FOUR

TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE

'Gales of Creative Destruction'

APPLIED CASE STUDY

As well as for the development of global business networks, globalizing media such as the Internet are also used to create, sustain and extend social welfare and activism networks. We will here consider the case of www.indymedia.org, an online anti-capitalist organization, as an example of a transnational social democracy movement, in terms of what it can tell us about the development of global networks and the unevenness of power relations.

www.indymedia.org is a website – or, rather, the hub of a system of websites – run by a global organization called 'Indymedia'. Established in 1999 to provide 'grassroots' coverage of the Seattle World Trade Organization protests, Indymedia is a volunteer organization explicitly aimed at news coverage of left-wing activism and issues around the world, building up the sense that there is a global community of like-minded anti-corporate media producers. According to its Frequently Asked Questions page, 'Indymedia is a collective of independent media organizations and hundreds of journalists offering grassroots, non-corporate coverage. Indymedia is a democratic media outlet for the creation of radical, accurate, and passionate tellings of truth.' It has more than 150 daughter websites run by local 'Independent Media Centres' (IMCs), catering to local issues, which take the same format as the parent website.

Indymedia explicitly aims at developing a global presence and at supporting issues of activism in the developing world. It emphasizes the use of free or cheap, easily-accessible media production techniques, such as the use of free websites, blogs, and digital footage and photography; recently, it has been developing a wiki site to house its document archive online. Indymedia encourages and invites developing

world participation, making content available not only in English and Spanish, but, where possible, in less global languages such as Polish, Albanian and Basque. Many of the issues with which it is concerned – environmental sustainability, fair trade, free education and the rights of indigenous peoples – are related to the developing world, and the homepage contains links to Iraqi and Iranian blogs. Indymedia thus aims to be a democratic left-wing organization which is truly global in terms of its focus and participation.

In practice, the organization's global reach is less extensive. Although all the continents of the world (and a few islands) are represented, most of the IMCs are based in the USA and Europe; developing nations represented tend to be those with significant wealthy, internationalized middle classes, such as South Africa, Korea, India and Nigeria. There are also conspicuous lacunae: neither the People's Republic of China nor the Republic of China, for instance, have IMCs, nor do any South Asian nations outside of India, and the Middle East is represented by Israel, Palestine, Beirut and Armenia.

This is not surprising when one considers the socio-economic infrastructure which underlies such organizations. Although the site's ethos, as noted, is to encourage participation from all possible areas and to focus on activities which are as low cost as possible, in practice, not only do digital media recorders cost money, but the leisure time, knowledge and access to even public or shared computers are very much artefacts of the developed world. Castells (1998) comments extensively on the fact that, in the 1990s, the lack of a physical communications infrastructure in Sub-Saharan Africa and the former Soviet Union strongly restricted the participation of both areas in the development of the Internet. There are also political complications, such as the ongoing governmental restriction of Internet access in China.

One consequence of this is that the concerns which are focused upon by Indymedia tend to be those of most interest to American and European participants, such as the Mexican indigenous rights movement or climate change. While Iran features on the front page of Indymedia as an 'ongoing feature' at the time of writing (2013), this was not the case in 2001, and the coverage of climate-related issues has also intensified since 2010. It is also worth considering Tomlinson's argument that the concept of cultural imperialism is a Western invention, imposing a sense of guilt for the exploitation of developing nations back on the developing nations themselves. Indymedia could thus be argued to be less a globalizing project than an alternative way of reflecting, and advancing, the dominance of the developed world, particularly the USA and EU.

The situation is, however, a complex one. The rise of the information-based service sector on the Indian subcontinent, for instance, suggests that change from within the developing world is ever more likely, as does the rise of online activism in China. Furthermore, recent projects in which members of the Chinese diaspora and, in some cases, Western activists work directly with mainland Chinese to allow them to work around the government's Internet restrictions, and/or to distribute accurate news about China worldwide (e.g. the China Digital Times, www.chinadigitaltimes.net), suggest that truly global collaboration on such projects is indeed a possibility. The question remains, however, of whether the digital divide can ever truly be conquered, or if inequality is an unavoidable part of global social and technological development.

In social activism and philanthropy as much as in business and technology, then, the digital divide exists and continues to permeate activities in the global sphere. The case of Indymedia indicates that even organizations which strive to transcend the digital divide nonetheless cannot avoid its effects. However, as with other aspects of globalization, this situation is in flux and shows signs of changing within the next 10 years.

QUESTIONS

1. Is inequality a necessary condition for globalization? Answer using Indymedia as an example.
2. How do the globalizing activities of Indymedia compare and contrast with those of the for-profit corporations considered elsewhere in this set of case studies?
3. Evaluate the role of new communications and transportation technologies in the development of organizations such as Indymedia.
4. Is Indymedia an example of a new system reinforcing an existing one, or of technology transforming human interaction? Justify your answer.

FURTHER READING

Castells, Manuel (1998) *End of Millennium*. The Information Age, vol. III. Oxford: Blackwell.

Moore, Fiona (2002) Telling it like it is: News websites and online newspapers. *Global Networks*, 2 (2): 171–177.

Tomlinson, John (1991) *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction*. London: Continuum.

Smith, Chris and Meiksins, Peter (1995) System, society and dominance effects in cross-national organizational analysis. *Work, Employment and Society*, 9 (2): 241–267.