Carnival and Commons: the Global IMC Network

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Dorothy Kidd,

Department of Media Studies,

University of San Francisco, USA

kiddd@usfca.edu

Introduction

I first encountered the indymedia center (IMC) in downtown Seattle, in late 1999, a whiff of tear gas away from the demonstrations against the World Trade Organization (WTO). Even then I was in awe. While earlier networks of radical media also countered the messaging of the dominant corporate and state media, the scope and scale of the IMC's information-circulation capacities far surpassed them[1]. The enormous costs and difficulties of production and distribution that earlier media activists like me had faced were minimized by the digital platform. Open Publishing, the IMC's own software innovation, allowed anyone with a modem to upload and download real-time audio, video, texts and photos to circulate almost instantly with a global reach, taking the project of amplifying the voices of under-represented groups, to a whole new plateau[2].

The strength of the global IMC network was not just its command of powerful technologies. As one of the co-founders, Jeff Perlstein, described in the first volume, the IMC was also an "experiment in media democracy," in which local crews operating autonomously and collaboratively, enabled "actual" community newsrooms with "virtual online counterparts" as spaces for organizing, participatory media-making and circulation. This model of do-it-yourself reporting took off after Seattle, and there are now over a hundred autonomous IMC sites around the world. In just three years, the IMC Network has become a critical resource for activists and audiences around the world, providing an extraordinary bounty of news reports and commentaries, first-person narratives, longer analyses, links to activist resources and interactive discussion opportunities.

The flexibility of the network of autonomous sites quickly led, according to Eddie Yuen, to the IMC becoming the trademark of the global movement. While the "carnivals of resistance" momentarily took down the fences of global capital in the streets, the global IMC seized electronic

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[1] For accounts of earlier media networks from around the world, see the first and second volume of John Downing's <u>Radical Media</u>, Clemencia Rodriguez's <u>Fissures in the Mediascape</u>, Alfonso Gumucio Dagron's <u>Making Waves: Stories of Participatory Communication for Social Change</u>, Dee Dee Halleck's <u>Hand-held visions: The impossibilities of community media</u>, and Nick Dyer-Witheford's <u>Cyber-Marx</u>. See also: Pilar Riaño (Ed.) <u>Women's Grassroots Communication</u>, Bruce Girard, (Ed.) <u>A Passion for Radio</u>, Alain Ambrosi and Nancy Thede, (Eds.) <u>Video: The Changing World</u>, and Bosma, et al (Eds.) <u>Read Me! Filtered by Netttime</u>,

[2] For a discussion of Open Publishing, see <u>www.cat.org.au.maffew/cat/openpub.html</u>, the site of Mathew Arnison, of the Community Activist Technology group in Sydney, Australia, who helped develop it.

and cyber space, going around the corporate and state media blockade to create a carnival of representation, a plurality of perspectives, images and modes of address.

Since Seattle, I have been following the IMC through their on-line presence, interviews, and participation in off and on-line discussions. The IMC Network continues to lead with almost-instant stories from protest movements around the world. However, since Seattle, the geopolitical context has changed enormously. The surprise and revelry of the carnivals of resistance has often been brutally set aside by the post-modern press gangs, dragooning governments and peoples around the world into the Empire's Order. The IMC itself has suffered raids from national and international security agencies, as well as regular attacks by spammers and hackers. The IMC Network's rapid growth and draw on resources, pace of production and dependence on volunteers, is increasingly hard to sustain. What about the long haul? How can the high-energy carnival of protest-based communications contribute to a longer- term news commons, autonomous in ownership, operations, form and content, from the dominant corporate and state media. What lessons might we learn from earlier radical media, the precursors to the IMC?

Press conferences versus mini-cam witnesses

In Seattle, two distinct radical media paradigms emerged. One was best represented by the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the International Forum on Globalization, Global Alliance, Corporate Europe Observatory, Friends of the Earth, Public Citizen, Sierra Club, Oxfam, and the Institute for Agricultural and Trade Policy. These mostly Anglo-US NGOs were funded by foundations such as Ford, Charles Stewart, and Solidego, and operated with a reformist agenda, arguing for "fair trade not free trade" (Wall, 2003:5). While there were differences among them, their overall intention was to "be at the table" to reform the process.

The NGO communications teams offered "alternative content," but their means of communications was not unlike the mainstream. Trained professionals would use rational arguments to appeal to the WTO, other multilateral organizations, national governments and the mainstream media. Their tactics included press conferences and the operations of a

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mainstream media press centre, advertisements in the mainstream media, and the circulation of reports and analyses via their own websites (Wall, 2002). One of the NGOs, the International Forum Against Globalization (IFG) also hosted a major teach-in in downtown Seattle, which I attended. Held in a large auditorium, the two days of expert testimony brought together an amazing array of international experts about the trade agreements and their impact. However, the Forum followed a cablecast model, in which talking heads lectured from the podium to a niche audience of hundreds of seated activists already schooled in many of these issues[3]. There were few opportunities for dialogue and discussion.

In contrast, the IMC articulated a very different communications strategy and practice. They did not prep professional communicators to counter the status quo inside formal meetings or press briefings. Instead a motley crew of several hundred volunteers took their cameras, microphones and writing implements to the streets. Their intention was to bring witness from the demonstrators, which another crew then rapidly edited and circulated to a global audience on the web. The communications strategy was to provide direct witness of a diversity of perspectives, from a range of tones and registers to a networked audience, using a media circuit primarily outside government and corporate regulation.

The Seattle convergence, of new levels of social movement organization, collective intelligence and technology, enabled a qualitative shift from a praxis of "alternative" media to "autonomous communications.[4] Since Seattle, the IMC has more clearly articulated this networked autonomous communications model. The Network has begun to move away from the reactive mode of much "alternative media" which focuses only on countering the hegemonic messages of the corporate and state media. Instead the IMC's emphasis on the direct witness of "open publishing, " and on the self-rule of local sites, begins to prefigure autonomous communications centered in the dreams, realities and communications needs of each locale. In the beginning, they focused primarily on mobilizations at the multilateral summits of neo-liberal

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[3] "Cable cast", rather than 'broadcast" because the audience was not a mass of different groups, but a much narrower self-selected niche of "the choir."

[4] See Scott Uzelman. "Catalyzing Participatory Communication: Independent Media Centre and the Politics of Direct Action. MA Thesis. Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, Canada.

governance. Now each site, and the Network as a whole, is much more differentiated, combining global coverage with regional, national and local concerns.

The electronic fabric of struggle

> Let's make a network of communication among all our struggles and resistances. An intercontinental network of alternative communication against neo-liberalism… [and[for humanity. This intercontinental network of alternative communication will search to weave the channels so that words may travel all the roads that resist… {I]t will be the medium by which distinct resistances communicate with one another. This intercontinental network of alternative communication is not an organizing structure, nor has a central head or decision-maker, nor does it have a central command or hierarchies. We are the network, all of us who speak and listen. (From the 1996 First Intercontinental Encounter for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism, in Chiapas, Mexico. Ruggiero and Duncan, cited in Rodriguez, 2001:155)

This networked communications paradigm was directly influenced by the Zapatistas. Several of those who started the Seattle IMC were involved in Zapatista solidarity work[5]. ON January 1, 1994, the Zapatistas in Chiapas, in southern Mexico, had courageously taken on the Mexican Army, as a protest against a key agreement of the global capitalist programme, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). However, unlike earlier revolutionary armed movements in Central America, the Zapatista's political objective was not the seizure of (national) state power, but the establishment of political, economic and cultural self-determination of their own territories. A central element of this new politics was that control of their images and representation was as important to their sovereignty as the rifle.

Key to this sophisticated communications strategy was the network of Zapatista solidarity Internet sites and newslists, operated by Zapatista sympathizers in Mexico, the US and Canada, Latin America and Europe. As Harry Cleaver has documented, the Zapatista internetwork built on earlier webs of trade unionists, women's and environmental groups,

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

organized against the 1990s series of trade liberalization agreements to create an "electronic fabric of struggle." [6]

Several of these movements met again in Seattle. The global women's movement, including many who had been involved in earlier campaigns against NAFTA, the Asian Pacific Economic Forum (APEC) and the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI), held a day long session and street protest. BAYAN, an international Filipino organization, had been involved in earlier struggles against WTO policies in the Philippines and throughout Asia, and convened a People's Assembly with several representatives from the Global South as well as actively participating in the street demonstrations. After their experience opposing World Bank restructuring policies imposed during the Asian economic melt-down, two Sotuh Korean groups came to Seattle. One was a group of farmers funded by the Korean Government. The other was a smaller group of labour, student and NGO activists, among which were representatives from Jinbonet, the Korean precursor to the IMC. Jinbonet was set up in late 1997 to host a number of Korean labour movement and activist websites, provide technical services, and an interactive news service[7]. However, what struck me in Seattle was how these earlier networks, with extensive experience campaigning against neoliberalism, were largely shifted aside, side-lined by the much younger, whiter and wealthier U.S. crowds. The heritage of the earlier organizing, and their communications strategies, were all but erased.

The Heritage of Seattle

While Seattle was a culmination of two decades of mobilizing against neoliberalism, the composition of the Seattle street was much different than Chiapas, or the other southern centers such as Caracas, Venezuela, Santo Domingo, or Lagos, where protests against the World Bank and IMF's structural adjustments programmes (SAPs) started in the 1980s. Unlike Seattle, the earlier wave of anti-globalization movements in the streets of the south, had often been led by poor, indigenous groups, among whom were many women. Their

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[6] There have been many analyses of the Zapatistas and their media use. See, for example, Harry Cleaver, 1995, Castells, 2000, Ford, 2001, Martinez-Torres, 2001, and Russell, 2001 and Midnight Notes.
[7] Personal Interview with MJ Kim, May 2003. See also MJ Kim, www.labortech.org/modules.php?op=modload&name-News&file=article&sid=15

primary communications instrument had been word-of-mouth and radio, and not the Internet. And while many did take to the streets, carnival-like, to resist their further immiseration, they also acted in many other ways to collectively create and regulate resources held in common, of water, electricity, healthcare, food and education.

Communications was key to the repertoire of the pre-Seattle social movement groups. While largely unknown to people in the US, so heterogeneous are these that it is impossible to summarize in such a short space[8]. However, there are some vital patterns worth rehearsing, so I'll feature the community or popular radio work of one region, of Latin America, which I have studied[9]. For example, the world's first community radio station began among the miners of Bolivia in the late 1940s, and in its long history has mixed short-term "tactical" uses with long term media institution building. During the 1980s and 1990s a proliferation of "alternative media" groups, often with short life-spans, did the same, adapting the available old and new communications technologies, of print, radio, video and Internet newsnets to provide reports and analyses, campaign information and support, as well as opportunities for local expression. Echoing Paolo Freire, they also emphasized the need to counter the imperialist message from the US, whether that of the US Government, or of entertainment corporations such as Disney. The radio network in Nicaragua, among many, recognized the need to facilitate the direct and unmediated expression of the "voiceless," the workers, peasants, indigenous people and urban wageless who were usually excluded from mainstream discourse of the media, the Church and government. The histories of most of these initiatives are usually coloured with struggles to survive against severe censorship and external constraints, lack of resources to produce and distribute, as well as internal power struggles.

In the 1980s and 1990s, several global alliances formed, such as the World Community Radio Association (AMARC), the Videazimut video network, and the Association for Progressive

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[8] Clemencia Rodriguez's Fissures in the Mediascape, Alfonso Gumucio Dagron's Making Waves: Stories of Participatory Communication for Social Change, Pilar Riaño (Ed.) Women's Grassroots Communication, Bruce Girard, (Ed.) A Passion for Radio.

[9] My Ph.D. dissertation, "Talking the Walk: The Communications Commons Amidst the Media Enclosures" is a history of radical radio projects in the Americas. Simon Fraser University, Canada, 1998.

Communications computer networks. Their common orientation, as Rafael Roncagliolo noted at the AMARC Conference, which I attended in Oaxtepec Mexico in 1992, was the recognition that communication practitioners are part of the wider struggles of social movements "in favour of human rights, racial equality, the rights of women, ecology, liberty of sexual preferences," who constitute a non-governmental and non-commercial third sector at national and international levels (1992). Roncagliolo suggested that the role of community radio was better defined as *alterative* … "not marginalization but alteration, change, transformation of the relationship of power within the domain of cultures"(1992:8). In the beginning, they primarily shared a political orientation, with operational knowledge and discussions about approaches, and bicycled a little programming. By the 1990s, a small number of programming exchanges began, which used the Internet for distribution. For example, one of these, Pulsar, a project of AMARC, began by circulating news and other scripts via the Internet, which local stations could download and reproduce in their own local languages and programme formats.

Earlier in 1988, at AMARC III in Managua, Nicaragua, Armand Mattelart had characterized the movement of community radio and other alternative media as a long-term project of developing new practices of democracy and communications. He suggested that new kinds of networks were forming, but asked how this new form of connection would differ from capitalist networks (Notes, 1988). For, many of the organizations were often hierarchical, reproducing the power differences within their societies. The earlier projects of the 1960s through 1980s were controlled directly or indirectly by trade union leadership, the Catholic Church or the revolutionary party, such as the Sandinistas or the Salvadoran Revolutionary Army. During the late 1980s and 1990s, a new sector of non-governmental organization professionals developed, as the neoliberal structural adjustment bullying took effect and southern nation states began to off-load public services onto the churches and NGOs.

Sonia Alvarez points out how the NGO boom shifted the direction and power base of the Latin American women's movement, environmental and human rights movements, away

from the grassroots and into the framing of the state and development establishment (1998 and 2000). This pattern of NGO professionalism was also evident in alternative media where non-governmental organizations and northern aid organizations began to fund and routinely recruit NGO type professionals to administer communications projects throughout Latin America. Alvarez underscores the continuing need to democratize the cultural and structural dimensions of the women's social movements.

Radio Fire

"I was listening to San Francisco Liberation Radio covering the anti-Iraq-war protests downtown and it reminded me of FIRE. One person would call in, and then another, just talking about what was happening. It had the same informality." (Personal Conversation, March 2003.)

The Feminist International Radio Endeavor (FIRE), is a bilingual (Spanish and English) media service that, is "perhaps the only women's radio programme located in the South that is truly global in scope" (Suárez Toro, 13). Begun on shortwave radio, they now combine a local FM service with an Internet site. FIRE began as a direct result of the international networking speeded up by the United Nations Forums on Women, and particularly the 1985 Forum in Nairobi, Kenya. Much like those organizing the protests against the WTO, the feminists of that era recognized the strategic importance of directing and producing their own media, to counter the mainstream patriarchal discourse. Just as importantly, their aim was to carve out the space to allow women to speak directly directly, without mediation, from their own experience; to share and connect this with other women; and to create alternative visions and analyses. And finally, the women's movement recognized it would need flexible communications instruments responsive enough to take action quickly on issues that not only transcended borders, but that were often considered unrelated such as waged and unwaged work, violence against women, reproductive rights, children's welfare, prostitution, peace and international development.

Much like the IMC, the FIRE Network also dealt with issues of autonomy from the mainstream media, as well as the movement media. FIRE's first decision was to work with existing feminist networks rather than starting a new one, and to try and reinforce south-south relations, as much as possible. They recognized their dual role of activist/communicator. However, according to FIRE co-founder, Maria Suárez Toro, their-self-described concept of "interactive autonomy" recognized reciprocity with the movement organizations with whom and for whom they worked. Unable to be self-sustaining, they ackowledged that their programming content, and their financial support was in turn dependent on their inclusion in the activities of women's networks, the support in kind from women's groups, and funding from women's foundations. And in turn, their role was to facilitate the communications of their networks., and particularly the horizontal connections south-south between activists within Latin America and with those in Africa and Asia.

FIRE also use media "tactically." They contribute to what Keck and Sikkink describe as the " boomerang" strategy, in which international advocacy networks combine to reap victories at the world stage, and then bounce them back to the weaker terrain of the local and national stage (12). For example, FIRE broadcast popular tribunals against violence against women, in which the Costa Rican women's movement held the Government of Costa Rica to account for international agreements brokered at the U.N., or the Organization of American States. FIRE has also covered campaigns against neoliberalism, including the Second Encuentro of the Zapatistas in Spain, in 1997[10]and the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre.

Another important parallel to the IMC was FIRE's inventiveness with technology. Drawing from her experience in the Sandinista literacy campaigns in Nicaragua, Suárez told me that the group's goal is to use whatever communications instruments are most widely and popularly available.. "Too many people think that the technology is the communication… But we have to liberate the technology to put it into the hands of the women where the action is" (Suarez, Personal Interview, 1998). For example, they created an portable radio set-up with

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

phone hook-up which allowed them to produce inexpensive live programming. They also

designed their website to distribute material to and from women's groups around the world.

Their tinkering has allowed them to surmount some of the gendered psychology of the

technology, showing that women could not only "control" the medium, but shape it to their

own needs (Suarez, 396).

FIRE grew out of the earlier generation of global social justice movements and

communications networks. They rely for their support from some of the same northern

government agencies and private foundations as many other international NGOs. While providing

reports from social movements of poor and indigenous women, they also circulate within the orbit

of INGOS in the women's, environmental and human rights movements. Nevertheless, their

communications paradigm is not the didactic, counter-hegemonic one of many "alternative media"

of the 1980s and 1990s. Their participation in south-south networks, and their nuanced

conception of interactive autonomy, which recognizes their dependence on movements, and on

northern funders, has allowed them to straddle these two sets of institutions and communications

paradigms.

A social network

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

Nick Dyer-Witheford, in an appreciation of Negri and Hardt's Empire, sketched the three

multitudes of contemporary global resistance movements --the high tech information workers, the

traditional organized working class, and the urban poor, the majority of whom are women, who

survive largely on the margins of the waged economy (Dyer-Witheford, 2001). All three of those

multitudes were in Seattle, yet seldom was the critique of globalization framed in terms of the

daily lived experience of the multitude of the vast majority, most of whom are communities of

colour, in both southern and northern hemispheres. Instead, while some attention is paid to this experience, and to the perspectives of the second multitude of trade unionists, the dominant voice in Seattle was definitely the new class fraction of primarily white, high-tech and information professionals.

The IMC began in this milieu. Seattle is Microsoft territory, and the original IMC drew on people and resources from the high-tech Seattle community, with a lot of help from media activists throughout the US and techies elsewhere. Mathew Arnason, from the Community Activist Technology (CAT) group in Sydney Australia, helped develop "open publishing" the technology which allows anyone to post information automatically. As the Network has grown, the global tech crew has taken a central role. Via cyberspace, from several locations around the world, the tech crew shares the support and improvement of sites and the network as a whole. They operate on the edges of the enclosed tech world: one San Francisco member commented that he helped out with the new sites in Argentina and Palestine during a break from his day job at a computer company.

This gender class balance met with a lot of criticism immediately in Seattle after the WTO. However, the reality remains that those people able to volunteer, and to work within the existing social milieu, tend to represent a small minority of young, white, male North Americans and Europeans (Rinaldo, 2000). This tendency has been exacerbated by the existing gendered, class and racialized divisions of labour among media and Internet aficionados, and continúes to be an issue of contention, in meetings and listserves, since the WTO (Rinaldo, 2000)[11].

However, the dynamism of the IMC has meant that several sites around the world began with activist groups outside the nexus of the white and/or professional class circles of the global justice movement, and techie crowd. For example, the New York IMC features the work of activists involved in the Diallo police brutality case, housing and AIDS. In Los Angeles, they work in collaboration with Latino community groups, on and off the Net. In San Francisco, the site

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[11] In 2001, FIRE broadcast a radio panel discussion, in which a group of IMC women from the US, commented on the tendency for the predominantly male tech crew to receive more public appreciation, while the critical organizing roles of the women remains unappreciated (Fire Broadcast, 2001).

owed its origins to an initiative to bring together activist groups working on the regional housing crisis, the prison industrial complex, and a protest against the National Association of Broadcasters, the U.S. corporate trade organization. (Messman, 2001; Personal Observation). Since then, the local group has developed a number of special series in collaboration with groups organizing around issues in the forest, anti-war, energy and labour. In the most recent wave of peace organizing, the San Francisco IMC have become a community fulcrum enabling discussion of movement and media issues in street demonstrations, public events, on micro-radio and on-line.

In Latin America, the IMC sites all draw on existing social activist groups, and communications media. Computers, telephone lines and Internet access are usually limited to the urban middle, professional and upper classes. Tim Russo of Chiapas Media, told me, "The Internet just doesn't cut it for getting information back to the communities…What is important in solidarity in the south is not so much how to produce information, but how to train people to produce information for themselves, and this is different than what a lot of other indymedia's [in the United States] think" (Personal Interview, 2002). The Chiapas IMC produces and distributes much of their content using radio and video, using the Internet primarily for national and international distribution.

In Brasil, they also mix Internet distribution with earlier kinds of media. In Rio, the IMC has taken video documentaries from favela to university to foster discussion of the upcoming Free Trade of the Americas (FTAA) agreement. In Porto Alegre, they use the Internet to gather and circulate news, which is then sent to a network of free and community radio stations. In Sao Paolo, the IMC has set up a free Internet center to enable poor people to access it. Almost all of the IMC centers also distribute printed newssheets that are photocopied and posted in walls all over the city, because of lack of funds for printed copies.

One of the strengths of the Buenos Aires IMC has been their bridging of generations of media activists, and multitudes. They not only go to assambleas in the neighbourhoods and factories to report on current issues, but also to actively recover their collective historical memories. The "escrache" was a technique used by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, to target

the generals and officials responsible for the disappearance of thousands during the "dirty war."
Now, the same technique is used to target government, and corporate officials as well as the
mainstream media.

Conclusion

The neoliberal project attacks three layers of social contracts ---between waged
workers and corporations; and the state and citizens as public goods and social services
were cut through programmes of privatization, debt reduction and structural adjustment
(SAPs). The attack of a a third social contract has become much more apparent during the
war against Iraq: the "communications contract" has been slashed as northern corporate, and
primarily Hollywood, cultural product is dumped everywhere, public telecom and media
services are privatized, and rules providing a modicum of accountability of media and
telecommunications monopolies are deregulated. All of these contracts were at stake in
Seattle, as the WTO's rule of the market undermines them all.

The WTO and other agreements combine to foster the extension of capital and the
logic of accumulation world-wide. However, the paradox is that globalization also creates
conditions of radical possibility: extending the technical networks and the corporate targets
world-wide. In the streets of Seattle were groups protesting the slashing of all three social
contracts: trade unionists whose waged livelihoods were threatened; social movements
concerned about the erosion of the social safety net for themselves and their living
environments; and as well, the DIY media makers who were no longer content to allow
corporate newsmedia to present the news that "the whole world was watching".

The challenge of the IMC is to foster as much circulation of social learning about the
network, as technical capacity and news. Most collaboration is still carnival-like, via hyperlinks
during major demonstrations and mobilizations, or one-off projects between radio and video
crews. While the techie crew meet on-line regularly, there is much less ongoing meeting and
global decision-making. Some of this is beginning to happen at the regional level, in North

America, Europe and Latin America. Commenting after one face to face encounter in 2002, Luz Ruiz, a Chiapas IMC volunteer, and sometime San Francisco resident, talked about the critical need for "south-south collaboration: so that she and others from the global south can share experiences, expertise and connections for their very different contexts. (Personal Interview, 2002).

The tragedy of the first land-based commons was that they were without resources and isolated, unable to muster enough resistance to defeat the first generation of capitalists. While the IMC Network is only one of a growing global communications commons, my own vision would be that they continue to build bridges to all, to create a true social network of all the multitudes.

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