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Indymedia in Belgium: the delicate balance between media activism and political activism

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Abstract : Belgium was one of the first European countries to establish a local 'national' branch of the global Indymedia network. The diversity of those involved in this 'national movement' ultimately turned out to be both the strength of the original website and the cause of its decline. Indeed, due to political and organizational disagreement, many activists decided to create their own 'local' IMC. This paper distinguishes two perspectives on the role of Indymedia: the '*political activists*' saw Indymedia as a means to an end, as an instrument to discuss strategies and tactics, and to coordinate social movements and grassroots movements. The '*media activists'*, on the other hand, saw Indymedia as an end in itself, as a platform for civil society organisations to make their voices heard and facilitate democratic debate - in this vein, the experience of Indymedia.be was transformed into the alternative news site DeWereldMorgen.be.

Belgium is a complex country, with five layers of public authorities, three official languages and a history of social movements struggling between confronting established power structures and being co-opted by them (for example, trade unions are relatively strongly institutionalized). In the French-speaking part of the country, there is a long history of activist media giving voice to the denunciations and aspirations of the less powerful, especially free and independent radio, but also magazines. Flanders, the Dutch-speaking community, had only seen short-lived initiatives before the arrival of Indymedia in 2000. The possibilities offered by this open publishing-network in terms of social interconnectivity and freedom of expression, however, managed to bring together media activists from the different parts of Belgium. While the creation of an Independent Media Centre (IMC or Indymedia) clearly energized media activism in Belgium, it also brought fundamental tensions to the forefront about the balance between the socio-political objectives of social movements and the media they produce: one perspective considers *media activism* as a goal in itself, to serve as a platform for civil society organisations to make their voices heard and create the conditions for an open, democratic-pluralist debate in the process. The other perspective considers media activism as a means to an end, e.g. as a tool to discuss different tactics and strategies, to coordinate (the) movement(s), and to enact prefigurative politics, thus privileging *political activism* to media activism. The tensions between these two perspectives have had profound implications for the configuration of the project. Their irreconcilable nature provoked the break-up and fragmentation of Indymedia Belgium into six different websites, whereby the initial national project was joined by five other projects/websites that ultimately retained a much more local character. The Belgian case may not be singular, but this commentary argues that it is paradigmatic to understand the strategic decisions underlying the development, success and eventual demise of Indymedia as an activist media project, and to interpret its legacy as the genesis of contemporary practices in the online communication of social movements. We conclude by discussing the transformation in 2010 of the national website into DeWereldMorgen.be, an alternative news site for the Dutch-speaking community. This commentary is based on 10 semi-structured in-depth interviews, conducted between September 2018 and September 2019, with media activists who were involved in the evolution of Indymedia Belgium during different moments. The names of the activists have been changed to preserve their anonymity.

Global movement, local initiatives

Bart Cammaerts has previously identified 3 different types of transnationalisation in activism: The first type is ‘trans-international’ activism. This refers to highly organized groups of activists which are integrated at transnational level, with staff or members who are internationally dispersed and who are focused on translating local interests and issues to a global level of governance. Here we find organisations such as Transparency International (TI), which strives for good and open government, or the Association for Progressive Communication (APC), which fights for communication rights. A second type of transnationalisation is ‘trans-national’ activism. In this type, the local or national cells remain relatively independent, but at the same time link-up local struggles with an international agenda and vice versa. In other words, the transnational provides a common frame of reference, but the organisation is clearly embedded in a local context. Here we find examples such as Greenpeace or Amnesty International. Cammaerts also identifies a third type, that we propose to refer to as ‘glocal’ activism. In this case, the emphasis lies on how groups of local activists are found to import, appropriate and adapt transnational discourses and action methods to the local context. Indymedia is usually

identified as an example of trans-national activism. However, this commentary argues that it is more fruitful to interpret Indymedia Belgium as an example of 'glocal' activism: the interviews showed how much its history can be characterized as a series of local initiatives, which replicate objectives, methods and technological solutions from the original experiences in Australia, London and Seattle, while at the same time maintaining a high degree of autonomy and basing their international exchanges on solidarity rather than central coordination.

The start of Indymedia.org in 1999 can be characterized as a moment in which the technological and the political were highly intertwined. It was a moment that showed how central media practices had become in the articulation of (new) social movements: one could say that the concepts of both Indymedia and the alter-globalization movement came to fruition together. After the success of this first Indymedia project, the idea and network were reproduced in other parts of the world, building an international community guided by global goals in the process, which in turn stimulated local activism again. In 2000, a few months after the Seattle WTO protests, more than a 100 people from diverse organisations and social movements convened at *Cinema Nova*, an independent movie theater in Brussels. The decision was made to start a Belgian edition of Indymedia, the first on the European mainland. As in other continental European countries such as Germany and France, it was decided to open a national website instead of city-level IMCs, which were more common in Anglo-Saxon culture. Especially after the events during the Genoa G8 Summit protests, the website (belgium.indymedia.org) was able to draw on an active community of young media activists and readers, both Dutch and French, which is unusual in the Belgian media landscape.

While the activists we interviewed confirm the importance of the revolutionary technology behind Indymedia, an emphasis was clearly put on its political importance, i.e. how it succeeded in mobilizing people with different politico-ideological perspectives to work together:

> “Moreover, Seattle was a great tactical success of the movement, where there was already People's Global Action, after the Zapatistas they had launched the idea of a diversity of tactics, so different groups with different tactics coming together in the same project without shooting one another in the foot” (Albert).

Indymedia served as a platform for these groups: “In fact, the goals were to provide a media platform for social movements. IMC really worked as an idea that each social movement, each group, each collective, becomes its own media, [and] publishes its own reports.” For the interviewees, the force of Indymedia consisted of this alliance of different, more radical social and environmental justice movements, pacifists, marxists, black bloc, etc. At the same time, a transition took place in Indymedia Belgium between 2000 and 2005, from a platform by and for activists to a platform open to any civil society organisation:

> “[A]nd Indymedia Belgium did open up to a broad, broader spectrum of social movements, such as labour unions, and environmental movements. Not only to the actual activist movements, but also, yes, a neighbourhood committee, or a youth group or labour union, that is [a fact]. And this transition was already slowly [taking place], when I arrived it was still a bit of a hardcore movement, but since then it gradually evolved” (Bertrand).

However, this transition did not take place without a fight, quite to the contrary, it came to define the history of Indymedia in Belgium.

One Indymedia, two souls

One might have concluded from a superficial look at Indymedia Belgium that it served as an open space for various left-wing movements and their anti-capitalist critique and proposals for social change. However, the typical debates on the left, i.e. the historical struggles about political strategy, did also play out in the internal meetings about its organisation. Two perspectives on the role of Indymedia emerged during the coordination meetings, each with a different view on the balance between media activism and political activism. However, both perspectives also had several things in common: media should be part of civil society (instead of market or state), media should be made by insiders (volunteers from civil society organisations themselves) and not by outsiders (such as professional journalists), and media should report from a particular socio-cultural point of view, in this case progressive left-wing politics.

The differences relate to whether media activism is considered subordinate to political activism or not. A first perspective, which considers the IMC as a form of *political activism* first and foremost, was found to be driven by anarchist ideals. It promoted an interpretation of the website as a tool to coordinate distributed action, announce activities and report about state repression. The other perspective perceives the IMC primarily as a form of *media activism*[1], giving voice to members and staff of diverse civil society organisations. If the first approaches media as a tool, by and for activists, the other sees media as a goal in itself, and aims at a wide audience, whose members are not interested in discussions between activists about tactics or strategies, but are all the more looking for in-depth information about society and media. Each perspective also has a different view on the internal organization of an IMC: the *political activists* wanted a volunteer-based, horizontal structure, with a lot of autonomy for the production of stories, mainly fuelled around the mediatisation of actions - put differently, as a tool to enact prefigurative politics. The *media activists* at the core of the project's early years, on the other hand, believed that the only way to consolidate Indymedia would be to have minimal infrastructure beyond the website led by a professional editorial team. One of our interviewees explains it bluntly:

> "If you want to build a decent organisation, you need to have a structure of people who perform certain tasks. Sometimes those are mainly the shitty tasks, sometimes you can write an article, which is more fun, but all the shitty tasks of an organisation like administration or writing e-mails to volunteers, assist them and so on, that is actual work. You can't do that on a voluntary basis" (Charles).

The Belgian Indymedia activists decided to create an association with legal entity (vzw GetBasic). This made it possible to be recognized and subsidized by the Flemish government as a "media movement" that strives for democratizing media by creating a professional team that organises regular workshops across the country to train media production skills, and contact volunteers to discuss story ideas, encourage them and solve their questions. This also

[1] The interviewees themselves make a distinction between activist media (first perspective) and citizen media (second perspective).

allowed to pay the rent for an office in the center of Brussels, in a building owned by the marxist Workers' Party PTB/PvDA (Parti du Travail de Belgique - Partij Van de Arbeid van België) that hosted different social movements and NGOs. The office literally functioned as a media centre with computers and photo and video cameras available at a time when multimedia smartphones did not yet exist. Volunteers could go there to write their stories or post their videos.

Such an intense debate about the level of professionalization has been observed before. In his work on US-based IMCs, Marc Garcelon also found a cultural divide between "professionalized" and "counter-cultural" approaches. The same for Todd Wolfson in his work on the global coordination listserv IMC-Communication. Eventually, tensions in the organisation became too strong, which resulted in the fragmentation of Indymedia Belgium into different Indymedia websites. The members of the core editorial staff were accused of selling out, on the one hand to the political party PTB/PVDA, by allowing it to exert too much influence on the website and coordination meetings, and on the other hand to the state, for accepting government grants. They responded by denying any influence of PTB/PVDA. And as a counter argument, they referred to how similar accusations were being voiced from the other side too: trade unions and NGOs had always held off more structural forms of cooperation because of a general perception of Indymedia as too extreme and ideological.

By the mid-2000s, the ideological clash had become insurmountable and the project of Indymedia in Belgium fragmented and literally dispersed across the country, as the names of the new websites all referred to the province or city of their promoters. Three new websites were created on the Dutch-speaking side: Oost-Vlaanderen (ovl.indymedia.org), West-Vlaanderen (wvl.indymedia.org) and Antwerp (antwerpen-indymedia.be). One was created on the French-speaking side in Liège (liege.indymedia.org). This last one was an initiative of the existing CEMAB (Centre de Médias Alternatifs de Bruxelles) and turned into Indymedia Bruxsel around 2010 (bxl.indymedia.org). Furthermore, some Belgian activists asked the Indymedia global coordination team to shut down the national website. As a response, the people behind the national project created a new one outside of the indymedia.org servers: www.indymedia.be.

With a message that recalls the earliest days of Indymedia, the people involved in the "local" IMCs argue that their project was about creating an activist platform by and for local activists:

> "Indymedia allowed us to communicate, to have a story different from that of [mainstream] media. We were not only active on Indymedia, but we were also an active relay for the social movements involved during all cycles of the fight against the closure of the Vottem car factory, it was a way for us to break the dominant story" (Dorien).

We found other similar quotes throughout the interviews: "To be an expression tool for social struggles" (Ellen), "For Liège, a visibility for the struggles of Liège" (Dorien), "Indymedia, that was the media of the movements" (Francis). Despite a common emphasis on the centrality of social movements, the underlying goal of the local IMCs was clearly different from the one formulated by those who were involved in Indymedia.be:

> "[O]ur idea was to make a broad medium (...) that touched a lot of people and if you go back to the Belgian history of media (...) all media were part of social movements.

> In fact we wanted to go back to that." (Georges)

The existence of these two perspectives was also apparent from a comparison of the original mission statements of the different IMCs (retrieved at archive.org). Indymedia Belgium stated the following in 2001: "In a country where there has been before no tradition of organised media activism and media monitoring, Indymedia Belgium offers a free daily text and video news enjoyable any time by anyone with an internet connection. In this age of wild colonisation of the net and the first web TV experiments by the big communication monopolists, Indymedia Belgium breaks out as the first Belgian web TV with an organised, motivated and independent editorial staff." Indymedia Bruxsel and Indymedia Antwerpen have a basic description highlighting the open publication process. The description of Indymedia Bruxsel appears to refer directly to the diverging views: "Indymedia is a network independent of any labour, political, religious or other organization. The role of Indymedia is to facilitate access for all to free and independent information". Indymedia Oost-Vlaanderen focused on its role as a tool to coordinate local activism: "The struggle for a different and better world can be fought in different ways. The attention of Indymedia Ondergronds Vlaanderen is mainly focused on small-scale and local campaigns, basic democratic initiatives and direct actions".

Decline of Indymedia, rise of social media and DeWereldMorgen.be

In the media crisis that followed the financial crisis of 2008, a realignment took place among journalists and media professionals in Belgium. Media activism entered into a new phase with numerous new media initiatives outside of the existing media conglomerates (e.g. Apache.be, Rekto:Verso, Charlie Magazine, Médor). In this context, the Indymedia.be team had come to the conclusion that the Indymedia brand would never be able to shake off the negative perceptions regarding its legacy (i.e. too extreme, too anarchist), so a new name and website was necessary to achieve their original goal of creating a broad alternative news site:

> "[W]e couldn't get there with Indymedia and that's our own mistake or that's the history of Indymedia because it was an activist media project which was mainly also a platform for activists who met each other, who were discussing different kinds of activism [and] was not so much focussed on making media itself" (Herbert).

The transformation to DeWereldMorgen.be in March 2010 enabled structural financial partnerships with diverse civil society organisations such as the trade unions, North-South NGOs, cultural organisations, peace and environmental movements, etc. At its peak, DeWereldMorgen.be had a pool of about 400 volunteers (or 'citizen journalists'), 40.000 newsletter subscribers and 15.000 visitors a day. At the same time, most of the local IMCs ended up disappearing, mainly because of a lack of participants, and aggravated by the technical failure of the server in the case of Liège. The one in Brussels is the only one that is still available, but with little activity[2]. Some of the activists from Liège now participate in the online media project *L'entonnoir* (entonnoir.org). One could conclude that the focus on the professionalization of the initial project, intended to consolidate it, may have actually fostered the dissolution of the movement and the fragmentation of initiatives, which proved too fragile to be sustainable because of a lack of critical mass (of volunteers).

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[2] Today, the site bxl.demosphere.net is considered the newest reference for activist events in Brussels, although without news content.

Nonetheless, the interviewees have wonderful memories of the exciting energy of Indymedia, as an enabler of activist coordination and a space that allowed them to articulate and publish their discourses in a more efficient and systematic way than with previous activist media initiatives. They often compare it to “social media before social media”: a necessary tool that had to be invented. Furthermore, it inspired a generation of young people to become politically active, teaching them the skills to organize and mobilize in the process. Many involved media activists from the early 2000s hold important positions today in civil society, at universities and in progressive political parties. The interviewees also express regret that, with the rise of commercial social media platforms, the left has handed over the open internet to global capitalism. At the same time, it is generally acknowledged that social media have made something like Indymedia irrelevant: activists worldwide have adopted social media as efficient communication and mobilization tools. The climate justice movement, a movement of movements similar to the alter-globalization movement of the early 2000s, succeeds in the global coordination of its actions in 2019 without Indymedia. The same is true for one of its more radical members, Extinction Rebellion: for the coordination of, and news about, their actions, their website refers every interested person to the Telegram messaging app, Twitter and Facebook.

To conclude, the Belgian case reminds us of some features of the wider movement. First, of course, is the fundamental tension we observed between the perspectives of Indymedia as a media activism project or a political activism project. Whereas the former advocates a professionalisation of practices, the latter emphasizes the establishment of a counter-cultural project. Second, a tension was also observed between decentralisation and participatory democracy. In Belgium, the difficulty of participatory democracy within the project explains the existence of decentralisation (five local IMCs), while research in other countries suggests that in the global Indymedia network, decentralisation explains the difficulty of participatory democracy. Nevertheless, this shows that evolving in different social, political and ideological contexts generally constitutes a major hindrance to establishing a strong collective political project. Finally, in the Belgian case these tensions caused a decrease in the number of contributors and participants, inducing a lack of diversity in Indymedia's content. Readers gradually left, joining new platforms such as blogs and social media.