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## Indymedia (The Independent Media Center)

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# **Encyclopedia of Social Movement Media**

## **Indymedia (The Independent Media Center)**

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The Independent Media Center (IMC) was born in Seattle, Washington, in late 1999, during mass demonstrations against the neoliberal mandates of the World Trade Organization (WTO). A loose coalition of media activists, social movement organizers, and open-source computer designers, realizing that the mainstream media would not adequately represent the demonstrators' varied perspectives on global social justice, opened a downtown storefront dubbed the Independent Media Center. One hundred fifty volunteers reported on the week of teach-ins, street protests, and cultural activities, for a variety of old and new media. These included a daily newspaper, a low-power FM radio station, the national Pacifica Radio network, and a documentary video project.

In addition, a team of computer designers set up a powerful new website, <http://indymedia.org>, with an open source design, and “open publishing” capacities, which provided a 24/7 forum for anyone with Internet access to upload text, audio, photographs, or video content to or from anywhere in the world. The IMC outperformed the mainstream media, providing reports for alternative and commercial media across the planet. Most notably, the website received a million and a half hits from all over the world.

The Seattle IMC rejected the commercial media international news model, in which a corps of professional journalists, relying on a small number of powerful government and corporate sources, package information for global audiences through the branded channels of a handful of transnational media corporations. They also turned down the approach of the international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), whose professional spokes-people mostly stick to the narrow talking points of reform they think acceptable to the mainstream press and policymakers.

Instead, the IMC critiqued both models and set about to assemble a corps of volunteers who would combine accurate reporting with perspectives infused by their commitment to social and economic justice. They also opened up their site to the interactive participation of people underrepresented in corporate and public service models of media production and content.

This practical demonstration of a collaborative way of making media, and of harnessing the global capacity of the Internet to produce and circulate multimedia information, resonated with activists in the emerging global justice movement. The IMC quickly became their platform of choice. The numbers of Indymedia centers grew during the ensuing wave of international protests against the WTO and its parallel organizations, such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the Free Trade of the Americas, and the G8/G20. By 2004, the global Indymedia network included 150 autonomously operated local centers, complemented by transnational technical support and special media production teams, and a shared technical infrastructure, in more than 50 countries.

The IMC was the first global site to adopt easy-to-use interactive web features, which later became an accepted part of the web 2.0 menu. However, equally important was the network's “DNA” of participatory democracy which informed every activity, from the consensus-based forms of decision making of each media production team and autonomous site, to the open publishing, archiving, and collaborative software. As the network grew, teams developed new ways to promote local and transnational cooperation, from easier language translation functions, to more participatory forms of discussion, production, and editing.

The technical crew espoused the collaborative problem-solving ethos of the Free and Open Source Software (FLOSS) movement and built the site with free software and open source code. The resulting decentralized network structure spurred the IMC's rapid growth as centers

everywhere could quickly share the resources. Many centers shared servers, operating code, systems of content management, and the basic webpage logo and layout. After signing onto a common agreement with the network, each center was encouraged to manage itself, making central overhead costs minimal. However, most participants were deeply critical of funding models based on government, foundation, or INGO support, and no consensus was ever achieved as to how to sustain such a complex transnational operation; almost all of the sites relied on volunteer labor and donations.

When the intense initial wave of protests waned in 2001, the global IMC shifted to providing news reports from a wide diversity of social justice movements. These varied from worldwide protests against the war in Iraq, to regional, national, and local campaigns for political, social, economic, and environmental justice.

Several solidarity teams set up in centers of global conflict, such as Palestine and Iraq, or Africa and Latin America, where there were fewer digital technology resources. Intra-regional projects enabled collaboration across arbitrary national borders originally established by the colonial powers. For example, Indymedia Estrecho linked collectives from Spain, the Canary Islands, and Morocco, while the Oceania hub aggregated features from across Southeast Asia and the Pacific region.

### **The Global and the Local**

Many IMC sites also began to experiment with different ways of utilizing media. In Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, for example, the IMC created a multimedia center in a former post office, started a free monthly paper funded by local labor groups, and helped organize a new community radio station.

In many countries of the global South, which had very few Internet hookups or even phones, IMC activists worked with the existing circuits of social movement communications. In México's Chiapas State, the birthplace of the Zapatista movement, whose approach to radical grassroots democracy had inspired many "IMCistas," the IMC team provided extensive training for local organizations in using audiotapes and radio. In Brazil, they also began primarily off-line, using existing community radio and video networks, video screenings in poor neighborhoods or public places, or printed news-sheets, distributed in schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods.

In Ecuador, the IMC organized three independent film festivals of social documentaries from Latin America. In Argentina, the IMC teams facilitated the video documentation of groups of unemployed workers, youth, neighborhood activists, and the Mapuche, an aboriginal people.

The astonishing pace of development was not without growing pains. Like many of its radical media precursors, the IMC Network had to deal with constant problems of sustainability, uneven and unequal distribution of financial, technical, and social resources among people around the globe, difficulties in overcoming long-standing social power differences among volunteers, and attacks from hostile governments and individuals. In addition to these problems, they faced the difficulties inherent in sustaining a more democratic communications model in an increasingly enclosed corporate media environment.

IMCs were consistently raided by national and international security agencies, for example, in Canada, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Several sites, especially the global Israel and Palestine IMCs, were systematically attacked. For example, in 2002, in

advance of the meetings of the European Union in Barcelona, the Spanish police announced they were tracking the IMC and other alternative information networks. In October 2004, just before a European Social Forum meeting on Communication Rights, the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation seized the hard drives of servers in the United States and United Kingdom, which linked 20 IMC sites, claiming they were elements in an “international terrorism investigation.” After an international solidarity campaign, the servers were returned, and the IMC discovered that the Italian and Swiss governments had prompted the actions.

IMC's openness also made it vulnerable. For example, the innovative text messaging and Internet reports during the New York protests against the Republican National Convention in 2004 provided both demonstrators and police with up-to-the-minute reports.

### **Free Expression, Censorship, and Archiving**

Partly in response, many local centers and the network as a whole began to practice more content selection, editing, and control of spam/flames, although many of the original crews protested this turn toward gatekeeping. By 2004, the global Newswire Working Group routinely cleared duplicate posts and commercial messages and hid hostile posts to encourage wider participation. Several sites, such as IMC Germany, explicitly filtered the newswire for racist, fascist, sexist, and anti-Semitic content, as well as for newness or originality of analysis.

By 2005, the growth of the global network began to slow. Many of the sites imploded, as the end of highly visible international street protests halted recruitment. Local teams were less able to sustain the long hours of unpaid work or to overcome differences of political perspective or social power. In addition, the IMC began to be eclipsed as the platform of protest in many countries. YouTube, Facebook, and similar commercial sites adopted their open publishing features. By 2007, those social justice organizations, with easy access to digital equipment and broadband, were routinely posting their reports to these commercial services. At the same time, a new generation of digitally rich youth no longer turned to the IMC as a media outlet.

However, the IMC continued to provide news, information, and commentary not readily available anywhere else. It was the first-on-the-scene in 2008, as Greek students demonstrated against their right-wing national government, and again, in 2009, during the resistance to the right-wing coup in Honduras. In addition, specialized teams provided more thematic features about social justice campaigns of students, Indigenous people, immigrants, and peace activists, for example. In the face of serious deficits in local and international mainstream news coverage, the IMC's timely multimedia coverage of protests, and links to other informational sites around the world, ensured their relevance.

- open source
- Indymedia
- open source software
- protest
- community radio
- independent media
- radio networks

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**See Also**

- [Alternative Media at Political Summits](#)
- [Anarchist Media](#)
- [Indymedia and Gender](#)
- [Indymedia: East Asia](#)
- [Radical Software \(United States\)](#)

**Further Readings**

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Studies of Indymedia: <https://docs.indymedia.org/Global/ImcEssayCollectionSimple>