

Indymedia UK: Urban Communica/action and the creation of a hybrid activist space in London

"Get off the internet - I'll see you in the streets!" - riseup.net

Indymedia UK is presently looking for a new banner to go on the top of its www.indymedia.org.uk website. The designer expressed difficulties to come up with a proposal:

Part of it is really not knowing what kind of image 'sums up' Indymedia... you're a strange beast...

In an email, Maqui, a London based volunteer, suggests a solution:

"if we find it difficult to find images (of protests, movement(s), and so on) that sum up what indymedia is and does, and if we can't find an image that represents the notion of 'UK' both as kollectives and geographically, then why don't we use indymedia itself as the motive of the banner?"

So basically we looked at the pics we had and found enough images of imc-uk's banners and flags. And more importantly, these being used in the 'real' space outside the web, like in demos, stalls or in Public Access Points during mobilisations. I think it would work well if the main banner represented imcuk outside cyberspace, sort of pointing out the fact that the project also inhabits the physical space."¹

Indeed, the indymedia project in London certainly inhabits both physical and virtual spaces. While facilitating and maintaining a website, the London indymedia node contributes to the creation of an activist space in London which is both virtual and physical. The lively online practices of indymedia have been described elsewhere², and they can be seen in action on the indymedia documentation project, the mailing lists and the irc chatrooms. Here, I am focussing on the real space practices of London indymedia in the framework of the discussions on Electronic Civil Disobedience. I am asking why the local practice of indymedia collectives in their increasingly privatised urban

¹ Mailing list: imc-uk-features, 10 August 2005

² Hamm, Marion: A r/c tivism in Physical and Virtual Spaces. German: Gerald Raunig (Hg.): Bildräume und Raumbilder. Repräsentationskritik in Film und Aktivismus. Wien 2004, p. 34-44. Online in republicart.net 09/2003, http://www.republicart.net/disc/realpublicspaces/hamm02_en.htm#_ftnref20 and Hamm, Marion: Indymedia – Concatenations of Physical and Virtual Spaces. Webjournal: republicart.net 06/2005, http://republicart.net/disc/publicum/hamm04_en.htm

draft - Marion Hamm, Indymedia London, at Re:activism, Budapest, 14/15 October 2005

surroundings remains almost invisible in academic research, journalistic writing and self-representations. Looking at the London node of indymedia, I will show how these practices can be rendered visible again by taking into consideration the context of social movements as well as its use of both traditional and new media: leaflets, banners, flags, stickers and t-shirts as well as satellite dishes, wireless connections and free software. I suggest an exercise in connotative mapping to bring the physical presence of this online project into view.

Electronic Civil Disobedience and the Return of Real Space

In programmatic writings during the cyber-crazed 1990s, it looked as if dissenting practices might disappear from the material urban geography of the streets and move into cyberspace. The Critical Art Ensemble (CAE), the most prominent proponent of this discourse, declared in 1994: "The new geography is a virtual geography, and the core of political and cultural resistance must assert itself in this electronic space"³. In their 1996 publication "Electronic Civil Disobedience & Other Unpopular Ideas", CAE analysed that "nothing of value for the power elite can be found on the streets, nor does this class need control of the streets to efficiently run and maintain state institutions. For CD to have any meaningful effect, the resisters must appropriate something of value to the state. Once they have an object of value, the resisters have a platform from which they may bargain for (or perhaps demand) change".⁴ Consequently, they called for a strategic move away from the streets: "Resistance—like power—must withdraw from the street. Cyberspace as a location and apparatus for resistance has yet to be realized. Now it is time to bring a new model of resistant practice into action."⁵ This type of analysis was widely discussed and put into practice.⁶ Hackers, artists and

3 Critical Art Ensemble: *Electronic Disturbance*, New York 1994. xx Online: <http://www.critical-art.net/books/ted/ted1.pdf>, p3.

4 Critical Art Ensemble: *Electronic Civil Disobedience & Other Unpopular Ideas*. New York 1996, p 11. Online: <http://www.critical-art.net/books/ecd/ecd2.pdf>. See also Martin Wassermair: *Den Mächtigen eine lange Nase drehen ... Taktische Netz- und Medienkultur als politische Positionierung*. Published in *Reader Soho in Ottakring 2005*, Online: http://www.konsortium.at/wassermair-den_maechtigen.html

5 Critical Art Ensemble: *Electronic Civil Disobedience & Other Unpopular Ideas*. New York 1996, p 20. Online: <http://www.critical-art.net/books/ecd/ecd2.pdf>. Also see Geert Lovink: *Radical Media Pragmatism Strategies for Techno-Social Movements*. Online: http://www.aec.at/en/archives/festival_archive/festival_catalogs/festival_artikel.asp?iProjectID=8436

6 As recent as 2004, Konrad Becker from the Austrian Institution for Net-Culture "Public Netbase" stated that "the physical space of spectacle has ceased to be the key to understanding or maintaining power. Instead, hegemonial control of virtual space and the world of images is the new space of

draft - Marion Hamm, Indymedia London, at Re:activism, Budapest, 14/15 October 2005

activists started to experiment with electronic civil disobedience⁷. Websites were hijacked, blocked or flooded with DoS-attacks in online-demonstrations and virtual sit-ins, online petitions started to appear, banners campaigning for a wide range of issues spread around the web.

Today, the conceptualisation of the relationship between physical and virtual spaces has become more differentiated. The dichotomy of virtual versus physical spaces, cyberspace versus streets, has given way to a more integrated view. It is now widely acknowledged that physical and informational spaces are intersecting with one another.⁸ Ricardo Dominguez, for instance, points out that the Electronic Disturbance Theatre "has always promoted VR-sit-in's as part of a hybrid action that takes place both on streets and on-line. The on-line element being just one more tool that can be used by activist to bring focus on the issues at hand. (...) VR-sit-ins should be used as part of the many activist tactics use. On-line activism should be added to all the other traditions that continue to be used by activist world wide."⁹

With the globally synchronised mass protest against the WTO in Seattle in 1999, a renaissance of traditional street activism has emerged, drawing on both online and offline tools. Social movements have largely abandoned their initial scepticism towards the electronic realm. While in the nineties, media activists, for instance the UK-based camcorder activists from undercurrents, were often faced with more or less open rejection when filming protests, demonstrations or actions, new media technologies are now being embraced both as means of communication and tools to voice dissent. The actions in the streets of Seattle were accompanied by hundreds of instant media activists. The first independent media center, a venue packed with old computers, cables,

power". See Konrad Becker: Terror, Freiheit und Semiotische Politik. Online in: Kulturrisse 2005, <http://igkultur.at/igkultur/kulturrisse/1088492475/1091783923>

7 For examples and a critique see autonome a.f.r.i.k.a gruppe: Stolpersteine auf der Datenautobahn, in: Marc Amman (Hg.): go.stop.act. Die Kunst des kreativen Straßenprotests. Geschichten - Aktionen - Ideen. Trotzdem Verlag Frankfurt, 2005, p xx. Online: ak 490 (2004) http://www.akweb.de/ak_s/ak490/06.htm.

8 See for example the world-information.org editorial 2005 by Konrad Becker and Felix Stalder: IP and the city - restricted landscapes and the wealth of the commons. Online: <http://www.mail-archive.com/nettime-1@bbs.thing.net/msg03048.html>, retrieved 20 October 2005.

9 Krempf, Stefan and Dominguez, Richardo (2000). Computerized Resistance After the Big Flood: Email Interview with Ricardo Dominguez, a Pioneer of Net Activism and One of the Founders of the Electronic Disturbance Theater. In Telepolis, Germany. 16 February 2000. Retrieved October 20, 2005 <http://www.heise.de/tp/english/inhalt/te/5801/1.html>

draft - Marion Hamm, Indymedia London, at Re:activism, Budapest, 14/15 October 2005

uploading facilities was embraced as one hub of the events, and its digital extension, the first indymedia website, has over the last six years been adopted and adapted by hundreds of activists worldwide.¹⁰

A hybrid communication space is emerging, made up of a multitude of specific local nodes and online as well as offline communication channels, defined by dissenting practice rather than theoretical language. The Seattle based alternative internet service provider riseup.net sums it up in a slogan: "Get off the internet - I'll see you in the streets".

A closer look at the media practice of indymedia London as one local node of the global network of independent media centers might illustrate how physical and virtual spaces, local and global practices, old and new media technologies are overlapping, merging, mutually enhancing and replacing each other.

Enter: Indymedia

Indymedia is a network of more than 150 open publishing alternative news websites, each run by a local collective. Resources like server space and bandwidth for websites, mailing lists, irc-chatrooms and wikis, as well as technological knowledge are shared across the network. Within the first ten months after the first IMC was set up in 1999, 33 IMCs appeared in more than 10 countries on four continents. In 2004, Biella Coleman counted "more than 110 IMCs around the world, on 6 continents, in over 35 countries, and using over 22 languages."¹¹

The fast proliferation of the indymedia network can be traced back to the convergence of established alternative media projects, the free software community and social movements. Two attitudes are cutting across these strands: A commitment to openness, participation and sharing was inherited from the free software community, and a hands-on attitude that resonates with what has become known as "DIY-culture".¹²

10 For a summary of the independent media center in Seattle see Hyde, Gene: Independent Media Centers: Cyber-Subversion and the alternative press. First Monday, volume 7, number 4 (April 2002). Online: http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue7_4/hyde/

11 Biella Coleman: Indymedia's Independence: From Activist Media to Free Software. <http://journal.planetwork.net/article.php?lab=coleman0704>

12 Graham Meikle suggests three versions of how the indymedia story could be told: One would be centered around the free software "active" used for the first IMCs, another one would focus on alternative media, and a third one on DIY culture. See Meikle, Graham: Indymedia and the new net news. First published in Media Development 4/2003, p 3-6.

draft - Marion Hamm, Indymedia London, at Re:activism, Budapest, 14/15 October 2005

The interwoven pattern of these strands and attitudes has been most poetically expressed by Darkveggie in a piece about the connections between the international networks of squatters, social movements and free software. He describes offline activities in computing metaphors and vice versa: "Being active programmers of our lives, not passive users" or "> get off the Internet, the street is a rootshell!"¹³

"Alternative media" includes projects from community radio and -TV, videos, photos, newssheets and papers. "Free software" means that everybody is free to examine the source code of programs, to use, copy, distribute and change them according to his or her own needs.¹⁴ Making free software turned into a movement when companies like microsoft started to "enclose" the source code. Coding free software started to accumulate some political signification as a vital part of the global commons. With the GNU public licence and more recently the creative commons licence, a legal tool was invented to protect the "four freedoms". Biella Coleman has written a concise article on indymedia's relationship to the Free Software movement¹⁵. The social movements that brought about indymedia stand up broadly, but not exclusively, against institutions of global governance: the WTO, the IMF, the Worldbank, the International Organisation of Migration. They protest against the sweep of neoliberal globalisation, the privatisation of the commons from public space to software, from water to dna. DIY-Culture has been defined as 'a youth-centred and -directed cluster of interests and practices around green radicalism, direct action politics, new musical sounds and experiences'¹⁶. In Indymedia, the DIY attitude is expressed in slogans like "Everybody is a journalist"; "Don't hate the media - be the media"; "make your own media"; "We don't ask: Is it possible? We ask: How can we get it?" The attitude of openness, participation and sharing has been adopted both from the free software movement and the no-money exchange economy of the squatting subculture. It is apparent in the concept of Open Publishing. Matthew Arnison, one of the coders of "active", explains:

13 Darkveggie: "From Free Software to Street Activism & Vice Versa", first published in May 2005 on <http://garlicviolence.org/txt/drkvg-fs2sa.html>, republished in more reader-friendly layout on InterActivist, 20 August 2005, <http://info.interactivist.net/article.pl?sid=05/08/20/2253233&mode=nested&tid=14>

14 More about the four freedoms of free software on the gnu website: <http://www.gnu.org/philosophy/free-sw.html>

15 Biella Coleman: Indymedia's Independence: From Activist Media to Free Software. 2004. <http://journal.planetwork.net/article.php?lab=coleman0704>

16 McKay:xx

draft - Marion Hamm, Indymedia London, at Re:activism, Budapest, 14/15 October 2005

"Open publishing means that the process of creating news is transparent to the readers. They can contribute a story and see it instantly appear in the pool of stories publicly available. Those stories are filtered as little as possible to help the readers find the stories they want. Readers can see editorial decisions being made by others. They can see how to get involved and help make editorial decisions... If they want to redistribute the news, they can, preferably on an open publishing site."¹⁷

In physical space, this attitude extends to hardware: The London imc crew has been sharing laptops, video projectors, minidisc-players, cameras, multiple DVD/CD burning towers, wireless hubs. By sharing, the equipment multiplies - hardly anything is idle for longer periods of time.

The combination of these strands and attitudes is different in each local IMC. The first node of imc uk was probably most strongly influenced by Reclaim the Streets. RTS was known for intervening in London's traffic-jammed streets by organising surprise streetparties. Individuals linked to the free software movement and existing alternative media heavily contributed to the project. During the global Carnival against Capitalism in the world's financial centers in 1999, more than 10000 people partied in the City of London, synchronised with many other street parties in the world. From an alternative internet lab overlooking the River Thames, media activists swarmed out with photo and video cameras, audio recording devices or pen and paper, and returned with footage to be uploaded to one single globally shared website.

This website run on an early version of "active", a cutting-edge software designed for the needs of the local activist community in Sydney, which was to be used for the early indymedia websites.¹⁸ From today's point of view, with the explosion of the blogosphere and more recently "citizens journalism", the technical ability to web-publish via browser is almost taken for granted. In 1999, "active" came as a breathtaking innovation: The open publishing facility allowed the uploading of content to the newswire of the website via a browser, without knowledge of html, ftp, or other programming tools.

The Carnival against Capitalism left visible traces in the city of London: The walls were covered in graffiti, some windows were broken and cars damaged. While corporate media had covered previous RTS parties sympathetically as environmental events, J18

¹⁷ See Matthew Arnison's explanation of Open Publishing:
<http://www.cat.org.au/maffew/cat/openpub.html>

¹⁸ Meanwhile, a number of additional codebases have been developed on planet indymedia. An overview of the indymedia codebases can be found on the indymedia documentation project:
<http://docs.indymedia.org/view/Devel/WebHome>

draft - Marion Hamm, Indymedia London, at Re:activism, Budapest, 14/15 October 2005

was represented as a violent riot. Responding to the ensuing criminalisation with classical counterinformation, RTS set up their own media group. In the next months, this group slowly took the shape of an indymedia node. Longstanding alternative media projects like the weekly newsheet Schnews, the magazine and party-project Squall and the camcorder activists from Undercurrents were consulted. Techies got more involved with the global indymedia network.

At the Mayday 2000 guerilla gardening in Londons Parliament Square, indymedia UK had its first appearance with a public access point. Reports were uploaded to a manually maintained website. The fully-fledged imc-uk website went online in time for the protests against the WMF/Worldbank conference in Prague, September 2000. At this time it was maintained by one collective in London. The worldwide anti-war protests in February 2003 became the catalyst for decentralisation and consequently an upgrade of the website to a different codebase called Mir. www.indymedia.org.uk became the shared startpage for a number of local imc collectives in the UK. Each of them set up its own local indymedia subpage, but they are all sharing the same database. From being the only imc collective in the UK, London became one node in a wider UK-based indymedia network.

Representing local indymedia practice in virtual space: Local signifiers on indymedia-websites

IMC websites are the online surface of a wide network of autonomous local collectives, each immersed in its own local politics and various grassroots scenes, with their own priorities, conflicts and preferences. Although their structure and design is largely determined by the various codebases, there is room for local customisation.

The global connectedness of local nodes is symbolically reflected on almost every indymedia website. The "cities list" on the left hand side or the bottom of the site displays links to every other IMC. More in-built links are pointing to the globally shared resources of the indymedia backoffice, including an index of the more than 900 indymedia mailing lists and the collaborative content management tool wiki.

Other than more explicitly interventionist groups like Reclaim the Streets or the Space Hijackers, local imc collectives, including the London crew, rarely feature themselves on the indymedia startpages as actors in urban space. Other than traditional newspapers, indymedia websites rarely have an editorial section, where editors and admins communicate with an audience. This resonates with the participatory ethos of the project: After all, indymedia set out to erode "the dividing line between reporters and reported,

draft - Marion Hamm, Indymedia London, at Re:activism, Budapest, 14/15 October 2005

between active producers and passive audience: people are enabled to speak for themselves."¹⁹ The prominently linked mission statements or "about us" sections are often programmatic statements rather than references to tangible physical geographies.

Representations of the local are appearing in the contents of the site, i.e. the features in the middle columns and the newswires on the right hand column. In reports and pictures assembled in indymedia newswires, knowledge of the local environment is imminent, especially where a collective is making the transition from mainly reporting "global events" to becoming an ongoing alternative news platform. Some elements on the startpages signify a connection to the specific urban (or rural) fabric surrounding each indymedia node.

Indymedia London, like most local IMCs in the UK, prominently displays a calendar of local upcoming events. Additional small banners and links can be added to draw attention to locally significant campaigns or groups.

Most collectives have customised the indymedia logo or the banner across the top of their site in some way. Some are playing on popular national symbols: Imcistas in the Netherlands, for example, have transformed the indymedia ((i)) into a windmill. The Irish IMC has chosen shamrock green as their predominant colour. The german language swiss IMC website displays the Alps. Some use imagery from the global protest movement: London chose a reference to the pink and silver carnivals and a typeface resembling an old-fashioned typewriter. Scotland displays an image of a piper in black, wearing a gasmask. IMC Manchester and IMC Sheffield show local landmarks of their respective cities. IMC Southcoast draws on the British seaside tourist culture by making its site look like a seaside postcard. IMC Westcountry, now disabled, referred to technology. A few imcs make a point to express the offline aspects of indymedia: IMC Austria has an image of the double decker bus of the Publix Theatre Caravan, which travelled as a mobile media unit to big protests like the G8 in Genoa. The indymedia URL was carefully painted on its side. Imc Oxford displays the indymedia URL graffitied onto a wall.

Writing on Indymedia: The fading of real space

In the numerous research papers and journalistic essays about indymedia, traces of indymedia presence in physical space are similarly rare. Few researchers include questions about indymedia as a project located in a specific, historical, material geography. While indymedia websites attract much attention, especially during big

¹⁹ IMC UK mission statement, online: <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/static/mission.html>

draft - Marion Hamm, Indymedia London, at Re:activism, Budapest, 14/15 October 2005

mobilisations²⁰, the physical aspect of the project tends to disappear.

Most researchers and writers have focussed on the “alternative media” strand of indymedia rather than its connection to free software²¹ or social movements. They have examined Indymedia in terms of its potential contribution to or challenge of mainstream journalism²², and as a challenge to the “Corporate Media Machine”²³. Many articles include a brief account of the rise of the network of independent media centers since 1999. They mention its relationship to social movements, describe the technologies and the open publishing facility as well as internal organising structures.²⁴ Indymedia was one of the case studies in a report by the Social Science Research Council, which aimed to make recommendations to civil society on how to best use new technologies.²⁵

Some articles, mainly those written by activists who are in some way involved in an indymedia project, provide a glimpse of the on-the-ground intensity of an indymedia

20 An average of two and a half million viewers accessed the first indymedia website in Seattle, 1999, every two hours xx Platon & Deuze (2003). A news service set up on a shoestring budget and run entirely by volunteers was featured on large corporate media sites like America Online, Yahoo, CNN or BBC Online.

21 The best account of indymedia's relationship to the free software movement I am aware of is Biella Coleman: Indymedia's Independence: From Activist Media to Free Software. PlaNetwork 2004, Online: <http://journal.planetwork.net/article.php?lab=coleman0704>

22 See for example Sara Platon and Mark Deuze: Indymedia journalism. A radical way of making, selecting and sharing news? In: Journalism 4 (2003), p.336-355; Atton, C.: What can Journalism Educators Learn from Alternative Media Practitioners?, paper presented at the Scottish Media and Communication Association annual conference, Glasgow, 22 November 2002.; Jankowski, Nicholas W. and Jansen, Marieke: Indymedia: Exploration of an Alternative Internet-based Source of Movement News. Conference Paper. Hong Kong, December 2003.

23 See Brooten, L. (2004). The Power of Public Reporting: The Independent Media Center's Challenge to the “Corporate Media Machine.” In L. Artz & Y. R. Kamalipour (Eds.), Bring ‘Em On! Media and Power in the Iraq War. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

24 See for expl Shumway, Chris: Democratizing Communication Through Community-based Participatory Media Networks: a Study of the Independent Media Center Movement. Masters Thesis 2003, online: <http://chris.shumway.tripod.com/papers/thesis.htm>; Morris, Douglas: Globalization and Media Democracy: The Case of Indymedia. In: Schuler, Douglas and Day, Peter (Eds.): Shaping the Network Society. 2003, MIT Press 2003. Pre-publication version online: <http://www.fis.utoronto.ca/research/iprp/c3n/CI/DMorris.htm>

25 Surman, M. and Reilly, K. Appropriating the Internet for Social Change: Towards the Strategic Use of Networked Technologies by Transnational Civil Society Organizations. Social Science Research Council, 2003. Online: http://www.ssrc.org/programs/itic/civ_soc_report/. This report was sponsored by the Ford Foundation, which had also offered a large grant to the IMC network, which was, after intense debate, turned down for political reasons.

draft - Marion Hamm, Indymedia London, at Re:activism, Budapest, 14/15 October 2005

operation during a big protest, for example, when Dorothy Kidd starts her article²⁶ with "a whiff of teargas"; when an activist describes the manic activity in setting up the physical independent media center in Seattle²⁷ or when DeeDee Halleck describes the same process²⁸. However, these glimpses are soon superseded by more structural or media centered reflections and descriptions. They rarely take the tangible locality of the event, its history, architecture, local specificity as a point of reference, and prefer to focus on the fast-moving, nomadic realm of global activism.

Many IMCs have been set up to counter corporate media by reporting about a specific event, in a specific place. The IMC for the global protest the IMF and world bank meeting in Prague, 2000, was set up mainly by "internationals"²⁹. German activists went back home inspired by the experience, to set up their own IMC. Its first project was to report, in close collaboration with protesters, the direct actions to disrupt the transports of nuclear waste across Germany in 2001³⁰. In his brief presentation of IMC Germany, Arne Hintz has scattered some descriptions of the landscape of the protests:

"North Germany was a cold and bleak place during the final days of March 2001. Winter had returned for a final appearance, it was snowing (...) Another large shipment of nuclear waste (...) was on its way to the depository in the little town of Gorleben (...) As Indymedia Germany was born between the snow, the police water cannons, and the hay of a countryside barn, people following the reporting locally as well as globally did not have to rely anymore on the notoriously negative reports of mainstream journalists who spent much of their week at police headquarters and portrayed the protests accordingly."

The description remains strangely general, like an unlabelled painting of a winter landscape, more akin to a metaphorical nativity scene than a specific location in the

26 Kidd, Dorothy: Carnival to Commons. In: Eddie Yuen, Daniel Burton Rose and George Katsiaficas (Eds.) *Confronting Capitalism: Dispatches from a Global Movement*. New York: Softskull Press, 2004, here page 1. Online:

http://docs.indymedia.org/pub/Global/ImcEssayCollection/Carnival_to_commons.pdf

27 See the indymedia section in chapter 4 of *Notes from nowhere: We are everywhere*. London 2003

28 Halleck, DeeDee: *Indymedia: Building an international activist Internet network*. First published in *Media Development* 4/2003.

29 Prague Indymedia has been disabled in 2004. Some pages are archived on archive.org, see for expl. <http://web.archive.org/web/20001019061941/http://prague.indymedia.org/>

30 See the indymedia starterkit on imc germany from 18 March 2001: <http://germany.indymedia.org/2001/03/88.shtml>

draft - Marion Hamm, Indymedia London, at Re:activism, Budapest, 14/15 October 2005

material world. If indymedia is being discussed as a separate entity, if it is being reduced to a media project, if its connections to the localised political, cultural or social context are not taken into consideration, its relationships to and impact on the urban fabric remain invisible. Even Indymedia Bristol, one of the IMCs that focusses most explicitly on local news, and encourages contributors to find a local angle on international events, positions itself more in the context of local and alternative media than the material fabric of their city.³¹

Academic research focusses on indymedia as a global network of alternative news production: Contents, comparisons to mainstream media, organisational structure. The local geographies of the various nodes remain invisible or mythological. Global and local, online and offline practices are at best presented as an addition of examples. Their mutual interaction remains a black box. The same tendency is apparent when indymedia participants themselves describe their project. The "backoffice" of indymedia, the space of production, is rarely included.

Zoom in: Indymedia London node

In a conscious effort to describe their project as "A Virtual Project In Real Space", Annie and Sam from Indymedia UK mention a few London landmarks while telling the story of the beginnings of what became Indymedia UK:

"City of London, [June 18 1999](#). Soundsystems, puppets, colourful banners. Dancing crowds swinging in the glistening sunshine: Europe's [Financial Center # 1](#) has been [taken over](#) by a [Carnival against Capitalism](#), cyberconnected to dozens of venues of a Global Street Party. In the vicinity of Jack the Ripper near the old Clink prison on the south side of the river Thames: [Backspace](#), an [alternative internetcafe](#). Cables, dusty boxes, keyboards, dirty mugs. Projections of the party on the wall. A sound- and video studio run by various media collectives. Typing, coding, converting, uploading. This was the seed of indymedia uk."³²

Looking at the day-to-day practice of the collective, they are touching on their relationship to the history and geography of the London landscape:

31 The growth and growth of Bristol Indymedia. First published in Media Development 4/2003, p 29.

32 Annie and Sam: From Indymedia UK to the United Kollektives. First published in Media Development 4/2003, p 27-28. Online: <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2004/12/302894.html>

draft - Marion Hamm, Indymedia London, at Re:activism, Budapest, 14/15 October 2005

"Our internal process had an emphasis on face to face meetings in real space. Ironically, we never managed to find a room of our own. Fluid nomadism seems to suit the urban landscape better than settlement. Most community centers were closed down by the Thatcher government, and even public toilets and the pavement at the Southbank are privatised. So we embarked on a journey through the guts of London - an artists caff at King's x, a freezing-cold disused warehouse in the East End, a pub in Kentish Town, a friend's kitchen, the basement of a pub in trendy Hoxton, a squatted button-factory in Brixton, the People's Palace, until we finally arrived back at the bosom of the activist ghetto in a resource center in a former synagogue in Whitechapel."

In their local practice, Sam and Annie are navigating the sprawl of London as users of the urban fabric. They don't "hack" the spacial code of the city like more interventionist groups do in their experiments and actions. Throughout the late nineties, Reclaim the Streets threw cheeky, unannounced streetparties. The Space Hijackers pushed the limits of spacial regulations with numerous tongue-in-cheek actions. The bike rides of Critical Mass have been causing a monthly, informally scheduled interruption of traffic since 1994. Although it held a few guerilla screenings³³, Sam and Annie's collective tends to participate in such events as media activists rather than organisers. Participation generates reports on the indymedia website. Indymedia volunteers become an interface between real space and virtual space. While physically present in many interventions in the streets, their role as an agents in urban space is fading once the reports are online, making way for agents like "the crowd", or "the protesters". In a video by Indymedia Argentina, a volunteer states: "We protest with cameras!"³⁴. This practice rarely makes it into the actual reports. A closer look at any of indymedia's offline activities uncovers a wealth of localised, spacial connections to the urban fabric of London.

Connotative Mapping: Public Screenings and Spacial Practices

Being a node in a global alternative media network, imc London had access to a vast amount of video productions. Although many of them can be downloaded from the web, their distribution "in real space" relies on an informal, self-organised network. With the launch of the European Newsreal in November 2002³⁵, the London indymedia collective

33 See for example the report about a screening at the Southbank on Media Democracy Day, 18 October 2002: <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2002/10/44055.html>

34 Indymedia Argentina: Eye of the Storm xx

35 See posting on the imc-london mailing list: <http://archives.lists.indymedia.org/imc-london/2002->

draft - Marion Hamm, Indymedia London, at Re:activism, Budapest, 14/15 October 2005

set out to organise monthly screenings in a wide range of venues: the OTHER Cinema, the Spitz Gallery, Brixton's Ritzi Cinema, the squatted RampArt social center and most recently the Synergy Project.

Browsing the [imc-london] organising email list³⁶ between November 2002 and July 2004 uncovers countless signifiers for indymedia's use of urban space: References to negotiations with various venue managers and organising groups, descriptions on how to get there, desperate searches for equipment from "a clean white sheet, ironed" to "quicktime.mov software", arrangements to pick up equipment ("Who has the video projector?").

Each venue opens up a different vista onto London's underground entertainment economy, and its crossovers and clashes with the mainstream. Even in a superficial connotative mapping, narratives of failed urban planning as well as creative attempts defying these failures are gaining visibility. The Spitz Gallery in the Eastend, "London's coolest music venue"³⁷, presents presents cutting edge, cross genre music from around the world and exhibits innovative work in a range of media. It overlooks the Old Spitalfields market, a previously tatty accumulation of old brick structures full of eclectic sights, treats and eats in an area where "old-time East Enders and Bengali immigrants live cheek-by-jowl with City workers."³⁸. Earmarked for demolition in 2003, most of it has now been redeveloped. Indymedia Screenings at the Spitz took place until April 2004. The OTHER cinema, a renowned arthouse cinema in the West End, was used for a year, until it ceased being an independent venue in November 2004.³⁹ The closure of this favourite Soho cinema was widely noted in the blogosphere. It has now reopened as a Picturehouse, owned by CityScreen. This arthouse chain specialises in which are not part of the commercial mainstream, but adheres to strictly commercial management. The Ritzy in Brixton is hosting indymedia screenings in its bar area. It was built in 1911 along with at least nine other cinemas in the area. Its original name "Electric Pavillon", in combination with nearby "Electric Avenue", refers back to the fascination with electricity around the turn of the twentieth century. In the 80s, the Brixton squatting scene used to

November/000011.html

³⁶ <http://lists.indymedia.org/mailman/listinfo/imc-london>

³⁷ See the Spitz website: <http://www.spitz.co.uk/>

³⁸ Fiona Wickham: Spitalfields Bows to Market Pressure. BBC News Online, 14 January 2003, Online: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/2410393.stm>

³⁹ See a statement from OTHER cinema staff including links to the venues history and track-record on <http://www.vertigomagazine.co.uk/newsandevents/OtherCampaign.htm>; a report of its closing night on [metrobloggers](http://london.metblogs.com/archives/2004/11/): <http://london.metblogs.com/archives/2004/11/>, and a call for donations <http://www.allaboutgiving.org/news/article.aspx?articleid=3447>.

draft - Marion Hamm, Indymedia London, at Re:activism, Budapest, 14/15 October 2005

go there with a few cans of beer and a lump of hash to celebrate birthday parties. Now owned by Cityscreen, it is the oldest cinema in south London still in use.⁴⁰

The Synergy project⁴¹, indymedia's most recent monthly screening venue in London, takes us to yet another section of London (underground?) culture - the various incarnations of the free party movement. After the criminalisation of this scene through the 1994 Criminal Justice Act, some hooked up with the road protest movement or Reclaim the Streets. Others continued to organise raving drug-crazed one-off squat parties and festivals. Members of Synergy established themselves at the more commercial angle, closer to the mainstream. An attempt to reclaim fun and entertainment from London's highly commercialised clubbing culture, Conscious Clubbing took place in the Scala, a stately former cinema at King's Cross. The Warp experience charged commercial rates for its 24 hour rave music-poetry-installations under the railway arches at London Bridge and employed professional bouncers. Through info-stalls, visuals or screenings, the London node of indymedia had a presence in many of these often conflicting strands of the free party scene and the festival circuit.

Over the last six years, there have been too many one-off indymedia presences in London to map them all out here. But the pattern I am trying to grasp would be misleading without mentioning at least a few locations that point to London's extended grassroots-anarchist-ecologist direct-action oriented DIY squatting scene. One most obvious place is the annual anarchist bookfair, an event that attracts politically active punters from far beyond London. It has been located at the University of London Students Union near Senate House and the British Museum, in Conway Hall⁴² near Soho, and at the London Voluntary Sector Resource Center in Holloway Road⁴³. Indymedia participates in the Anarchist Bookfair with well-presented stalls and in some years video screenings. Many indymedia meetings as well as some screenings are taking place in LARC and rampART, both in Whitechapel near Brick Lane. The London Activist Resource Center LARC was originally built as a church, then used as a synagogue, before it became a social center/infopoint⁴⁴. The founding group explains their need for

40 See the documentation on Brixton's local forum "Urban 75":

<http://www.urban75.org/brixton/history/theatre.html>

41 See on their website: Origins of the Synergy project,

http://www.thesynergyproject.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=32&Itemid=60

42 Conway Hall describes itself as a landmark of London's independent intellectual, political and cultural life: <http://www.conwayhall.org.uk/conwayhallhistory.htm>

43 For some background about this area of North London, see Class-War's Section on "Radical Holloway": http://www.londonclasswar.org/newswire_October%20London%20Calling.htm

44 see the "Old Jewish East End" section of the The South West Essex And Settlement Reform

draft - Marion Hamm, Indymedia London, at Re:activism, Budapest, 14/15 October 2005

such a center:

"we had come to feel that the one-off spectacular actions weren't enough to build the 'creative alternatives' we often talked about in our agit-prop. Along side this we were increasingly fed-up with relying on meeting in, or being chucked out from, rooms in pubs or community centres and having our offices in someones spare room."⁴⁵

The disused school building in Rampart street nearby has been squatted since May 2004.⁴⁶ Set up as a social and cultural center, rampART has a poster and flyer exhibition, a hacklab and frequent film events⁴⁷. The banner of its website features a simplified map of its East End surroundings, but the history section makes no mention of former uses of the building.⁴⁸

The institutional, spacial and historical depth of urban alternative/activist media practice is not by default visible. It is embodied in specific spaces, its representation scattered across far-off websites, quick postings deep down in the archives of mailing lists and forums, stored in an evasive archive of collective memory that is defined by gossip, narratives and the exchange of personal experiences, a local knowledge accessible to those who are living it. Only few of those who pass the Starbucks at Clink Street will make the connotation to the legendary backspace. Activist space is nomadic, temporary, fluid, it signifies by a network of communication rather than fixed places. A more extended connotative mapping of the indymedia presence could contribute to a more concise analysis of the patterns of a hybrid activist space in London.

Mix and match of old and new technologies

Creating a "hybrid activist space" involves both virtual and spacial practices. Indymedia had its first public appearance in the UK at the Guerilla Gardening in London's Parliament Square on Mayday 2000. It consisted of a white marquee housing two laptops, rumour has it that they were bicycle powered. Reports were saved on floppy disks and brought to

Synagogue: http://www.rigal.freemove.co.uk/old_sites.htm

45 See the history section on their website: http://www.londonarc.org/larc_history.html

46 See the opening announcement on indymedia.org.uk:

<http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2004/05/291846.html>

47 See a round-up of rampARTs activities after the first six months:

http://www.wombles.org.uk/news/article_2004_12_13_5142.php

48 See <http://www.rampart.co.nr/>

draft - Marion Hamm, Indymedia London, at Re:activism, Budapest, 14/15 October 2005

a makeshift media center deep down in the basement of a nearby pub, where they were manually uploaded to a simple html website via the telephone line of said pub. Such "public access points" were an integral part of indymedia london's attempts to connect the streets to the internet, and thereby to an emerging global alliance of social movements.⁴⁹ Gradually, public access points grew into small versions of the first independent media center in Seattle. Set up in a parish hall⁵⁰ or a friendly internet cafe⁵¹, a community center⁵² or a former church⁵³ or a tent⁵⁴ and equipped with usually old, linux-powered boxes, these centers provide internet access, laptop network points, plugs to charge mobile phones, cameras or minidisc players. Sometimes, this requires advanced technology: The media set-up at the rural action camp during the protests against the G8 in Scotland was connected via satellite dish, providing wireless access throughout most of the camp. 20 recycled Pentium I laptops connected to a laptop based server running Debian were available for those without their own machines.⁵⁵

Except for those moments in time when a demonstration or a protest requires independent media access, other projects are better suited than indymedia to show how cutting-edge technology intersects with the urban fabric, through wireless networks, community websites or media art. When the London indymedia crew seeks visibility, they tend to turn to old media.

Saskia Sassen is promoting the term "barefoot engineering" for the mix and match of new and old technologies, a practice outside formal systems found in resource-poor areas. Although London as a whole is far from being a resource poor area, the space between the digital access interface and the user is far from empty in Europe's self-declared media capital. In "Dark Fiber", Geert Lovink states that what counts with tactical media "are

⁴⁹ See for expl. an image of the indymedia public access point at the protests in Prague, September 26, 2000: <http://docs.indymedia.org/pub/Local/UkPhotos/PublicAccesspraha.jpg>

⁵⁰ For the 2003 protests against the international arms-fair dsei, a media center was set up in St. Anne's Parish Hall: <http://indymedia.org.uk/en/2003/09/277471.html>

⁵¹ An internet cafe was used for the 2001 protests against the international arms fair dsei on 11 September 2001.

⁵² During the European Social Forum in 2004, Camden Center hosted the Forum for Communication Rights and an Independent Media Center.

⁵³ The Independent Media Center for the reporting of the protests against the G8 in Scotland was set up in a former church.

⁵⁴ During the G8 protests in Scotland, the action camp in Stirling had it's own media tent: <http://docs.indymedia.org/view/Global/FieldIMCHowTo>

⁵⁵ See details on the technical setup on <http://docs.indymedia.org/view/Global/FieldIMCHowTo>

draft - Marion Hamm, Indymedia London, at Re:activism, Budapest, 14/15 October 2005

temporary connections between old and new, practice and theory, alternative and mainstream (...) Tactical media may intervene within a movement, but it may also link a movement to social groups."⁵⁶

Indymedia's public screenings are transferring DIY-videos from digital into physical space. Copies of those videos on CDs or DVD are a staple fundraising source for the collective. Hand-printed T-shirts with indymedia logos are serving the same purpose.⁵⁷ They also enhance the project's visibility at parties, demos, or festivals. Contents of indymedia newswires are further distributed in the photocopied newsheet "offline" and since 2002 in a weekly radio show on the London-based community radio station Resonance FM. For larger protesting events in London, a telephone-line to phone in reports is being publicised, mostly on small, ad-hoc flyers photocopied at the last minute. With a nod to the free party scene and Reclaim The Streets, small stickers with various indymedia URLs are appearing on lamp-posts and billboards, in tube stations and pubs. A considerable contingent of visual artists within the indymedia London collective is churning out expertly designed banners and flags. Like the traditional banners of the worker's movements, they appear at demonstrations. At the demo against the closure of the refugee camp in Sangatte in December 2002, flags and a banner visually transformed a truck with a laptop inside into a media vehicle.⁵⁸ When the FBI seized IMC servers in the UK just before the European Social Forum in October 2004, indymedia volunteers reacted not only by putting the indymedia backoffice into action, networking with civil liberties organisations and media work, or by improving the technical set up. The London crew also brought a 30 foot purpose-made banner to the final demonstration. The same banner was used along with others to decorate the newly squatted Circle Community Centre at St. George's in Tufnell Park for a big indymedia fundraising and birthday party the following month. This amazing round venue was originally built as a church, then used as a theatre, abandoned for four years, and squatted until evicted in October 2005. Putting a squat on the map means turning it into a public space, giving it profile and meaning as a meeting space, a cultural or artist project, a social center, a venue for events or something in between. Visual elements like banners and flags from a variety of groups help to draw out this profile. Amazingly large banners originally made for the road protests in the late nineties, for several Mayday demonstrations and Reclaim the Streets

⁵⁶ Geert Lovink, *Dark Fiber: Tracking Critical Internet Culture*. Cambridge Mass, 2002

⁵⁷ About the function of T-shirts in the mix and match of activist media tools see Patricia Koestring from the Austrian IG-Kultur in *Kulturrisse* 03 (2004), Online:
<http://igkultur.at/igkultur/kulturrisse/1088492475/1091003675>

⁵⁸ See pictures: <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2002/12/49053.html>

draft - Marion Hamm, Indymedia London, at Re:activism, Budapest, 14/15 October 2005

parties, were pulled out for the Reclaim the Futures (RTF) parties in 2002⁵⁹, 2003⁶⁰ and 2005. Indymedia marked out a cinema space with banners. Staged in a squatted warehouses, and a former nightclub, these rave "parties with purpose" are seen as interventions:

"RTF was created as a way to show that the streets are ours and we will not be prevented from partying and protesting by laws which have tried to squash the reclaim the streets movement. RTF is also about working together for a future that we all want, free from capitalism and freedom from exploitation for all peoples and for a planet free from the destruction and pollution it currently endures."⁶¹

In the context of demonstrations and political squat parties, indymedia's visual presence has an additional meaning. The physical presence of a media project in this context was part of the appropriation of new media technologies in political groups. Making new technologies available for social movements is useless if they are not being accepted, recognised and present in offline practices.

Banners and flags can also be used to temporarily mark a more mainstream space as "activist" or "political". During Indymedia screenings, two long vertical indymedia banners on both sides of the screen gave the OTHER cinema as an activist air. Even when indymedia volunteers give lectures to university students, banners can help to shift the atmosphere from plain teaching to a more meeting-like setting.

A temporary geography of protest

The indymedia project is widely recognised as an open publishing platform for alternative news. Its innovative open publishing software was truly innovative when the project started in 1999, years before the explosion of the blogosphere. Early adoption of new media technologies, software innovations and online communication tools are part of its success⁶². Far from having caused a shrinking of protest in public space, competent, hands-on use of old and new media technologies has contributed to the multiplication and

⁵⁹ See report on a-infos: <http://www.ainfos.ca/02/oct/ainfos00466.html>

⁶⁰ See report in Squall: <http://www.squall.co.uk/squall.cfm/ses/sq=2003020701/ct=9>

⁶¹ See announcement of RTF III on indymedia.org.uk:
<http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2005/06/312873.html>

⁶² Biella Coleman describes indymedia's relationship to the Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) movement in her article: Indymedia's Independence: From Activist Media to Free Software, in PlaNetwork Journal: <http://journal.planetwork.net/article.php?lab=coleman0704>

draft - Marion Hamm, Indymedia London, at Re:activism, Budapest, 14/15 October 2005

globalisation of protest and dissent through mediated synchronisation and a densifying of inter-activist networking.

Although Indymedia's localised connections to the respective urban (or rural) fabric in physical space are less prominent, they are a crucial part to the success of the project. In London, these connections are most poignant when looking at the links to localised social movements.

In the ordinary everyday, the indymedia machine rattles on unnoticed - newswires are cleaned, bits of code are being written, arguments are had on mailing lists and in face to face meetings. While making, maintaining, improving a local/regional website, the London node of indymedia accumulates local knowledge. Navigating through the streets and alleyways of London's neighbourhoods, filming, recording and reporting protests, broadcasting radio, sourcing hardware, organising public screenings, attending meetings and generally connecting to social movements, indymedia volunteers become an interface between physical and virtual space. Day-to-day indymedia work leads into the online space where reporting, discussions, developments and conflicts are negotiated on mailing lists, wikis and in chatrooms. In this hybrid communication space, the global and the local, online and offline collaborations can collapse into each other.

This communication space is most vibrant during big mobilisations. Rather than being a news-service in the traditional sense, Indymedia websites have become a collaborative fotoalbum, a diary, noticeboard, or gossip-channel for a global alliance of social movements. They function as a platform where the global movement imagines itself by representing a choice of protest imagery from dancing fairies in pink and silver to lines of black clad riot cops resembling mediaval dark knights, from happy carnivals to brutal police attacks and black-block-type streetfighting.

Big mobilisations generate a an extra layer of sudden infrastructure on top of the existing urban fabric of any respective location. This layer is defined by convergence centers in squatted or hired warehouses or rural campsites, crash-spaces to accommodate thousands of international activists, gatherings and targets. As part of a fluid, fast, improvised, temporary infrastructure, the indymedia machine churns out reports, networks of volunteers and technological infrastructures. A temporary geography of protest emerges, grounded in specific spacial and historical situations and connecting them both digitally and physically to global networks.

It is no coincidence that Indymedia resonates with the Second Declaration of La Realidad from 1996, where the Zapatistas declared:

That we will make a network of communication among all our struggles and resistance's. An intercontinental network of alternative communication against neoliberalism, an intercontinental network of alternative communication for humanity. This intercontinental network of alternative communication will search to weave the channels so that words may travel all the roads that resist. This intercontinental network of alternative communication will be the medium by which distinct resistance's communicate with one another. This intercontinental network of alternative communication is not an organising structure, nor has a central head or decision maker, nor does it have a central command or hierarchies. We are the network, all of us who speak and listen.⁶³

⁶³ The Second declaration of La Realidad is widely spread over the internet. This quote is from:
<http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/3849/dec2real.html>