

Globalization from below? ICTs and Democratic Development in the Project "Indymedia Africa"

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Indymedia Africa (IMCA) is a global network of media activists that aims to both connect and foster the use of Independent Media in Africa. Originating in the digital age activism of the late nineties, the Indymedia network has been surfing a wave of optimism regarding the potentials of new media and the digital public sphere to democratize publishing and the media. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) were understood as permitting "convergence" between people and movements in a horizontally organized fashion, thereby facilitating desired organizational cultures based on consensus and plurality, and producing "open spaces" relatively unstructured and uncontrolled by conventional political and economic structures. As an element of a "globalization from below," IMCA considered these ideas as an answer to problems of democracy and freedom of expression in Africa and attempted to spread its own organizational principles into African independent media. In four years of creating virtual and physical convergence spaces, online forums, and Web sites, as well as organizing transnational gatherings, however, the IMCA network has had to face something of a reality check regarding the conditions of its own work and the African context. It has also gone through a process of action and reflection that appears symptomatic for a variety of initiatives of global cooperation in the field of new media, highlighting the limits of technological and pragmatic answers to the debate of the democratic potentials of these media. This chapter considers

the actors and ideologies that have informed, defined, and altered IMCA practices since its inception, via an action research guided analysis of its virtual and physical encounters.

INTRODUCTION

Independent media projects such as the global Independent Media (or "Indymedia") Network (www.indymedia.org), which are based on the use of new ICTs, have been part and parcel of the transformation of publishing in the global sphere in the digital age. Born as a tool of communication between activists in the protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle in 1999, and following prototypes such as the use of a shared Web site for uploading media reports during the London protests against the G8 on June 18, 1999 (Notes from Nowhere 2003, 231–2), Indymedia attempts to be an "open space" in the virtual world (Pickard 2006; Mamadouh, 2004; Pickett 2004). "Open space" here refers to the intention that Indymedia functions as a news-based Internet portal that allows the "open posting" of articles by any author to a Web site, while a set of publishing regulations and an inclusive editorial collective are the only gatekeepers (Keraghel and Sen 2004; Patomäki and Teivainen 2004; Böhm et al. 2005). Instead of depending on corporate or state sponsored media, grassroots initiatives and individual activists thus find here an open media space where their localities and concerns can be independently produced and represented for a potentially global audience, facilitating the networking of similar and related struggles, and allowing for a radical horizontal reorganizing of the public sphere. The open editorial collectives operate through online synchronous communication (Internet Relay Chats or IRCs) to allow participants to engage in the editorial process and enable consensus resolutions to be reached. Despite the importance of ICTs in the communication structures of Indymedia, its principles also emphasize a strong local and face-to-face component of the editorial work. Essentially a network of autonomous local groups, Indymedia as an organizational "umbrella" insists on a certain purity with regard to new members who want to join the network.¹ Indymedia also attempts to foster "globalization from below," a concept that derives from a critique of a top-down neoliberal globalization driven by the globalized finance sector, large-scale corporations and powerful states (Della Porta 2006; Harvey 2007; Klein 2007).

Technically, Indymedia's development was permitted and propelled by the rapid expansion of the availability and use of ICTs. In fact, the ever-increasing number of people using ICTs at decreasing costs constitutes one of the major reasons social theorists speak of systemic changes in social organization under current rapid processes of globalization (e.g., McLuhan 1964; Dery 1996; Melucci 1996; Castells 1997; Gleick

1999). The ability to use alternative and new media thus is critical in producing emerging forms of political organization, particularly in the realm of contemporary social movements (Escobar 2004, 4). Indymedia is a prime example of this kind of "information-age activism" (Routledge 2003). What is often overlooked in this celebration of ICTs, however, is the fact that they have been equally crucial to the development of neoliberal globalization, particularly in the realm of international finance. ICTs are integral not just for democratic critique, but also for the development of a late capitalist global economy. The centrality of ICTs in both globalization and its critical discourse opens a set of questions regarding a situation of limited access and spread of ICTs, as is the case in Africa.

DEVELOPMENT, "NEOLIBERAL" OR "FROM BELOW"?

Although the growth rate of Internet usage and available bandwidth are massive today in Africa as elsewhere, there is a dramatically smaller availability and use of the Internet in Africa than in any other part of the world.² Globally, there is a digital divide,³ or inequality, in Internet usage, related to a lack of technostucture.⁴ This has been identified as a major development concern (Flatz 1999) resulting in such technodeterministic projects as Negroponte's "Laptop for every child" some of which are highly uncritical of the ideologies underlying media, education, and technology programs in development projects. (Berman 1980a, 1980b). This is particularly in the area of producing a hegemonic global civil society shaped by Northern discourses of trade liberalization, individualistic consumerism, and "democracy" (cf. Reed 1996; Gramsci 2003 [1971]; Spicer et al. 2006).

The global state-critical and neoliberal discourse resulted in a tendency to bypass state institutions in international funding in the 1990s, and to rely more on civil society actors such as NGOs. Non-state actors were believed to be less biased, less bureaucratic, less corrupt, and more reliable partners in aid than state agencies. But the new focus on civil society did little more than legitimate structural adjustment along the lines of the Washington Consensus. State spending in the South was reduced or terminated, education, health, transport, and the environment, were privatized, and nonprofitable aspects of the state's solidarity and transfer systems were reorganized through NGOs that became the main receivers of international aid flows. These new NGOs were often the antennae of transnational, Northern-dominated NGOs. Wallerstein (2004, 269) thus points out that despite the anti-systemic, or state-critical origin of several NGOs in the North, their actual policy and impact in their international work have made them appear more as "agents of their home states" in the South. They were certainly agents

of the neoliberal turn in global aid flows. This has not necessarily delivered a higher rate of development, democracy, or alleviation of poverty for Africa. From the perspective of producing greater social justice in Africa, the neoliberal development policy arguably has failed dramatically (Shikwati 2005; Mwenda 2006).

Indymedia is centrally engaged in providing, supporting, and disseminating the critique of neoliberal globalization; however, in its own network it also is confronted with a "development" problem. There is a digital gap mirroring the global one in the Independent Media network, which currently has some sixty-one Independent Media Centers (IMCs) listed for the United States, fifty for Europe (with a further fourteen listed for the UK), but only six for Africa.⁵

While critical of neoliberal policies and resulting development strategies, Indymedia also found itself creating its own "development" initiative. The IMCA network is animated by a wish to contest and depart from criticized neoliberal development strategies and to create an alternative approach. IMCA thus pursues what has been described as a need to go beyond development (Escobar 1992), particularly by focusing on grassroots initiatives as central agencies in the challenge to "co-move" rather than to develop (Esteva 1987, 33). The idea of "co-movement" is to "intensify the processes of construction of direct democracy." IMCA attempted to put into practice these ideas in its four years of existence.

IMCA

Founded in 2003, the IMCA working group consisted of African and European members of the global Indymedia network who shared the aim of holding a conference of Independent Media Activists in Dakar, Senegal. IMCA started from the premise that it would be a good idea for existing African independent media initiatives to be linked with Indymedia, while at the same time hoping to foster the creation of new initiatives.

In the making of the first conference, it became clear that the attempt to depart from the problems associated with neoliberal development policies had failed in several aspects:

1. In Dakar local participants were not involved in the planning process. The whole idea of the conference was conceived outside Dakar. Larger local participation only commenced with the beginning of the conference, thanks to an outreach initiative to local students and some local activists. The *Global/Local News* or the politics of scale in transnational planning process was radically imbalanced.
2. As the money for the meeting came from the "north," it was mainly Northern participants who controlled and administered

the spending of funds and acted as *organizers* at the convergence space (see below). Additionally, Northern participants knowledgeable in ICTs were invited to join the meeting, specifically coming to *teach* participating Africans. This resulted in a situation where the power lines at the convergence space were along a North-South trajectory.

3. Several Northerners participated in the meeting on their own terms, using their own resources. No nonlocal Africans were able to participate as independently as this. Instead, their participation was enabled by funding from project budgets. Radically different *global mobilities* structured the conferences and influenced actors' attitudes and roles in it.

Since the Dakar meeting, IMCA has organized two similar conferences: the IMC at the polycentric World Social Forum (WSF) in Bamako, Mali, in January 2006; and at the WSF in Nairobi, in January 2007. Through taking a closer look at the 2007 Nairobi conference, we will discuss the process and the learning experience of the IMCA over the period of its existence, with reference to these three points.

ANALYZING CONVERGENCE SPACES: WSF NAIROBI 2007—AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION

The concept of "convergence space"—used broadly in globalization critical movements to describe their open-space meetings and gatherings—has been proposed as a "tool by which to understand and criticize grassroots globalization networks" (Routledge 2003, 334). Amongst activists, the phrase refers to specific locations—sleeping spaces, media spaces, and so on—at the large-scale gatherings of protestors occurring at summit mobilizations such as the anti-G8 protests. The term reflects an understanding that in these meetings activists and groups from diverse backgrounds and cultures come together to form a new social entity, respecting the initial differences rather than subsuming them into one overall narrative. At the same time, these real-time meetings are prepared, enhanced, reflected upon, and ultimately made possible by ICTs situated in what has been labeled convergence culture (Jenkins 2006). Mailing lists, web chat-rooms and wiki-pages, open publishing, and web 2.0 allow the formation of global networks that are able to mobilize people for real-life encounters.

The following case-study focuses on the convergence space of the Nairobi IMCA conference, an actual meeting of not more than forty-five people at a time that took place over three weeks in Nairobi, as well as on the virtual social spaces that existed around this convergence and that made the actual meeting possible. As a place of negotiation of heterogeneity

and the politics of scale, the conference and its virtual environment highlights some of the issues produced more generally by emerging global interactions and transfers of aid, technology, and discursive frames. As Roulledge (2003, 347) points out, "attention needs to be paid to the internal structures of the movements and groups that participate in convergence spaces, and to their placing within local realities." In this respect the notion of "open space" is significant in the analysis of convergence spaces. The particular role that the ICT-based virtual convergence plays in relation to the physical convergence is discussed here in some detail.

The IMCA embraces the need to reflect on its own dynamics, and participants in the Nairobi convergence gave their consensus to this study, which thereby owes many of its insights to the ensuing collective reflections. We approached the convergence as participants and observers and with "action research"-guided qualitative methods,⁶ applied discourse analytical tools to public mailing lists and online forums (e.g., Fowler 1991; Fairclough 1995), and explored peoples' motivations and perspectives in a set of interviews with a total of ten participants.⁷ In the following sections, only a very small amount of the material is displayed. The quoted sources were chosen because they reflected best the tendencies and arguments that were exchanged in the convergence space. The choice of the largely ethnographic and qualitative methods was necessitated by the impossibility of quantifying the largely hidden power structures and contradictions described above. Insider knowledge and a long-term commitment to the work of the group helped to understand the specific meanings carried in expressions and discourse.

Our analysis is oriented toward the three points identified above. In each case a discussion follows the ways the specific problem occurred, and how it influenced and prevented, helped or necessitated, the ideal of a horizontally and democratically organized convergence in the case of the Nairobi meeting. By drawing on participant observation and discursive analysis of the Dakar conference and the Nairobi event, their planning and realization, and their material and virtual manifestations are explored. The changing role of ICTs in this process is of specific importance. The collective learning process of the group over a period of several years is of additional interest here. In particular, we highlight some ways in which actors might be drawn into roles that can reinforce rather than reconfigure the material realities of global inequality, despite their awareness of these patterns and processes. The reflections in this study thus seek to contribute to the ongoing organizing work with IMCA.⁸

Global-Local Nexus

From the moment the IMCA was formed at the convergence spaces of the polycentric WSF in Bamako in 2006,⁹ people within and beyond the

IMCA working group discussed plans to create a larger and well-planned convergence-based IMC at the WSF in Nairobi. The actual discussions and planning process started in the early summer of 2006 through the connection of the already established IMCA working group with the Philadelphia, U.S.-based community radio project, Prometheus. Other than in Bamako, the IMCA working group was already networked into Kenya through the Kenya IMC, which had been established as a result of the Dakar Indymedia conference in 2004.¹⁰ From September 2006, a call out¹¹ was circulated within and beyond the Indymedia network to join the convergence in Nairobi. Funding applications were made while the planning process continued through communications on the mailing list and wiki of the IMCA working group. The overall plan was to connect as many media activists as possible globally, and especially to assist with the participation of African media activists through the network and the funding possibilities it might tap into. The specific importance of actual meetings to build transnational networks has been stressed above. The global face-to-face convergence of media activists from different cultures and backgrounds was framed as part of the larger convergence of "insurgent cosmopolitanism" in the World Social Forum (de Sousa Santos 2006).

As for the local impact, it was hoped that the convergence would boost the IMC Kenya group, dormant since January 2006, and allow the Kenya IMC to network further with local media activists. The IMCA was also hoping to enlarge and strengthen its own network by allowing other African delegates to participate, especially from the long-running IMCs in South Africa and Amazonia/Cameroon, as well as the new IMCs in Mali and Nigeria. The overall aim was to create an outstanding experience for everybody involved: an experience of a horizontal organizing process as much as of active participation in the WSF. Practically a series of discussions and seminars were planned on various media-related issues, while hands-on workshops were to teach radio construction, silk-screen printing, open publishing, and video editing.

The planning process was largely ICT-based and transnational; however, following the experiences in Dakar, it was clear that a strong local planning in Nairobi was needed just as much. Reflecting on the planning process in Nairobi, one of the main local organizers thus remembered that

We could make a difference and it was up to us in Kenya to ensure that we actually provided leadership to make it happen (Interview 9).

However, the process appeared to be problematic. The local preparation fell to two main organizers. Of these one increasingly was unable to provide any support, because he was involved in the WSF organizing himself, while the other was committed to a full-time job up until ten

days before the convergence started. Other local volunteers were not ready to take the same amount of responsibility and leadership in the organizing process

which was actually a source of frustration because as I said we knew we had to provide leadership so here was a case where people were enthusiastic and sometimes it wasn't always obvious to them that there were so many other things we were doing here (Interview 9).

IMC Kenya was expected to be not only the main local logistical organizer but also was organizing the content of the event. This was particularly in relation to preparing the discussion and discourse of the conference, the latter aspect central in contributing to the philosophy of a "globalization from below." These tasks overwhelmed the local structure due to the labor and time constraints mentioned above.

This situation caused several problems for the project. Because certain logistical aspects were not dealt with, the project lost resources. One example of this was the process of obtaining visas for delegates from West Africa. This task was not dealt with in time and resulted in the inability for these delegates to attend at all. As tickets for them were purchased in the belief that the visa issue was being dealt with, the project lost a significant amount of money in cancellation fees, and also in time spent dealing with the issue. But more importantly, the participation of five West African delegates became impossible, causing a major setback for the within-Africa networking process, and thereby seriously hampering one of the central aims of the convergence.

In other words, the local group was not strong enough to support the logistical necessities of a conference of this size. This problem illustrates how material conditions structure local organizing culture, as well as how the celebration of transnational and somewhat delocalized ICT-based organization can foster a gross misinterpretation of logistical problems on the ground. Global ICT-based communication possibilities seem to provide a background for common and horizontal action on the ground, yet the particularities of localities may easily be ignored, masking and maintaining strong structural imbalances with regard to power and resources in the wake of a global organizing process. The colonizing notion of "open space" (Chesher 1999) seems to become obvious here, as the global ICT-based communication gives an illusion of open participation in a planning process that actually overwhelms the local group. One option might have been to strengthen the local organization by paying full-time local organizers. This was not seriously considered, as Indymedia does not—in general—employ professional staff. In any case, this professionalization would have amounted to the reestablishing of postcolonial structures in the African context, as local network nodes

would have become a contractor of the globally sponsored Indymedia network, thereby contradicting the idea of a "globalization from below."

Instead, a second option came into play, with local organizing in the case of the IMCA conference becoming dependent on the help and assistance of Northern volunteers. The value of this assistance—being nonlocal and not speaking the local languages—was limited in practical terms. Interviewee 9 did comment on the steep but valuable learning experience that was fostered through having to respond directly and urgently to the unexpected logistical issues arising as the project unfolded, understanding the "madness and craziness" of the IMCA convergence space as a chance for Northern participants to experience better the real local issues at stake, or what was described as "the African context" by many of them. This somewhat conciliatory and optimistic view, however, contrasted sharply with that of another Southern participant, who described the convergence space as a situation of "constant crisis," and argued that a productive negotiation of difference was unable to take place as a result.¹² He concluded that the North-South divide was reinforced as a power-divide precisely because there were such massive logistical challenges, which thereby allowed Northern participants to assert expert roles as "technocrats" for pragmatic reasons. This observation takes us neatly into our next point.

Organizers and Teachers

The imbalance of organizing responsibilities and power along the lines of existing global structures was matched by a stream of reflections, critique, and explanations amongst a group clearly motivated by global justice issues. A Southern participant critiqued the situation, in retrospective, vociferously and provocatively, and his critique was representative of many of the statements people gave about the encounter:

From start to finish, the convergence lived in a situation of crisis... an environment in which experts and bureaucrats flourish their capabilities, and a particular kind of emergency community thrives while democracy is postponed, an emergency community in which those who typically have more power—due to race, class, a command of imperial languages—consolidate that power... it's not surprise that this technocracy was white.¹³

In the convergence, an early attempt was made to put structures in place to deal with key logistics democratically and to assess and discuss the varying expectations and roles of participants to allow a collective reflective process regarding this. Daily plenary meetings and several

working groups for various logistical issues were put into place. Additionally, sessions were devoted to debating expectations and objectives of the convergence. Importantly, for all aspects of the logistical and content side of the convergence, structures had been formed in the course of the first week of the meeting, while the daily plenary session remained to decide substantial issues, by consensus where possible.

These structures are based on the organizational patterns of Indymedia as it was developed in a historical process as part of the consolidation of a Northern activist culture in recent years. From this it seems they can hardly be separated: the processes of decision-making seem not so much to depend upon the nominal structures and the ideological claims of their horizontality, but on experience, individual performance, and a practical situation that unfolds. Interviewee 9 addressed the issue of control of financial resources in the convergence. Despite horizontal ideals and structures, Northerners technically held the funding and thus were perceived by Southerners as gatekeepers; as controller of funds rather than as equal participants in an open debate about their use (Interviewee 9). Furthermore, the use of most of the funds was not controlled by the actual convergence on the ground, but by the ICT-based planning process in advance of the actual meeting. Although this was done democratically, Southern participants were underrepresented in the planning process due to their limited access to ICTs. In this way, the ICT-based preparation made a democratic approach to the physical convergence difficult.

In summary, Northerners holding funds were perceived by some Southerners as unwilling to share responsibility for funds democratically. As such, Northerners were perceived as obstacles to the emergence of a properly democratic and equitable process (Interviewee 9). An additional context was the case of a set of participants from Uganda, who actively tried to bargain for personal allowances out of the collective resources in nearly every collective meeting. Within the group, this undermined trust and beliefs in the seriousness of their alternative media concerns.

Many Northerners also received requests for material aid outside the official structure of the convergence. A U.S. media activist (Interview 5) described how a roommate "asked me constantly if I could give her everything [electronics] I had," without a clear idea of what to do with them, especially the ICT gadgets. This interviewee was concerned about articulating a distinction between empowerment and charity, which was expressed in comparable terms by several Northern participants. While she felt unsure about the need and use of charity, as the practice of materially enriching people for their benefit, she found empowerment of people through skills training to be important. The training she provided the African participants in interview skills was something that she considered desirable, as it could help them enrich their lives (Interview 5).

At the same time, several of the Southern activists expressed in interviews that they were expecting help and support from the Northern participants in the use of technologies. As stated by a Nairobi-based participant, his desire was to connect with "professionals from all over the world" who can "give us the knowledge" in a situation where "we don't have the resources and facilities." He also suggested that he understood the encounter to be an exchange process of global skills for local experience, in which the teachers "can learn more of our local things," thereby referring to sites of tourist interest for Northerners, such as the Kenyan national parks (Interview 2). Another African participant explained that training in basic radio or interview skills, as it was done in the convergence, offered a great opportunity for them to improve their knowledge, and emphasized the monetary value of the teaching. In their environment, similar training was available only for high payment (Interview 6).

As such, ICTs became something like alternative currencies that structured the convergence. They were techniques of empowerment that facilitated a transfer of resources in ways that all those involved felt more comfortable with than if this had come down to simply handing over material and money. This transfer worked for "both sides," and it came to be prioritized over the ideals of horizontality and "open space." The U.S. media activists gave a pragmatic notion of this point:

The situation is when you have a group of people that come in and they have got access to not only the equipment but basic skills around media production. And there are a group of people who are really hungry for those skills and they are vocal about wanting those skills now. Do you spend a whole bunch of time trying to work out horizontal leadership, oh, I am not really a teacher we are all teachers. Or do you pull up your sleeves and say lets learn audio production today (Interview 5).

The role of ICTs in this context, however, is very different from the "information age activism" vision discussed at the start of this chapter. They did not democratize the convergence as such, and thereby radically reorganize the public sphere. Rather, they were unable to escape the structuring effects of preexisting inequalities between Northern and Southern activists. As such, it could be argued that ICTs in this context became a currency that facilitated the exchange between people in a situation that was dominated by large inequality. ICTs thus became objects of a unidirectional flow of nonmonetary resources channeled from North to South: they became parcels of aid, with Northern participants, as organizers and teachers, ultimately deciding what constituted charity and what might facilitate empowerment, or what was acceptable aid and what was not.

As we saw, the contradictions of aid in relation to the ideals of the project were discussed intensely in the context of organizing and teaching the convergence, and vociferous critique was voiced in regard to the emergence of postcolonial patterns of North-South relations. To discuss this further, we now consider a third area of contradiction, that of differential global mobilities. In Nairobi, the group seemed little concerned about the practices of sponsored mobility that allowed many of the participants to actually meet, despite the fact that this aid was also clearly structured along the lines of the North-South trajectory.

Global Mobilities

Indymedia's principles of open participation and open space are generally applied to both virtual and physical meetings. In the case of physical meetings, nonlocal participants need to travel to arrive. Developed in the North against a backdrop of a large volunteer force of political activists that are interested in participating in open conferences and are willing and able to take care of most of the costs involved, these principles are discriminating against people whose access to mobility is financially constrained. Indymedia has provided funds in a variety of forms to allow people to be supported in attending meetings across different geographical areas within the Global North and beyond, but these systems are marginal in comparison to a much larger number of self-funded participants who take part in meetings. In the African context, however, the number of people ready to spend time and money to participate in social movements is much smaller than in the Northern areas where Indymedia originated. Acknowledging these problems, but also unwilling to create a clear distinction between Northern and Southern participants, IMCA therefore attempted to fund the travel of all participants for its initial conference in Dakar. Practically, however, it proved to be much easier to secure funding for African media activists. The reason for this was that the German foundation Umwelteilen—one of the most important funding sources for all three convergences—has a policy to support only African participants.

This system of positive discrimination had been established by the time of the Nairobi conference as the standard procedure for the mobility policy in IMCA. The general budget of the convergence covered all travel and other costs for African participants. The fact that the project's policy on travel support is formed by its main funding source shows again how preexisting structures come to govern and structure new projects in the field. At the same time, it was critical in terms of enhancing African participation. In the case of the Nairobi meeting, it meant that the participation of Kenyan and other African delegates in the convergence was higher than that of the Northerners (24 to 18), and this also accounted

for the largest part of the funding, consuming about one-third of the overall budget.

Interestingly, after some debates regarding this issue in Dakar,¹⁴ positive discrimination of African delegates in regard to mobility hardly elicited any critical discussion during the Nairobi convergence. However, it constituted a clear dividing line between Southern and Northern participants and a one-directional flow of aid, as none of latter benefited from the IMCA budget in a similar way.

As in Dakar, the participation of Northern activists in Nairobi was partly voluntary and self-organized. While most of those coming to fulfill explicit trainer roles were funded, this was not done through the overall budget of the conference, but through funds that these participants had managed to organize for themselves. Additionally, there were other Northern participants who came solely on their own behalf, without any funding. All participants benefited from free food and housing in the convergence, but they also shouldered private travel costs and other financial burdens that were incurred while attending. In part, this is because financially they were able to do so, and in part this also speaks to participants' desires to proliferate independent media content and organizations in the "global south." Another view might also place such participations in the realm of tourism, or, more precisely, of "voluntourism," which Wearing (2001) defines as global volunteering, involving high mobilities. Volunteer mobility has been identified as important for social movements in enabling the growth of social networks and the sharing of information regarding issues of concern (McGehee and Santos 2005).

In the convergence, "tourist" and "tourism" became terms to negotiate the seriousness of participants' concerns. Some participants were accused of acting as if on "a European funded excursion." Another participant proposed a typology of activists in this context: According to him, political events tend to consist of "real activists" actively organizing political events, in contrast to the "political tourists" who were just participating (Interview 1). It becomes obvious that the role of a "mere" tourist is something that participants might want to distance themselves from in these kinds of meetings. Conversely, being beyond the label of "tourist" might mean to render the high mobility employed to allow for participation in meetings as somehow purposeful and functional for the causes of the global justice movement.

As with the role of ICTs discussed in the previous section, mobilities employed in the convergence thus were at a crossroads between a technique to facilitate a "globalization from below" on one hand, and acting as a parcel of aid, on the other. To some extent they affirmed structures of global inequality, reinforcing a dividing line between Northerners and Southern participants. At the same time, no one questioned that mobility needed to be supplied to African participants through a system of

positive discrimination. Instead, participants discussed the way mobilities were actually used, whether they were used for mere tourism or for the purpose of active involvement in the convergence and therefore ultimately for the advancement of global justice. Importantly, this debate on the purposefulness of the employed mobility, whether funded or self-arranged, was applied equally to all participants regardless of their backgrounds. It could be interpreted that the project IMCA matured over the initial problems with positive discrimination in the context of mobility and discussed this matter more thoroughly than the question of the transfer of ICTs and related skills. It may be that this reflects the specific ideological configuration of ICTs in the context of the IMCA project, as well as the broader contexts that structure ICTs as quick answers to questions of global inequality and development.

DISCUSSION

Experience and critique of international aid projects and initiatives indicate that these initiatives may enhance the inequalities they are intended to ameliorate. Despite a high critical awareness of these problems of aid and the conscious attempt to “develop from below,” the IMCA also reproduced global inequalities in the myriad articulations between “North” and “South” via existing structures of inequality that permit Northern activists to transmit certain ideas and practices, even as Southern participants also shape these through their engagement.

Potentially then, Indymedia in Africa, as a political project in the realm of ICTs and new media, may underestimate the significance of structural inequalities in its own network and practices. As this case suggests, postcolonial and neoliberal realities to some extent were perhaps enhanced by idealistic assumptions regarding the potential of ICTs to overcome these realities in what is framed as “open space” and “information-age activism.” ICTs to some extent become a currency in which global inequalities are traded and maintained, rather than tools to overcome them. At the same time, organizational principles of “open space” and “volunteering,” as developed in the North, are based on a priori similarities in backgrounds and a shared embeddedness in relation to a corresponding technostucture; they are culturally and socially specific manifestations that are fairly limited even within Northern societies. When they are uncritically promoted elsewhere, they can take place in the realm of what has been described as a “double colonization”: the way the project is funded already operates in the context of aid flows and associated controversial practices, while the ideals linked with uncritical assumptions of ICTs as a means to overcome these structures might render practitioners less conscious of the persistence of postcolonial structures in the project.

ICTs specifically, and technology in general, thus may shift from being a potential solution to becoming a problem, particularly when their absence becomes the explanation for deficits in democracy or development that might be more likely explained by structural conditions under global capitalism or problematic leadership issues. While ICTs might empower grassroots groups, networks, and individuals, their availability and proficiency does not necessarily result in empowerment. In the case of ICTs in Africa then, their potential is limited by the same constraints that caused their delayed arrival in the first place.

It is interesting to see how the convergence dealt with the imbalance in access to mobilities that allowed for people to actually meet in Nairobi. The clear positive discrimination of African participants was not questioned, for it was obvious that, compared to Indymedia activists in the North, constrained resources prevented Africans from participating outside their own countries. Instead, the crucial debates centered around questions of how the mobilities were actually used. Did the enhanced mobilities of the African participants and the volunteer mobilities of Northern participants facilitate what might be considered as “political tourism”—a privilege that is fully part and parcel of the global economic *status quo*; or did they enable contexts of empowerment that might flow into a “counter-globalization from below”?

In face of the differences that exist in access and knowledge to ICTs in different parts of the world, positive discrimination to balance these inequalities is a path toward enabling social convergences and the strengthening of critical discourses and practices of empowerment. Critical questions for IMCA might be the following: How are the transfers used? Did the participants embed the enhanced IT knowledge into local practice? Did ICTs in a given situation constitute mere objects of status, reproducing global inequalities? Or did they enable counter practices and organizations of globalization? By asking such questions, projects such as the IMCA become part of a process that moves towards contesting and remolding the structural inequalities in which it is itself embedded.

NOTES

1. Indymedia emphasizes the importance of horizontality for its working structure. Collectives and local IMCs that want to become a node in the network have to adhere to these and a few other principles. For details see <https://docs.indymedia.org/view/Global/NewIMCForm> (accessed June 1, 2008).
2. Although differences between countries are significant, most countries in Africa seem to face similar problems. Mike Jensen's webpage gives a comprehensive insight into the development of Internet connectivity

- in all parts of Africa, documenting impressive growth but also a continuing lack of resources, <http://www3.sn-appc.org/africa/> (accessed June 1, 2008).
3. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_digital_divide (accessed June 1, 2008).
 4. East Africa, for example, currently relies on satellite communications, and is awaiting the completion of the construction of a fibre-optic submarine cable. As stated on the Cipesa Web site (2006, 2), which documents the efforts and aims to increase the ability of Africa and Africans to utilize new ICTs, "[t]his situation made East Africa one of the most 'digitally excluded' regions of the world (...)" see <http://www.cipesa.org/195> (accessed June 1, 2008). Further delays of the construction of the fibre-optic cable were recently reported, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/5328578.stm> (accessed June 1, 2008).
 5. See www.indymedia.org (accessed June 1, 2008).
 6. For example, see action research resources at http://carbon.cudenver.edu/~mryder/itc/act_res.html (accessed June 1, 2008).
 7. These interviews were conducted during the course of, or immediately after, the convergence in Nairobi. All participants are kept anonymous here.
 8. A detailed evaluation of this process is also available online at <https://en.wiki.in-no.org/WSEF2007Report> (accessed June 1, 2008).
 9. See <http://en.wiki.in-no.org/WfMali> (accessed June 1, 2008).
 10. See <http://www.kenya.indymedia.org/> (accessed June 1, 2008).
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CHAPTER 11

New Public Spheres: The Digital Age
and Big Brother

Keyan G. Tomaselli and Ruth E. Teer-Tomaselli

"Reality Television," a novelty only a few years ago, is now an entrenched genre, and has been afforded the same status as long-established formats such as soap operas and sitcoms (cf. Hill 2002; Mathijs and Jones 2004; Tinknell and Raghuram 2002). Our own study attempts to examine the way in which ordinary people, politicians, civil society, and religious organizations have responded to these programs.

Reality Television is unashamedly voyeuristic, sensationalist, and contrived. The genre purports to portray the illusion of unmediated events in which contestants compete for the public vote. Particularly in its earlier manifestations, salaciousness was a built-in characteristic. Jeremy Daniel, in "Being Big Brother," writes without a trace of irony of the surreal experience of being behind the scenes of *Big Brother II*: "Even before the housemates were chosen, dozens of technical personnel were being trained in the art of voyeurism" (*Film South Africa*, n.d., 7). A much less spicy variation is *Survivor*, where competitors periodically vote for the excommunication of one among them, in this case based on their (in)ability to survive jungles and wild animals, oceans, and tropical islands. Exposé Television, such as *Cheaters*, records adulterous and kinky behavior; *Temptation Island* sets up and glamorizes promiscuity. Some of these traits of Reality Television have bled into other genres, such as chat shows, spawning crossovers between talk, burlesque, and "true" (*sic*) confessions. The *Jerry Springer Show* is a prime example, featuring errant partners in no-holds-barred public spats, and encouraging brawls involving whole families.

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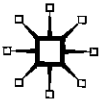
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Green Capitalism, and the Cultural Poverty of Constructing Nature as Service Provider*

Sian Sullivan

People differ not only in their culture but also in their nature, or rather, in the way they construct relations between humans and non-humans.¹

Loss

We hear a lot these days about loss. In April 2009, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimated that banks, insurance instruments and pension funds have 'lost' some US \$4.1 trillion from the global economy.² The amounts lost to taxpayers via government removal of the toxic assets littering the financial sector are so huge as to be almost meaningless. According to the IMF, UK taxpayers have already lost over £1.2 trillion to Britain's financial sector,³ while in North America the Inspector General of the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) stated recently that potential government/taxpayer assistance could total \$23.7 trillion.⁴ Meanwhile, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) asserts that the wildlife crisis actually is worse than the economic crisis, with almost 900 species lost already in an analysis of some 45,000, and no fewer than 16,928 of these currently threatened with extinction.⁵ Habitat loss to 'development' is a major cause of these extinctions. Greenpeace reports of the Brazilian Amazon that 'one acre [is] lost every 8 seconds', the hamburger-cattle sector identified here as the major driver of clear-felling in this landscape.⁶

Crisis Capitalism and the Creation of 'Value'

Notwithstanding the complexities beneath these alarming figures, they do seem to signal some sort of crisis, both of capitalism, and of 'the environment'. Intuitively it makes sense to think that these crises might be connected in two key ways. First, that economic exploitation and the profit motive, in driving production and transformed consumption of 'natural resources', is causing and contributing to ecological crisis. And second, that the ecological crisis arising from these pressures is itself generating crisis in the global economy, through making manifest the material limits to economic production and consumption. This is the so-called Limits to Growth argument of the 1970s,⁷ which posited resource limits to economic growth, and the need to sensibly distribute resources as well as reducing production and consumption to avert both economic and ecological crises.