

Indymedia and the long story of rebellion against neoliberal capitalism

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Abstract

Indymedia was born of the anti-globalisation movement of the late 1990s and quickly spread to become a social movement in its own right. This article reflects on how prescient the claims of the anti-globalisation movement have proven to be and how 20 years ago Indymedia and the anti-globalisation movement predicted there was trouble ahead and that neoliberalism was a central part of the problem. It notes how a history of struggle and protest emanating from the days of Indymedia has developed over time building a counter-politics that is becoming ever wiser about the multiple intersectional harms of capitalism and ever more sophisticated in its political response. The challenge is what comes next.

Keywords

activism, anti-globalisation, Indymedia, Internet, neoliberalism, protest

Indymedia is now part of history – something to look back on fondly and mull over the good old days when protest seemed to matter and the Internet still held the promise of revolutionary potential. It was born of the anti-globalisation movement of the late 1990s and quickly spread to become a social movement in its own right. It came into the public consciousness at what became known as ‘The Battle of Seattle’ on 30 November 1999 (Fenton, 2016). As an alliance of labour and environmental activists congregated in Seattle in opposition to the neoliberal politics of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), little did they know that just under 10 years later we would be in the grips of a financial crisis brought about by some of the very forces they were objecting to. Although the

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Battle of Seattle was portrayed by much of the mainstream media as a group of anarchists hell-bent on destruction, in reality the anti-globalisation movement was made up of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), debt campaigners, students and indigenous peoples, all finding common cause in the harms committed by forms of trade liberalisation that undermine local economies, decimate communities and serve global corporate expansion above all else (Downing, 2003). How very prescient.

Twenty years later, neoliberalism has run amok. The brutal form of capitalism that many of us now exist within has massively increased global and national inequality with the accumulation of wealth in ever fewer hands (Dorling, 2014; Oxfam, 2019) and has led to more precarious and insecure labour (Armstrong, 2018), with increases in poverty (Armstrong, 2018; Piketty, 2014) and massive environmental degradation as a result of extractive relations to nature (IPCC, 2018) alongside the hollowing out of democracy by market forces (Brown, 2015). And as Fraser and Jaeggi (2018) note, it has involved ‘the corporate capture of political parties and public institutions at the level of the territorial state . . . [and] . . . the usurpation of political decision making power at the transnational level by global finance’ (p. 3).

Twenty years ago, the protest against the neoliberal policies that contributed to the current crises was huge, transnational and fast moving. A petition of more than 1700 groups, mostly from the Global South, was raised within a day to object to how the WTO talks were being conducted. At the time, it was believed to be one of the largest and fastest responses ever on a global protest issue made possible because of digital communications (Halleck, 2002). Back then, that seemed to count. Now of course, hundreds of thousands can sign petitions from all over the world and no one blinks an eye. This was followed by a march of more than 5000 people led by steelworkers, trade unions and students indicative of a new mode of coalition building and an increased awareness that neoliberal trade policy was destroying livelihoods around the world and wreaking havoc on the environment. Simultaneously, it was claimed that nearly 1200 NGOs in 87 countries called for the wholesale reform of the WTO staging their own protests wherever they were located. The Internet became a crucial part of their strategies. The Independent Media Centre, itself a coalition of different alternative media groups and activists, was formed to provide grassroots coverage and counter mainstream misrepresentations, respond to journalists, and distribute up to the minute reports, video footage, photos and audio. As one activist said, ‘Indymedia goes to where the silences are’ (cited in Pickard, 2006: 20). During the Seattle demonstration, the site logged more than 2 million hits and was featured on major news outlets. This was collective citizen journalism combined with Internet activism, and it worked. Independent Media Centres sprang up on every continent connecting protests around the world, building participation in the movement and bringing people news and information they were unable to get from the mainstream media while attempting to provide non-hierarchical and inclusive forms of media production, at a speed that was unprecedented (Pickard, 2006). Indymedia was exciting and hopeful: this was the moment that democratic, non-corporate, citizen-controlled media production could flourish – it had a movement to organise around and a platform to distribute from (Kidd, 2003). Yet, 20 years on things have only got worse – we are faced with massive and unprecedented inequality, exasperated citizens in degenerative democracies with deeply degraded public spheres – so did Indymedia fail? What sense can we make of this as media scholars?

While the protests may change and the media activism adapts to the technological environment it is part of, the same questions about who holds the balance of power pertain now as they did then. The media activist is able to use digital media to mobilise social protest but seems unlikely to be able to overthrow global capitalism. And while alternative media producers can circulate oppositional and counter-hegemonic content with increasing ease, legacy media still dominates the media landscape (Media Reform Coalition (MRC), 2018). Even after Indymedia's heyday, when digital activism was sometimes (and wrongly) credited with sole responsibility for the uprisings that came to be known as the Arab Spring, more measured analyses have noted how elite power often works behind our backs and out of view and is largely unaffected by major forms of protest that have followed in the anti-globalisation movement's wake (such as Occupy, the Umbrella movement and pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, and climate change strikes across many nations). We have more protest than ever before and more radical media sites, production and distribution than ever before, yet we also have to recognise that global inequalities between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless are increasing while environmental degradation continues apace.

One simple response is that as inspiring and exciting as digital activism can be, technology alone is never the answer if global capitalism is the problem. Digital activism may begin with a revolutionary impulse but too often becomes the end focus itself as the means of communication is invested with the ability to undermine dominant power and challenge authority. However radical alternative media is and digital activism can be, turned inwards it becomes fragmentary and loses sight of the broader politics and solidarity building required to form counter-hegemonic blocs and shift power. Some media theorists were lured into the same trap and too quickly heralded new technology as political saviour. Much of this literature chimes with Castells' argument that the Internet offers multiple prospects for intervention and manipulation coming from a myriad of social nodes that can combine to create a new symbolic counter-force capable of shifting dominant power relations and empowering sovereign audiences through the creative autonomy bestowed upon them. Ultimately, Castells (2009) suggests this could provide 'the material and cultural basis for the anarchist utopia of networked self-management to become a social practice' (p. 346) such that 'significant political change will result, in due time, from the actions of networked social movements' p. 312). Such accounts depend on the implicit assumptions about the consequential relations between networked communications and political demands that will result in social and political change. But the political demands were often unclear. The radical democratic politics on which Indymedia operated sought to diminish structural inequalities and be dynamically decentralised, non-hierarchical, inclusive and open – a politics deemed well-suited to the architecture of the Internet. Hence, although many of the activists involved were vehemently opposed to corporate capitalism, they were reluctant to organise around this principle for fear of adopting what could be seen as yet another totalising and exclusionary grand narrative.

Twenty years on and few remain in thrall to the revolutionary potential of the Internet that has been well and truly captured by capitalism. The tech giants dominate our digital lives – Facebook, Alphabet (the parent company of Google), Amazon, Microsoft and Apple together have a combined annual revenue larger than the gross domestic product

(GDP) of 90% of the world's countries (Lawrence and Laybourn-Langton, 2019). Apple is the first trillion-dollar company in history. Jeff Bezos, the founder and owner of Amazon, is the richest person in history, with his net wealth increasing by US\$400 million a day in 2018. These corporations form the largest oligopolies the world has ever seen. They are resistant to traditional forms of regulation and are largely out of reach of democratically organised political will-formation.

Meanwhile, Facebook is fast becoming the dominant digital platform for news. Google has some 90% of global desktop search, and Google and Facebook together account for around two-thirds of all digital advertising in the United States (eMarketer, 2019). According to the *Wall Street Journal* (2017), 85 cents of every dollar spent on digital advertising in America goes to Google and Facebook, evidence of a concentration of market power in two companies that not only own the playing field but are able to set the rules of the game as well. And in 2019 they soaked up 67% of the world's digital ad spend (eMarketer, 2019). These companies are not only the most concentrated forms of media ownership we have ever seen, but they are also key to the contemporary condition of advanced capitalism. The bewildering market power wielded by the likes of Google and Facebook has not come at the expense of the influence of mainstream press and broadcasters. Google, Facebook and Twitter are, if anything, *reinforcing* the agenda-setting power of the mainstream news brands by facilitating their increased circulation through algorithms. The gatekeeping power of Google and Facebook works *in tandem* with that of mainstream news providers, mutually reinforcing each other around what they consider to be real, legitimate and authoritative news (MRC, 2018).

Technology may not be the answer, but the politics that Indymedia and the anti-globalisation movement were campaigning against did point us in the right direction. Continued deregulation of the market has enabled the amassing of global corporate capital and huge economic inequality. In 2011, the Occupy movement took this politics further and linked inequality directly to the demise of democracy. But still the likes of the WTO aim to maximise the flow of international trade uninhibited by national policies that may seek to protect the national interest and the public good to the advantage of mega global corporations (including media and tech corporations). Global capitalist geopolitical hegemonies are ever more entrenched. Most recently, we have seen this in the form of financialised capitalism that involves a new layer of governance through global financial institutions – the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the WTO, the European Central Bank and bond rating agencies – that set the rules around free trade, are entirely unaccountable and largely untouched by political action at the state level, yet set strict limits on what states can and cannot do. This was made alarmingly clear in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008 when these organisations instructed national governments how to order their economies so that banks and financial agencies could recoup the finance they had lent to governments in order to solve the problems they had brought about in the first place through irresponsibly and recklessly encouraging individual debt. As Davis (2019) notes, '[t]he largest transnational corporations and financial institutions now control more funds than most of our largest economies' (p. 47). While nation states are losing control of things such as environmental degradation, climate change, food distribution and energy resources, they are left having to cope with the consequences of reduced corporate taxation, deregulation and a

weakened welfare state, leading to more crime, more homelessness, more ill-health and more protest. Citizens experience this variously as a loss of sovereignty, being overlooked and left behind or simply as feeling irrelevant (CSF, 2018).

The precise configuration of capitalism at any one time is reliant on the dynamic between economic power and political power with citizens having virtually no influence over the former and increasingly being squeezed out of the latter. But Indymedia also taught us that this does not mean that economic power is totalising or that the capitalist state has a single and unified political character. Struggles take place constantly within capitalism and in relation to the state: whether they come from media activists, Black activists, climate activists, anarchists, socialists or feminists. These struggles do not just evaporate into thin air, they leave trails of hope and provide tracks for other movements to take up the baton. In his work on media reform movements, McChesney (2008) argues that the contemporary US media reform movement was triggered by the anti-globalisation struggles which raised serious questions about the incorporation of the right to communicate within neoliberal frames and policies in which Indymedia was key. The reverberations did not stop there.

In 2018, the teenager Greta Thunberg went on strike from school in Stockholm Sweden in response to the lack of government action about climate breakdown. She said she was inspired by the young people in Parkland, Florida, who led a national wave of class walkouts demanding tough controls on gun ownership after 17 people were murdered at their school in February 2018. In turn, Thunberg inspired youth climate strikes in 125 countries across the globe with an estimated 1.6 million young people participating. As heroic as Thunberg is, she is not a lone traveller but part of a transnational response that has been building over decades. The anti-globalisation movement and Indymedia were part of this history of struggle and protest that grows and develops over time building a counter-politics that is becoming ever wiser about the intersectional harms of capitalism and ever more sophisticated in its political response.

The latest environmental movements seem to be gathering more public support. In the United Kingdom, Extinction Rebellion has sparked a raft of direct action and civil disobedience that has quickly spread. In the United States, the Sunrise Movement occupied the office of Nancy Pelosi demanding Congress immediately adopt a rapid decarbonisation framework (Klein, 2019). Although climate change activism has a long history, the difference now is that capitalism is evidently failing on multiple fronts and people are beginning to join the dots. As Naomi Klein notes, the destruction of the planet goes hand in hand with the destruction of people's lives in other ways, from wage stagnation, to gaping inequalities to crumbling services, to the rise of the far-right and the collapse of our information ecology, and all are marked by race, gender and class. It is the system of global capitalism that needs to change, and more and more people know it. Everywhere you look, in neoliberal economies around the world, the stark contradiction of growing inequalities between rich and poor while striving for economic growth against all odds, with dire consequences for the planet and its inhabitants, is finally being understood. A market-driven politics that drives ever higher production output, ever worse labour conditions and demands ever increasing consumption has come up against the demise of collective services on which democracy depends, including news and information provision.

Twenty years ago, Indymedia and the anti-globalisation movement knew there was trouble ahead and that neoliberalism was part of the problem. They started to set out the hard edges of the jigsaw. Twenty years on, it is abundantly clear that neoliberalism is not working for the vast majority of people, many of whom are beginning to acknowledge that global capitalism is the cause and are beginning to rebel against an economic system hell-bent on profit at the expense of their futures. The pieces of the jigsaw are beginning to fall into place and the picture is not pretty. Over the next 20 years, we need to break it up and start anew.

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