms, as a belated remote contribution to the summit.

When facebook first started, many activists wouldn't go anywhere near it. Today, many political-minded individuals use it to disseminate interesting articles amongst their friends, and many political groups have their own facebook presence - for instance the EuroMayDay circle in Hamburg. At the same time, general unease with facebook's hunger for users data is growing.

For a few years now, activist groups have created online platforms with the characteristics of social network sites but tailored to activist needs. The ability to accumulate friends, create groups, give quick status updates, chat is combined with hosting on secure servers controlled by movements rather than corporations, sensible privacy settings and places to collaborate online.

Some of the social network features were satisfied by the indymedia Twiki. Combined with mailing lists and chatrooms as well as the indymedia websites, it allowed online collaboration in a more "private" way - publicly available, but rarely linked from websites. As an indymedia volunteer, I also used it to manually manage my contacts, as people mostly used the same nicknames in chat, mailing lists and the twiki. But I never used it for "public note-taking" like I do for instance on my N-1 blog.

Indymedia volunteers culturally constructed indymedia and its backoffice for clearly political purposes. It would have seemed wrong to ramble on about non-political personal experiences, jokes, games, individual meaning-making, everyday stuff. This is visible in the moderating policies on the indymedia newswires. In order to keep the site concise, many indymedia collectives developed rather strict policies on what is suitable for the front page newswire, what gets moved a few clicks away and what is hidden. Sometimes, it's references to cultural events or practices that don't fit in, sometimes it's announcements of events, sometimes it's articles that don't refer to a specified geographical area.

Facebook (and flickr, youtube, myspace etc) did not only automatise some of the functions that were conducted manually in the indymedia and its backoffice. I think an important reason for facebook's success was its cultural construction which, ironically, in some ways was more open than the indymedia cosmos. Open to individuals and whatever they wanted to communicate about. On the other hand, it would seem weird

to use facebook to organise political meetings, work out agendas and protest events. Not because these things are necessarily secret - the indymedia twiki is completely open to anyone who wants to see it; but because they don't fit into the cultural set-up of facebook.

The first activist platform taking a non-corporate social network approach I used was riseup: a massive wiki farm with a "friends" function, chat, groups and document management functions coded by activists in the US. Many activists groups use it for political organising.

N-I, coded by activists in Spain, takes a slightly different approach. It has a blogging function which can be read as an invitation to communicate about things that are not directly part of a defined, collectively organised political project. And I think it hasn't got a wiki (or has it?).

Indymedia London with its code "hyperactive" is trying to insert some social network functions into the indymedia format - if you chose to log in, you can create groups, edit your articles, publicise events on a comfortable calendar.

Recently, four students in New York started to code their own alternative to facebook. Diaspora will be a platform that runs on distributed servers (just like in the old days). It doesn't seem to cater mainly for activist/political needs, but maybe it will be a place to mix political and just social communications.

These are just some alternatives to corporate online platforms I know of. There are many more. Will these efforts eventually shift the internet away from corporate data-mining? Looking at Indymedia as a template, I see obstacles to that.

First, technologies of scale. Indymedia, when it started, was cutting edge technology, generated by a convergence of excellent programmers, organisers, alternative media makers and activists. It was to my knowledge the first global alternative media project. But it has been overrun by corporate platforms which are in many ways easier to use, have stronger servers, less down-time, are quicker to add new functionalities. Many efforts to update the indymedia code have not yet led to THE new, upgraded concept that every collective wants to use: a comfortable, multi-media, stable, software that continues the open publishing model and combines it with new functionality. A model that would link the multiplicity of existing radical web-projects (blogs, websites, wikis etc) together without forcing them to give up their autonomy. A model that would also include the not-quite-as-straightforwardly-political communications. A platform that I could use as my gateway to the web rather than an information site for a clearly defined political purpose.

Technologies of scale leads to the second point: money/resources. I don't think indymedia lost its cutting edge due to a lack of knowledge, but to a lack of money. We all need to pay the rent, or food, or healthcare etc. We can't earn money by developing and maintain new radical online platforms. Sometimes there are synergies - skills move forward and backward between wage labour and activist labour. The time we have for political activities is restricted by the need to do wage labour - or fulfill the requirements

attached to the benefit system. Some of us spend a few years living very cheaply and reducing the time spent on earning money to a minimum, but this is difficult to uphold as you grow older, start families etc. Ok, maybe its not a lack of money, but a lack of sustainability - we can't meet all our basic needs through activism. Or, as a report on the hyperactive summit states:

"There will be powerful corporate-owned mass media until the capitalist system can be replaced with more participatory institutions throughout the economic system. Indymedia cannot win until everybody wins."

Third, cultural construction. Had social movements wanted to create an online platform for the general public 10 years ago, they could have done it. But the aim was "a network of alternative communication", not a general platform for personal diary keeping, general comment, neighbourhood organising, exchange on hobbies like cooking or trainspotting, anything that people do in their everyday lives. The result was indymedia - a clearly political platform, with a huge backoffice that taught many of us how to use the net, while we developed it according to our own needs. Indymedia worked as an online gateway to altermondialismo. But - it tended to be closed to the more personal, everyday aspects of life that even activists have. You couldn't use the indymedia wiki to prepare, for instance, a family meeting to celebrate your reactionary grandfathers 80th birthday, or keep in touch with your straighter friends.

The Hamburg Euromayday circle decided to use facebook in order to mix activist activities with other sociabilities - friends, family, people who may be sympathetic to the politics of Euromayday, but are not directly or permanently involved. Riseup or indymedia cannot be used in this way. You'd need to convince all your non-activist friends and relations to join one of these platforms first - on facebook, they are already there. By now, Euromayday Hamburg is generating a lively communication flow about events, occurrences in personal daily lives, and interesting links on facebook - while their website is only used sporadically, although it has an open publishing function.

Fourth, the strive to autonomy and self organising. Part of the attraction of social activism is the chance to run your own projects, to not only participate, but to control what is happening: a degree of autonomy. As was pointed out in the keynote on the hyperactive summit, there is no technical reason why all indymedia sites should not be run on one single platform. It was a political decision to set up many separate indymedia sites, each run autonomously by a collective. Setting up an indymedia site was deliberately not a one-click affair like today's blog-farms, but a political process that also involved raising resources - people, knowledge, technological infrastructure.

Indymedia UK with its MIR codebase was a step in a different direction - it was an effort to pool resources. For a few years, almost all indymedia collectives in the UK shared one platform, which was controlled collectively by consensus decisionmaking. Content from all regions were fed to the Indymedia UK newswire by one tick of a box, technical resources and knowledge were shared.

But consensus decisionmaking in such a large and geographically distributed network