

# Indymedia in Argentina

By Pablo Boido

## 1. The Beginning

As it has been already said, the birth of the Indymedia global network is related to the growth of the protest movement motivated by World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund, and World Bank summits. The Argentinean case is not different, since the Argentina Independent Media Center was created in April 2001 in Buenos Aires to provide information on the protests against the meeting of Latin American Economics Ministers, who were to sign the ALCA (Spanish acronym for Americas' Free Trade Agreement).

However, we can also state that Indymedia was truly born in Buenos Aires on December 19 and 20, 2001. These two dates are key to understanding both the growth and development of new social movements in Argentina, and the continuity and development of independent and participatory media. December 19 and 20 reveal the development of a completely silent resistance to the neo-liberal economic model that seemed hidden until then.

Through an economic and social crisis that surpasses all expectations, massive civil disobedience actions spontaneously emerge against the state of siege that the government seeks to impose in desperation for its own political collapse ever since the crisis worsened. During the days that have followed, streets have continued to burn, and the memories of the popular revolt that ended De la Rúa's government are still alive and are taking new shapes.

A "new social protagonism" emerges —characterized by ignoring traditional political representations— based on different social practices. This implies radical questioning of the concept of representational democracy, as well as searching different forms of organization based on direct democracy. Such social practices

are characterized by the high level of independence from party, union and, of course, State structures. One movement that already had these characteristics was that of the unemployed workers, the so-called “picketer” organizations. Moreover, as a result of the so-called “cacerolazos” (pot-banging protests), new organizations such as the Neighborhood Assemblies are created in urban centers around the country.

Groups that participate in social struggle quickly assume a critical position with respect to media, especially television, which steadfastly refuses to show their actions, movements, and protests. Thus, for one sector of society, the surrounding media dictatorship becomes evident. It seems as if nothing affecting the interests of great corporations will be shown.

Not only political and economic systems are then questioned, but also media that give them an outlet. Direct measures against censorship and boycotts of different media, as well as “escraches”<sup>iii</sup> (peaceful but noisy citizen protests held at a presumed criminal’s home) against television channels that foster these representation models are promptly proposed.

Within movements, there is a return to a more primitive or basic way of communication; neighborhood flyers and pamphlets flourish. These characteristics are evident even in physical forms of expression in the search for others. Therefore, the first meetings focus on passing on a series of individual problems to foster encounters with others. For many, this is the end of individualism as imposed by consumer society.

As it was mentioned at the beginning, we can state that the birth of this medium is only possible when linked to the different social movements’ expectations and demands, which in turn multiply Indymedia’s effectiveness.

## 2. Transposition and identity

The first question that those working in alternative media in a Latin American country such as Argentina must answer is: What is the motivation for developing alternative media in a country where 49% of the population is poor? Although it may seem obvious, what we want to define is a political gesture of intervention into reality based on radical criticism of communication models and companies that maintain the status quo.

Our answer is that we do not consider information a commodity. Information broadcasting intends to be free and to contribute to the social change we believe we produce.

The second question to be asked while constructing our own identity is: How do we reach that sector of the population that is financially unable to access those change-promoting media?

In Argentina, the average population that has (very limited) access to the Internet is about 3 million people, out of a total population of 36 million. Evidently, access to this medium is not massive. At this point, it is important to recall that the Indymedia communication model was born and has been developed mainly through the Internet.

We have decided to take on the challenge of starting this new medium to create other new media. As the basis for its construction—that we can identify with and be a part of—it is important to think about transposing the models we have developed.

We understand transposition as the critical adaptation to other media and language. Therefore, it was only until December 19 and 20 that we read critically Indymedia's models, which until then were (and still are) mainly European and American. Clearly, they were constructed based on certain social organization

experiences that were very different from that of Argentina, a country located in one of the poorest continents in the world.

To accomplish these goals, we have formulated two lines of work that are related to each other, but require separate work teams to perfect each project's practices.

### 3. Every person is a Reporter

The sentence, "Every man is a reporter", by Rodolfo Walsh, the journalist murdered by the last military dictatorship, summarizes the spirit of our daily work at the media center. We have updated it to "Every person is a reporter", to express the idea that every person involved in movements, actions, campaigns, or social work, can publish his / her news through the Internet.

Therefore, we formed a team of chroniclers who have documented the development of social movements during the last year and a half. We also cover systematically those moments when social conflict is most acute.

Since the relationship is not one of "exploitation" with respect to the people involved in the events documented, we carry out projects that return the information to those people. Moreover, these projects rescue the best experiences, those where we achieve true communication.

As it was mentioned before, access to the Internet is limited; however, this medium makes the spread of information easier, as we have seen that many images we produced have been reproduced. Thus, we have created a reference site for people interested in creating new communication tools.

By July 26, one month after two young members of the Unemployed Workers Movement were murdered during a protest for real work,<sup>iii</sup> we uploaded a

series of photographs within the framework of a cultural event in remembrance of the two young strugglers. One of the pictures showed Dario Santillán, one of the youngsters murdered by the police, in the place where he worked in solidarity. Another picture showed both young men at a self-managed “bloquera” (concrete block making factory) that worked to improve neighborhood houses in one of the poorest areas in Buenos Aires.

People in the movement were surprised and touched the picture; a long line was formed to see it, and there were tears shed and prayers said before the image. This was the opposite to Dario’s image; he had been lately portrayed by the big media as a “violent man” who had attacked the police, or had been shown murdered on the ground as he bled to death, as part of a campaign to criminalize popular movements.

There was a similar experience at Zanón, one of the largest factories which was recovered and now run by more than 300 workers without bosses.

A sample of photographs that showed the workers’ struggle to keep their jobs was set up in the factory’s dining room. Reactions were always the same: identification with what was shown, acknowledgement of workers’ trajectory and their struggle, which inspired them to continue with their daily work.

Based on these experiences and other similar ones, we realized the following step should be to eliminate definitely all gaps between receivers and broadcasters; in this case, knowledge production tools should be made popular to generate new broadcasters.

#### 4. Formulation and Creation of New Expression Tools

One of the first signs that led us to think about education projects with members of different social movements was the filming of a short documentary

called "Compañero cineasta piquetero"<sup>iv</sup> ("Film-making Picketeer Comrade"). This film was entirely made by a young picketer.

Since February 2002, there has been a growing coordination among people who have decided to work on alternative coverage by exploring social organizations. Thus, on a normal workday, a worker decides to film the land-taking activity in a municipal lot at the outskirts of the city. After working all afternoon, he looks at the film and finds a complete narration of the reality lived during the land taking, and the way it was lived in that particular neighborhood.

One of the members of the young unemployed workers movement with whom he had been at the activity, borrowed the camera and filmed for quite a while, without his knowledge, making a short film about his life. Off-camera, he recounts his experiences within the movement and how it was often attacked by the municipality. He introduces us to the different characters of his neighborhood, and shows us how he lives and how everything works in a truly educational image journey. The result is highly surprising since it is the very first time he takes a camera in his hands, a fact that is evident in the way he manages light and the close-ups allowed by the camera.

What can be produced from and with people immersed in the reality we seek to show is really important. They may have the tools, and we have the possibility of sharing knowledge that will lead to the construction of new means of expression. The goal is to create the possibility of a critical construction of their own media, and to generate formal innovations that somehow change the concept of "reception" in the fields of communication and art.

Base<sup>v</sup>-film making is a popular and alternative communication experience that is presented as a historical precedent in many collective projects that alternative media are trying to implement.

This project was carried out in the mid 70s. Several journalists and producers of audiovisual materials participated in the group. One outstanding group member was Raymundo Gleyzer, a filmmaker later murdered during the military dictatorship. Counter-information is one of the main goals named by Gleyzer's friends, but this experience also included many other work topics as well as discussions.

One of the members of the base-film group, Nerio Barberis, recalls: "We used to say, freely, that we wanted to show our films, and that debate should follow. Experience showed us that the more we screened, the more we realized the enormous force of what was happening. As we grew, our appreciation of gray areas became wider (...) I had never been to a slum. When I go in, talk to people, and realize that I can speak with them as equals, I perceive that phenomenon of great communication between classes that the 70s produced. That's when you start to learn that things are greater."<sup>vi</sup> Some of the aspects pointed out by Nerio can be useful when thinking about some of the more recent counter-information phenomena. The groups and people who participated in the "Argentina Arde" [Argentina Burns] assembly after December 2001, somehow re-edited the need of communication between the different sectors in the struggle. They also reformulated the necessity of intellectuals', artists', and journalists' participation in an "equal to equal" dialogue between people from different classes and people who have been "de-classed" during the 90s.

Today, there is an urgency to produce counter informational material to break media hegemony. However, the work of new documentary groups fosters the exhibition and distribution of materials where new spaces and forms of collective reception are generated.

We know that in art, past experience legitimizes new practices (be it through rejection or affirmation); in this sense, art as a field increasingly uses its own history as reference. We cannot think about current practices without linking them

to past experiences. However, it is necessary to achieve deeper analysis in possible links.

By looking at Gleyzer and other people in recent history, we could justify ways of thinking about films or even about documentaries. However, the real challenge always lies in taking this prolific artist as a toolbox that can be used in new realities.

## 5. Organization and net working

When working in a net, we constantly feel the tension between local and global spaces. Developing good communication among participants is not always easy. There are many differences between the realities of North and South. However, several work agreements have produced excellent results. This fact has allowed us to think about common spaces and to generate a wider framework. Solidarity protests on December 20, 2002 around the world are an example of how important the work of hundreds of network activists was in divulging the situation Argentina was living at that time. They inspired other activists to go back to political intervention practices that were reemerging in new forms.

## Epilogue. The Future Is Ours / Going back to the Streets

The use of Indymedia as a tool has become widespread. A large spectrum of the population consults it and uses it daily. This is important as we seek to be a pluralistic space where differences are overcome and dialogue is fostered among different social groups. At a time when different media can be constructed to suit each and everyone of us, our search could be considered a transversal construction that allows criticism and breaks self-reference, so common in some independent media.

We think of subjectivity as a vestige of individual speech, and we attack the objectivity proclaimed by traditional media. Such objectivity is presented as that which is real but out of context from ideological and historical signifiers.<sup>vii</sup>

To continue producing independent information, it is indispensable to keep being independent from large companies, media and the State, as well as from the large Foundations involved in the terrible policies imposed to our region by credit organizations.

Streets continue to be our field of action, insofar as they still are the channel for social movements' intervention. The presence of independent media in the streets is the answer to the clear need to end impunity that benefits security forces that enforce repression against social protests. This is why members of Indymedia have been attacked several times while they were covering events. Movements' possibility of self-defense becomes a means to document the aggression they suffer, and a channel where events and their causes are broadcast.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> This concept is developed in the book "19 y 20 Apuntes para el nuevo protagonismo social. Colectivo Situaciones." [ *19 and 20 Notes for a New Social Protagonism. Situations Collective*] Ediciones de Mano en Mano. Buenos Aires, 2002.

<sup>ii</sup> "Escraches" appear during the mid 90s as a collective action to denounce impunity the oppressors of Argentina's last dictatorship benefited from. The group H.I.J.O.S. (Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio [Spanish acronym for Sons for Identity and Justice against Forgetting and Silence]) spread this new form of struggle. At present, the practice is shared by different social organizations throughout the country.

<sup>iii</sup> An independent investigation into the events of June 26 has been published. It analyzes and demonstrates the national government's participation in the planning of the massacre. The investigation is part of a book by the Unemployed Workers Movement, "Dario and Maxi Picketers' Dignity: Unemployed Workers Movement, Anibal Verón". Ediciones 26 de junio, Buenos Aires 2003.

<sup>iv</sup> This short film was made thanks to the collective project entitled E.N.E.R.C. The material is in the second show of the New Social and Political Video in Argentina.

<sup>v</sup> Excerpts from the article "Raymundo: Sobre Raymundo Glayzer", published in Indymedia Argentina,

<sup>vi</sup> Excerpts from a magazine, which is part of the book "El cine quema" ("Film Burns"), Fernando Marín Peña, Carlos Vallina. Ediciones La Flor, Buenos Aires 2000.

<sup>vii</sup> An obsession with the transparency of language exists in different dominant communication models; discourse hides language's ideological and historical meaning. We intend to revert that phenomenon to de-naturalize language and recognize links with what is "real".

