

Which would you rather: Seattle or Porto Alegre?
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Introduction

In 1996, The First Intercontinental Encounter for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism, in Chiapas, Mexico, called for a network of international solidarity. This project would need to

learn from previous international experiences. After the fall of the wall of Berlin, we do not need to fall into the temptation of importing revolutionary models. We do not have to fall into the error of creating new internationals like those of the past, with centralized and institutionalized commands... These networks will have to communicate autonomously and horizontally. We propose an International of Hope, Struggle, Solidarity and Cooperation. Never has it been so difficult for a people to liberate itself, and that's why the international struggle is so important. Nonetheless, the base of the change has to be the struggle of each country, within its own experience and its own culture (cited in Waterman, xxiv).

Alternative communication was central:

Let's make a network of communication among all our struggles and resistances. An intercontinental network of alternative communication against neo-liberalism... [and] for humanity. This intercontinental network of alternative communication will search to weave the channels so that words may travel all the roads that resist... [I]t will be the medium by which distinct resistances communicate with one another. This intercontinental network of alternative communication is not an organizing 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. (Ruggiero and Duncan, cited in Rodriguez, 2001:155)

This dream of an international network of networks came closest to realization with the Seattle protests and the founding of the Independent Media Center movement (IMC) in Seattle in 1999.¹ The Seattle IMC brought together 300 people from several "networks of resistance," including some who had participated in the Zapatista Encuentro, as well as other anarchists and leftists, environmentalists and feminists, computer technicians from the open

¹ There have been many analyses of the Zapatistas and their media use. See, for example, Harry Cleaver, 1995, Castells, 2000, Ford, 2001, Martinez-Torres, 2001, and Russell, 2001 and Midnight Notes.

source movement; activist media producers; and local community activists². Together they built a communications platform that provided a quantum leap in scope and scale from earlier alternative media networks.

The IMC is especially stunning, for those of us, like many of the participants at this conference, who have been involved in earlier alternative media networks³. I cut my teeth in participatory video in Canada in the early 1970s, and connected with the international women's networks and the nascent anti-globalization movements largely through the networks of international community radio in the 1980s and early 1990s. Now, each time I encounter the IMC, from my first visit during the WTO protests, to face to face meetings in Seattle and San Francisco, e-mail, and observations of the site, I am struck by two feelings. One is the excitement I feel with the scale of the project, and the scope of achievement. The other is a profound sense of déjà-vu, as I listen to the values and goals of IMC volunteers, and witness the tensions and challenges.

Many of the enormous costs and difficulties we faced in earlier networks are minimized. Distribution is not as daunting when programming in any format can be distributed immediately to those with an Internet hook-up. The multimedia digital platform, with its unlimited ceiling on content, has helped to curb some of the rivalries over resources and craft loyalties that continue to plague many alternative media projects, such as community radio and television. The Open source, non-proprietary software and the capable global tech crew have provided the appropriate technologies and support so that all web-sites on the system can be kept up and continually improved. And finally, the use of open publishing, allowing anyone who can afford and operate a modem to post any format of media, provides what free

² Chris Shumway suggests that the IMC came more directly from ideas of Zapatismo (2002). One of the first IMC activists, Greg Ruggiero, from Seven Stories Press had been at the First Encuentro and was at the IMC in Seattle. Afterwards, three of the IMC founders travelled to Chiapas to assist the group there. (Personal Communication, Jeff Perlstein, 2002).

³ See the first and second volume of John Downing's Radical Media, Clemencia Rodriguez's Fissures in the Mediascape, Alfonso Gumucio Dagron's Making Waves: Stories of Participatory Communication for Social Change, and Dee Dee Halleck's Hand-held visions: The impossibilities of community media. See also Maria Rosa Alfaro, Clemencia Rodriguez and my own piece in Pilar Riaño (ed.) Women's Grassroots Communication. Notable works with an international focus include Bruce Girard, Ed. A Passion for Radio, about the World Association of Community Radio (AMARC), Alain Ambrosi and Nancy Thede, Ed. Video: The Changing World, Bosma, et al Eds. Read Me! Filtered by Nettime, and Nick Dyer-Witheford's Cyber-Marx and my own history of community radio, Talking the Walk.

radio grandfather Bertolt Brecht could only describe as “utopian”, when he called for radio to become a communications apparatus that would allow “the listener to speak as well as hear ... to bring [him] into a relationship instead of isolat[ion].” (Brecht, 15)

However, as Dee Dee Halleck points out in Hand-held Visions, the success of the IMC is not just the lucky result of superior technologies. The IMC has succeeded, so far, due to its commitment to radical democracy, with a communications paradigm to match. Now, over seventy sites world-wide, they share a vision of the IMC as a media resource for the international movement against corporate globalization. From the beginning, the IMC fostered organization that is collaborative, non-hierarchical, and largely self-governing. Most sites operate autonomously, through consensus decision-making, with no “central head or decision-maker,” as the First Encuentro called for. Their model of communications is based on each person representing themselves, with a minimum of gate-keeping to ensure the freest circulation of information. Dialogue and discussion is fostered on and off-line, through interviews, comment and chat lines, newslists, and face to face meetings. Rather than a journalism of a professional corps, whose mantra is “objectivity”, Indymedia promotes itself as a democratic media outlet for the creation of radical, accurate and passionate tellings of the truth” (www.indymedia.org).

After only two and a half years, and very rapid development, many in indymedia are reassessing how to best grow the IMC. This piece is a contribution to that discussion, to learn from some of the “previous international experiences, ” and in particular, from their forms of organization and communication. In this piece, I highlight some of the issues of organization and communication that keep recurring in my conversations with indymedia activists. These include: sustainability; labour and power divisions marked especially by global north and south, and by gender; the best use of communications technologies, and relations with some of these older networks. Some of these questions, of who gets supported, to say what, through which medium, are achingly familiar. I have no answers. I hope only to provide some context, and in that way, shed some light.

My paper title, "Seattle or Porto Alegre?" provocatively refers to the last question, the relationships with the older networks. I took the title from a comment of Dee Dee Halleck, who was describing the two strategies for participation at the upcoming World Summit on Information Society in Geneva in 2003, between the direct action in the streets of Seattle versus the hundreds of tents at the world social forum in Porto Alegre. Seattle, in actual fact, included both these strategies, and a third one, referred to in the Zapatista Encuentro as "the highly centralized international," which matches both the Leninist party and that of the AFL-CIO and official trade unions. As well, the membership of these three strategies is also fluid, involving all kinds of contradictions and overlaps. In a later paper, I will discuss the role of international labour communications. Here, I would like to address the Porto Alegre strategy of international NGOs, as well as look at the communications of the international women's movement, that blends both strategies.

Seattle: a new name for two decades of mobilizing

"Seattle" was the culmination of at least two decades of organizing against the most recent program of corporate capitalism, variously called neo-liberalism, or globalization, involving corporate down-sizing and networking, programs of structural adjustment (SAPs), privatization of public institutions and facilities, and free trade and other capital-friendly agreements. There had been critiques of the Bretton Woods Institutions, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, from movements of the right and the left, since the 1960s. However, it was not until the 1980s, and the dissemination of horror stories related to debt-imposition, structural adjustment programs, and the huge dams and mega-projects, that widespread protests targeted these two multilateral institutions and their policies (Cleaver, 1999:8). To rehearse very briefly, the resistance took many forms, from street protests and riots, to shutdowns of work-sites and cyber-sites, counter-conferences and lobbying, boycotts and petition drives. What I'd like to underscore here is some of the key organization and communications characteristics of the budding international networks of networks.

The wave of protests, the analyses, and their alternative proposals, were not uniform; but there are some patterns we can observe. First, the resistance was not based in new technology, but began with a human face, and often a woman's face, among social movements of small farmers and fishers, urban poor, indigenous peoples, and trade unionists. The neoliberal policies had displaced many from their lands and livelihoods, and removed already bare community infrastructures and social support systems. As well as the protests targeting national governments, multilateral organizations, and corporate players, they also acted to create their own modes of survival, of water, electricity, health, food and community development.

The vector of mass popular protest was from south to north. "From 1985 to 1992, 56 'IMF riots' or 'austerity protests were waged in Latin America, the Caribbean, the Middle East, Africa and Eastern Europe (Starr, 2000:46). The international work of activists in the 1980s was a way to extend the mobilization in their home communities, and to critique the programmes of international development sent south. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, in a much softer version, the restructuring programs and the protests against them, emerged up north, as Canadians and Europeans demonstrated against policies of privatization, deregulation and continental standardization of social welfare, communications and culture,. In Canada, the focus of these protests were the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and then, with Mexico and US allies, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA); in Europe, the European Community (EEU). This nascent cross-border organizing continued against the Multilateral Agreement on Investment, and the extension of free trade policies of the Asia Pacific Economic Conference (APEC)⁴. After a run-up of a decade of organization and mobilization, mass protests against "corporate globalization" finally reached the US in Seattle in 1999 (Starr, 2000).

Many of these actions were supported by, or had generated their own alternative media, of newsletters and magazines, micro and community radio, video and film documentaries, cable, broadcast and satellite television programming, and Internet newlists

and web-sites. During the same decades of the 1980s and 1990s, several of these local, national and regional media projects had formed global alliances, such as the World Community Radio Association (AMARC), various video networks like Videazimut, and the new APC computer nets, that contributed to the movement by providing reports and analyses, and campaign information.

There had, of course, been international movements before, of labour, of women, of human rights, of left political parties, and even of cultural workers (Keck and Sikkink, 1998, Waterman, 1993). What was notable about these movements, even before Seattle, was the involvement of new social movements, the important role of non-governmental organizations and the new role of independent networks of activist media.⁵

The growth of international non-governmental organizations

The new social movements of grassroots women, indigenous peoples, small fishers and farmers, and urban poor, included many popular organizations whose focus was local campaigns of survival, self-help community development, popular education and culture. During the 1980s, there was also a rapid growth of local and national NGOs. For US activists, NGOs are a little different than “non-profits”. Briefly, they are “intermediary” organizations that are “composed of middle-class, educated and professional people who have opted for political or humanitarian reasons to work with (or on behalf of) the poor and the marginalized” (Pierce, cited in Alvarez). They are often funded by development organizations of northern governments, and religious institutions, and to a large degree their growth, and the growth of social movements based on daily survival, parallels the weakening of the state in providing social services. While the majority of NGOs work locally, there has also been a growth of international NGOs (INGOs) centered in North America and Europe, whose orbit is global.

The strength of NGOs has been their ability to coordinate information, acting as information brokers between different social actors, in networks which are somewhat

⁴ Many of the forty busloads of Vancouverites at the Seattle demonstrations had participated in the demonstrations against NAFTA, and in the protests and counter-conferences against APEC in Vancouver in 1997.

decentralized, fluid and pragmatic (Ribeiro, 1998). These increasingly specialised, and professionally-staffed INGOs, have been effective in changing and reframing the agenda and influencing the positions and policies of states and international organizations on many different social issues, most notably including women's rights, human rights, and the environment (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). However their growth has not been without contradictions as I discuss below.

One of the most important fields of networking have been the meetings between NGOs, social movement organizations, and unaligned individuals, during the counter-forums of UN Conferences, and most recently of multilateral organizations such as the IMF and World Bank. This format of official conference and NGO Forum was adopted for the UN Conference on Women in Mexico City, and the subsequent meetings in Copenhagen in 1980, Nairobi in 1985 and Beijing in 1995. By the 1990s, there was a flurry of these international gatherings⁶. NGOs have been able to gain influence with the official organizations through lobbying of officials and bureaucrats, as well as some street actions and demonstrations⁷. However, their most successful strategy has been discursive, in which knowledge does appear to be power. They have been able to re-frame some of the issues by brokering alternative information, presenting important technical data, as well as putting a human face on complex social problems, by featuring individual testimonies and stories (Keck and Sikkink, 21).

One of the key instruments used by these INGO networks, and of the anti-globalization movements as a whole, have been computer-mediated global communications. This network of networks "preceded and long remained parallel to the commercialized Internet," linking many regions in Africa, and the former Soviet Union, via cheap systems of e-mail and newlists (Murphy, 2001b). For this, they drew on the webs of community-oriented

⁵ The official and rank-and-file labour movement have both played important, although contradictory roles, which I will discuss in another paper.

⁶ The Conference on the Environment in Rio in 1992, World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, the UN Population and Development Conference in 1994 in Cairo, the Social Development Summit in Copenhagen in 1995 ...

⁷ During the Meetings on World Development in Copenhagen, there was a hunger strike of 15 women in the Hall where the Official Summit was taking place (Suarez-Toro, 186).

techies and administrators who had developed open source software and hardware systems (Castells, 2001). Between 1987 and 1990, linked computer networks, such as Geonet, Worknet, Fidonet, Econet, Greenet, Labornet, Peacenet and Women's Net, Pegasus, Nicarao and Alternex in Brazil shared text-based information. In 1990, the Association of Progressive Communicators (APC) formed to support this global network, providing the first of many Internet services with low-cost access to extensive resources, at a global reach and speed, dramatically transforming the possibilities for political organization and action (Smith 2001, Eagleton-Pierce, 2001). By 1995, there were 18 international member networks, in use by 30,000 community activists, scientists, natural resource managers, educators, policy makers, and non-profit organizations (Ribeiro, 336).

These cyber networks strengthened the power of social movements and international NGOs, allowing them to broker information among many different groups, with little interference from nation states. The rapid transfer of information was used for internal education, as well as public education, and to counter government, corporate, and corporate media mis-information. The ability to confer on-line, by-passing space and time limits, allowed INGOs and other movement groups to develop common strategies and tactics, and coordinate lobbying and mobilizations. During the 1990s, the INGOs and social movements mastered their publication and networking skills, through events such as the assassination of Chico Mendes in Brasil, the Tienanmen Square protesters in 1989, Russian unionists in 1993, the Rio Summit in 1992, the support of the EZLN in Chiapas, and the Multilateral Agreement on Investment in the late 1990s. By 1999, and Seattle, they were ready.

All networks are not equal

Seattle, the high-water mark of NGO advocacy networks, can also provide us with some cautionary tales about Internet activism. While tens of thousands demonstrated in the streets, it was really only a handful of organizations, operating primarily through web-sites and listservs that brought us together. These groups included the Third World Network, the International Forum on Globalization, Global Alliance, Corporate Europe Observatory,

Friends of the Earth, Public Citizen, the Direct Action Network, and the various media organizations associated with the IMC. A handful of web-sites provided reams of content to contest the corporate media and official government arguments, as well as providing the key social nexus for people to link to events, housing, etc. The list-servs helped to coalesce a coalition by providing a webbed link, from the many to the many, to a common discussion about objectives and goals.

Once in Seattle, groups such as the Direct Action Network, the Ruckus Society, Art in Revolution, and the Independent Media Centre provided a series of participatory occasions, preparing huge puppets and costumes, rehearsing music, dance and street theatre, equipping teams of medical, legal, tactical and media support. While many of the NGO group became involved in the days of street demonstrations, their own plan for the week had been very different.

The main event was an NGO-style forum. Sponsored by the International Forum Against Globalization, the teach-in was hosted in a large auditorium with limited opportunity for dialogue and discussion. While the two days of expert testimony brought together an amazing array of international intelligence, the forum really followed the broadcast communications model, or perhaps the cable TV model, in which participants had a few choices of salons to attend.

As well, as Mathew Eagleton-Pierce argues (2001), the Forum, and the Internet communications did not remove hierarchies of power, but only reconstructed them. Those who have greater resources off-line were only reconstituted on-line. Witness the relative absence of those who were not represented in all of the preparatory on-line networks, people of colour. {This, of course, was a major failing of the Direction Action contingents as well (Martinez, 2002). The new hierarchy is based on the old divisions of economic and political power, as well as on access to information, to cyber-broadcasting via the web-site, and to decision-making. most of the important decisions by the NGOs at Seattle were made by a few key actors off-line. Instructive is the comment of Lori Wallach, of Public Citizen: "The real organizing ...culminating in Seattle was face to face. It's people I've been meeting with three

to four times a year, from around the world, since 1992” (334). Or of Elizabeth Martinez, who named the individual organizers whose personal actions brought a small number of key youth of colour (Martinez, 2002).

The same caution is necessary when evaluating the new global advocacy networks more generally. Internet listservs can bring in those on the geographic margins; however, access is still very limited outside of North American and European urban professional centres. Access to these new technologies can reproduce existing imbalances of power, internationally, and among organizations. Among many local and international NGOs, there is a continuing northern power dominance. This is reinforced by the funding base of US foundations, European and Canadian governments, UN organizations and the World Bank and IMF. As well, there is a danger of “policy capture”, as NGOs, and INGOs focus their work in response to multilateral organizations in Washington, UN-sponsored conferences, or even the northern membership-based constituencies. Northern NGOs, with their broadbanded offices, and their Internet-rich members, can skew priorities, so that southern partners can be deluged with information, or with actions, that take them away from their own local priorities (Leon, Burch, Tamayo, 2001). Or, as Keck and Sikkink discuss, the campaign may be framed by a northern partner to highlight or filter a testimony, and remove it from the original context, or control of the story-teller (19).

This northern growth has often led to tensions with southern movements and NGOs. As well, all these networks are built on different foundations of trust: in the north, activists approach the idea of a global connection with optimism; in the south this is tempered by a high level of distrust, through years of colonial and neocolonial relations (Keck and Sikkink, 10). As well, as Sonia Alvarez discusses in her analysis of the NGO Boom among Latin American Feminist NGOs, many southern NGOs have also had their objectives and their work narrowed and, in some cases, compromised by national governments, as they are enlisted in developing policy, and shift from their earlier work in popular education and mobilization with poor and working class women. (Alvarez, 2000).

The International Feminist Networks of Communications

Many young and older women were involved in all three kinds of protest activities, from the trade union march, to the NGO Forums, to the participation of Filipino and Korean left organizations, to the Direct Action contingents. However, the feminist presence in Seattle, and in many of the anti-globalization activities, since, including the IMC, has been strangely absent. Below, I outline some of the contribution that the international women's movement has presented to ideas about democratic organization and communications.

There had been earlier international women's networks since the mid- 19th century, against slavery, for women's suffrage, international peace, equal rights in the workplace and in political organizations (Eschle, 2001: 193). However, most of these efforts had been coordinated through what the Zapatistas characterized as the highly "centralized and institutionalized commands" of western capitalist governments, the Soviet-directed third international or multilateral organizations of the United Nations. In the 1970s a new generation of feminist movements emerged, which distinguished itself, among other characteristics, by a critique of hierarchical male-led state and corporate institutions, as well as leftist parties. While by no means the only stream, many of us in North America, northern Europe and Latin America, formed "autonomous" women's movements and attempted to create organizational forms and communications instruments that fostered direct, rather than representative, democracy⁸.

Communications was a key element and the take-over of corporate and alternative media, and/or the creation of women's media was one of the first acts of many women's groups⁹. Women recognized the importance of directing and producing their own media, not only to counter the mainstream patriarchal discourse, but to carve out the space to create alternative visions and analyses. Consistent with the new practice of consciousness-raising, feminist communications would allow individual women to speak directly, without mediation, from their own experience; and to share and connect this with other women. And finally, the

⁸ However, "autonomy" was practised very differently. See Rowbotham, (1979) for the English spectrum of practices and Alvarez for those in Latin America (1998).

women's movement recognized it would need flexible communications instruments that would be flexible and responsive enough to take action quickly on issues that transcended borders, such as waged and unwaged work, violence against women, reproductive rights, children's welfare, prostitution, peace and international development.

Several different kinds of communications were integral to the development of women's movements internationally. Briefly, the importance of older forms of cultural production cannot be minimized. These have included a myriad of forms, such as women's music, theatre, art, literature and critical studies of all kinds. Internationally, the UN forums were important convergences of tens of thousands of women, bringing together the official government delegations, the NGOs, the grassroots organizations, and thousands of unaligned individuals (primarily from western countries). These global encounters were complemented by regional ones, including the series of Latin American women's encuentros, as well as the beginning of meetings between activists in the new movements against free trade, sweatshops, and corporate globalization. These conferences and encounters provided opportunities for face to face exchange, which became the basis of later cross-movement, cross-border networks¹⁰. As well, they were important celebrations of heart and shared experience that helped establish the bonds necessary for international solidarity.

Very early, by the mid-to-late 1970s, three international communication networks were established, revealing differences in strategies and organizational form. The earlier international movement for a New World Communications and Information Order led to the creation of women's news programming services. Depth News in Asia, the Women's Feature Service in New Delhi, and the Caribbean Women's Feature Syndicate were funded with

⁹ In New York, women took over ... In Toronto, a group of women took over the lefty-hippy alternative press called "Guerilla."

¹⁰ In the 1980s, many south-south research networks were developed, often using the occasion of the UN conferences to form. These included Development Alternatives for a New Era (DAWN), linking activist-researchers from Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, the International Solidarity Network of Women Living Under Muslim Laws, and women's labour organizations from India and the Philippines

support from UN organizations in the late 1970s. By 1994, only Depthnews and the feature service sponsored by Inter Press Service survived.¹¹

A group of professional women in New York started The International Women's Tribune Centre (IWTC), to maintain communication between the six thousand participants of the NGO counter-conference in Mexico in 1975. They provided information through newsletters, publications and exhibits at international meetings. They continue to work within existing multilateral associations and activist networks, and played an important role in the preparations for the Beijing Women's Conference and counter-conferences, assisting in the coordination, publishing and training of women in the use of the Internet.

The third international feminist network was ISIS, the International Women's Information and Communication Service. ISIS formed at the First International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women in Brussels in 1976, one of the first INGO counter-conferences. Two thousand women met to discuss and present their own issues and strategies autonomously from the multilateral institutions and national governments at the official UN Women's Conference the year before. The Tribunal used a format of individual testimonials, that has since become an important instrument of non-governmental organizations. First located in Rome and Geneva, in 1984, ISIS chose to redress some of the power differences between women of the global north and south, and relocated, first to Santiago, Chile, then to the Philippines, and now also operate in Kampala, Uganda.

By the late 1980s, ISIS, IWTC, a growing number of women's NGOs, and a new set of anti-globalization activists had formed informal networks of global communication.. At first their newsletter and bulletins were exchanged via conferences, visits, telephone, and fax. By the late 1980s, they started using e-mail, often through the nets of the APC. One of the first group of innovators were a trinational collective called Mujer a Mujer, based in Mexico City that arose from the organizing against NAFTA. Looking for better national and transnational communications, they helped to form Laneta, the Mexican APC partner, which eventually facilitated the use of the Internet by the EZLN in Chiapas (Martinez-Torres, 2001).

¹¹The latter became independent in 1991 and runs an international service. Depthnews continues under the sponsorship

Soon after, ISIS, the Women's Tribune Centre, and the APC Women's Net Support Program combined to work on a major project of training of women in information technologies. Focused on the preparations for the Beijing Conference, they provided training and support for women's groups around the world. Since then, many more NGOs have become involved, including AMARC, focusing the Internet-facilitated network on reports and assessments of the Beijing Conference and other UN-led conferences (Villanueva, 2000). This precursor network needs more research to assess the lessons, However, I think the preliminary evidence will tell us that the Network tended to reinforce tendencies already problematic among the international feminist advocacy networks, in which the international NGOs lost touch with their activist roots and saw too many of their goals compromised by their UN and government focus (Alvarez, 2000).

Below, I discuss some of the lessons from an earlier media network, of radio communicators, in which I was more involved. Radio is perhaps the most widely available and popular mass media in the global south. Cheap and relatively easy to operate and to receive, it reproduces the forms of communications, the different dialects of voice and music, already practised by everyone, and does not need print or computer literacy to learn. Radio broadcasting was also an industry that was abandoned by corporate capital during the 1980s, which provided an available mass medium for women, and other social movements throughout Latin America, Canada, and Europe.

During the early 1990s, and facilitated by the UN women's conferences, and of AMARC, women radio producers began to network within their regions, of Latin America and the Caribbean, North America, Europe and Africa. Participants included Frieda Werden from the U.S.-based radio network WINGS (Women's International News Gathering Service that still operates from Austin, Texas; Radio Tierra, the women's radio station, in Santiago, Chile, a collective of women producers in Peru, Radio FIRE in Costa Rica, as well as women programmers from community radio stations in Latin America, North America and Europe (Kidd, 1998). Slow to develop, the AMARC Women's network now supports several

of the Press Foundation of Asia (Anand, 1994).

international projects of programme collaboration, and training programmes for women in new communications technologies (Boezak, 2000).

Activist Communicators

One of the early participants, and an active member of the AMARC Women's Network, is the Feminist International Radio Endeavor (FIRE). FIRE is "perhaps the only women's radio programme located in the South that is truly global in scope" (Suárez Toro, 13). FIRE is a bilingual service that began on short-wave radio, and continues as an Internet radio service, and on local FM radio. Inspired by the women's peace tent at the Nairobi Women's Conference, FIRE was started by Genevieve Vaughan, who operates a women's foundation in Texas. I first met FIRE at the AMARC Conference in Mexico in 1992, spent a month with them in Costa Rica in 1998, and think that they provide some important lessons for international media networks.

FIRE's first decision was to work with existing feminist networks rather than starting a new one, and to try and reinforce south-south relations, as much as possible. They produced their radio programme through a combination of local production, telephone interviews, mailed-in programme segments from other women, and especially, participation at regional and international conferences¹². Their programming reinforces the strategies and practices of the women's movements by providing stories and experiences of individual

¹² Much of their programming is produced at counter conferences of non-government organizations to UN-sponsored meetings, such as the World Conference on the Environment in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992, the U.N. Human Rights Conference in Vienna in 1993, the U.N. Population and Development Conference in Cairo 1994, the UN Social Development Summit in Copenhagen in 1994, the South African Women's Health Conference in 1994, and the Beijing Women's Conference in 1995; as well as the Second International Encuentro against Neoliberalism in Spain in the summer of 1997. Jeanne Carstensen described the good feeling to be able to march into a UN event and "hook up their equipment to a telephone and begin talking with grassroots, NGO, and government delegates about the issues, and know that the interview is being broadcast in sixty countries around the world". (Suárez Toro, 47)

women, as well as reports, analyses and campaign information from organizations operating from the local to the international. Their relationship with the women's movements has always been reciprocal: much of their coverage is made possible by their inclusion in the activities of these networks, the support in kind from women's groups, and the funding from women's foundations. And in turn, their access to the networks of activists, provides a wider choice of information and of interview subjects and a deeper, more informed discussion.

FIRE, like the indymedia activists, see themselves with two roles. They combine work as communicators and as activists. One of FIRE's founders, Maria Suárez Toro, calls this "interactive autonomy." "Interactive autonomy" challenges both the notion of objectivity of mainstream journalism, and the practice of many alternative journalists, whose allegiances to political perspectives or organizations has not allowed for a "true interaction between participants in the communication process" (Suárez Toro, 1997a)."

The networks in which they participate is extensive. Much of their work is south-south, in Latin America, as part of the Latin American Network of Women Communicators¹³. Many in this network operate with a communications paradigm that critiques the "monopolistic concentration of communications media [which] limits the exercise of the right of citizens to free expression and access to information...However, they valorize the expression of individual women, without mediation, without interrogation and without censorship. " (Suárez Toro, 1997a.)

This new paradigm revises notions of reporting and of objectivity. Many of the FIRE broadcasts are very informal, with guests often involved in directing the conversation. FIRE worker Nancy Vargas described their approach in 1994, at a meeting of 500 women communicators from Latin America and the Caribbean, Europe, India, Africa, Asia and North America in Bangkok, Thailand.

¹³ This network also includes the women of AMARC, ISIS, Fempress, Flora Tristan from Peru, the World Association of Christian Communication-WACC, the Latin American Information Agency-ALAI, the Brazilian Network of Women in Communication, the Latin American Association of Educational Radio-ALER, the Latin American Youth Network for Sustainable Development, Nicarao, Conducta Improperia, Network of Afro-Latino American and Afro-Caribbean Women and CEPAM.

We decided not to put too much emphasis on formats where “objectivity” hinders women’s work in communication. We try to show...that we women have ideas, feelings, values, identities, dreams, a history- that we have had to learn to survive and become subjects in our own lives...It is unacceptable and immoral that we women, the poorest of the poor, have to bear the burden of neoliberal policies and structural adjustment policies... We have found that women use personal testimony as the most valuable means of describing our lives from our own points of view, without being chopped up by traditional or predetermined formats. In this way we get closer to ensuring that the audience...can identify with particular situations... (Suárez Toro, 2000:58-59)

FIRE also have organized and broadcast a number of feminist tribunals, built on the tradition begun in Europe in the 1970s, combined with the Latin America practice of denouncements. Katerina Anfossi Gómez, a FIRE co-founder, considers the tribunals one of their most important achievements in international communications strategy because it has “fostered the recognition that women’s words constitute a political analysis of reality.” (20)

Working the nets

FIRE workers are also active in feminist and social justice networks. Their interviews help circulate information about political advances at the local and national levels, as well as in specific campaigns, such as tribunals or public testimonials, action alerts, petitions, and coordinated calendar campaigns around specific days, such as International Women’s Day. FIRE also contributes to what Keck and Sikkink describe as the “ boomerang” strategy, in which the combined forces of international advocacy networks are able to reap victories at the world stage, and then bounce them back to the weaker terrain of the local and national stage (12). For example, FIRE has focused their broadcasts, as well as contributed to the Costa Rican women’s movement convening of public events around violence against women. At these tribunals, or meetings with government officials, FIRE broadcasters participate in holding the Costa Rican Government to account for international agreements brokered at the U.N. or member agencies, or the Organization of American States.

FIRE has also played a role in other campaigns against neoliberalism. During the demonstrations against the US NAVY base in Vieques, Puerto Rico, they reported from the protest site in Puerto Rico and from the New York demonstrations. They also covered the

Second Encuentro of the Zapatistas in Spain, in 1997¹⁴. More recently, they have collaborated with other independent news services at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, and from the Conference against Racism and Xenophobia in Durban, South Africa¹⁵.

FIRE also used the power of their international broadcast to support a local, and ultimately successful, campaign against the dumping of garbage in a neighbouring forest. Broadcasting from horseback, they sponsored a live call-in from listeners around the world. Their participation in local and national campaigns helped the FIRE collective to start their own FM centre in late 1999. Their program, “Está Legal” is broadcast in Spanish and features interviews, live broadcasts, discussions, and call-in shows. While primarily local, it is also regional and global in scope under the slogan “Fem Interactive: Global women’s voices from within the part of the continent that is Latin!” (311).

The technology is not the communication

FIRE’s experience with technology is also instructive. Drawing from her experience in the Sandinista literacy campaigns in Nicaragua, Suárez says the group’s goal is to use whatever communications instruments are most widely and popularly available.. “Too many people think that the technology is the communication... But we have to liberate the technology to put it into the hands of the women where the action is” (Suarez, Personal Interview, 1998).

¹⁴ Earlier, in 1996, Commandante Marcos was retreating from the Mexican Army, checking the shortwave radio, to find out what was going on around him. He tuned into a FIRE interview with” Marcela Lagarde, a Mexican feminist, about the struggle women in Latin America had to make inside the “movement.” Marcos tracked down Lagarde through the FIRE broadcast and invited her to come to meet the FZLN and become their ‘gender advisor.’ (Suárez-Toro, 2000: 14).

¹⁵ Their upcoming calendar includes The UN World Summit on Sustainable Development in South Africa, the AWID forum “Reinventing Globalization”, the 8th AMARC Conference in Katmandu, Nepal and the 9th Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Encuentro.

Their original choice of technology, made by Genevieve Vaughan, the founder and first funder, was short-wave radio because of its global scope, and its capacity for reproducing women's speech and conversation. However, SW access was limited. Their original audience included many more men, and from the northern hemispheres. However, since 1998, and a conflict with their original provider, FIRE has moved to an Internet radio site, as well as a programme on local FM.

Their greatest inventiveness has been their use of portable set-ups for the NGO conferences and other live broadcasts. They adapted a basic remote set-up, with microphone and telephone, to broadcast live, on-the-spot coverage from activists at these events. They also made their radio broadcasts events in themselves, producing live programming as part of the counter-conferences and often featuring debates with protagonists from the official meetings. This innovative approach has also allowed them to surmount some of the gendered psychology of the technology, showing that women could not only "control" the medium, but shape it to their own needs (Suarez, 396). Their adaptability has also allowed them to by-pass some of the attempts at censorship at international gatherings, such as the Beijing conference. More recently, when they were shut out of the short-wave service in Costa Rica, they quickly figured out a way they could produce an Internet radio programme.

During the AMARC Conference in Milán, Italy in 1998, FIRE coordinated and hosted two hours of international live programming as part of a 24 hour broadcast via satellite and the Internet. With that experience, they launched their own web-site, with Spanish and English pages, as well as text reports, photos and audio interviews. Owned, designed and operated by women from the south, it is regional and at the same time local and international. It has also allowed for more decentralization of the power to communicate. Independent media can use the site as a source, and re-broadcast or re-use the interviews and information in their own media. As well, women producers, particularly in Latin America, have another venue for distribution. Several new women, operating from other small portable work-sites can now collaborate with the Costa Rica FIRE collective, (see list of contributors on site).

Discussion

If Seattle was a high-water mark in the movement against capitalist globalization, it also marked a shift in movement strategies, and communications strategies. Among the disparate set of activist networks and social movements were three, or perhaps four, avenues of organizational tactics and communications models. [Two other avenues have seldom been discussed among western activists. In the street demonstrations, and organizing their own forums, were activists from the huge international network of Philippine workers and community activists; as well as representatives from one of the globe's most militant organizations against neoliberalism, the Korean Labour Movement.]¹⁶

The trade unions, and in particular the AFL-CIO best fits the model of “centralized and institutionalized” command. Their intention was to “be at the table” to reform the process to protect “US workers”. Prior to Seattle, their web-sites and communication instruments included information about the trade talks, and the implications for US jobs, but almost no discussion of the global implications for trade unionists, or non-unionized working people from the south. In numbers, the labour contingent was one of the largest, with members from all over the west coast, and the rest of the US, and including 40 buses from Vancouver, Canada. However, during the heaviest days of action, the AFL-CIO held a huge stadium rally in a stadium, which included a few well-known speakers from international NGOs, away from the downtown core. Their march, while a colourful combination of bare-chested young dykes and Steelworkers, was carefully engineered to flow miles from the confrontations. I can still remember, looking around during the tear-gas ending of our scrawny picket in front of one of the WTO entrances, and wondering where the ‘labor guys’ were. Fortunately, some of the rank-and-file Longshoremen and Steelworkers eventually broke from the main labour demonstration and joined us.

Although I have yet to complete a thorough review of international labour communications, a recent article by Peter Waterman does not offer a lot of optimism. Titled

“The Agony of Union Internationalism” one of the sub-heads reads “Back to National-Industrial-Colonial Union Internationalism.” However, my own involvement in Labor Tech 2001, in San Francisco suggests that there are some important grassroots labour initiatives to learn from, including the recent campaigns of the California Longshoremen, the Liverpool Dockers, the Australian Dockers, as well as some of the experiences from the Marxist labour organizations in the Philippines, Korea and South Africa (Scipes, 1996, Waterman, 1988, Kim, 2002).

Since Seattle, the International Forum Against Globalization, and many of the NGOs and direct action groups, have participated in the World Social Forums in Porto Alegre, Brasil in 2001 and 2002. Since Seattle, the Forums have become more participatory. In Porto Alegre itself, 50,000 people convened in hundreds of workshops, formulating alternative social and economic proposals under the banner “Under World Is Possible.” Regional meetings will convene in Europe, Argentina, Asia, the Amazon, Oceania and Porto Alegre in preparation for the next World Social Forum .

As well, the media hook-up has become much more collaborative, and has incorporated Internet capabilities. A collaborative effort between hundreds of independent news organizations, Il Ciranda, was also convened (www.ciranda.net). The IMC also sponsored a simulcast between Brasil and New York during the protests against the World Economic Forum, broadcast via loudspeakers in the youth camp in Porto Alegre.

Since Seattle, the IMC has also developed, extending their reach to over 70 sites around the world. The first year focussed on event-based reports from all of the protests against neoliberal multilateral institutions (WTO, IMF, WB, G8, EEU, FTAA, etc.) Since then, many sites have started to facilitate activist communications at the local level. For example, the San Francisco site features special sections on housing, the forests, police, anti-war, energy, labor and judi bari; and New York has special sections on the Diallo story, September 11th, Pacifica Radio, Housing, AIDs, Vieques, Bush and S8; LA Indymedia, as

¹⁶ See Scipes, 1996 for a discussion of labor internationalism among one Filipino group, the Labor Centre of the Philippines, and Kim, 2002, for a discussion of Korean Labour movement communications.

well as the Latin American IMCs, in Brasil and Chiapas especially, focus more on training people to produce their own stories .

What might the IMC learn from these precursor networks? In a companion piece, I discuss the challenges facing the IMC in more detail. In summary here, I think that we need to revise some of the understandings of Internet activist networks, in light of Seattle and September 11th. The stakes are higher now, as the corporate networks close rank, and the Big Ten media moguls move towards a neobroadcast model of communications. The activist networks, and the IMC are contending with a number of new measures on and off the Internet: police harassment of sites, arrests of those who would exchange free software and content, copyright gouging of Internet radio sites, police invasions of IMC centers, etc.

One of the biggest lessons: the greatest shock to the status quo has not been from sophisticated computer networks, but from the social organization and networking among a myriad of social forces, using all the new and old communications available. As Sheri Herndon, from the Seattle IMC, said in a radio discussion in April 2002.

We need a new understanding ...of how our solidarity can create a network. A lot of time [people] think of [indymedia] as a digital network... a digital network is not going to be a threat to the status quo and corporate power. Where the threat is is that we are organizing a coordinated social network and that means improving our communications from the many, to the many and to all the nodes. And that is where women's strength really comes in ... (Sheri Herndon, Seattle IMC, Madison-Wisconsin IMC Broadcast, 2002)

Mobilizing for the upcoming World Information Society Summit will probably include all of the different forms of organizations, and communications, from inside lobbying of the NGOs, attempting to speak truth to power; the counter-forums, and preparatory meetings to exchange information and experiences; the Internet mobilizations, and the street demonstrations. How might each of these instruments be best used to weave the channels of resistance and promote a new International of Hope, Struggle, Solidarity and Cooperation.

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