

Indymedia legacies in Brazil and Spain: the integration of technopolitical and intersectional media practices

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Abstract

The Indymedia network is recognized for its open-editorial platform, as well as its prefigurative combination of technological tactics and organizational strategies. In this article, we discuss the legacy of Indymedia in countries not often focalized in the network or in the scholarly literature, namely Brazil and Spain. These countries were chosen to address gaps in the literature regarding Indymedia-influenced adaptations of horizontal media practices established in peripheral spaces such as Latin America and the so-called ‘Global South of Europe’. This research is based on data sets from two empirical research projects comprised of 37 semi-structured interviews in Spain and Brazil. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and comparatively analyzed using NVivo. Media activist practices challenge the reductionist binary that situates information and communication technologies (ICTs) as either deterministically revolutionary or intrinsically complicit with capitalism. In this context, using Midia Ninja in Brazil and XNet in Spain as case studies, we argue that Indymedia has had an impact on technological innovations adopted by contemporary intersectional social movement media projects in the global south, critically analyzing ways in which media activist projects have resisted exogenous and endogenous intersectional inequalities through developing specific organizational structures and practices. We find that intersectional practices related to the anti-capitalist technopolitics of Indymedia have both shaped and been shaped by specific dimensions of digital technologies. We argue that in alternative media practices, intersectionality and anti-capitalist technopolitics have emerged together as intertwined legacies of Indymedia.

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The Indymedia network is recognized for its open-editorial technologies and prefigurative organizational practices (Hanke, 2005; Pickard, 2006). Scholars have argued that the hacker ethic and free culture politics of these hybrid online and offline spaces (Fuster Morell, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012) have created legacies in contemporary technopolitical movements (Toret et al., 2013). We address two gaps in this literature, considering first, media movements in Brazil and Spain, countries not often focalized in Indymedia activist networks or academic literature, and second, intersectional practices (Crenshaw, 1991) in activist media projects (Breton et al., 2012; Jeppesen et al., 2014), complexifying the key intersectional axis of global location (Collins and Bilge, 2016).

While Indymedia has championed directly democratic processes (Atton, 2003; Giraud, 2014; Milioni, 2009), scholars and activists alike have observed inequalities in practice. Open processes tend to favor individuals whose race, gender, and/or class privilege provide access to time, digital literacies, and public discourse (Jeppesen and Petrick, 2018), rendering horizontality vulnerable to informal power hierarchies (Costanza-Chock, 2012; Wolfson, 2013). To address this, feminist and anarchist movements have introduced intersectionality into practices of horizontality (Breton et al., 2012; Rodríguez and Moreno, 2016; Sitrin, 2006).

In our research, many female and/or queer and/or racialized activists involved in Indymedia said they found it challenging to fight for a voice within Indymedia, and instead decided to leave to create their own media activist projects. It is therefore crucial to examine not only ways in which digital media are integrated into multi-issue struggles against exogenous socio-political oppressions but also ways in which intersectionality is integrated into horizontal practices within media activist projects to challenge endogenous oppressions. Thus, while other interventions in this Special Issue forensically analyze historical practices of specific Indymedia groups, we argue that there are many subsequent intersectional media projects and practices that have taken lessons from and moved beyond Indymedia legacies.

We first present a brief methodology and theoretical framework. These are followed by observations from our research with intersectional media activists, focusing predominantly on two case studies: *Mídia Ninja* in Brazil and *XNet* in Spain. In rendering more nuanced the reductionist binary that situates information and communication technologies (ICTs) as either deterministically revolutionary or complicit with capitalism (Treré et al., 2017), we argue that the media practices in the recent wave of anti-capitalist technopolitics movements have shaped and been shaped not just by specific affordances of digital technologies but also by the evolution of horizontality to include intersectionality in multi-issue movements and media activism. Moreover, we have found that specifically in Spain and Brazil, these intersectional practices within technopolitics reflect and extend the legacies of Indymedia through both endogenous and exogenous politics.

Methodology

This research draws on 37 semi-structured interviews. From a 2015 project on *Protest Media Ecologies*, we selected data on Spain ($n=20$), and from a project on *Indymedia 2.0: New Media Activism in the Global Digital Economy*, we selected data on Brazil ($n=10$) and Spain ($n=7$). Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and collaboratively analyzed using NVivo (Jeppesen et al., 2017).

Theoretical framework

Scholars have investigated the Spanish 15M movement use of *technopolitics*, defined as subversive use of digital technologies by anti-capitalist social movements (Toret et al., 2013: 20), enabling connected multitudes to coordinate connective action (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). The concept originated and remains most active in Latin America and Spain (Kurban et al., 2017; Caballero and Gravante, 2017) and has been linked to the free culture movement (Fuster Morell, 2012), which played a pivotal role in actuating Indymedia in 1999 at the Seattle anti-WTO protests (Milberry and Anderson, 2009), the Occupy movement (Giraud, 2014), and the Spanish Indignados (Treré et al., 2017). The free culture movement is well known for its use of horizontality, but less so for its use of intersectionality; yet we find both to be active, intertwined legacies of Indymedia. We will briefly outline how we understand these key terms.

Media practices of *horizontality* are processes of ‘democratic communication on a level plane [that] involves – or at least intentionally strives towards – non-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian creation’ (Sitrin, 2006: 3). These practices of *horizontality* (or horizontalism) are key legacies of Indymedia processes used to challenge inequalities that play out within media projects (Costanza-Chock, 2012; Freeman, 2013; Sitrin, 2006, 2012) and to foster the development of equitable social practices within media activism (Ascacibar, 2017; Garcia Sanchez, 2017; Kurban et al., 2017; Caballero and Gravante, 2017).

In the media projects interviewed, in describing practices of horizontality, media activists have consistently referenced *intersectionality*, defined as the ways in which individual identities and interlocking structures of power mutually shape and influence each other along axes of race, class, gender, sex, colonialism, and more (Collins and Bilge, 2016: 2). Increasingly, grassroots media activist projects integrate intersectionality into horizontal technopolitical practices to challenge intersectional oppressions not just discursively in media content but also materially in organizational practices. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the ways in which intersectionality is actively practiced within horizontality in any analysis of technopolitics.

Findings: Indymedia legacies in the global south

We have noted specific key legacies of Indymedia, in the cases of Midia Ninja in Brazil and XNet in Spain, whose technopolitics practices have emerged from, revised and extended key dimensions of Indymedia’s horizontality.

Brazil

While Indymedia created a global network, many activists and academics have noted that the core/periphery digital divide was never successfully addressed. When it comes to exogenous inequalities, Brazilian media activists emphasized how, in a large country with a history of colonialism, they continued to challenge the divide between core and periphery in movement imaginaries (Sunkel, 2007). How are these inequalities taken up in media projects that developed on the heels of Indymedia?

Midia Ninja: Exogenous intersectional inequalities. Midia Ninja is a free communications network developing technologies in tandem with intersectional collaborative labor logics. Their prefigurative horizontal network involves a live-work space where members transparently share resources in an intentionally anti-capitalist logic. Media content production and dissemination hinges on a counter-hegemonic, collaborative logic that engages affordances of specific digital technologies taken up extensively in Brazil despite the digital divide. As such, they use technopolitics or what they call ‘technical hacking’ to subvert digital technologies for revolutionary ends in combination with what they called the ‘social hacking’ of intersectionality:

livestreaming a future that everyone tries to push aside: as women, as black people, as fat people, as the LGBT community, as [people] from the hood, as [people] that have no money, that [have] decided to live a different way. (BR-MN-01)

Their intersectional technical and social hacking practices explicitly change social norms through technopolitics.

This characterizes an intersectional technopolitical logic, where ICTs underpin the struggles of Midia Ninja members against social inequalities, combining the politics of everyday life with digital media technologies to confront intersectional exogenous oppressions from a peripheral global location.

Endogenous intersectional horizontality. Intersectional practices within Midia Ninja are integral to the technopolitical practices of the collective house. These post-Indymedia practices have moved beyond critiques of straight-white-male domination within horizontal practices – which we characterize as horizontality from above, also noted by Wolfson (2013) – to create an equality-based form of intersectional horizontality that can be characterized as horizontal power from the margins.

Midia Ninja has intentionally put structures and practices in place to prevent the development of informal elites that generate endogenous inequalities based on inadvertent reproduction of society-wide intersectional power structures (Mansell, 2004). Participants described how empathetic dialogue provided the space to have empowering conversations about intersectional oppressions based on respect for a diversity of experiences, needs, and ‘timings’ or the fact that people come to political consciousness on issues at different times through different processes (BR-MN-01). This circumnavigates the harsh calling-out culture in North American intersectional activist circles (Vemuri, 2018) and is a more positive tool for collective self-empowerment that opens up uncoerced, self-determined, intersectional lines of dialogical communication.

At the same time, dialogical empathy is combined with an element of collective self-surveillance when it comes to individuals with privilege who may be reproducing social inequalities within the group; friendly conversations and humor are often used intentionally to curtail unhealthy precedents and re-center respectful attitudes, discourses, and behaviors (BR-MN-01).

The combination of intersectional empowerment and humor was also seen in the feminist magazine collective *Revista AzMina*, where (BR-AZ-01) a white woman, preferred not to participate in a TV interview and instead recommended a Black collective member, who was found by the media to be a ‘brilliant speaker’ and became *AzMina*’s new spokesperson. This example of horizontal task rotation, a process used within *Indymedia*, taken up in *AzMina* in this particular way, illustrates an intersectional consciousness, intentionally working against the only public face of the collective being members who experience privilege. Thus, intersectional horizontality facilitates sharing power among exogenously marginalized members through endogenous media practices that are not dependent on capitalist platforms or other digital technologies, but are nonetheless used in conjunction with them.

Spain

Spanish activists foregrounded their anti-capitalist politics as anti-colonial, tentatively positioning themselves as ‘the global south of Europe’, noting that geopolitics in Spain involves the complexities of a historically imperialistic country now controversially considered to be on the periphery within European Union (EU) power structures.

In Spain, (SP-XN-03) articulated an experience in France, where being a young woman from the ‘global South of Europe’ delegitimized her deeper knowledge of collective strategies through three intersectional structures: age, gender, and global location. XNet’s analysis of geopolitical location as a complicated axis of oppression and privilege articulates how they interact with South American movements in relations of reciprocity and mutual aid, allowing for the equitable exchange of knowledge on intersectional technopolitics practices.

XNet: Exogenous inequalities. As a digitally oriented, meta-issue, predominantly feminist organization in the 15M movement, XNet is concerned with multiple intersecting systemic exogenous oppressions in society. They were one of the key contributors to the technopolitical strategies of 15M and considered communication as a strategic pillar of the movement, much more than a layer to be added to the protest strategy: ‘It’s always intermingled and it is inconceivable to build a strategy without communication’ (SP-XN-03).

One particularly relevant exogenous inequality in technopolitical movements is the capitalist hegemony of the Internet. Activists are aware of the contradiction of organizing anti-capitalist movements using capitalist platforms. While much of their content and activity may be owned by large social media platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook, they understand the need to communicate with the large number of people that utilize those platforms, allowing their messages to be seen and heard by the general population. Activists understand these companies are making a business out of

their data and also that what they publish is not private but vulnerable to surveillance, so they use these platforms with caution. However, they also expressed the frustration of having no other options that provide the affordance of global reach in the digital era (SP-XN-02).

While XNet seeks to challenge capitalism, its mass mobilization successes have been provided by the saturation of capitalist platforms. For this technopolitical movement, the Internet itself is a space of political dispute; therefore, technopolitical activists also emphasize creating autonomous platforms such as Indymedia, or 15M's self-managed site *DemocraciaRealYa!* Thus, they have developed digital mobilization presences on both autonomous media and capitalist platforms.

Endogenous inequalities. When it comes to endogenous inequalities, a feminist intersectional politics of care is as relevant in XNet as in Midia Ninja. For (SP-XN-03), the anti-austerity movement was conscious of the need to make horizontality a prefigurative process. She describes the use of feminist strategies to reduce internal hierarchies, including: care-taking and respect when talking to one another, facilitation of debates, general assemblies, and horizontal directly democratic decision-making processes. This is considered part of the DNA of many of the collectives that were active in and evolved out of the 15M and were also at least peripheral in other waves of contention such as Occupy. The intersectional feminism of 15M was integrated into the movement's technopolitics through collective practices of empathy and respect, and collective mobilization and processes of self-organized committees, all of which supported their technopolitical foundation.

Moreover, XNet translates technological formations such as digital coding practices into horizontal organizational and decision-making processes. For example, they employ a sociotechnical process called 'the fork' which is adopted from writing algorithms. As a social practice, the fork

means, okay, I have this opinion and you have this other one, and none of them is better than the other. I will work myself in this direction, you work yourself in this other direction. The project can diverge, and both will be valid. (SP-XN-01)

In programming an algorithm, this appears as an 'if-then-else then' decision tree where two different pieces of code, or two alternative directions, will be followed. The social practice of 'the fork' mimics the technological practice, where each member can follow through in their own divergent manner (SP-XN-01).

Diverging viewpoints and work practices coexist as equally legitimate in a media practice that values everyone's initiatives equally. The fork, adopted in this way, is a technopolitical practice that is also intrinsically intersectional. The transparent work practice of using digital technologies to share labor, in combination with the sociotechnical mimicry of the fork to validate all member's ideas and projects, provides consistent mechanisms that work to create better practices of horizontality, curtailing the development of endogenous inequalities where one member's proposal is valued over another's, leaving the unvalued individual feeling rejected and the potential of their proposal unexplored. Thus, we see the reflection of intersectionality in technopolitics and the inflection of technopolitics in intersectionality.

Conclusion

Technopolitics is a political strategy of the movements we interviewed and can be seen as a legacy of Indymedia in the global South, including the ‘global South of Europe’. On the one hand, exogenous inequalities are challenged through technopolitics by a subversive use of ICTs against intersectional oppressions, though not implicating digital technology as intrinsically revolutionary because media activists acknowledge the Internet is subject to intersectional capitalist hegemony. On the other hand, endogenous inequalities are not solved by technology alone, because horizontality still faces analog human interventions best challenged through face-to-face intersectional practices and yet these are also inflected with digital technological logics.

As we have shown through these two case studies, in technopolitics, social practices have integrated technological structures, and technological structures are designed with intersectional social solidarity and horizontal objectives and practices. These intersectional technopolitical practices of horizontality, we have observed, had their early manifestations in Indymedia. Through emergent and established intersectional collectives and movements, these specific legacies of Indymedia will continue to be ‘livestreamed into the future’.

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