

The Goods of Community? The Potential of Journalism as a Social Practice

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This paper considers the question of whether journalism can be considered to be a social practice. After considering some of the goods of journalism the paper moves to investigate how external goods can corrupt the practice and make it somewhat ineffective. The paper therefore looks to consider ways in which the goods claimed have been better served in 'radical' journalism. Bristol Independent Media Centre is then evaluated as an example of an active project in which the goods of community are pursued through an inclusive form of participatory journalism.

Introduction

Fifteen years ago James Aucoin¹ implored researchers and educators to contribute to a project of applying MacIntyre's concept of 'social practice' to journalism. The concept of social practices has been developed by MacIntyre as part of his 'Aristotelian' project to explain the capacity of human beings to act in accord with their nature as social, dependent rational animals oriented to commonly agreed rationally ordered ends. However, social practices come to be dominated by the 'external goods' of money and power, mediated by capitalistic and bureaucratic institutions, and are consequently prevented from facilitating human flourishing as human beings and the practices in which they take part are instrumentalised and oriented to the acquisition of external goods. In contrast, a practice is a

coherent and complex form of socially established co-operative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.²

Practices cannot be understood as deriving from compulsion, managers or money, but as embodying historically developed standards of excellence, serving the practice, the product and the community in which it takes place. For MacIntyre, this historical grounding of practices serves to enable the practitioner to understand its purpose, to enable newcomers to learn it through knowing it as a 'tradition', and to enable the observer to have some limited external understanding of the practice. Once the practice is known (and perhaps mastered), changes can be introduced. The concept of tradition in this sense is not conservative, but obliges one to reflect on the past and have a concern for the future of the practice.

Not all social activity can be considered a practice, however. For MacIntyre social practices should nurture the virtues of justice, courage, and honesty (to which one might add, if we accept MacIntyre's argument that we are *dependent* rational animals, solidarity) in the individual practitioner. Further to this, as MacIntyre refuses to separate the individual from her social existence, the virtues learned through practices enable the practitioner to become good for the community, and the practice itself should contribute to the rationally understood goods of a community. In view of this, I would like to consider the possibility of sustaining the goods of the particular practice of journalism within existing communities in tension with institutions of capital and the state, rather than focusing on romanticised fishing and farming communities. To this end, I follow Coe and Beadle's suggestion in this Special Issue that,

¹ James L Aucoin 'Professionals or Practitioners? The MacIntyrean Social Practice Paradigm and the Study of Journalism Development' presented at the *Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication*, Kansas 1993

² Alasdair MacIntyre *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* Gerald Duckworth & Co Ltd, London 1981 p187

The question is...better seen not as the identification of the practice-based community as such but rather of the ways in which actual existing communities move towards or away from those standards through which a practice-based community is to be understood.

In this paper, following the methodological approaches of critical theorists³, I consider the potential for journalism to take place as a social practice. Though the bulk of research has shown institutionalised journalism to have been corrupted in many respects,⁴ following Adorno's argument that theory ought to 'dissolve the rigidity of an object frozen in the here-and-now into a field of tensions between the possible and the actual; for each of these two – the possible and the actual – depends on the other for its very existence',⁵ I suggest that we ought not treat corrupted forms of journalism as the practice as such. Rather, I suggest that we consider the potential for a social practice of journalism in other contexts. To this end, radical media histories⁶ illustrate potential forms of journalism and media practices that have been marginalised by the development of mainstream journalism. The traditions of radical media have been reinvigorated more recently by the flourishing of social movements and the use of new technologies. I use a case study, based on four years of 'participant observation' (or, more accurately, participation), of the Independent Media Centre (IMC) movement to illustrate the potential for a social practice of journalism that pursues its internal goods and the goods of community. Again, IMCs ought not be considered in a state of stasis, but should be considered as dynamic, responsive and changeable – indeed, they encourage criticism as a learning process to aid development. The significance of this latter is that I am not attempting to positively demonstrate that IMCs are in fact and unproblematically practice-based communities – not least because they take place amidst an institutional order which is itself corrupt. Rather, the aim here is to consider potential and to point out how that might be realised or repressed. Here I suggest that because IMCs are grounded in local communities, they can be key sites of struggle in community politics, as illustrated with the case of Bristol IMC.

Journalism: Internal and External Goods

The question Aucoin raised was whether and how journalism can be considered a practice – to which I add, the question of what sort of practice can it become? As he notes, the status of journalism has been contested for decades – especially in relation to the concept of 'professionalism'. Discussions of the latter generally refer to the perceived need for journalists to attain certain standards as journalists, but also in relation to goods of the communities or publics they supposedly serve.⁷ These standards should be attained and retained, for some, as in the professional medical and legal fields, by autonomous, self-governing professional associations. However, this impulse to professionalisation has been easily resisted by those who argue that it would lessen the 'freedom' of journalists to pursue the truth. For journalism to play a role in so-called democratic societies it calls upon liberal democratic values such as freedom of speech. This freedom would be restricted under professionalisation by restricting the parameters of the practice and also by restricting the possibility of participation.

The freedom pursued by journalists enables them to pursue what we might refer to, in MacIntyre's sense, as goods that are 'internal' to the practice and 'goods of excellence'. The pursuit of truth is often described as the chief 'good' of journalism, and its pursuit takes place in the interests of

³ Alasdair MacIntyre 'Social Science Methodology as the Ideology of Bureaucratic Authority in Knight K. *The MacIntyre Reader* Polity Press, London 1998; Theodor Adorno 'Sociology and Empirical Research' Trans. Graham Bartram, in Paul Connerton. *Critical Sociology*. Penguin, Harmondsworth 1976

⁴ Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John N. Clarke and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* Palgrave, London, 1978; Herman E and Chomsky N *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. Vintage, London 1994; Franklin B *Newszak and News Media* Hodder Arnold, London, 1997; Roy Greenslade *Press Gang: How Newspapers Make Profits from Propaganda* MacMillan, London 2003

⁵ Theodor Adorno (op cit) 238

⁶ James Curran and Jean Seaton (Eds.) *Power Without Responsibility: The Press and Broadcasting in Britain* 4th ed. Routledge, London 1991; Raymond Williams R *The Long Revolution* Penguin, Harmondsworth 1965

⁷ On the problems associated with the competing orientations of journalists, see Robert J Rosen *What Are Journalists For?* Yale University Press, New Haven 1999

citizens. The pursuit of truth requires certain techniques of journalism, such as witnessing, verification, interviewing and so on. However, practices are not simply techniques or skills (such as bricklaying), though they do require the exercise of them, but are *social goods* such as building (of which bricklaying is a part), and their internal goods should contribute to 'the narrative unity of human life' and to 'a wider tradition' – the latter becomes 'the goods of community'.⁸ Within this complex, virtues such as justice, courage, truthfulness and solidarity can be achieved and sustained within the shared tradition of journalism.

At the same time, however, the bulk of research into journalism argues that the 'external goods' pursued by the institutions within which journalists work have come to dominate the practice. Indeed, although MacIntyre points out that 'the history and structure of a practice is never to be identified with the history of and structure of the institutions which are the bearers of that practice',⁹ understanding the history of institutions can help us understand the limitations placed on the practice. This directs our attention to the problems not just of the institutions that directly sustain journalists, but also of the 'secondary' institutional structures with which they interface and of the institutional order as a whole.

The domination of external goods over journalism has taken a number of routes. In the very first instance, the materials used by journalistic institutions (offices, computers, desks, light bulbs and so on) are produced under a capitalist mode of production. This means that the autonomy from capitalism, even in 'public service' institutions, is limited – they have to pay for the means of production. The response of private news organisations has tended to be to integrate into that system – to buy and rent the means of production, and cover those costs with revenue raised by selling journalistic products. Thereby journalistic copy is sold in the form of news outlets (newspapers, television stations, news shows etc) and syndicated articles, and the audience is then moulded to form a specific consumer group – 'public goods' are replaced by managerially ordered customer satisfaction. The creation of consumer groups serves a double purpose – it continues to be produced for the recognisable commodity that is the news outlet, but also as a recognisable commodity itself, access to which is sold to advertisers. In this sense the idea of 'a public' or 'a community' is weakened as competing journalistic products compete for different fragmented consumer groups, whose separateness is reinforced through such competition. The ultimate institutional goal of corporate media institutions is to generate profit from these activities.¹⁰ To ensure this occurs, a layer of executive management is necessary. Removed from the production process, the executive layer supposedly ensures the business as a whole runs efficiently and that it meets the needs and desires of the major investors and advertisers.¹¹ This means that executives are able to consider the journalists and their work solely in terms of the capacity to generate surplus value for primary and secondary institutions. The journalists themselves are managed through a hierarchical system of non-executive editorial management. The commercial nature of private news organisations also creates a division between journalists and their communities – as readers and writers or, more to the point, as producers and consumers.

The need to speak to a specific consumer group goes some way to affecting the particularity of journalistic practices and news discourses, but there are also some generally dominant institutions that affect journalistic practices and news discourses. Despite journalistic claims to 'objectivity', liberal-democratic understandings of politics pervade the general outlook of corporate news organisations and, all too often, the orientation of individual journalists. This does not mean that journalists are forced or otherwise compelled to adopt a particular explanatory framework. Rather, more general patterns of recruitment ensure that only those whose worldviews follow a general, liberal democratic framework are selected. Noam Chomsky explained this process to the BBC journalist Andrew Marr, after he misinterpreted Chomsky's propaganda model as implying that journalists deliberately 'self censor'. Chomsky replied, 'I don't say you're self-censoring - I'm sure you

⁸ Kelvin Knight *Aristotelian Philosophy: Ethics and Politics from Aristotle to MacIntyre* Polity, London 2007 p149

⁹ Ibid p144

¹⁰ Ben Bagdikian *The Media Monopoly* Beacon Press, Boston 2004

¹¹ For example, AOL Time Warner is 73% owned by U.S. Trust Co, Capital Research, Axa, Barclays Bank, Citygroup bank, Wellington Management Company, State Street Corporation, Dodge Street, Cox and other corporate investment groups (September 2005 stock portfolio)

believe everything you're saying; but what I'm saying is, if you believed something different, you wouldn't be sitting where you're sitting'.¹² The political beliefs of such journalists are based on the idea that legitimate sovereign power is invested in the legislature and the executive, and as such they should be subject to journalistic scrutiny. This scrutiny assists the voting public, to which the state responds. According to liberal ideology, this mediation requires journalists to adopt a *passive* position in relation to the world of activity; their role is to communicate what is happening without interfering. Accordingly, mainstream news can serve to sustain the hegemonic position of a particular political order: public problems, often perceived and amplified by journalists, can be and should be resolved by the institutions of state. The practices and institutions of journalism interface with dominant political institutions, and consequently tend to marginalise and discredit other forms of political activity. News discourses come to presume and protect certain dominant norms and values – the sanctity of property, the basic rights of the state and capital, the benevolence of foreign policy, the idea of the nation state, the legitimacy of standing armies, the 'reasonableness' of political positions, the need for economic efficiency and so on.

Again, this 'interface' imposes a certain form on news organisations. In the first instance, journalists in news organisations are positioned to correspond with the order of the state. This ordering allows the state to become a privileged actor in news discourse, and in turn management in news organisations take on a hierarchical form that serves to order and discipline news production. This makes possible a chain of responsibility through which explicit and tacit agreements (such as Defence Advisory Notices, individual defamation law, rules on court reporting, official secrets legislation and so on) on stories to cover, and how to cover them, can be managed. The dominant form of use of broadcast news media reflects a dual interface with the economic system and the state.

Despite reservations over the imposition of media institutions on the practice of journalism, it is still held by most journalists that they do pursue certain social goods such as the truth, justice, the public interest, checks on the powerful and so on. These goods might be said to require journalists to nurture the virtues of honesty, justice and courage. Clearly there are challenges to their capacity to pursue these goods, but their self-belief is – with good reason – often referred to as a 'powerful occupational mythology'¹³ or the 'occupational ideology of journalism',¹⁴ which Deuze breaks down into public service, objectivity, autonomy, immediacy, and ethics.

If 'ideology' is understood as the construction of a myth that denies the reality of the situation, then perhaps there is a clear 'occupational ideology' of journalism. However, the claims of journalists can also be read as aspirations. Few journalists would argue that they are always already free to pursue 'the truth'. And those who do tend to be journalists working in institutions that very consciously try to balance the internal goods of journalism with the external goods pursued by the institution (for example, *The Guardian* is run as a trust, and Reuters is run as a not-for-profit company). To this end Kovach and Rosenstiel's *Elements of Journalism*¹⁵ (the claim that journalism's first obligation is to truth, that its first loyalty is to citizens (especially to provide citizens as members of a public with a forum for criticism), that journalists must be independent of those about whom they write (especially the powerful), that its essence is a discipline of verification and its accessible style of writing, and that its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience) can be read as standards of excellence to which good journalists aspire.

Whilst we can understand the aspirational quality of the claims of journalism, we must also recognise the futility of these aspirations within bureaucratic institutions that are guided by the interests of capital and the state. For MacIntyre certainly, the power of the individual will was rejected as a possible strategy a long time ago. Instead, Knight explains that MacIntyre suggests collective solutions to the more general problem of social practices and community under

¹² BBC *The Big Idea – Interview with Noam Chomsky* February 1996 transcript [online] Available at <http://www.zmag.org/Chomsky/interviews/9602-big-idea.html> accessed January 2006

¹³ Meryl Aldridge M and Julia Evetts 'Rethinking the concept of professionalism: the case of journalism' *The British Journal of Sociology* 54 no 4 (2003) p 547

¹⁴ Mark Deuze 'What is journalism? Professional identity and ideology of journalists reconsidered' *Journalism: Theory, Practice, Criticism* 6 no 4 (2005)

¹⁵ Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel *The Elements of Journalism* Atlantic Books, London 2003 pp 11-13

bureaucratic capitalism. In the first instance, there should be a refusal of the dominant institutional order and a 'refusal of co-optation'. At the same time, non-co-opted cooperative projects should be initiated on a *local* level – in the first place because 'a local network of social relations affords little room for duplicity' and it can 'afford participation in rational deliberation and decision-making to all'.¹⁶ Such participation does not, of course, consist in liberal democratic state legitimation, the restricted form of secretly writing an X on a piece of paper periodically. Rather, it consists in practitioners cooperating in 'active projects', cooperatively and rationally considering common goals and appropriate means to achieve these. Participation in these active projects in which practices can be situated allows participants to cultivate virtues, whilst being able to identify opposing forces (generally, managers who are motivated primarily by 'goods of effectiveness' such as power, income and efficiency). Such projects should facilitate the breakdown of barriers between the roles one occupies, so humans are not compartmentalised. They must also be defended against the general 'systemic' constraints of institutional power, ultimately with the intention of destroying those institutions that 'systemically generate injustice'.¹⁷ To this end, the power needed for 'self-defence' is nurtured on the basis of the virtues learned in good practices.

The dominant institutionalised forms and conventions of journalism do not exhaust the potential forms – and it is potential that interests me here. To be sure, a number of studies have drawn attention to other 'alternative' or 'radical' traditions of journalism, which can be regarded as the sort of 'active projects' noted above. For example, against the dominant liberal history, James Curran¹⁸ has outlined a 'radical' history of the press in Britain wherein thriving radical workers' presses declined because media barons, pursuing the external goods of money and power, worked with politicians to create a media market in which social practices that did not work within the constraints of capitalist enterprise became marginalised. Catherine Squires,¹⁹ John Downing²⁰ and Chris Atton²¹ have traced the marginalised practices of 'radical media' among various subjugated groups throughout the twentieth century.

Such projects are in marked contrast to the tradition of 'objective' journalism that emerged in the US in the mid to late nineteenth century²² (Stephens, 1988: 262), to a degree driven by the enlightenment faith in positivistic, empirical scientific knowledge.²³ The idea of the detached, objective scientist, who can access a neutral understanding of an objective social world and is able, as David Hume had insisted, to distinguish between fact and value has resonance with the occupational ideology of journalism²⁴. We might object to this 'Anglo-American' model on basis of the MacIntyrean arguments against Humean empiricism and against the 'view from nowhere'. Certainly the claim that the 'objectivity' and 'neutrality' of mainstream journalists prioritises and naturalises the dominant institutional order raises important questions about the practice of journalism. In contrast, whereas corporate journalist practice often pursues self-contained goods, radical projects are part of the practice of 'making and sustaining ... human community' whilst opposing domination and exploitation, and should be evaluated on this basis, or rather, should be evaluated simultaneously on the basis of the performance of the individual, of the group and of its particular value to the community.

We might, then, think again what purpose journalism *should* serve as a social practice. At the moment, its main function is what might be termed 'critical legitimation' – that is, whilst it does not doggedly serve the particular actions of the dominant institutional order, it rarely questions the

¹⁶ Kelvin Knight, 2007 (op cit) p 180

¹⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, cited in Kelvin Knight, 1998 (op cit) p 187

¹⁸ James Curran and Jean Seaton (op.cit)

¹⁹ Catherine Squires C 'The Black Press and the State' in Robert Asen and Daniel C Bower *Counterpublics and the State* State University of New York Press, New York 2001

²⁰ John Downing *Radical Media: Rebellious Communications and Social Movements*. Sage, London 2001

²¹ Chris Atton *Alternative Media*. Sage, London 2001

²² Mitchell Stephens *A History of News: From the Drum to the Satellite* New York: Viking, New York 1988

²³ Dan Schiller *Objectivity in the News: The public and the rise of commercial news* University of Philadelphia Press, Philadelphia 1981

²⁴ It should be noted, however, that this is not the case for all social practices of journalism in all cultures. Indeed, Daniel C Hallin and Stylianos Papathanassopoulos 'Political clientelism and the media: southern Europe and Latin America in comparative perspective' *Media, Culture & Society* 24 no 2, 2002 argue that today journalists in southern Europe and Latin America have maintained their traditions of advocacy. And as mentioned above, radical traditions survive in North America and northern Europe.

institutional order itself, to which it gives discursive priority. On the other hand, a MacIntyrean social practice of journalism will serve the good of the community in which it takes place (and, one would hope, the good of community itself). To this end, it would prioritise and defend the community and social practices that take place within it – it would act as a communications network not merely *for* the community, but *of* and *by* the community. It would *be* the community – that is, there would be no separation between the community and the journalist. Such a journalism, therefore, would address MacIntyre's concern that

Politically the societies of advanced Western modernity are oligarchies disguised as liberal democracies. The large majority of those who inhabit them are excluded from membership in the elites that determine the range of alternatives between which voters are permitted to choose. And the most fundamental issues are excluded from that range of alternatives.²⁵

For MacIntyre, as noted above, this situation requires a politics of local community, in which there is 'a shared practical understanding of the relationships between goods, rules and virtues', in which 'practical questions receive answers in action', and in which

those who hold political office can be put to the question by citizens and the citizens put to the question by those who hold political office in the course of extended deliberative debate in which there is widespread participation and from which no one from whom something might be learned is excluded.²⁶

It is through such rational political participation that citizens can, and must, deliberate about and order the goods they pursue, but at the moment deliberative forums in which 'ordinary people' are 'able to engage each other in systematic reasoned debate'²⁷ are often inadequate. Part of journalism's role in a practice-based community would be to facilitate this process of deliberation not by observing people and events, but by involving people and being part of events. One would expect the practice to enable citizens to participate as citizen-journalists in ongoing discussions, in 'conversational groups'²⁸ that are linked to practical activity. This expected because in the first place, rational discussions have to allow people to participate on their own terms, and it is through practical activity that people have the experiential goods with which to discuss *and act* on the basis of those discussions.

As noted, there are traditions of radical journalism that have adhered to such forms. From the eighteenth century to the present day, radical media have been linked to local communities and embedded in the practical activities of social movements. They are based on the practical, rational self-activity of 'participants', usually affording participation to anyone from 'whom something might be learned'. The relations between participants are non-instrumental or, as Habermas puts it, communicative. Production in radical media projects tends to be unlicensed, or at least exists in tense relation to the state, and organised on a not-for-profit basis.²⁹ The projects are financed by a variety of funding mechanisms, including grants, financial and equipment donations, fundraising and voluntary cover-prices. Some make connections with institutions, such as television studios in universities, to gain access to resources at no direct cost to themselves.³⁰ To this end, radical media projects try to escape direct steering by the money medium, insofar as it is subservient to the aims of the practice.³¹ A consequence of the suppression of financial considerations is that content is not commodified, but usually non-copyright and can be shared, reprinted and redistributed. In turn, distribution tends to rely on cooperative agreements with local shops, cafes and bars, street sales (or

²⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre in Kelvin Knight 1998 (op.cit) p 237

²⁶ Ibid p 248

²⁷ Ibid p 239

²⁸ Alasdair MacIntyre 'Some Enlightenment Projects Reconsidered' in Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (Eds.) *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy* Routledge, London 1999 p 250

²⁹ John Downing (op.cit)

³⁰ Douglas Kellner *Television and the Crisis of Democracy* Westview Press, Boulder Colorado 1990

³¹ For accounts of the impact of the reorientation of radical media projects to the pursuit of external goods, see Herbert Pimlott 'Mainstreaming the Margins: the transformation of *Marxism Today*' in James Curran (Ed.) *Media Organisations in Society*. Arnold, London 2000 and Gholam Khiabany 'Red Pepper: a new model for the alternative press?' *Media Culture and Society* 22. (2000)

free street distribution), mail subscription and delivery, and reader reproduction. The Internet has made distribution cheaper and easier, with some paper and video publications encouraging people to print or copy onto disk and redistribute.

Because access to production in many radical media projects is open (though prone to cliquishness, itself a corruption), and because there is no need to divide functions into business and editorial sectors, production relations of radical media projects tend to be very different to those found in systemic media. In contrast, labour in radical media projects tends to be cooperative, with a minimal division of labour between the roles of editor, writer and technician; there tends to be internal democracy and no hierarchical management structures. Accordingly, the 'institutions' are built up around the practice.

Because most radical media projects are open to a high degree of participation by 'ordinary' members of the public, and because they tend to reject the forms of 'professionalism' – especially neutrality, passivity and asserting a view from nowhere – of mainstream media organisations, the content produced in such projects often appears very different to that produced by most corporate news organisations and is provided through the interface with social and political movements embedded in the community rather than with the state. This in turn raises the possibility of nurturing virtues – those participating can, potentially, learn to participate in an important, solidaristic, community-based social practice, and contribute to a politics of ordering goods, and – perhaps more frequently – criticising 'evil practices'.

Radical media projects make innovative use of technologies, using photocopiers, cheap video cameras, cable television, and radio transmitters, often making their own, or altering existing, technologies, such as some pirate radio groups that 'hack' radio frequencies and transmission equipment. Generally, these forms of use of technology tend to be subsumed under communicative processes, as opposed to the instrumental processes evident in their deployment in corporations.

Practical involvement in radical media projects tends to take place at a number of levels: first, in the political activities, such as campaign groups, demonstrations, direct actions, camps, festivals, squats, public meetings and so on, in which the projects' participants partake and from where much of the content comes. Secondly, in the process of production, such as in editorial meetings and other decision-making meetings, fundraising, distributing, printing/broadcasting and so on, the former of which often take place in pubs, cafes, private houses, community centres and the like. Finally, practical involvement takes place in the production, consumption and response of participants – engagement with content does not consist merely in production, consumption and response within media, but also in the calls to action which are often an integral part of content.

New Technologies, Old Practices

In recent years a number of writers, researchers and journalists have suggested that Internet technologies have significantly challenged the 'old order' of society, whether positively³² or negatively.³³ Similar claims have been made about the effects of the Internet on journalism, whether negatively, by facilitating inaccuracy, rumour, lying, hyper-individualism and ultimately the destruction of the practice of journalism, or positively, by allowing journalists to bypass restrictive institutions, to reconfigure the relationship between the journalists and readers, or by facilitating the development of new collaborative practices of journalism.

It should be noted at the outset that I do not accept that a communication technology has determinate effects on the society in which it is used. Technologies do not fall from the sky – the process of technological development is very complex. For all of the new communication technologies that are adopted, there are many more that are not. Very often the adoption of a technology depends on its profitability, or at least its utility to those controlling productive resources. As Raymond Williams put it,

³² See for example, James Slevin *The Internet and Society* Polity, London 2000

³³ See for example, Gordon Graham *The Internet: a philosophical inquiry* Routledge, London 1999

[a] need which corresponds with the priorities of the real decision-making groups will, obviously, more quickly attract the investment of resources and the official permission, approval or encouragement on which a working technology, as distinct from available technical devices, depends.³⁴

Furthermore, such a 'need' is often historically or culturally specific, as are the particular paths of development. I refer to this specificity as a 'form of use'. Specific dominant needs that are interpreted as preferred uses come to shape or form the technology, imposing a 'dominant form of use' which in turn may restrict or manage other uses.³⁵ This restriction and management is imposed through technological design, legal regulations and institutional direction. However, none of these restrictions is complete. For example, the design of a technology may lead to unforeseen uses, legal regulations may be contradictory, difficult to apply or simply resisted, and institutional forms may change in response to new technologies, or the technology may allow people to bypass the institution. The limits to control can be exploited and pushed back by those, perhaps of radical traditions, seeking to develop alternative forms of use and alternative social practices. Of course, these limits may also facilitate the use of communications technologies for malign purposes – the point is that it is not the technology as such that matters, but the form of use.

It should be clear by now that the potential that a new communication technology might hold for dominant institutions or for radical traditions may or may not be realised. Before moving to consider the potential for radical journalistic practices using the Internet, I would like to illustrate how managers in existing dominant institutions might restrict the potential of new technologies.

When new technologies of production are deployed in dominant media institutions, the systemic constraints under which they operate in turn constrain the potential for improving the practice as such – technological potential is repressed because of the dominant orientation towards external goods. Generally, the utilisation of new technologies in (news) media organisations is controlled by managers with the intention of increasing 'efficiency' and cutting costs.³⁶ Rather than allowing, say, journalists to do more journalism or engage the public more effectively, the tendency has been for the deployment of new technology to be dependent on cuts in funding. This has meant new technologies often result in journalists being made redundant, being re-skilled and spending time that might otherwise be spent engaging the community – or seeing how a technology might help improve the practice – carrying out technical tasks such as editing. As Simon Cottle explains in his study of the deployment of new technologies at the BBC,

new technologies, multi-media news production and associated practices of multi-skilling at this [Bristol] BBC newscentre have, despite corporate and management claims to the contrary, contributed to the production of more standardised news treatments and formats, and led to more superficial journalist involvement with selected news stories and their sources³⁷.

Ultimately, Cottle's research shows that the "radical" promise of new digital technologies is not borne out' and when their deployment even in non-commercial institutions such as the BBC is motivated by the desire to cut costs and reduce the number of people involved in production, it is 'unlikely to encourage "radical new directions in programme making"'.³⁸ Because of managerial control over the deployment of digital technologies as a means to increase the workload and decrease costs, Cottle found that, amongst journalists, '[t]here was no consideration ... of how palmcoders or videophones, for example, could provide the means for increased audience news access or even

³⁴ Raymond Williams *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* Fontana, London 1974 p 19

³⁵ Lee Salter 'Structure and Forms of Use: a contribution to understanding the role of the Internet in deliberative democracy' *Information, Communication and Society* 7 no 2 (2004) pp291-309

³⁶ Henry Braverman *Labor and Monopoly Capital: Monthly Review Press, New York 1974; Hanno Hardt 'Newworkers, Technology and Journalism History' Critical Studies in Mass Communication, 7 (1990); Michael Bromley 'How Multiskilling Will Change the Journalist's Craft,' Press Gazette, 22 March 1996 p16; Michael Bromley 'The End of Journalism? Changes in Workplace Practices in the Press and Broadcasting in the 1990s,' Michael Bromley and Tom O' Malley. *A Journalism Reader* Routledge, London 1997; Simon Cottle 'From BBC Newsroom to BBC Newscentre: On Changing Technology and Journalist Practices' *Convergence* 5 no 3 (1999)*

³⁷ Simon Cottle, *Ibid* p 38

³⁸ *Ibid*

opportunities for limited editorial control, or how e-mail could facilitate audience feedback and/or enhanced source interventions, or how the internet could be harnessed to locate and expand the range of regular news sources'.³⁹ The dominant form of use persisted.

However, new technologies are not always and completely subject to a dominant form of use. Although bureaucratic managers will try to impose dominant forms of use, and dominant institutions will impose limitations on other uses, sometimes, as with radical media practices, actors can take advantage of the potential of a technology and subject its use and development to radical, communicative needs. I will illustrate this by reference to a particular project, Bristol Independent Media Centre.

Bristol Independent Media Centre

Independent Media Centres (IMCs, www.indymedia.org) are part of a tradition of radical media projects, and draw on the more recent practice of 'public journalism', wherein journalists embed themselves within the community.⁴⁰ This is to say that they consciously situate themselves in the traditions of radical media, and firmly against the traditions of mainstream news media.⁴¹ They also draw on more recent traditions in computing – mainly the ideas that have motivated computing and software engineers, which Barbrook and Cameron⁴² referred to as the 'Californian ideology', specifically, the development of cooperative communities built around specific projects. The best known of these ideas are found in the 'open source' and 'free software' movements, wherein software is left 'open' potentially for cooperative communities to develop, change and use freely according to their specific needs (though, again it should be said that there is nothing 'good' about open source in abstraction of its form of use). Open source and free software differs from 'closed' software insofar as it doesn't impose an institution-like order on the possible uses of it – it can be built around or adapted to particular needs, without necessarily restricting the possible uses of others. In this sense, if we consider technologies and software as having institutional qualities, 'open source' allows those institutional qualities to be decided by users. Open source ideas have now moved beyond software and have come to encompass almost all forms of cultural production – whether film, music, games, books, or journalism. This idea of using open source software and production to open up production to 'widespread participation', 'from which no one from whom something might be learned is excluded' is perhaps best exemplified by Wikipedia, but IMCs differ insofar as they are rooted in local communities and aim towards facilitating practical activity for those communities within and outside the web site.

The first IMC was set up in 1999 to act as an information clearing centre during the anti-capitalist protests in Seattle. Soon, the IMCs expanded globally and locally, from South Africa to Burma and Bristol to Jerusalem, with each centre linking to the others. The IMC network as a whole is based on 'principles of equality, decentralization, and local autonomy', which are derived from 'the self-organization of autonomous collectives that recognise the importance of developing a union of networks'⁴³. This means that each IMC can – within general boundaries of the Mission Statement and Principles of Unity – develop its own modes of operation.

The primary interface of IMCs is not the state, but ordinary people and groups within communities, hence the slogan 'don't hate the media, be the media'. Rejecting the understanding of news reporting as the reserve of a select group of institutionalised 'professionals', IMCs aim to develop an architecture that encourages as many ordinary people as possible to participate. Participation can take place on many levels. People can be involved in the news production process by collaboratively writing features, contributing reports, or commenting on stories through the

³⁹ Ibid p 40

⁴⁰ See Robert Rosen, op cit

⁴¹ IMC *The IMC - A New Model*. Walcot-Upon-Avon, Hedonist Books 2004 p 14

⁴² Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron 'The Californian Ideology', 1995 [online] Available at <http://www.hrc.wmin.ac.uk/theory-californianideology-main.html> accessed January 2005

⁴³ IMC (op cit) p 33

'open publishing' system. The content tends to be proactive insofar as it tends to encourage participation in local community politics, social centres, associations, campaigns, community groups and so on, whilst marginalising commercial and state institutions.

Ordinary people can participate in any of the groups on legal, editorial, process or technical aspects of IMCs. As such they can help change any of these aspects, through involvement in collective decision making, and as a consequence there is no need for a managerial layer.

Furthermore, people can set up their own IMCs. The motivation for this latter may be simply a desire for local news coverage, such as with Bristol IMC, or a response to a specific event, such as Zambia IMC being founded in response to the Conference of Parties of the United Nations Convention on Climate Change,⁴⁴ and Washington DC IMC being founded to cover the World Bank/IMF protests in 2000.⁴⁵ As long as it is willing to subscribe to the IMC's Mission Statement and Principles of Unity, and is able to sustain the site, the new IMC will be integrated to the network, and participants will be able to use the IMC's tools, resources and domain name (for example, la.indymedia.org or ecuador.indymedia.org).

The IMC 'network' serves to link the individual centres, participants and movements, to each other and to share resources across them. In this sense, individual IMCs and the Confederated Network are similar to the social centre movement⁴⁶ and the World Social Forum. Like these, IMCs focus on local resistance and active politics at the local level, but also seek to developed internationalist, solidaristic links across locales and across borders. It is in this sense that a local politics of community opens up into a solidaristic politics of humanity.

To participate fully in Bristol IMC can be to learn how to act virtuously. As there are no corporate or governmental backers, participants must rely on their shared understanding of what goods Indymedia serve (which are themselves open to discussion), and pursue those goods as they see fit. The important issue here is that through the use of emailing lists and physical meetings, participants are able to cooperatively determine and reflect on their practice. Due to the degree of autonomy of IMCs from each other it is difficult to generalise about participation. However, most IMCs in the UK are made up of a core of media activists who are most readily able to run the computer and software systems. Others may lead projects for community outreach, publicity and fundraising, feature-writing. At Bristol Indymedia, for instance, there is a PO Box for mail, a pub is used for open meetings, email lists are used for general discussions and decision making, a local independent cinema is used for screenings, core participants who lead projects number around 8, the number of people who subscribe to the main email list is around 20, though the number of people who contribute stories and reports is unknown – there are regular postings on anti-militarism campaigns, cycling campaigns, asylum and human rights, on reclaiming public space, on climate action, animal protection and local government politics, many of which come directly from people involved in such campaigns. The Bristol collective is one of the few centres around the UK that is physically autonomous from the UK collective - its web server is hosted as a private address in Bristol rather than being hosted on the main IMC UK server.

As 'institutions', IMCs are interesting because they are in a sense part of the practice of journalism and of community; that is to say, they do not separate their 'institutional' functions from their 'practical' ones, and therefore do not need managers to run them. Bristol IMC also provides space for others to determine, deliberate and reflect on their activities, for it is used by most of the activist groups around the city – for peace campaigns and refugee support groups, to help build trade unions, to attack political corruption and the cooption of local projects, to organise resistance to gentrification and capitalistic development against the interests of the local community and so on. To this end, Bristol IMC aims at nurturing the virtues of justice and solidarity among participants and in the wider community.

Without the financial, political and legal institutions that support corporate media workers, and with the commitment to open architecture, IMC participants must embody the courage needed to act on the basis of their reason alone. There are no automatic institutionalised procedures (and no

⁴⁴ IMC (op cit) p 124

⁴⁵ IMC (op cit) p 43

⁴⁶ On the social centre movement, see Lucy Finchett-Maddock's paper in this Special Issue.

legal departments) to deal with problems they face as a result of open architecture – they must deal with each problem as they face it, on their own, as independent practical reasoners. For instance, in 2005 the police requested access to Bristol IMC's IP logs (the logs containing the computer identification of those using the site) because someone had reported on, and advocated, the sabotage of trains carrying new cars through the city. Bristol IMC (as all IMCs) guarantees that participants can retain anonymity if they wish, so the request meant that the collective faced a dilemma – remain true to their principles, or face possible legal action. The collective decided to remain true, and the home of a participant, and the location of the web server, was raided, computers seized, and the participant arrested. Despite this (and similar actions against IMCs across the world⁴⁷ see Salter, 2006), Bristol IMC retained its integrity.

Bristol Independent Media Centre, and others like it, is not without problems, though the problems it faces cannot be addressed as discrete problems – they must be understood in the context of the broader cultural context. This is to say that they are problems that affect social practices as such. The problems that the collective face are numerous. First, the limited resources (which cannot be otherwise in a society in which resources are controlled by capital), in which I include human resources (as IMCs rely on voluntary labour, most participants view their work for IMCs as secondary work, insofar as without paid employment they cannot eat), means that funding and participation is sporadic and often only temporary, which can threaten the continued existence of IMCs.

Secondly, the choice of refusing to interface with the dominant institutional order does not mean that the institutional order reciprocates – one's existence within such an order usually involves some compulsion to conform. For example, IMCs are not only subject to the attention of the state, but also to the use of law by private institutional actors – 'take down' notices are often used by the powerful subjects of IMC reports to prevent or remove publication and discussion of reports on issues of genuine concern. One of the most notorious spats of legal wrangling took place when reports from the 'Smash EDO Systems' campaign on actions against that arms manufacturer led lawyers for EDO Systems to issue a threat of legal action for defamation against the UK Independent Media Centre. Again, UK IMC participants acted courageously and refused to be intimidated, suggesting that 'war mongers' (the term objected to by lawyers) was actually an accurate description of the directors of EDO systems. Nevertheless, the use of law against IMCs has led some to consider becoming Incorporated Bodies so that individual participants cannot be held legally responsible for what goes on on the websites. IMCs are slowly being drawn into the institutional order.

Thirdly, although IMCs do have a sense of the good they serve, in a culture in which people are unaccustomed to reasonably discussing goods in public and in which people are taught to leave decision making to an elite within an hierarchically structured and bureaucratically ordered society, the untutored participation in such an activity may yield unfortunate results – whilst participants usually give good reasons within discussions, they less frequently accept or agree reasons⁴⁸. This raises significant problems in terms of facilitating what MacIntyre refers to as 'serious intellectual enquiry'⁴⁹ or 'systematic reasoned debate'.⁵⁰ These problems are not, however, exclusive to IMCs, but seem to be more general problems of a culture whose communicative resources are, as Habermas puts it, 'systemically distorted',⁵¹ These general social conditions present a significant problem for IMCs – if they are to remain open to anonymous participation (which is regarded as necessary to protect participants, especially in countries where participation is dangerous), then they must address the fact that some participants may intentionally or unintentionally disrupt and disturb

⁴⁷ Lee Salter 'Democracy & Online News: Indymedia and the Limits of Participatory Media' *Journal of Media, Arts, Culture* 3 no 1, (2006) pp336-355

⁴⁸ This finding stems from my PhD work on the Internet and communicative ethics. Having analysed 134 discussion threads in a week-long period and another 41 threads two years later, I found that whereas most participants offer substantive reasons in discussions, they *seem* less inclined to accept reasons offered by others.

⁴⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre in Kelvin Knight (Ed.) 1998, (op.cit) p 238

⁵⁰ Ibid p 239

⁵¹ Jurgen Habermas *The Theory of Communicative Action: The Critique of Functionalist Reason*. (trans. McCarthy, T) Polity Press, Cambridge, 1987

discussions. At the moment this is addressed by moderation and removal of disruptive contributions, and, infrequently, banning participants. Learning how to deal with such communicative problems under conditions of general systemic distortion is an ongoing challenge for IMCs.

Finally, IMCs exist within an institutional order in which they are marginalised. This marginalization takes place not just at the material level of access to resources, but also in terms of its existence on the Internet, the development of which has become so much driven by the external good of money. Without going into detail on the technical elements of search engines, IMCs, as non-commercial entities are systematically excluded from Internet portals, which are most people's point of access to the Internet, and they are marginalised from even the best search engines. So, for example, even on Google the big corporations dominate a search for 'news', with the first alternative news source, National Public Radio, appearing at position 32 and the next, Altnet, appearing at position 82. Global Indymedia does not appear until position 115, one position above Chemical and Engineering News. This is despite the fact that in 2006 Google registered more than 50,000 Web pages linking to the IMC UK home page from outside the IMC network (on the basis of which it 'ranks' pages). Similarly, though Yahoo reported over 900,000 links to the global IMC site, it does not register any of the IMCs among the top 300 returns for 'news'.

Conclusion

Despite the shortcomings of IMCs as practice-based communities, they do demonstrate the human desire to collectively engage in the pursuit of social goods. IMCs are a clear example of community self-organisation with the aim of improving the ability of ordinary people to pursue social goods through discussion and action. Participants in IMCs benefit from being able to learn and communicate what is wrong with their communities and beyond, and from being encouraged to do something about it themselves, especially without a managerial section moderating these goods in the interests of customer satisfaction, investor relations, advertising rates and so on. They are also able to benefit from participation within this new social practice of collaborative journalism by learning the virtues of truthfulness, courage, justice and solidarity as a result, or even condition, of that participation. To deal with the challenges faced by a collective which does not operate within the dominant institutional order, or rather, which seeks to resist and oppose this order, require the exercise of virtues, constant contemplation and discussion of the goods served by the practice, and patient learning about how to achieve these.

The last and perhaps most important question, however, is one that is unaddressed by Bristol IMC – what is the end of the collective and whether it seeks to destroy the institutional order that causes it to continually exist on the margins of public consciousness. Certainly Bristol IMC's 'neutrality' in this respect (at least formally, if not substantively) resembles that of mainstream media, especially in contrast to other IMCs. For instance, the UK IMC contrasts with Bristol in referring to itself as an 'interactive platform for reports from the struggles for a world based on freedom, cooperation, justice and solidarity, and against environmental degradation, neoliberal exploitation, racism and patriarchy', and firmly commits itself to a struggle against 'all systems of domination and discrimination' and for 'radical change'. Its fundamental commitment is to support agitation for social change by ordinary people, without tying itself to the bureaucratic organisational forms that MacIntyre charged with subverting the potential of Marxism.

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