

# **Cultural opposition to the dominant media and cultural industries: the case of the United States**

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## **Introduction**

A forthcoming book by veteran British media researcher Jeremy Tunstall is entitled *The Media Were American: U.S. mass media in decline* (Tunstall 2006). On the face of it, his data certainly show that for broadcasting and cinema, the global trade in these U.S. cultural products has retreated from a high point some thirty years ago, when he wrote an earlier study, *The Media Are American* (Tunstall 1977). One might argue in consequence that forms of opposition to the U.S. cultural industries outside the USA are of declining significance, and perhaps even inside as well.

However, the trade in media formats, the continuing impact of the popular music industry, the transformations of Bollywood, advertising and public relations strategies, including political public relations, all suggest that if for the term “media” we substitute the term “culture,” the saga of U.S. “soft power” is a long way from over. Furthermore, inside the USA itself, the Bush regime’s ability to pursue its catastrophic course in West and Central Asia owes a great deal to the media and cultural industries for at least two reasons. The first is the conspicuous failure of U.S. news media to point out the emperor’s nakedness during the build-up to the war on Iraq. The second is their cumulative, longitudinal impact over generations. I cannot explore this second point at any length here, but I have argued in a forthcoming study (*The Imperiled ‘American’*) based on a conference presentation earlier this year at Paris 4, that the Hollywood Western and many films since the Western genre’s decline have encouraged Americans to see themselves as constantly in danger, and thus to be highly susceptible to government alarms and alerts (Downing 2006). The 9/11 massacres fiercely underlined this already entrenched cultural trope, as did the Pearl Harbor attack some sixty years before.

The question of internal opposition within the USA to its media and cultural industries is therefore one of great moment, internally and externally, just as was the case during the South East Asia war thirty to forty years ago. I propose to focus here on three cases of internal opposition to these industries. The first two are from the right of the political spectrum, and consist of the Christian fundamentalist right’s organized opposition to the mainstream entertainment media industry, encompassing cinema, television, popular music and videogames, and the secular right’s organized opposition to the mainstream news media. The third case, to which I will devote rather more attention, is the Indymedia network, which is

definitively on the left of the political spectrum and in a number of ways constitutes a neo-anarchist global media project.

### **The Christian and secular Right on the march**

That the Christian Right is extremely well established in the USA at the present time, is hardly news. In some ways it represents a stinging rebuke to the Left, inasmuch as Christian Right activists have been prepared to engage in the unremittingly hard slog of knocking on doors, filling envelopes, picketing, connecting, repeating and then repeating over and over again, in other words all the tedious work involved in gradually constructing a social movement over a period of decades. Obviously, it has been greatly aided by the combination of billions of donated dollars from millionaires and billionaires, by the huge social network of church institutions, and not least by the psychological comforts of rectitude and missionary zeal. Religious television and radio channels, the notorious televangelists, have certainly helped as well. But without that patient dedication to the humdrum, it is hard to imagine the Christian Right's success.

Nonetheless, a prime target of the Christian Right has been the often highly sexualized entertainment industry and equally what has been perceived as the contempt for Christianity and Christians in television entertainment. It is beyond my scope here to offer an evaluation of the true extent to which mass entertainment is sexualized, not least because for the puritanically minded *any* verbal or acted allusion to sexuality is *strengst verboten*. The puritan mentality sets the bar exceedingly high and has no problem in cleaning up Shakespeare. (Maybe Corneille would pass their test...)

The fact remains that a major source of opposition to the U.S. cultural industries emanates from the highly organized Christian Right. By "highly organized" I do not mean to say "unanimous" – there are factions and controversies within the Christian Right as within any major social movement. But *in public* within the Christian Right there is rather widespread agreement that Hollywood film and TV, the rap and hip hop music industry, and the videogame industry, promote sexual licentiousness and moral corruption.<sup>1</sup> The surreptitious use of pornography by members of the Christian Right would be an interesting, if difficult, phenomenon to research.

Most recently the sustained attacks on the novel and film *The Da Vinci Code*, especially within the Catholic Church and from Opus Dei sources, have gone international. It is important to recognize, however, that much of the motive power summoned up in these campaigns comes from individuals who feel – or are told that they *should* feel – under attack. Far from feeling part of a mighty and victorious movement that has twice gotten born-again George W. Bush into the White House, religious devotees, including some whose political persuasions make them sympathetic to social justice campaigns, routinely feel - and are encouraged to feel - beleaguered, publicly ridiculed and marginalized. This mindset is one that may yet come to be manipulated into wielding significant transformations in the media

and cultural industries, at least in certain countries where religious practice is common such as the USA.

At the more secular end of things in the USA, the claim has been circulated since the end of the Vietnam War that the mainstream news media are dominated by a left-leaning, self-satisfied East Coast Ivy League elite, thoroughly out of touch with their fellow-Americans, and indeed thoroughly contemptuous of them (cf. Lichter et al., 1986). In my own judgment, the descriptors “self-satisfied” and “East Coast Ivy League elite” may not be too far off the mark, but the rest has all the marks of a caricature, not least the “left-leaning” – unless, that is, the U.S. Democratic Party is defined as a socialist campaign organization!<sup>2</sup> S. Robert Lichter has been a prominent proponent of this view for twenty years. He is author of numerous studies, many with questionable methodology, attacking mainstream media on these grounds, and is president of the Center for Media and Public Affairs, endorsed by Ronald Reagan, Patrick Buchanan and the Reverend Pat Robertson, and funded by leading rightist foundations, such as Olin, Coors and Scaife. The politics of News Corporation’s Fox Cable News Channel rather directly reflect and propagate that perspective, and have been successful to date in convincing a number of U.S. TV users, not least students in many universities, that only the Fox Channel tells the true story, unvarnished and in lively language.

In other words, distrust of most mainstream media has been inflated considerably, and has also had the effect often of prompting competitor channels to emulate Fox’s approach in order to try to win back audience share. Thus in discussing transformations in U.S. cultural and media industries, it would be a grave error to focus only on convergence, ownership concentration, and new delivery formats. Organized political and religious movements of opinion have a sustained critique of the industries, and their impact is underestimated at our peril.

### **The Indymedia network, 1999-2006<sup>3</sup>**

In the late 1999 WTO confrontation in Seattle, the roles of radical media of many kinds were of the highest importance. They served to prepare the ground for the demonstrations months beforehand, to enable on-the-ground communication among the demonstrators at the time, to bypass corporate media in order to inform the global public of what had transpired in the confrontation and afterwards, and to facilitate international discussion of the issues thereafter. At the media heart of this political activity during the demonstrations and over the year following – but not “at the center,” for that implies a form of central direction that was conspicuously absent – was Seattle’s Independent Media Center. In later confrontations during the World Bank meeting in Washington DC in April 2000, during the IMF and World Bank meeting in Prague in November 2000, at the G8 meeting in Genova in 2001 (samizdat.net et complices 2002), and in still other places where the powerful foregathered to forge their policy priorities, Independent Media Centers (IMC) emerged as a dynamic, original and contestatory mediatic constellation.

In the build-up to the Seattle confrontations, small-scale radical media had been tremendously important.<sup>4</sup> For mainstream media, it often appeared as though the opposition movements had materialized out of nowhere. But the preparations had begun long before with a plethora of groups, from U.S. steelworkers who had booked 1000 rooms in metro area hotels to 700 international groups who had signed on to the umbrella group Citizens' Trade Campaign, to farmers', church, environmentalist and peace organizations.

Indeed it is arguable that the real turning point had emerged over two years previously when April 1998 demonstrations in Canada forced the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) into cold storage. The MAI planning documents were a prime example of global neo-liberal policy that many Canadians as well as others around the world saw as subverting national autonomy in vital economic, cultural and political matters. The important conclusion we need to draw from this is what we might call the anti-technology one, namely that the Internet's *potential* was used by activists who also worked long and hard in countless other ways *as well* to prepare for the confrontation. It was not that the Internet somehow generated the confrontation.

Equally, the mainstream media emphasis at the time on activists' Internet use blotted out how they combined the most banal forms of communication technology with it. For instance, in listing the practical communication needs for mobilizing media activism, the IMC organizational record (Blueprint 2000) underscored the irreplaceable function inside the physical IMC space...of *whiteboards!* Likewise, in subsequent discussions of the future for IMCs and the wider diffusion of their information, voices were heard calling for print versions of information otherwise out of reach to people the wrong side of the digital divide. Today, indeed, a number of IMC site-organizations organize weekly or monthly newspapers as well.

However, the ability to stream audio and video brought back to the IMC site by a mass of independent media activists ranging the streets of Seattle, combined with the ability to edit together this material later into documentaries,<sup>5</sup> was indeed a coup. Webcasting this material simultaneously with the events was equally a powerful use of digital technology to convey the reality of the protestors' challenge. But it is vital still to emphasize the bread-and-butter elements: having enough toner, having enough copiers to handle overload breakdown, more than one fax machine, finding the best rates on cell-phone hires, negotiating a DSL line in sufficient time, having a space that worked sound-wise for recording purposes, having people experienced in logging audio and video files, the evergreen dynamism of still photos, having enough network cards: such factors were found to be vital.

In the coverage of the Seattle confrontation the impact was extraordinary of having over four hundred videographers, audio-interviewers, photographers and writers on the streets and *inside* the action. This was very different from the mainstream media professionals, safely ensconced behind police lines, their cameras as our eyes looking out *with* the police *at* the demonstrators, and with their reporting agenda largely pre-set by the combination of their employers and their typical routines.<sup>6</sup> The striking difference in costs of the reporting work of

the activists (compared to the paid professional teams), combined with the advantage of physical vantage-point, enabled their pictures, sound and written reportage to dispute with immediate evidence the mainstream media characterization of the demonstrators as violent, disruptive and uninformed.

In the seven years since Seattle, IMCs mushroomed. As of September 2006, there were some 150 worldwide. They were concentrated mostly in the “West,” i.e. the USA (62), Canada (12), Europe (48), 7 in Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand; but 17 in Latin America, only 12 in all of Asia including West Asia, and 3 in Africa, amounting to almost 25% of the total sites. This enumeration understates, since at least two sites, Brazil and Italy, are federated sites with a number of sub-sites scattered around the country.

Many IMC sites in the first 2-3 years started up as did the Seattle site, in the process of protest movements’ organizing a major local confrontation with one or other agency or forum for transnational corporate policy-makers. Then they continued on afterwards as a communication node for news about global neo-liberal strategies and decisions, and for local conflicts over labor, human rights and environmental issues. As time went by, however, new sites emerged, all hyperlinked. It is possible in principle now to access fresh news, with still photographs, audio files and video files, *from* – not simply about! – global social justice struggles and movements in all these locations around the world. The dominant language is English, but Spanish, French, Portuguese, and some other languages also figure, with certain sites routinely including translations as well.

The specificity of language is one important communicative dimension of the Indymedia process. Another is the dynamic of space and place, international and local (Downing 2003b). There have been a number of commentators who have claimed that the Internet serves to cancel out space and condense time, to telescope the planet. Indeed, the revival of interest in Marshall McLuhan among commentators on digital technology frames the Internet, as he might have done, as a new kind of time- and physical-space-bending prosthesis. Yet as already noted, many Indymedia sites came into being in the context of a specific meeting of global leaders, and afterwards persisted as communication centers in that same locality, combining news and discussion on local political issues with the hyperlinked opportunity to check in on all the other listed Indymedia sites around the world, with their local as well as global news. Place, like the state, has not melted away!

Earlier I also referred to the Indymedia project as neo-anarchist. In my reading, that is not a put-down. The socialist anarchist political heritage is at least one hundred and fifty years old, and has a number of strengths absent from the marxist socialist political heritage (Downing 2003c). Neither of these, self-evidently, has a satisfactory array of answers to the issues that bedevil the planet at this point in time, but both continue to contribute some critically important perspectives to our dilemmas. As regards the anarchist tradition, among the absorbing experiments in the Indymedia process have been the attempts to actualize certain forms of open publishing and consensual decision-making (Pickard 2006a; 2006b). Anyone, for the most part in most of the sites and for most of the time, can post their news item or their

comments and critiques of other news items. And decisions in many Indymedia collectives are taken on a consensus basis.

Clearly, there are serious down-sides to both these procedures. Some sites have been engulfed by neo-nazi postings, or merely frivolous and personal ones. The process of consensual decision-making is one that may demand more time and patience than many working people have. In both cases, the procedures have been modified at a number of Indymedia sites, for example to shunt postings contrary to the basic purpose of the site into a file where they may be inspected by the curious or the mildly paranoid, and to find ways of indicating levels of dissent which fall short of a blocking dissent.

I do not wish to close this brief discussion of the Indymedia network by suggesting that all in the garden is lovely. In a much-cited intervention in the online *LiP Magazine*, one writer long associated with Indymedia work in a number of countries ripped into what she termed the shoddy standards of postings, both technical and journalistic, and the typical obsession with police repression of street protest (Whitney 2005). Opel and Templin (2005) have argued that the political surveillance concern of Indymedia sites not to track their server activity is misplaced, and that some sense for what is working and not working for their users is crucial.

Nonetheless, the formation and operation of the Indymedia network, especially though far from exclusively grounded in the USA, constitutes an absorbing example – among many others, but its global and neo-anarchist dimensions make it stand out from the pack – of the cautiously optimistic judgment in the recent book *The Wealth of Networks* by Yale University Law professor Yochai Benkler (Benkler 2006), that

“We are seeing the emergence to much greater significance of nonmarket, individual, and cooperative peer-production efforts to produce universal intake of observations and opinions about the state of the world and what might and ought to be done about it... These practices leave no single point of failure for discourse: no single point where observations can be squelched or attention commanded – by fiat or with the application of money” (*op.cit.*, 271).

## **Conclusions**

In these three instances, I have tried to address a bi-ordinate spectrum of challenges to cultural and media industries in the USA, in other words from the political Left and the political Right, and from conservative social movement critique of established media, to the *altermondialiste* implementation of Internet media technology potential for developing new networks to reflect on and mobilize against global social injustice.

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<sup>1</sup> For a very interesting, if now slightly dated, set of essays on the Christian Right’s attitudes to and uses of media, see Kintz & Lesage (1998).

<sup>2</sup> For a lively and detailed critique of this position, see Alterman (2003).

<sup>3</sup> I have drawn here at points on my earlier publications on Indymedia (Downing 2002; 2003a, b, c).

<sup>4</sup> For a valuable account of this preparatory phase, see Kidd (2003).

<sup>5</sup> Such as *Showdown In Seattle* (Indymedia, 2000) and *This Is What Democracy Looks Like* (Big Noise Productions, 2000), which traveled the length and breadth of the USA and Canada, and quite widely in other European and anglophone countries. *Breaking The Bank*, a Paper Tiger TV documentary on Washington DC protest of April 2000, and *The Autumn of Praha*, the Belgian IMC documentary on the Prague confrontation, were two further examples.

<sup>6</sup> This is intended as a comment on the employers and the routines, not a personal attack on mainstream journalists, a number of whom, such as Lisa Cohen of King Five in Seattle, while probably not in particular sympathy with the general viewpoint of my analysis here, nonetheless worked very hard to review and reflect upon the failings of Seattle’s mainstream media coverage of the events.