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Alternative media in North and South - a comparison  
The cases of IFIWatchnet and Indymedia in Africa

**Abstract**

Alternative media form an important part of the global mediascape. Research on this phenomenon is however often drawn upon studies in the 'global north'. In this paper we discuss alternative media in the 'global south'. We do this by exploring two case studies of co-operation between Northern and Southern partners: 'IFIwatchnet' and 'Indymedia Centre in Africa (IMCA)'. We highlight how Northern and Southern partners differed in identity, organizational forms, and accountability. We find that Northern partners were oriented to more 'marginal' identities, fluid organizational structures, and informal structures of accountability. In contrast, Southern activists articulated more 'mainstream' identities, relied on more structured forms, and linked to formalised modes of accountability. The result was often significant clashes over it meant to be an alternative media, how it should be organized and how people should be held to account. This meant North South co-operation was often fraught with struggles. These difficulties remind us of the limitations of creating global co-operation through seeking to spread modes of activist developed in the North which emphasize autonomy, networks, fluidity and direct action.

## **Introduction**

The arrival and establishment of low cost media platforms based on Internet Communication Technologies (ICTs) has created a rich ecology of media falling outside state or corporate ownership. This has been variously labelled radical media (Downing 1984), citizen media (Rodríguez 2001) or alternative media (Atton 2002). We prefer the term alternative media, which broadly involves ‘media production which challenges, at least implicitly, actual concentration of media power, whatever form these concentrations make take in different locations’ (Couldry & Curran 2003, p.7). Despite an increasing awareness of alternative media organizations, research has largely focused on alternative media in the wealthy ‘global north’. This provides relatively benign circumstances for alternative media networks to emerge: there are plentiful resources and state repression or censorship is often not particularly harsh. But, what do alternative media look like in the ‘global south’ where state repression and censorship is more intense and resources are less plentiful than in the developed world?

Little work has been done so far to consider this question. Existing comparative studies of media indicate that media organizations in relatively low income countries and/or in situations constrained by sustained conflict have quite a radically different experience to those in more developed contexts (Frenzel & Sullivan 2009). Anecdotal evidence of the experience of media activists working with alternative media in developing country contexts also suggests that they face a whole raft of issues which are unfamiliar to media-producers in more developed contexts. But at the same time, there is a widespread assumption that the proliferation of ICTs based media would allow for alternative media

organisations to develop easier in the 'global south'. This assumption has prompted investment in ICT projects by development NGOs and international donors in the last 20 years. Such tendencies have been questioned for 'uncritically positing new media technology as deterministic of social progress' (Mudhai et al. 2009, p.1). Southern alternative media organisations often rely on significant support from 'northern' NGOs, donors, or funding. This creates unique challenges for southern alternative media organisations. Rather than only challenging the power of large-scale media organisation, they also have to relate to and to resist the power exercised by their northern partners and donors.

In this paper we address the lack of research into southern alternative media by exploring differences between alternative media organizations in the 'north' and the 'south'. To do this, we have conducted research with two alternative media networks: namely IFIWatchnet and Indymedia Africa. These two networks bridge the 'north' and 'south' not simply by establishing links between nodes in the North and the South. Rather they attempted to create more substantial co-operation between Northern and Southern nodes. They hoped this would facilitate the democratization and growth of the respective network. However we found that North-South co-operation often unveiled significant differences about how formal the organization should be: Northern media activists had a preference for highly decentralized and autonomous modes of organizing. Southern activists usually focused on more formalized structures and processes that could garner funding from large foreign NGOs and Aid agencies. This led to conflicts which were often difficult to resolve because a lack of a set of share assumptions about the identity,

form and structures of accountability each group associated with alternative media. This suggests that attempts to build North-South co-operation by transferring the model of alternative media with an emphasis on 'open source' and 'autonomist' principles is rather naïve. Instead, North-south alternative media co-operation appears to involve a struggle between very different sets of assumptions about what alternative media is and how it is organised.

To make this point, we begin by reviewing existing studies of alternative media organizations, noting that this literature has rarely considered the important differences which might exist between alternative media in 'northern' and 'southern' contexts. We then outline our comparative case-based methodology for studying these differences. Next we look in more detail at our two case organisations of North-South co-operation: 1. IFIWatchnet, a civil society network established to link the work of groups 'watching' the activities of International Financial Institutions (IFIs) such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB), and in which we focus on the shift of the network's 'headquarters' from 'north' to 'south'; and 2. 'Indymedia Centre in Africa (IMCA)', initiated as part of the global 'Indymedia' network. After outlining the history of these two cases, we focus on their identities, their organizational forms, and their structures of funding and accountability. We then move to a discussion where these two cases are compared, and we draw out the differences between the Northern and Southern partner's assumptions. We conclude by suggesting some important areas for future comparative research on alternative media organizations facing clashing assumptions between Northern and Southern partners. We also draw out some implications for cross-

context collaborations to sustain effective global alternative media-producing networks that are sensitive to these differences.

### **Alternative Media Organizations**

Alternative media has been a neglected area of study, with few studies of this thriving sector existing prior to the 1990s (for some exceptions see Halloran 1970; Gitlin 1980; Downing 1984). In the past twenty years, however, there has been increasing recognition of a long history of alternative media and the important role it plays in the contemporary media landscape (Coyer et al. 2007). Because of the diversity of forms of alternative media, it is difficult to identify a set of stable characteristics that define it. Some argue that it is precisely because of the participatory and dynamic nature of alternative media that it is so difficult to tie it down in any meaningful sense (Gumucio-Dagron 2004). This is because alternative media appears to always be in the process of evolving and overflowing any strict boundaries around what it could, or indeed should, be.

Despite these concerns, there have been a number of attempts to enumerate a cluster of common aspects associated with alternative media. These include: interactivity between producers and consumers, collective production and a focus on everyday life (Enzensberger 1974); the production of small-scale media involving horizontal (i.e. relatively non-hierarchical) patterns of communication (McQuail 1986); a rejection of dominant political values, coupled with democratic or collectivist means of producing media; and a commitment to innovative creation of content (O'Sullivan 1994).

Alternative media is also associated with innovations in media use and distribution, being

characterised by ‘distributive use’ and alternative forms of transmission, transformed social use, such as breaking down conventional producer-consumer relationships, and transformed communication processes, through an emphasis on networked horizontal links (Atton 2002).

From these different lists of alternative media characteristics, it is possible to identify some common themes. The first is that alternative media typically have a radically different collective identity to other forms of media, involving a shared sense of what is specific, unique and enduring to the organization or network (Whetten 2006). While the specific form this takes may differ quite significantly, most alternative media organizations typically have an identity based around an overriding concern for producing social change (Gumucio-Dagron 2004): from radical utopian desires (such as those articulated by deep-ecology media) to more modest aesthetic goals (as can be seen in many cultural movements); and from claims for economic justice and social accountability, to reactionary right wing desires (such as can be seen in some racist media). Alternative media has often evolved from grievances of social movement activist who find their view misrepresented in mainstream media (Cresswell 1996; Routledge 1997). The intent of alternative media thus is not simply to garner a large audience (as with commercial media), or to promote state-policies (as might occur with state-funded media). Rather, it involves an attempt to create some kind of social and cultural change.

The second characteristic that seems to be unique to alternative media producers is the organizational form they adopt. An organizational form is made up of goals of the

organization, its authority relations, the technology it uses, and the markets it seeks to serve (Hannan & Freeman 1984; Scott 1995). Alternative media tends to emphasise the desirability of social change (as discussed above), organizing through more participatory and voluntary divisions of labour, using locally specific or ‘tactical’ media, and blurring the boundaries between producer and consumer. A central thread is the importance of participation as a core organising principle, with a consistent theme in the literature being the active involvement of ordinary people or staff of campaigning organisations who otherwise are often marginalized in the production of media content. This involves encouraging contributions from active citizens, not being attached to a political party, a focus on and association with social movements, and an emphasis on ‘prefigurative politics’ (Downing 1984, p.17).

The final distinctive aspect of alternative media organizations is their structure of accountability. This involves the answerability of an organization (i.e. who it must justify its actions to and how), and the enforcement of standards (Schedler 1999). Many alternative media organizations would say that they are ultimately answerable to the communities that they set out to serve. These communities might be formally represented through a board or some other kind of governance mechanism typical to an NGO with intra-organisational hierarchies. Others might reject this kind of accountability, and instead seek to create accountability through consensus decision-making processes and direct democracy. Many alternative media organizations thus seek to break down structured links that typically exist between media producers and consumers, governors and the governed, through championing strongly participatory modes of decision-making



such as consensus processes. Such emphasis on radical democracy may be emphasised and enshired in standards or code of practices.

Alternative media organizations tend to differ significantly from more mainstream media organizations in terms of their oppositional identities, horizontal organizational forms, and participatory structures of accountability. However, we should note that the difference between alternative media organizations and other more mainstream forms is far from neat (Downing 2001; Kim & Hamilton 2006). Nevertheless, many of the radical characteristics of alternative media described above have themselves been further radicalised following the rise of the ICTs (Lovink 2002; Meikle 2002; Van de Donk 2004; Atton 2002). This has permitted the appearance of a whole new set of now well known forms of alternative media which are largely web based, including the global independent media network or 'Indymedia' (Pickerill 2007; Downing 2001), OhmyNews in South Korea (Kim & Hamilton 2006), and others. Many of these networked organizations foster identities that are radically boundary-less and open, influenced strongly by discourses associated with the open publishing and open source software movements and associated to 'autonomous geographies' (Pickerill & Chatterton 2006). The assumption has been that ICTs permit the radical involvement and broadcasting of marginalised views and voices (Spicer & Perkmann 2008). In addition, online ventures are considered to reframe and radicalise the ways in which these organizations operate, through placing further emphasis on networked and 'glocal' organizational forms (Sullivan 2008). Bennett (2003), for instance, points out the importance of 'SPIN' organisational characteristics in online-based social movements: emphasising

Segmentation (with fluid boundaries between hubs or nodes), Polycentricism (or multiple hubs), Integration (through horizontal structures of multiple or rhizomatic paths of communication), and Networking (effected by high degrees of connectivity). In addition, many online-based social movements have sought to push participatory accountability structures even further by actively changing the relationship of users to content. This has entailed a radical blurring of boundaries between users and producers through experimentation with open content and open editing processes, exemplified by the Indymedia slogan 'Don't hate the media, be the media!' (Downing 2001).

The language of participation, networks, openness and engagement is now ubiquitous within these media-producing organizations,. The principles of Indymedia are laid out in a so called 'code of unity', a description of a radical democratic organisational identity, form and accountability that is meant to enable the growth of the network without compromising local autonomy (Kidd 2003). However conflicts between the local and the global have continued to appear as codifications and standards may be interpreted in different ways while powers to enforce a certain understanding may be limited.

Discussing a conflict over funding from the Ford Foundation in the early years of the Indymedia Network, Picard (2006) has pointed towards the problems that may arise when principles of local autonomy and network coherence clash. A US IMC had secured a large grant from the foundation to fund a global conference. The Argentinian IMC attempted to block this because they saw the Ford Foundation as tainted with US attempts to seek global hegemony and neoliberal economic policies. Arguable a code of unity could not prevent a very different reading of whether it was ok to receive funding from

the Ford Foundation. According to Picard (2006), democratic openness is functionally central in allowing network growth of alternative media. “In the case of Indymedia, it is this radical democratic discourse manifesting in democratic communication processes that serves as the organizational glue making the global network cohere.” (p.327)

So far, it might be argued, this general problem has only been addressed in the contexts of a fairly limited set of studies and alternative media-producing situations. Indeed the study of alternative media is often focused in northern contexts (Hamilton & Atton 2001) where the material conditions are relatively comparable. The little work that does on Southern contexts indicates that there indeed are some important differences between alternative media in 'north' and 'south' (e.g. Downing et al. 1995; Park & Curran 2000; Frenzel & Sullivan 2009; Kim & Hamilton 2006; Gumucio-Dagron 2004). Furthermore, Picard's (2006) study of the fate of Ford Foundation funding in Indymedia suggests that these differences may shape how Northern and Southern partners co-operate.

Given this relative paucity of work that researches alternative media specific to southern contexts, in this paper we ask whether and how alternative media networks in the north and south differ. In particular, we are interested the potential differences between the identities, organizational forms, and structures of accountability expressed by alternative media organizations that are attempting to cooperate and collaborate in global alternative media networks.

## **Methodology**

To explore differences between alternative media in the 'north' and 'south', and how these played out during North-South co-operation, we adopt a comparative case study methodology. This involves the selection, analysis and systematic comparison of cases that we might expect to differ in theoretically significant ways (as described above). Single case studies have been favoured in the study of alternative media research: proving effective in investigating the dynamics and specificities of the work of alternative media in particular settings; in revealing rich information regarding each case; and sometimes in generating new concepts and theories (Eisenhardt 1989). Here, however, we are interested in producing a relatively systematic analysis of how concepts and theories might generate and explain context-dependent differences in alternative media organisations operating as nodes within global media networks. A comparative case method involves the systematic analysis of the characteristics and dynamics specific to cases, coupled with analysis of the similarities and differences between cases along a range of relevant dimensions (Ragin 1992). Such comparative approaches have proved useful in identifying differences in models of public broadcasting (Kueng-Shankleman 2000), and are likely to be similarly useful for exploring differences in alternative media. In order to explore differences between alternative media in 'northern' and 'southern' contexts, we selected two global networks that involved both Northern and Southern partners. These are IFIWatchnet, focusing on the shift of the network's 'headquarters' from 'north' to 'south', and the Indymedia Centre Africa (IMCA), which is part of the global 'Indymedia' network. We have tried to ensure that these two media networks are

sufficiently similar to warrant comparison: they use the same medium (the internet), and share broadly similar left-leaning political orientations. Each involves substantial interaction between Northern and Southern actors. As we describe, a couple of years after its founding, the headquarters of IFIWatchnet moved from the North (London) to the South (Montevideo), whilst continuing to serve a global audience and involving activists from multiple locations. On the other hand, the founding conferences of IMCA discussed in this paper were all based in the 'south' (in Senegal, Mali and Kenya). Nevertheless, Indymedia activists from the North played a role in developing IMCA. Both cases thus provide extremely interesting and potentially comparable examples of co-operation between Northern and Southern contexts.

To compare these cases, we sought first to construct a comprehensive picture of each organisation through extensive documentation, coupled with first-hand involvement and observation. In some cases this involved narrative accounts of organisational histories; in others, projects were documented through a collection of their output (e.g. exchanges on public domain e-lists). We also conducted semi-structured interviews with participants in each of these cases. The interviewees were chosen because of their intense involvement in the case study projects. This material has been substantially augmented by extensive involvement in each of the case organisations. Two co-authors (XXXX) thus were involved over the longer-term as active creators of aspects of IFIwatchnet and IMCA respectively, whilst also conducting 'action research' regarding these projects.

Furthermore participants in both cases were involved in the reviewing of this paper in line with the action research methodology adopted here. (Kemmis & McTaggart 2005;

Kindon et al. 2007).

In analysing the extensive data generated for each case, we began by developing a descriptive account of each organisation. This involved broadly tracing the history of each of the cases, documenting how they developed, the core participants involved, and some of the central issues faced by each organisation and their associated network. We then developed a more analytical account of each of the cases, based on the three key dimensions of alternative media, which we located in the literature: their identity, their organizational form, and their structures of accountability. These three dimensions were then used in a comparison of the similarities and differences between these organisations. In what follows, we detail the results of this analysis.

## **IFIWATCHNET**

IFIwatchnet.org was established in London in 2002 through the Bretton Woods Project (BWP). The IFIWatchnet homepage presents news, campaigns, reports, links to member groups, video and more. This information comes mainly from pre-existing network hubs such as the Bank Information Centre in Washington, Central and Eastern European Bankwatch Network in Prague and the NGO Forum on the Asian Development Bank in Manila. These organisations were invited to participate in IFIWatchnet to share information and raise the profile of their work on International Financial Institutions (IFIs), and in particular to establish a more visible and systematic presence on the web for research, perspectives and campaigns from Southern civil society.

In October 2002 BWP applied to the Ford Foundation for funding for a one year pilot project, and in early 2003 'ifiwatchnet.org' was established with a shared calendar and e-mail discussion 'D-group' that became the de facto governance structure for the nascent IFIwatchnet. The design was simple enough to be easy to access on dial up connections in the South. The technical platform chosen for IFIwatchnet was Actionapps, an open-source content management system (CMS).

With support from the Ford Foundation, a co-ordinator was employed for two days a week, supported by staff of BWP and also the Bank Information Center. In 2005 the Ford Foundation continued its support for IFIWatchnet with a second two-year phase to be hosted in an organization based in the south. Several networks were put forward as potential new hosts, and the Instituto Tercer Mundo (ITeM) in Uruguay was selected from among the interested organisations. This decision was partly made because the majority of organisations in the network were from the the North. One interviewee explained "they are better resourced, with more web access and people with the paid time to get involved, and provide materials online". The management of the IFIWatchnet.org website was shifted from BWP – a small, horizontally organised Northern research and lobbying network – to ITeM, a more hierarchically-organised and information-technology focused southern NGO which had not until then been a member of IFIWatchnet. Initially, there was much optimism associated with the move because BWP were happy to hand over technical aspects of the work to a more specialised team. However the transfer process was hindered by the fact that nobody visited from either organisation in the initial process.

The substantial role of the part time core co-ordinator, more or less invisible from outside the network, was not effectively shifted into the new host. Her role in relationship building, managing informal interactions and facilitating ownership was not effectively recreated or replaced within ITeM, and regional animators somewhat neglected. The senior staff member within ITeM who took on a figurehead role did not have time for day-to-day communications. Junior staff members hence maintained relationships within the network, and they were not empowered to respond to members and animators requests. This resulted in a communication gap in the nascent social networks driving IFIWatchnet. As one interviewee said, “like any network, it was about people and personalities who could sell an idea, or push a certain idea, or a certain way of thinking”. It was this side of the organisation of the network that was not missing or at least not very emphasized. Instead, emphasis was now placed on maintaining and updating the technical infrastructure such as the web platform. This often came at the expense of this softer side of the infrastructure. In 2006, ITeM developers shifted the database from the original Actionapps software to the open source Drupal CMS (Content management System). The decision to invest time and resources in this shift was perceived within ITeM as technical, responding to the growing profile and utility of Drupal. The decision involved consultation with the Association of Progressive Communications (APC) and the IFIWatchnet steering committee, but not with IFIwatchnet’s animators.

IFWatchnet’s funding was due to run out in 2007. A year’s extension to the Ford Foundation grant was allowed for ITEM to explore further funding opportunities. Suggestions included subscriptions by participating groups and networks, and selling



appropriate ethical advertising. These proposals did not get far, ostensibly because member organisations had not really seen the point of a network that expected substantial extra work by their staff and showed only limited progress towards information sharing.

### ***Organizational Identity***

Several key aspects of the political identity motivating IFIwatchnet can be identified.

Central for its Northern founders was the idea of a networked information sharing structure that could be enabled by ICTs and used to enhance counter-hegemonic struggle to influence development discourses. Positioned as challengers of the power of dominant donors to shape banking institutions' policies and discourses, the founders' political backgrounds can be located in the global justice movement focusing on critique of the international finance sector, environmental degradation, unpayable 'third world' debt and neoliberal structural adjustment.

With the move of IFWatchnet from its former base in London to a new location in the South, some changes in the nature of the project were apparent. While there was great overlap in an understanding of IFIwatchnet as counter-hegemonic globally, some more intangible elements of this identity came into conflict with parts of the new host organization. To some degree this may have been because ITeM's technical work processes were more formalised than they had been in BWP. In addition, since most ITeM staff were only peripherally involved in international IFIwatching communities, and did not attend the World Bank/IMF annual meetings or engage in the cross-network policy communications that are BWP's everyday work. The result was that

communications with those networks became less intimate, collaborative and effective. As a result “quite often, things don’t happen”, as one interviewee expressed it, which was “a very slow, frustrating way to work”.

So while the move introduced a more ‘professionalized’ identity, it also meant that a sense of distance from direct campaigning against IFIs. Some interviewees told us that the content of IFIwatchnet became simply another facet of ITeM’s strategic technical work; a website to promote certain political perspectives and generate grant funding. Staff in ITeM claimed independence in the site management process. ITeM’s sense of independence in terms of claiming the right to manage the network in a particular way was partly informed by a deep seated anti-colonial identity amongst staff in Uruguay. In one interview reference was made, without the prompting by the interviewer, to British colonial involvement in Uruguay’s past, which the interviewee at ITeM used to explain some of the communication problems the network had been experiencing.

### ***Organisational Form***

When IFIwatchnet initially emerged in London, it had a fairly flat organisational structure. This informality was a practical way of working to a low budget, with a few people collaborating on a wide range of tasks, embodying oversight at the same time as communications and some of the more traditionally ‘low status’ tasks involved. Building networks and communities for information-sharing and coalition-building was seen as a productive political act in and of itself. The aim was to produce ‘warm’ atmospheres of supportive and responsive collaboration among an ‘adhocracy’ of those committed to the

networking project. This was frequently contrasted with the 'colder' feeling of more formal structures. It was felt that mutual understanding between core people involved in delivery of a broad network like IFIWatchnet was essential. This included respect for different organisational set ups and how they shape participation, individual motivations and assumptions.

Before the move to ITeM, informality was embodied both in the way the project was formed in London and also in the networking with partners across the world by the northern founders of the project. The adoption of ICTs was intended as media sharing infrastructure to enhance this informal development of networks, and was based in a social and political convergence prior and parallel to the technical networking. As the project moved south to Uruguay, arguably a different, more instrumental and technical understanding of the role of ICTs emerged, exemplified by the management of the change of CMS. Importantly, the problem did not lie in the new CMS, but rather in the assumption that decisions about CMS are merely technical and hence do not require consultation and building on others' experience. As one interviewee said, during the move to the South "a lot of the sense that this is a network not a technical platform" got lost. Attitudes towards ICTs arguably indicate different organisational forms. For another interview this was not about a "North-South split", as she expressed it. However, she continued to say that "if you want it [the network] to be more representative, then you need to put more work into supporting and encouraging people ... and that sort of implies more people involved really; and if there are more people involved then I think you do need to have somebody who's pushing that, and driving that, and keeping people

motivated and so on”. With the move from the North to the South this precise engagement with people became de-emphasized, as the network became more technical focused and less engaged with network building activities and informal interaction.

The movement drew out a clash between a more informal organizational form with a focus on networking championed by Northern activists and a more formalised one with a focus on technical issues championed by Southern activists. This clash became more evident on a number of occasions. One instance was when some Northern activists collaborated with each other to explore possibilities to further develop Actionapps, the CMS that was used for the IFIWatchnet website at that time. One activist told us that “ITeM then got involved, hysterically as always, sending a message to xxx telling him that he’s fucked up things”. While this might have been an example of an overheated discussion, it is an indication of the strains in the network at that time. These strains came from a clash between the more formalized structures articulated by the Southern group and the more informal structures associated with networks and direct action preferred by Northern activists.

### *Accountability*

IFNWatchnet’s move to the South was proposed by its initiators to the Ford Foundation as an indicator of their serious intent to maximise Southern involvement in IFIWatchnet. In other words, a project based on critique of global financial institutions established in the ‘North’ ideally should not be based in Northern centres of finance capital like London. Instead, it was felt that it should put its political principles into practice by

moving the headquarters to the South. It was felt that by locating in the South, the network could practice their responsibility and broader accountability to the global movement they served.

However this move had unforeseen implications. When the network was based in the North, systems of accountability were largely based on dense networked relationships. Accountabilities and responsibilities were negotiated and usually founded upon personal trust. This system of accountability was relatively informal in nature. However, when the networked moved to Montevideo, it became far more formalized in nature and specific task responsibilities became more circumscribed and specified. The result was that when tasks did not fit clearly with circumscribed responsibilities, they could be disregarded. Similarly, when Northern activists intervened in others areas of responsibility (such as happened with the CMS example mentioned above), there was a strong negative reaction from the Southern partners. What this suggests is that different understandings of what it meant to be accountable and responsible for an activity gave rise to some important clashes.

The clashes between the more informally oriented Northern and more formally oriented Southern groups evolved in a way which limited functionality of the network as a whole to such an extent that the originating project discontinued. It is unknowable to what extent outcomes might have been different had IFIWatchnet relocated to an organization with a profile similar ITeM's – larger, more hierarchical – but still based in London; nor whether ideal co-ordination and technical systems would have resulted in more users

contributing to the site. As one interviewee from the North said, “we are all suffering from the same capacity problems, not really finding sufficient time for working on IFIWatchnet”. That is, there are capacity issues at work that does not necessarily have anything to do with North-South relations. However, as our research of IFIWatchnet shows, the move of the network management role from North to South did create a range of problems for this alternative media organization.

### **Indymedia Centre Africa (IMCA)**

Indymedia is a global network of Independent Media Centres (IMCs) founded in Seattle in the context of the emerging global justice movement (GJM) and its 'coming out party' which closed the Ministerial Meeting of the World Trade Organisation in November 1999. It is bound up with a broader desire to foster a 'globalisation from below', or what has been described as 'grassroots globalisation' (Appadurai 2001). Indymedia represents itself as a tool for the networking of struggles and the convergence of activists across the world against neo-liberal globalisation, as well as a social movement to democratise the production of news media (e.g. Routledge 2003; Mamadouh 2004a; Pickard 2006; Pickerill 2007). After a period of rapid 'organic' growth effecting the proliferation of network nodes in various locations in the first months and years of its existence, Indymedia became concerned about the radical north-south imbalance of its growth (Halleck 2002). In 2003 the whole continent of Africa was represented by only four IMCs, while the UK alone had thirteen (Mamadouh 2004b)(Frenzel & Sullivan 2009). Mirroring the global 'digital divide', the lack of IMCs in Africa was understood as a challenge to Indymedia by some of its members. Indymedia's claim to 'globalise from

below' suffered from the conspicuous dominance of Northern nodes in the network. At the same time ICT based media promised to have a great potential to support processes of democratisation in Africa. In 2003 following an initiative of activists from the IMC Ambazonia (Cameroon), an IMC run by diaspora activists in Europe, four existing African IMCs, together with members from across the global network, founded IMC Africa (IMCA). IMCA was inspired by the idea to foster the development of Indymedia network nodes in Africa through support, knowledge exchange and networking. Initially a network based on an email listserv, IMCA soon started organising for a conference in Senegal, to be held in March 2004. The aim of the conference was to bring together journalists and media activists from Africa, and to train them in the use of ICTs as independent media activists. This was intended to initiate the foundation of more IMCs in various places in Africa.

Within the global Indymedia network this idea was controversial. The GJM had one of its origins in the movements against neo-liberal development policies imposed under the 'Washington Consensus'. The GJM was inspired by the idea to go 'beyond development' (Escobar 1992; Esteva & Prakash 1998). Indymedia activists consequently showed some reservations to embark on a project that tried to 'bring' the idea of Indymedia to Africa, being highly conscious about the colonial undertone of this approach. To operate with metaphors like 'open space', used frequently in ICT and GJM discourses, in post-colonial contexts had already been criticised as 'double colonisation' (Chesher 1994; Frenzel & Sullivan 2009; Flatz 1999). A funding request to Indymedia global for delegates plane tickets was blocked by the IMC Uruguay on the grounds that linking the creation of new

IMCs to transfer of funds from the global Indymedia would create ‘dependent’ rather than ‘independent media’ (Indymedia 2004). The project had support from the existing African IMCs and from many other IMC and went ahead without the financial support from Indymedia global. The activists in IMCA organised their first conference in Dakar in 2004 and two subsequent conferences in 2006 and 2007 in Bamako and Nairobi. From the outset, IMCA faced the challenge of a lack of equivalent resources in the African context. To combat this, IMCA adopted models more closely associated with conventional NGO funding structures. Funding was sought and found through donors active in ICT and north-south cooperation, which were used to finance travel costs of African participants. IMCA also often relied on a broader set of local partners, involving NGOs, development institutions and universities. This caused a series of controversies between Northern and Southern participants in the IMCA and with the broader Indymedia network. In the 2006 IMCA conference in Bamako, Mali, some local organising work in preparation of the conference was done from a media NGOs called Geek corps, whose operations were financed by USAid, the US government development agency. This involvement caused strong concerns among Indymedia members from Latin-America:

“I was very disturbed with the information that IMC Bamako room was co-financed by USAID (see story below from liege.indymedia). USAID was one of the main US agencies financing ideologic aparatus during latin american dictatorships in the 60s and 70s” (Indymedia 2006).

Despite a level of misunderstanding causing this particular conflict (IMC Africa did not receive financial support from USAid), this conflict had a base in very different



organisation identities of IMCs in Latin America and West Africa. Local organisers in Mali had very little concern working with USAid, as the French government's post-colonial influence in this part of Africa was considered much more problematic than US influence.

Despite the increasing understanding and reflection within IMCA and Indymedia regarding particularities of the African context, conflicts occurred repetitively over organisational patterns and funding during its time existence often infringing on the working of the project. As we attempt to do in the section that follows, these features of IMCA's history enables us to tease out some strands relevant for possible further analysis, reflection and comparison. It will look particularly at the ways these conflicts emerged during IMCA conferences between Northern and Southern participants.

### ***Organizational Identity***

Participants agreed to a framework in which the conferences were to be radically democratic, aspiring to relatively non-hierarchical organisational and communications structures, following not simply the code of unity but more implicit, everyday understandings of politics. For some Northern participants this included the politics of house-keeping, cooking, washing dishes and other tasks which are frequently gendered as part of a feminised domestic sphere. As some of the Souther' (female) participants wryly expressed, 'African men' were not used to the idea of doing their dishes, while Northern male participants were likely to at least pay lip service to the importance of these activities. The shared rejection of global capitalism and its consequences did not extent to

a shared discourse on politics of the everyday. In other instances political cultures clashed as activists from the north who self-identified as ‘queer’, met openly homophobic participants from the South. Activists B expressed in an interview: “(some) people have been guided by this idea that gayness, queerness, homosexuality that is bad, that is wrong that is evil. So that has been really hard, that has been hard.”

Some of the perceptions of African poverty held by Northern participants clashed considerably with Southern perspectives. Some Northern participants pressed the group for close relations with ‘slum dwellers’ and were actively searching for projects that engaged with slums. In Nairobi there was a direct conflict when some northern participants questioned the gated community type of location of the conference and asked for a relocation of the project into the slums. This implicitly criticized and undermined the planning of work carried out by local organisers, who reacted with protest against the assumption of the Northerners that working and living in the slums would be somehow politically more valuable. For African participants in the project, it involved “glorifying poverty and glorifying ghetto life” which expressed the naivety of Northern participants. Activists C from Nairobi explained this point in more depth:

“... in the western context if you wear very very dirty jeans, you have a cap with Che Guevara on it, and you hang out in these abandoned houses then you really feel you are separate from society and you are doing something.(...) in Nairobi you are never going to find an abandoned house to hang out in and if you want to see real change (...) (y)ou then need to work closely with Kenya Indymedia in South Africa to understand this whole notion of poverty(...)”

The request to relocate to the slums arguably indicated an antipathy towards working with African activists who were middle class. It seemed that the Northern participants were actively searching to find in their African partners the images of Africa they brought with them.

### ***Organisational Form***

Following the experiences of difficulties in aligning organisational form between different contexts, IMCA came to the conclusion that participants first needed to learn about forms of horizontal decision making. In an email exchange during the preparation process of the Nairobi IMCA conference an organiser said:

“Since at the core of the whole work of INDYMEDIA IS THE CONCEPT OF HORIZONTAL/PARTICIPATIVE DEMOCRACY, C.T. will run workshops before the 13th. The hope is that the skills acquired in how to organize along consensus lines could be put to practice in all the workshops in tech skills.”

(Indymedia 2006)

The focus on horizontality led to some Northern participants assuming powerful roles of teachers and instructors in the convergence. By doing this, IMCA arguably replicated developmental approaches whereby an advanced Northern mode of organisation is to be diffused into Africa by Northern experts: As one interviewee reflected on this problem:

“I think to an extent a lot of us in that first week had our work clearly cut out, but some of us didn’t really have it clearly cut out. And then at that foundational level they pretty much established themselves in that mentality of receiving. I think you can bear me witness that that seems to have endured pretty much up to the very last day. In the sense that we were so busy doing things that were very important and unknowingly I guess certain comrades actually became spectators while the

action took place.”

As Northern teacher attempt to instruct Southern participants about horizontal and participatory organizational forms, there was a sense that they were creating an undemocratic situation by creating hierarchies and making some Southern participants into ‘spectators’.

### *Accountability*

The fact that most of the funding for IMCA came from the North might be not surprising. This however led to imbalances between participants, even within the relatively informal setting of IMCA. As Northerners were accountable for the use of the money, they assumed powerful positions as gatekeepers within the project. This power could be mediated to some extent through the establishment of appropriate distributive structures, involving a finance committee. Nevertheless, the tensions emerging in negotiations regarding distribution of funds provide further evidence of the significance of power differences in shaping organisational cultures. Some southern participants often asked for resources from the group to pay for mobile phone costs, transport expenses, and copy costs. For many Northerners these requests were questionable and even ‘selfish’, because they were seen as private consumption needs rather than needs for the project. This notion of selfishness is important as it belies Northerner’s assumption that political work should be ‘unselfish’ or charitable. The radically differing understandings of what constituted legitimate use of funds for political work made it difficult to operate within structures like a finance committee. One Nairobi activists thought that for many African participants certain organisers appeared “like gatekeepers of the money.(...) There are

resources there but there are people standing in the way so we have to push them so we can reach these resources.” In the process, activists from the North became conscious about the material basis of their ‘unselfishness’. A Northern activist said “So here I am from the US, I am a white female, and I am coming with a lot of tools, a lot of electronics, a lot of media and so that just sets up a whole series of dynamics and conversations and things to sort through.”

## **Discussion**

There are some key differences among 'northern' and 'southern' participants. In the case of IFIWatchnet, many of the Northern founders of IFIWatchnet understood it to be a global network with a relatively informal and non-hierarchical organizational form with informal trust based forms of accountability. In contrast, the new Southern hosts understood IFIWatchnet to be a technical platform that should be organised in a more hierarchical way in order to comply with more formal modes of accountability demanded by foundations. In the case of IMCA, we found that Northern participants saw it as a radical political movement that was informally or horizontally organized and should be based on passionate political accountability. In contrast, Southern participants saw IMCA as more of an Non Government Organization that involve more formal structures which has restrictive forms of accountability controlled by Northern participants.

Although there are significant differences in both cases, there are some striking aspects of similarity. Northern participants appear to seek alternative media as having a radical identity, being organized in a more informal and horizontal way and having more trust or

commitment based forms of accountability. In contrast Southern participants tended to emphasise a more 'mainstream' identity, formalized modes of organization, and modes of accountability more tied to foundations and donors. The organizational characteristics which we found amongst Northern participants very much reflect other accounts of alternative media which see themselves as agents of radical social change, work with decentralization and flexible networks, and use trust based forms of accountability (eg. Atton 2002). However, Southern participants approached Alternative Media in a very different way that could be said to more closely resemble more mainstream 'western media'.

There are at least three possible reasons we can identify for these differences between the Northern and Southern activists orientation to alternative media. The first reason that comes up clearly in each of the cases is the differential access to resources. Northern activists tended to rely on many resources they had access to through informal media such as other projects or private means of support. In contrast, Southern activists frequently did not have access to these kinds of resources and therefore needed to more formal sources of funding such as foundations. This meant that they often needed to develop an organizational identity that did not threaten funders (ie. was not too radical) and put in place more formal organizational and accountability structures to fulfil funder demands. The second reason for this difference is the differing activist cultures that media activists work within. The Northern activists tend to be part of activist cultures that emphasise direct action, participation and radical democratic involvement based on temporary projects. In contrast, many of the Southern activists were immersed in activists

subcultures which tended to operate through more formal NGO structures. These two cultures were reflected in how activists sought to build up alternative media organizations. The final reason for these divergence in Northern and Southern orientation to alternative media is the quite political opportunity structures which media activists face in the North and South. Most of the Northern media activists faced relative benign opportunity structures that are characteristic of liberal societies that provided them significant space for airing their views and engaging in political action. In contrast, Southern activists typically faced more difficult opportunity structures that may have limited political action and the airing of political voice in particular ways.

The different assumptions about identity, form and accountability in conjunction with the different patterns of resource distribution, activist culture and political opportunity structure created significant barriers for co-operation between Northern and Southern activists. In the case of IFIWatchnet, there was significant clash around how the network should be managed and whether more attention should be paid to building a technical platform or fostering network interaction. This ultimately lead to many participants loosing interest in the project and it eventually being closed. In the IMCA case, the differences created some conflicts around where events were held, how they should be run, and who should have access to resources. Although there was not the kind of eventual failure we found in the IFIWatch case, there were ongoing concerns that infused the project.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have investigated the difference between alternative media in the North and South and how these differences influence co-operation. Focusing on IFIWatchnet and IMCA, we found that Northern participants were broadly oriented towards more 'horizontal' modes of organizing while Southern participants tended to draw on more 'vertical' or hierarchical modes of organizing. This suggests we need to move away from broad claims that attribute particular organizational characteristics to alternative media throughout independent of context. From our small sample, it appears that understanding alternative media in the South requires the investigation of a range of organizational identities, forms and structures of accountability. More broadly, this recognition of diversity offers a clear rebuke to recent techno-utopian visions of the internet that tend to see it as creating a natural drive towards horizontal forms of social interaction and collaboration (eg. Shirky, 2008). Based on our current study, it appears that the network modes of organizing are actually primarily the province of Northern activists. In the South, more 'vertical' model of organization appear to be used to put new ICTs to work.

The different assumptions of Northern and Southern participants had a profound influence on co-operation. The lack of a shared identity, organisational form and accountability can produce misunderstandings and conflicts unknown within local organising contexts of 'autonomous geographies' (Pickerill & Chatterton 2006). We highlighted how conflicts over projects, the distribution of funding, and the broader survival of the network were shaped by clashing assumption and modes of organizing.



This meant that North – South Co-operation was often underpinned by deeper struggles around what each of the organizations were and how they should operate. Furthermore, there was a propensity to overlook differences in alternative media networks among participants. Northern activists will tend to understand their preferred organisational forms as being democratically advanced and ‘naturally’ facilitating global involvement and co-operation. However these ‘horizontal’ structures clashed with the locally specific needs of many Southern participants to garner resources through funding from more formal NGOs and foundations. What this suggests is that far from being a natural basis for facilitating spontaneous co-operation, the horizontal structures championed by many media activists may actually be a barrier to co-operation in some cases. The commitment to ‘vertical’ modes of organization that are encouraged by various factors in the South can certainly be an important barrier to co-operation. But Northern activists cling to the assumption that horizontal modes of organizing are naturally superior at facilitating co-operation can also be a barrier to co-operation. High levels of commitment to the ideals of Horizontalism can mean that Northern alternative media organisations overlook the particularity of their contexts. The result is that co-operation might reproduce developmental logics and unequal power relations between Northern and Southern participants. The problem of a ‘double colonisation’, applying ‘open space’ metaphors in the context of great inequality become apparent (Chesher 1994; Flatz 1999).

While it is important and somewhat inevitable that global networking of alternative media continues, this process may face significant difficulties. In particular these difficulties may arise out of different sets of assumption of what alternative media

organization is and how it should be organized. We should be clear that our sample is limited to two networks that involve Northern and Southern activists. This makes our broader claims about North-South differences somewhat initial. In order to consider whether our findings are more general, it would be vital to examine other North-South co-operation in alternative media. By considering other cases, it would be possible to explore the dynamics of co-operation and conflict. Future studies should reflect upon the issues that came to the forefront in this study to complement the research presented here. In this way, research can play an active role in enhancing and improving future co-operations. Alternative media will have to join into the ongoing learning processes of meetings like the World Social Forum (WSF) where many of the issues discussed have been a constant feature of organisation (Boehm et al. 2005; Wallerstein 2004; Keraghel & Sen 2004). We would argue that it is only by learning from these problematic encounters that real progress towards higher degrees of global co-operation can be achieved.

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