

# **CENSORSHIP IN TIMES OF NETWAR**

Guamanian  
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and for posing the question that sparked the essay in the first place.

All errors and omissions are entirely my own – Guamanian  
<http://docs.indymedia.org/view/Main/GuamaniaN> (May 14, 2004)

**Important Note:** Much of this essay is presented in the form of excerpts from the  
Victoria Indymedia web site at <http://victoria.indymedia.org>, the reader should note that the excerpts  
have been edited for length, coherence, and focus, and some names and identifying details  
have been altered. The excerpts should be treated as a narrative technique, rather than as verbatim  
transcripts of user posts. The original posts currently remain visible at <http://victoria.indymedia.org>.

## Introduction

Censorship on the Internet has undergone a paradigm shift. The legal and moral framework of the ‘Town Square’, in which issues of censorship and freedom have traditionally been contested, has been largely abandoned.

We have moved instead into the framework of ‘Netwar’, in which actors deploying weaponized information contend for ‘Information Dominance’ using techniques drawn from marketing, public relations, military intelligence, and information science.

### **The Town Square Framework**

Censorship in the North American context has traditionally been played out in a kind of civil agora: a metaphorical Town Square containing the requisite chestnut tree, soapbox, courthouse, and school. In this idealized space, individual rights and collective morality find resolution, with a measure of freedom and a measure of safety.

It is not unlike the last reel of a Jimmy Stewart film.

Our collective wisdom on issues of censorship and freedom is couched in the reasonable rhetoric of the Town Square:

*“The very aim and end of our institutions is just this: that we may think what we like and say what we think” ... “Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties” ... “If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear” ... “I have always been among those who believed that the greatest freedom of speech was the greatest safety, because if a man is a fool the best thing to do is to encourage him to advertise the fact by speaking.” ... “The trouble with fighting for human freedom is that one spends most of one’s time defending scoundrels. For it is against scoundrels that oppressive laws are first aimed, and oppression must be stopped at the beginning if it is to be stopped at all.” ... “Wherever they burn books, they will also, in the end, burn people.” ... “The most stringent protection of free speech would not protect a man in falsely shouting fire in a theater, and causing a panic” ... “Free speech means the right to shout ‘theatre’ in a crowded fire.”<sup>1</sup>*

Of course, it was never entirely so civil. Censorship in times of war is an ancient tradition, and systematic propaganda is as old as the mass media. The Town Square has

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1 Sources for quotations, in order of appearance (All viewed on 3/14/04):  
Oliver Wendel Holmes: [http://www.annabelle.net/topics/censorship\\_and\\_free\\_speech.php](http://www.annabelle.net/topics/censorship_and_free_speech.php)  
John Milton: <http://www.ifla.org/faife/litter/subject/speech.htm>  
George Orwell: <http://www.ifla.org/faife/litter/subject/speech.htm>  
Woodrow Wilson: <http://www.ifla.org/faife/litter/subject/speech.htm>  
H. L. Mencken: <http://free.freespeech.org/unlimitedfreedom/quotes.html>  
Ralph Waldo Emerson: <http://free.freespeech.org/unlimitedfreedom/quotes.html>  
Oliver Wendel Holmes (Again): <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/89jan/dershowitz.htm>  
Abbie Hoffman: <http://www.quotemeonit.com/hoffmana.html>

never encompassed those perceived as truly dangerous – the lynching tree was more like to be their precinct, and our history is peppered with IWW ‘free speech’ fights, police raids, deportations and executions based solely on transgressions of thought and speech.

However, despite this subcurrent of repression, censorship issues were generally resolved in the Town Square tradition of balancing rights and responsibilities in the community.

A substantial – but dwindling – proportion of the debate over censorship and freedom on the Internet is still played out in the framework of the Town Square. Child pornography, Internet filters, and marketing ‘spyware’, to pick three examples, raise issues of morality, freedom and privacy that are clearly within this traditional civil realm.

## ***The Netwar Framework***

Netwar and Information Dominance are both the result of the forced evolution of propaganda and military intelligence brought about by the ‘total wars’ of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Systematic propaganda as an art can be traced to the Hearst newspapers carefully crafted nurturance – or creation – of the Spanish-American war. Systematic propaganda as a science we owe to the ‘Committee on Public Information’ which was created to put a PR gloss on the insanity of trench warfare during WWI. Brief stops with Edward Bernays – *“It was, of course, the astounding success of propaganda during the war that opened the eyes of the intelligent few in all departments of life to the possibilities of regimenting the public mind”*; Goebbels – *“Propaganda is a means to an end. Its purpose is to lead the people to an understanding that will allow them to willingly and without internal resistance devote themselves to the tasks and goals of a superior leadership”*; McCarthy – *“I have here a list of 205 names of Communists working today in America...(while holding up a blank sheet of paper)”*; and Kissinger – *“The real distinction is between those who adapt their purposes to reality and those who seek to mold reality in the light of their purposes.”*<sup>2</sup> – carry us through the era of industrial warfare and up to the dawn of the information age. Literally millions of person-years were spent during this period perfecting the techniques of propaganda, censorship, military signal intelligence and public relations.

Modern information warfare utilizes these finely-honed techniques in the pursuit of ‘Information Dominance’, the communications component of the US military doctrine of ‘Full Spectrum Dominance’<sup>3</sup>, the official US strategic doctrine. One brief, rather chilling,

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2 Sources (All viewed on 3/14/04):

Hearst: <http://www.humboldt.edu/~jcb10/spanwar.shtml>

‘CPI’: <http://carmen.artsci.washington.edu/propaganda/war2.htm>

Bernays: <http://carmen.artsci.washington.edu/propaganda/war4.htm>

Goebbels: [http://www.ciadvertising.org/student\\_account/spring\\_02/adv382j/ortega/Introduction.htm](http://www.ciadvertising.org/student_account/spring_02/adv382j/ortega/Introduction.htm)

McCarthy: <http://iws.ccccd.edu/kwilkison/Online1302home/20th%20Century/redscare.html>

Kissinger: [http://www.quotationspage.com/quotes/Henry\\_Kissinger/](http://www.quotationspage.com/quotes/Henry_Kissinger/)

3 Full Spectrum Dominance was originally described in the Joint Vision 2010 document at:

<http://www.dtic.mil/jointvision/history/jv2010.pdf> and is briefly excerpted at

<http://www.russfound.org/Enet/FSD.htm> (viewed on 3/14/04)

definition of Information Dominance is:

*... We think of [information] dominance in terms of 'having our way' – 'Overmatch' over all operational possibilities. This connotation is qualitative rather than quantitative. When dominance occurs, nothing done, makes any difference. We have sufficient knowledge to stop anything we don't want to occur, or do anything we want to do.<sup>4</sup>*

Closely related to Information Dominance is the concept of Netwar<sup>5</sup>, formulated by RAND Institute researchers in 1993, and since refined multiple times as a result of conflicts ranging from the Zapatista uprising in Mexico to the anti-globalization protests in Seattle in 1999.<sup>6</sup>

The Rand study defines Netwar as:

*To be precise, the term netwar refers to an emerging mode of conflict... at societal levels, short of traditional military warfare, in which the protagonists use network forms of organization and related doctrines, strategies, and technologies attuned to the information age. These protagonists are likely to consist of dispersed organizations, small groups, and individuals who communicate, coordinate, and conduct their campaigns in an internetted manner, often without a precise central command.*

Within the realm of Netwar is the concept of 'Social Netwar', the application of Netwar techniques to civil and revolutionary conflict:

*[Social Netwar takes] full advantage of the extremely dense and wide-reaching alternative media network via the Internet. The use of "media special forces" is one of the hallmarks of netwar and informational conflicts... One of the dictums of netwar is that netwar actors have a much greater interest in keeping communications working, rather than shutting them down... Both protesters and their opponents will have to come to terms with the implications of netwar and the struggle for information, understanding, and "topside." Because the ultimate prize in a netwar conflict is understanding—not opinion—the quality of information (not quantity) determines the final outcome.<sup>6</sup>*

The RAND researchers have been careful to distinguish 'activist' social Netwar from terrorist and criminal Netwar at the theoretical level, while insisting that the three are operationally very similar. However, recent state Netwar actions ranging from heightened

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4 Winters and Griffin, 1997. Quoted at <http://www.scoop.co.nz/mason/stories/HL0312/S00216.htm> (viewed on 3/14/04)

5 To a military analyst Netwar and Information Dominance are distinct doctrines: Netwar applying at the tactical and low intensity end of the conflict scale, and 'ID' at the strategic and large-scale end. The two doctrines are currently being applied in full coordination, so I will generally refer to the combination as simply Netwar.

6 The most recent update of the netWar doctrine based on the original 1993 Arquilla and Ronfeldt study is posted on the RAND web site at: <http://www.rand.org/publications/MR/MR1382/> (viewed on 3/14/04)

surveillance of NGOs, activist groups, and UN officials to the massive multinational ‘WMD’ disinformation campaign used to justify the Iraq war indicate that this supposed distinction may itself be a Netwar technique in which stated policy and actual praxis are intentionally kept incongruent in order to maximize uncertainty and confusion.

## Components of Netwar

A brief review of the combined techniques of Netwar and Information Dominance is useful in developing a sense of the scope and range of activities that are the components of this new approach to information and communications.

Netwar as it applies to the Internet and mass media includes:

- **The creation of information** through public relations, journalism and other content creation activities. (Note that in the Netwar framework, journalists are intentionally and efficiently integrated – ‘embedded’ – in one or the other of the Netwar belligerents, and there is little more than a face-saving pretense of objectivity.)
- **The creation of information context** through the manipulation of access, point-of-view, meta-editorial control (i.e. The social creation of the range of allowed thought) and the direct fabrication of the events and actors that then become reported ‘facts’. Note that facts are mutable and manipulable in the Netwar framework, and do not need to remain ‘factual’ after their initial purpose is served. This area is traditionally the realm of propagandists and covert intelligence operations, but has come increasingly to be handled by specialty issues management firms (As typified by Hill and Knowlton’s ‘Iraqi Soldiers Dump Kuwaiti Babies From Incubators’ fabrication<sup>7</sup>)
- **The control of information transmission:** enhancing the transmission of desired information, and blocking the transmission of undesired information through direct censorship, technical control of the transmission network, jamming of reception, and social engineering through overt transmission monitoring. As an example, the Chinese ‘Great Firewall’ – currently being enhanced for improved surveillance capability by Nortel, Cisco, and other transnationals<sup>8</sup> – utilizes all of these mechanisms to achieve state Information Dominance over the Chinese population.
- **The manipulation of current information.** Once information is out ‘in the wild’, signal intelligence and psychological operations techniques are used to degrade or modify the information, replace the information in transit, reduce the verifiability and reliability of the information in the eyes of the receiver, or disseminate contradictory or dissonant counter-information.
- **Surveillance and interception of information.** Techniques applied in Netwar include

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7 This is probably the best known Netwar ‘fabricated event’, and serves as clear evidence of the validity of Information Dominance doctrine: “*When dominance occurs, nothing done makes any difference.*” The subsequent exposure of the non-factual ‘fact’ has no meaning, no future deterrent value, and is of literally no consequence. <http://www.prcanada.ca/ETHIX/TRUTHTX.HTM> (viewed on 3/14/04)

8 Source: <http://www.theregister.co.uk/content/archive/22401.html> (viewed on 3/14/04)

all levels of message interception, keystroke logging, hacker techniques such as trojan ‘backdoor’ insertion, digital fingerprint and embedded ID techniques and counter-surveillance cryptography, as well as traditional ‘human intelligence’.

Netwar brings these formerly diverse strands of manipulation into a single flexible adaptive system based on network, as opposed to hierarchical, command and control structures. Ironically, while the original meaning of ‘Netwar’ focused on the creative tactics of small, flexible ‘terrorist, activist, and criminal’ groups and juxtaposed these with the actions of the lumbering, inflexible, hierarchical state, it is now the state and corporate sectors that have perfected Netwar techniques, creating a potent hybrid system.

Epitomizing this new adaptive state is the US Office of Homeland Security, which has been intentionally structured as a proactive, adaptive domestic Netwar department, drawing extensively on complexity theory and social network theory to counter and neutralize both activist and terrorist groups.<sup>9</sup>

An interesting and problematic development – which I believe is characteristic of all ‘warfare models’ of human activity – is that Netwar has developed it’s own internal logic of escalation: As the state has adopted Netwar, much of the activist community has reciprocated with a less successful attempt to adopt Information Dominance techniques, leading to both sides operating more and more consciously and intentionally within the new Netwar framework. Thus a progressive organizer writing about grassroots communications in Harpers magazine states:

*...the essential point of the progressive talk radio and television project [is that] ...we want to convince the people that the liberal viewpoint and the Democratic Party are better for America... this requires... a massive coordination effort behind the scenes, so that politicians, media spokespersons, and television personalities make the same points and emphasise the same issues when shaping the national debate.<sup>10</sup>*

The emphasis on ‘total coordination’ is dictated by the logic of Netwar: the framework sets the rules, and the actors attempt to function within the confines of the new paradigm.

## **9/11: The Framework Shifts**

In the highly-charged atmosphere following the 9/11 attacks, the traditional Town Square framework for managing issues of political censorship and individual speech rights was rapidly and efficiently set aside, and the Netwar framework of the PATRIOT Act, Homeland Security and a permanent War on Terror was deployed in its place.

Perhaps as important as the draconian shift in law (which has widely been mimicked in Canada and elsewhere), is the shift in mindset of both the state and of its civil activist-opponents. The atmosphere is one of force, deception, and manipulation at all levels: from the abrogation of international law at the global level, right down to the escalating

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<sup>9</sup> Eli Sopow, RCMP Issues Management Strategist. Presentation “*Knowledge Management: Oxymoron or Opportunity*” at Royal Roads University Knowledge Management Symposium, January 28-29, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Scott Anderson in ‘Letters’. Harpers Magazine, February 2004. pg 4.

street confrontations between activists and police in the local community.

The dogs of Netwar have been unleashed, and it is uncertain when – or if – they will ever be re-kenned.

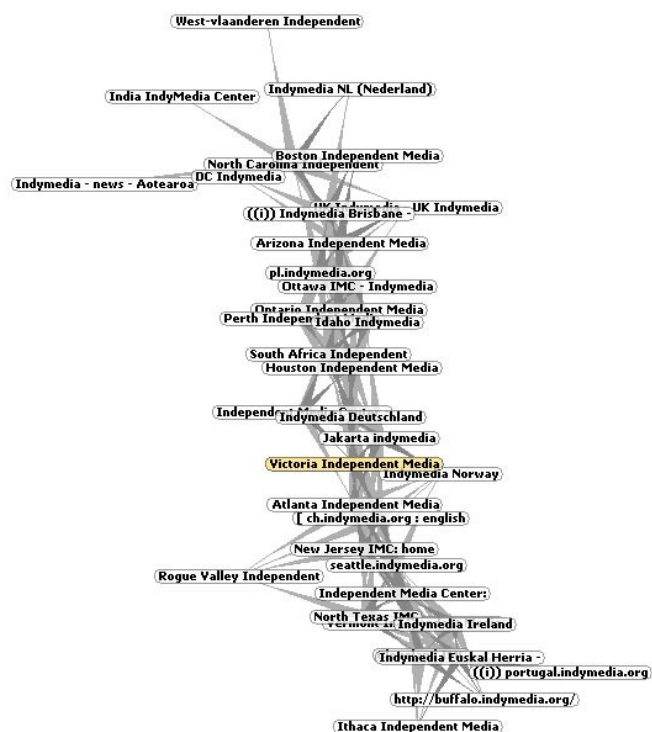
## Netwar by Example

At this stage I'm going to zoom in by using transcripts, logs, and direct statements by participants to illustrate the techniques and thinking of some of the Netwar 'actors' involved in Victoria IndyMedia, a small activist web site located in Victoria, B.C.

This involves a change of scale from the realm of grand strategy to the local (and occasionally petty) actions of individuals making decisions about access, censorship, and manipulation of information. The impact of these decisions is limited to the several hundred activists and others who use the Victoria IndyMedia web site. The patterns, however, apply at all scales – though the information warfare practiced by corporations, governments, and transnational organizations is far more sophisticated, constructing the perceived reality of billions of people around the world.

### What's an 'IndyMedia'?

The Victoria Independent Media Centre (Also known as the Victoria IMC or Victoria IndyMedia) is one node in the global IMC network<sup>11</sup>, which is comprised of over 100 activist news web site run by local collectives around the world. All of these sites cover local and global stories, and are linked to each other and the global IndyMedia web site at <http://www.indymedia.org/>. The various IMCs each run autonomously, setting their own editorial policies and adhering to a loosely defined set of common practices, including consensus decision-making within each local collective, support for participatory 'Open Publishing' of user-submitted news reports and comments, and adherence to a set of progressive policies on issues of race, gender and power. The IMC network as a whole is often held

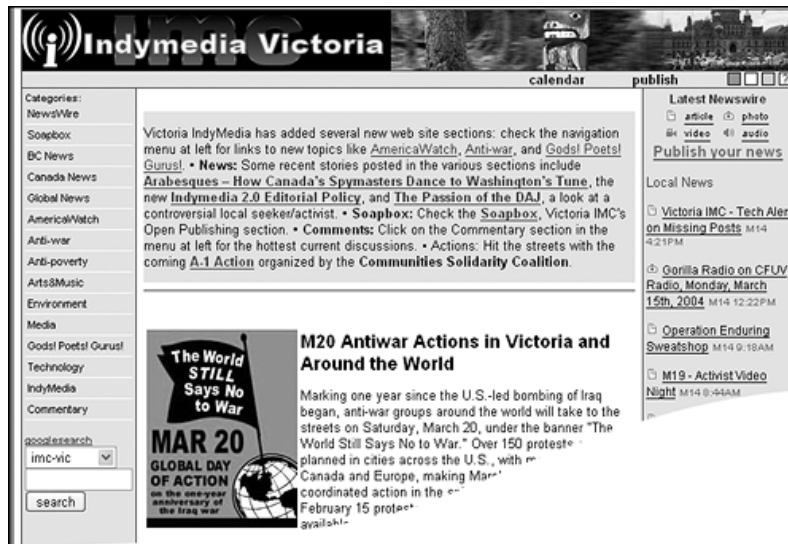


<sup>11</sup> The network graphic is a screenshot of a realtime network map of <http://victoria.indymedia.org/>, generated on March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2004 using Touchgraph: <http://www.touchgraph.com/TGGoogleBrowser.html>



up as an example of ‘leaderless’ anarchist organizational structure, an identification which sits well with the membership, which is broadly anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian in orientation.

The Victoria IMC web site is divided into various zones, as shown on the diagram below:



The location within this structure of any particular post by a user – and thus indirectly its visibility and implied credibility – is controlled by the Victoria IMC volunteers, who can promote a particular story to the top of the public NewsWire (The righthand column of the web site), allow it to languish lower down in the NewsWire column, banish it to the Soapbox (A section not directly visible from the Victoria IMC home page) convert it to a home page feature (The high-profile centre column of the site), or to a less prominent ‘special-interest’ feature (accessible from the various links in the left-hand column).

This control over the placement of a news story amounts to the de facto ability to ‘kill’ a story by burying it, or to ‘push’ a story to the top of the agenda, without engaging in overt censorship of the contents of the post itself.

The Indymedia network, like many anarchist ventures, has a streak of utopianism within it. From the start we believed that Open Publishing – allowing users to directly post their uncensored news and opinion without editorial interference – would empower people to tell their stories with honesty and passion, learning from each other, breaking down barriers, and achieving new insights together.

It didn’t work out quite that way...

## **Open Publishing: 'The Nightmare of a Train Wreck'**

Much of the story from here will be told in clippings, emails and files drawn from the Victoria IMC web site at <http://victoria.indymedia.org> and related personal notes. These artifacts are delineated by grey boxes, as shown below, and have sometimes been edited for length and coherence. I use the handle 'Guamanian' in these communications.

Issue at hand

by % • Tuesday January 06, 2004 at 06:08 PM

I'm out looking for evidence that the IMC project is working anywhere at all in Canada. Haven't found it yet. Sorry, CMAQ seems to be well run. Otherwise, where it hasn't been overrun by racists, it is a hair's breadth from implosion, or simply does not enjoy support from the wider community. What could be the beautiful anarchy of a rainforest is instead an anarchic nightmare of a train wreck.<sup>12</sup>

More info please...

by Guamanian • Tuesday January 06, 2004 at 09:23 PM

'%' -- can you elaborate more? Do you think there is an innate contradiction between open publishing and constructive engagement? I am beginning to question this a lot, as open publishing newswires seem to me to spiral rapidly into troll playgrounds populated by abusive egoists, who drive out other voices. In my experience, the first to leave Victoria IMC were the feminists and anti-racists, followed by most serious political activists, including many anarchists. Few now participate in the 'discussions', though more perhaps read and post stories, and simply avoid the comment threads altogether.

In its three years of operation, Victoria Indymedia – and the rest of the global Indymedia network – struggled constantly to reconcile Open Publishing with progressive social activism. We largely failed. Web site usage plummeted as the 'noise to signal' ratio soared: the combination of an unmoderated discussion forum with guaranteed personal anonymity proved irresistible to neo-nazis, fringe cultists and 'trolls' lurking in the comment threads waiting to ambush and abuse activist web site users.

Caught on the horns of an ideological dilemma, the Victoria Indymedia Collective struggled to 'err on the side of freedom' and 'fight bad thought with good analysis', while our users melted away to less hostile online environments.

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<sup>12</sup> All Newswire comment excerpts are selected from discussion threads at: <http://victoria.indymedia.org/>. All Newswire posts are anonymous, and therefore unverifiable. Their reproduction here in edited form is intended solely to illustrate typical positions and viewpoints, rather than those of specific persons.

Guamanian's Notebook:

Sometimes I think the correct definition of Indymedia is: "A free online publishing service run by members of the extreme left for the sole benefit of lunatics on the extreme right."

Slowly the Victoria IMC Collective moved to establish editorial control, first eliminating the obvious – hate speech, death threats, and racism – and then tackling the ‘trolls’ by removing what we came to call destabilization posts – personal attacks, rants, and abusive images posted intentionally to antagonize activists. Patterns began to emerge from the chaos, indicating that while much of the ‘troll-work’ was local, some of it was orchestrated and coordinated to achieve typical ‘Netwar’ goals. Numerous nodes in the IndyMedia network showed the same attack patterns: Destabilization, Content Stuffing, and Swarming.

## **Netwar 101 – Some Methods of Attack**

### **Destabilization Attacks**

These are flurries of abusive posts intended to stress site users psychologically, making the use of the site unpleasant and disturbing. Individually, they are mildly obnoxious: planted repeatedly in every discussion thread, they became a real barrier to use.

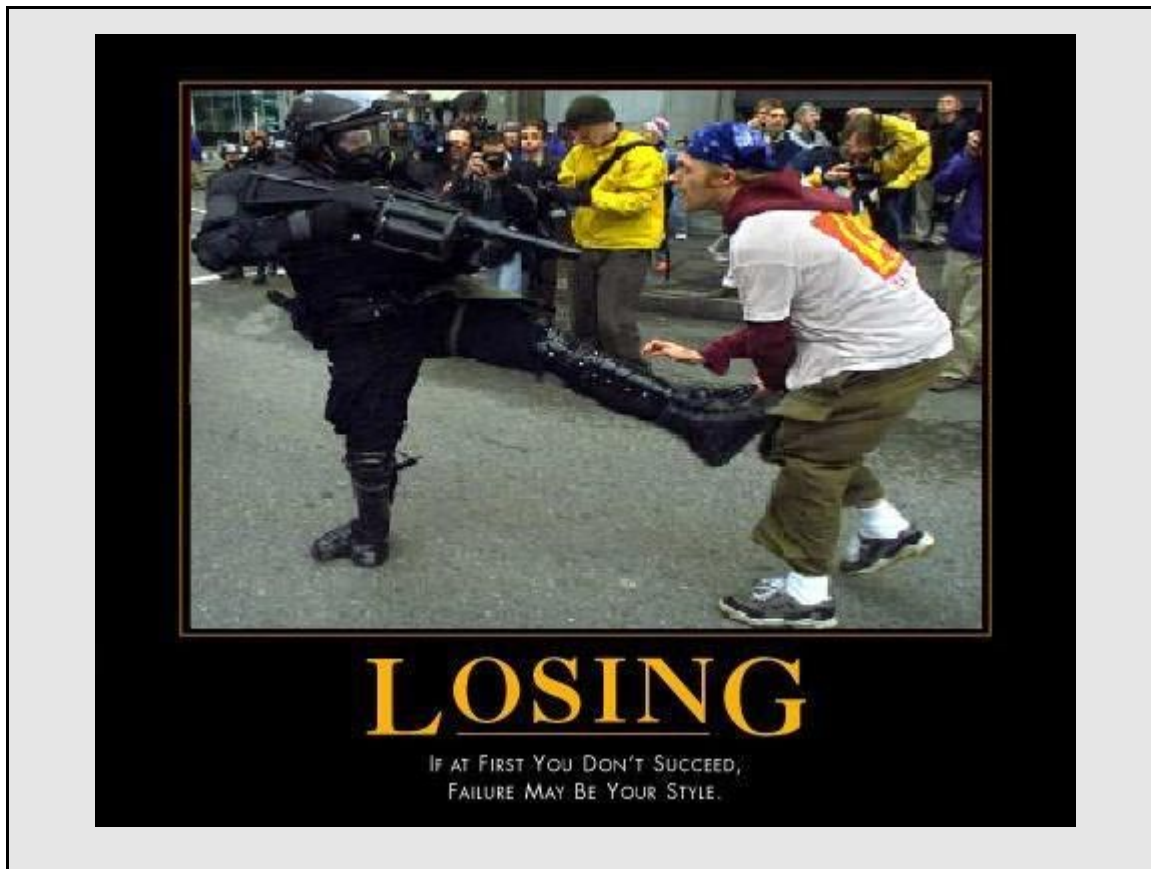
An entity undertaking a destabilization attack will generally rapidly spam their posts across multiple discussions, to create a ‘meme field’ of obnoxious and disturbing posts.

This type of post often uses abusive language and photo-retouched images to heighten their emotional impact. The power of visual dissonance in propaganda is a well-established technique: During the Contra war of the 1980's in Nicaragua, the US-funded opposition newspaper, La Prensa, often ran jarring juxtapositions of unrelated disturbing imagery along with reporting on the Sandinista government<sup>13</sup>. It is a manipulation technique that adapts well to Netwar.

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<sup>13</sup> Observed during visits to Nicaragua in 1987 and 1990. It is in keeping with the techniques outlined in “Psychological Operations in Guerilla Warfare” the standard US PsyOps manual during this period.

One example of a destabilization post will suffice:



## Content Stuffing

Content Stuffing is the systematic spamming of propaganda across multiple sources to gain greater reach. The IndyMedia Newswires are vulnerable to being used as channels for propaganda aimed specifically at activist users.

We began to speculate that ‘grey propaganda’ techniques were being used to channel US-government funded messages through the network, using ‘astroturf’ (government or PR company funded grassroots organizations) as cut-outs to increase the perceived legitimacy of the propaganda.<sup>14</sup>

While no solid evidence has arisen to back up these speculations, the sheer reach of some of these operations – some including hundreds of posts spread systematically across the entire global Indymedia network – fosters the suspicion that these are not entirely the work of the individuals that appear as the source of the posts.

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<sup>14</sup> For an irreverent look at one of these ‘grey ops’, scan “The Model, Her Shadow, Their Payload and the IMC” at: <http://victoria.indymedia.org/features/media/>, along with its associated discussion thread.

## Swarming

A variation on Content Stuffing is Swarming, in which a Netwar attack comes from multiple directions at once, with different entities playing different roles in the conflict.

A good example of a Swarming attack is a recent flood of posts on one of the most volatile subjects debated on the Web: the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict is fertile Netwar ground, with entrenched positions, vivid and expert propaganda, and deeply committed actors on both sides of the struggle.

It is further complicated by the problems of anti-semitism that circle around the fringes of the debate:

Antisemitism, censorship, and the IMC

by Guamanian . Tuesday October 28, 2003 at 07:53 PM

IMCs have grappled with users posting racist, sexist anti-semitic and abusive material from the beginning.

As an open publishing newswire, we cannot 'pre-censor' material - all posts go up in realtime, and IMC newswire clerks -- all volunteers -- check for abusive material that violates the individual IMC's editorial policy, and remove it when found...

For the most part, anti-semitic material is simply spammed at IMC newswires -- it is not actually originating in the local community, but is broadcast in the same fashion as posts from other newswire spammers.

There is, of course, a large body of polemical material on the newswire that is critical of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, but this does not constitute 'anti-semitism' by any reasonable definition.

For myself, when patrolling the newswire for anti-semitic material, I watch for the keywords 'Jewish' and 'Zionist', and check the post for context: unless someone is posting about comparative religion or early 20th century ideology, these words are often flags of a possible anti-semitic post -- generally one where 'Israeli' is being inappropriately morphed to 'Jewish' or where one of the classic anti-semitic motifs is being perpetrated. If so, the post is hidden.

Considering the polarization of the debate -- second only to the pro-and anti-choice conflict -- I think we on the Victoria IMC do a pretty fair job of distinguishing between anti-semitism and anti-occupation posts, eliminating the former and leaving the latter.

Starting in mid-February, Victoria IMC began to receive a flood of abusive anti-Palestinian posts, such as the one below, posted as a comment on a vigil by 'Women In Black', a Nobel Prize-nominated pacifist group that originated in Israel and supports withdrawal from the West bank and Gaza.

Again, a single example will suffice:

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bitches in black
by yasser • Thursday February 05, 2004 at 07:54 PM
yasser@palsolidarity.com

To give the vigil more authenticity, participants are encouraged
to wear harnesses containing sticks of fake dynamite and bags of
scrap metal. Participants should then board city buses on Douglas
Street to take their protest to commuters.
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A flood of similar posts began to appear, often grouped in batches and all containing abusive language. These were shortly joined by other posts that were reprints of legitimate news items that supported the Israeli side in the conflict, but were contextualized with anti-Arab or anti-Muslim introductions and posted under false arabic-sounding 'names'. (All posts to Victoria IMC are anonymous, so posters can quite easily assume multiple or false identities.)

Shortly thereafter a second entity joined the campaign, using the identity 'Brian'. Brian's role was to join in discussion threads started by 'yasser' and offer support to 'yasser's attacks in the often heated discussions that followed. By this time the 'yasser' posts were beginning to dominate the web site based on sheer volume: they began to displace other local issues and embroil the web site in an irresolvable never-ending conflict. Soon the Netwar attack itself became a topic of discussion:

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Free Speech and Information Dominance
by Guamanian • Tuesday February 17, 2004 at 09:18 AM

It seems to me that with media of any sort there is a major set
of dimensions to consider that are outside of the traditional
model of free speech.

Mediated speech starts with an individual voice -- or often now a
brand, project, or other construct designed to be perceived as an
individual voice -- which is then amplified and framed by the
transmission media.

For example -- the anti-Palestinian spammer is achieving
information dominance of the Newswire through volume and
selective presentation. To the extent that I can within the
present editorial policy, I'm resisting this move to achieve
dominance of the Victoria IMC newswire channel by not promoting
the spammer's posts to 'Global' -- even though many of the
spammer's posts are appropriate for the 'Global' newswire.

This specific issue is not one of free speech -- the individual
post is clearly protected speech -- but one of strategic
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dominance of the channel. How much of OTHER user's free speech should we allow to be displaced by this particular spammer?

How many of the visible pixels of the Newswire do we cede to a one-sided anti-Palestinian propaganda campaign?

At present these posts constitute about 20% of visible newswire capacity -- by far the largest single viewpoint -- if they are promoted to Global, this would rise to about 40%.

Running 40% anti-Palestinian propaganda would result in the Victoria IMC newswire having a greater percentage of this material than most of the official pro-Israel sites on the web. Essentially, the Victoria IMC newswire would be turned into an amplifier for a specific right-wing agenda.

I guess this is just one specific instance of the current Victoria IMC discussion about 'Activist' vs. 'Open' publishing.

Shortly there after two new 'trolls' joined the fray, one laying repeated charges of anti-semitism against the Victoria IMC Collective, and the other fueling the fire by posting blatantly anti-semitic rants.

*Guamanian's Notebook*

*I decided to take the unusual step of reviewing the site logs to sort out the various constructs involved, in order to determine if we were under coordinated attack, and if so, who the players might be. The results were interesting:*

*Brian/yasser – 219 Posts – Log analysis shows that the abusive 'yasser' and the rational 'Brian' are the same person, posting from a fixed IP number hosted by a local ISP.*

*QB5 – All of the supporting posts accusing Victoria IMC of anti-semitism originate in a dynamic IP number within the Qwest Block 5 range, registered out of Denver Colorado.*

*TheTroll – All anti-semitic posts are originating from an ISP registered in Savannah, Georgia.*

Decisions to hide 'yasser' posts that were overtly anti-arab or anti-Muslim resulted in additional charges of anti-semitism by 'Brian' – a Catch 22 situation that began to feel like an intentional set-up:

we saw that one already...  
by brian • Saturday February 28, 2004 at 06:14 PM

Allan's been peddling another vicious lie: that Israel is a "Racist apartheid state."

And hate propaganda directed at an identifiable entity like that has only one purpose. To prepare the ground for murder. That's history.

Now Guamanian or whoever is the sysop is going to have to decide exactly how much HATE PROPAGANDA , LIES, LIBELS and unsubstantiated accusations this little board will put up with.

Either that or reach a common agreement and make the announcement that an important function of this board is to work towards the destruction of the State of Israel and annihilate the Jewish occupants. What is this board prepared to aid, abet and tolerate?

This appeared to be the intention of the 'Brian' project – to force a crisis in Victoria IMC and push the web site into a position where it would be dismissed as anti-semitic or choose to run extreme anti-Palestinian material as a form of 'balance' to the largely anti-occupation editorial content of the site. Assuming that the intent was to support an extreme right-wing position on the Occupation, either would constitute a kind of victory.

Endgame?  
by Guamanian • Saturday February 28, 2004 at 08:22 PM

Brian... what is the game here? Is this some kind of bizarre little propaganda setup you're running?

You appeared here at Victoria IMC as part of a high-volume spamming flood that included the posting of dozens of anti-arab and anti-palestinian reprints. Shortly after these posts began, you began to participate in the Newswire community as 'Brian', while the flood of abusive spam under multiple aliases continued non-stop.

It seemed to be a sort of a Good Troll/Bad Troll game with 'Brian' cast as the good troll -- willing to participate in the community and dialogue with others -- while 'yasser' continued to flood the channel with anti-palestinian reposts.

Shortly thereafter, our first real live genuine "Classic Anti-semitic Moron" troll appeared, using the handle 'theTroll'. This entity began posting rabid anti-semitic rants as comments to your posts, seemingly bent on to proving your insinuations that Victoria IMC is a hotbed of anti-semitic hatred. Of course we deleted 'theTroll's' posts immediately, as we would any hate



literature.

I find it bizarre that this anti-semitic strawman appeared just in time to lend credence to your accusations, but I can assure you that their posts have been and will continue to be deleted.

Other members of the Victoria IMC collective weighed in:

What is your agenda Brian?

by Radhippie • Sunday February 29, 2004 at 09:55 AM

You are a difficult case Brian. We, (the editorial folks), have had all sorts of discussions about your recent posts. This has been useful and has helped clarify our ideas around the role we believe Indymedia should play in our community. In that way, your three week blitz of anti-Palestinian posts has been a small benefit to this project. For the most part though, you've caused us a series of headaches with your highly slanted postings from mainstream and arch-conservative media outlets. It is a wonder to me that you haven't yet posted clippings from the Drudge report.

I'm not so sure you are acting independently. I'm not so sure who I think might be feeding you but based on my own research, I am pretty sure you are part of a much larger PR effort.

Here's headache this forces us to consider. What does a small IMC outpost do if it thinks it is (or even might be) being used by a right-wing funded PR machine to promote a regressive or oppressive agenda? I think Brian is being fed sources from which he draws material. I think these come in the form of a mass emailing to people who volunteer to participate in a grassroots lobby-effort. This again presents a problem for us at Victoria IMC. We find ourselves stuck between the positions of defenders of the right to free speech in the "open posting" concept, and defenders of what we perceive to be a useful activist media source. Being gamed by an organized lobby effort does not serve the activist community in any way.

Nor does allowing posters to use imagery, mis-contextualization and sheer number or postings to intimidate others. Each of these "journalistic" offences deters others from expressing their opinion and ultimately makes a mockery of the IMC project...

Brian, your postings tend to target a specific group of horribly oppressed people. The headlines you choose and the images you use express a deeply held hatred you must have for Palestinians and Muslims in general. While you are a free person and can think what ever you wish to think, you may not express hatred towards an identifiable group of people in this media. That behaviour is simply not acceptable and will not be promoted on this outlet of the IMC.

Brian responded with an interesting clarification, excerpted below:

Note to Radhippie  
by brian • Sunday February 29, 2004 at 02:06 PM

Hi Radhippy and whoever else has tuned in.

Is Brian an aspect of a coordinated right wing PR effort? Good question, but wrong. Brian has a professional background in media and used to be called "left wing" himself, up until a few years ago, when the antisemitism in the guise of Israel-bashing became too embarrassing and upsetting to hang around.

Also, these kinds of squabbles such as the board now has to get their heads around are now not terribly unusual in Indymedia generally.

After a three-week-long exchange that involved over 400 posts, a decision was reached:

Last call...  
by Guamanian • Sunday February 29, 2004 at 02:36 PM

I note that the 'Brian' persona has not responded to my request for a clear statement of intent, and the withdrawal of the accusations of anti-semitism, while the 'yasser' persona continues to post hot-button attacks and baseless accusations of anti-semitism.

From this point onwards I will delete all posts by 'yasser' and the other constructs involved in this peculiar little destabilization project, until I hear from the 'Brian' persona with clarification on the project's intentions.

<aside>

Sigh. Why it matters to me that I get a response from one specific construct -- one I have decided to treat as 'real' based solely on it's presentation -- is opaque to me.

It must be some kind of pre-modern atavism. Perhaps we humans are hardwired for personification?

I expect, in the end, that this will be used against us.

Perhaps it already is.

Ah... Here he is...  
by Guamanian • Sunday February 29, 2004 at 02:47 PM

I see that 'Brian' and I have cross-posted.

I'm happy to hear that 'Brian' believes he is real. However, I do tend to doubt the rumours of Brian's 'retirement' from the communications industry... perhaps he still consults a little?

The fact that you have a professional media background, Brian, leads me to believe that you know precisely the effects you have been achieving with your decontextualized and manipulative posts.

Therefore: My apologies for attempting to send you to 'Troll School" in order to educate you on appropriate techniques of discussion group discourse -- you obviously already know exactly what you are doing.

Fade to black...

by Guamanian • Sunday February 29, 2004 at 02:54 PM

The Brian/yasser entity is banned from further discussion posts for 48 hours. All future comment and discussion posts by this entity during this time period will be removed.

The Brian/yasser entity may continue to post news and reprints, which will be moved into the 'Soapbox' section of the web site.

This particular Swarming attack ended in our decision to impose selective censorship of the main Newswire, in a move away from 'Open Publishing' and towards moderated 'Activist Publishing'.

Some days later, Guamanian had a dream.

*Guamanian's Notebook*

*I dreamed that the Web was a dark tree floating in dim empty space, all green and black.*

*I hovered over and around it with small clippers, trimming off a leaf here and another there.*

*A voice said 'fascist bonsai'.*

*I woke up... and found myself uncertain as to whether I was the good gardener, nurturing the tree by carefully trimming away fascism and rot, or whether I was the fascist, oppressing and stunting the tree.*

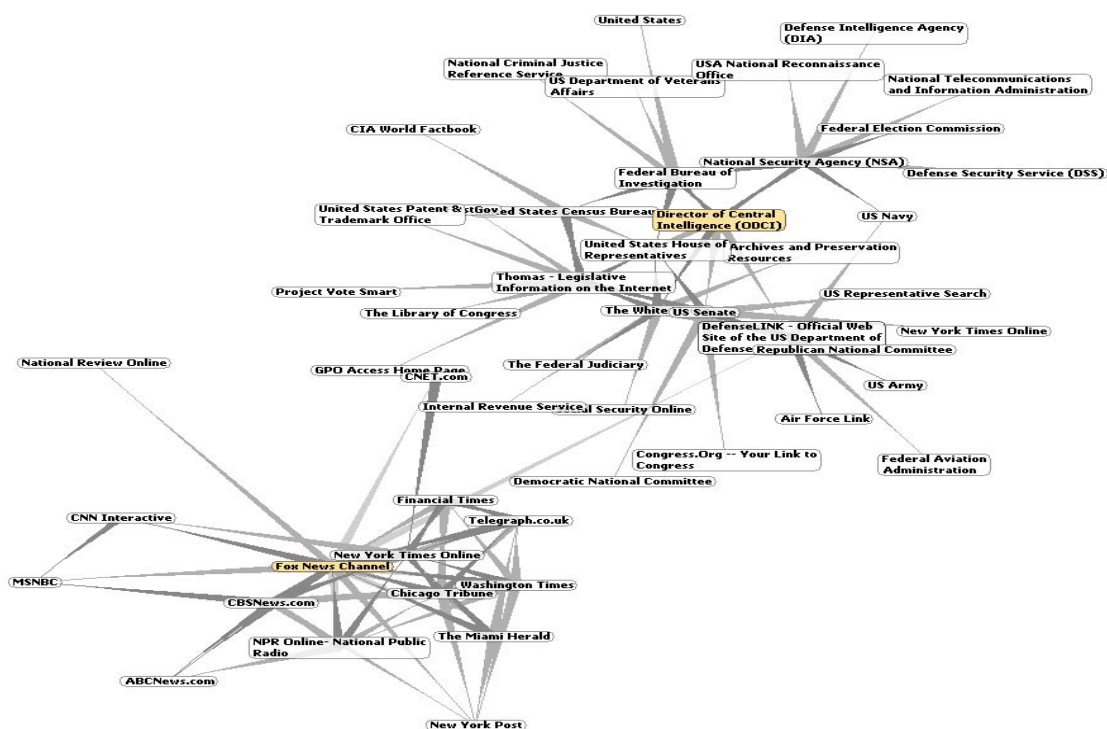
## Summary: Is it real, or is it Memex<sup>15</sup>?

Destabilization, Content Stuffing, and Swarming are a handful of the techniques that are used to shape weaponized information in the Netwar, the new framework of discourse that bears little resemblance to the old model of the Town Square that we still carry in our minds and hearts.

The case could be made that nothing has really changed – that the forms of Netwar are just updates of the older rhetorical devices of the Town Square, amplified and accelerated to take advantage of the new media.

Alternatively, it could be said that Netwar is a virtual tempest of no importance to the wider world, but is merely a sideshow – a game – with little real impact on our thought and behavior.

I do not think so. While this essay has focused on the petty ‘Netwar in a bottle’ surrounding a small activist web site, it is worth recalling that there are other players<sup>16</sup>, working at far grander scales, focusing all of their considerable power and expertise on achieving Information Dominance: that highly desired permanent state where “*nothing done, makes any difference.*”



15 After Vannevar Bush's original conceptual model of virtual hypertext. A visit to Memex Corporation [http://www.memex.com/ns\\_market.shtml](http://www.memex.com/ns_market.shtml) is recommended if you have a taste for grim irony.

16 The graphic above is a composite realtime network map of <http://www.cia.gov>, and <http://www.fox.com> generated on March 2<sup>3rd</sup>, 2004 using Touchgraph: <http://www.touchgraph.com/> DefenseLINK connects the two networks, apparently serving as a high link-density/high-relevancy bridge between them.