Media Mayhem

Anarchists and the Mass Media

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If the media is full of reports about violent hooligan terrorist anarchists, but the anarchists who appear in the media seem to be sane, rational, well-informed and articulate, the chances of the public smelling something fishy are increased many times.

lies and distortions. Basically, they depend on the fact that most people believe most of the things that they write. Although there is a widespread understanding that much news is sensationalised and closer to entertainment than information, especially in the tabloids, very few people have any idea of the process by which news is created and are ignorant of the powerful forces that consciously distort information in pursuit of their own agendas and will tend to generally believe news reports unless they have a good reason not to. Once the illusion of the credibility of the mainstream media is shattered, it is difficult to reforge. People who become aware of the depth of the manipulations and distortions can be difficult to win back, so the media, particularly those sections that have greater pretensions about their own worth, are cautious about publishing information that is seen as clearly false by a large number of people.

The most effective thing that we can do in the long term to limit the lies that the mainstream media tells about us is to create our own alternatives and give people access to information that we produce. In addition to creating our own media, by being active as anarchists in our communities, workplaces and campaigns, blatant media lies about our movement will prove more costly to the corporate media and will tend to push people towards us. However, in the current situation, with our small size and tiny circulation of our publications, these factors are only really significant in very localised campaigns or struggles on relatively marginal issues. When the might of the state and corporate sector decide to attack us — as is becoming par for the course in the run up to large protests that challenge the fundamental concepts of our capitalist world order — our own media and local connections only reach a negligible proportion of the audience. In these cases, if we refuse to challenge the slanders in the mainstream media, the vast majority of people will have absolutely no reason not to believe the rubbish that they are being fed. On the other hand, even by showing a willingness to argue our case in the mainstream, we place limits on their lies.

On one level the phrase "the media" simply refers to the various modern technologies for transmitting ideas to large populations, such as newspapers, television, magazines, radio and the new kid on the block, the Internet. These are extremely useful tools. They allow people to know what's happening in the world and hence share some common understanding with strangers. A fundamental precondition for achieving the type of revolutionary change that anarchists seek is that a large number of people actively desire it, or at the very least are open to it. Indeed, communicating "our beloved propaganda" to the masses has always played a major part in anarchist activity and hence we require the media. However, today, when we talk about the media, we also implicitly refer to the corporate machine that comes very close to operating monopoly control over mass communication.

This article examines the mainstream media and looks at the various factors which ensure that it effectively works as a propaganda tool for the powerful. It looks at ways in which anarchists can deal with this situation, by creating our own media, but also by challenging the hostility that they habitually encounter from the mainstream. It is mostly based on the experience of the 2004 Mayday protests in Dublin, which saw a huge smear campaign against the organisers, and looks at some of the ways in which they tried to respond.

Part One: Mainstream Media — The Propaganda Factory

A critique of the role of the mainstream media has long been a central part of the global anti-capitalist movement. Noam Chomsky's book and film, "Manufacturing Consent," can probably be considered a core text of this new movement. It provides a very detailed critique of how news is created and disseminated according to what Chomsky calls the 'propaganda model': a series of information fil-

ters which serve to tailor information to the needs of the powerful. This section simply presents some of these important factors in outline. I strongly recommend Chomsky's text for a much more detailed analysis, including a wealth of empirical evidence.

Ownership

With the increasing pace of corporate globalisation, the ownership of mainstream media resources like newspapers, television channels and radio stations is concentrated in the hands of an ever smaller number of enormous companies. As a result, the tiny number of individuals who own and control these companies enjoy effective control over a huge percentage of the information that is seen by the public. Naturally, the owners tend to favour news that reflects their own worldviews. So, for example, news items that are critical of the concentration of ownership in the media industry are unlikely to be very popular in their productions.

Rupert Murdoch and Silvio Berlusconi are two of the better-known global media moguls, but there are lesser-known figures who exercise a large degree of control within particular areas or industries. For example, Tony O'Reilly's company, Independent News and Media, owns Ireland's best-selling daily broadsheet, best selling daily tabloid, best selling Sunday broadsheet, best selling Sunday tabloid, best selling evening paper as well as owning more than 50% of all local newspapers and radio stations in the country. This naturally gives him enormous ability to shape the news agenda in the country.

Advertising

The primary source of income of virtually all mainstream media comes from advertising. This has created a situation where the media's core role is not to sell news to consumers, it is to sell demographic slices of the public to advertisers. As a result of this focus,

We should remember that the reason that they want to talk to us (and slander us) is because we are news. There is a growing ideological vacuum at the heart of capitalism. In its arrogance, Western capitalism has dispensed with the trouble of convincing its subjects to internalise the ideologies of the ruling classes. Abstentionism in elections is rife and pervasive. Trust in our leaders and public figures is practically non-existent. Authoritarian socialism has collapsed into a tiny shadow of its former self and either remains rigidly fixed into an antiquated theoretical framework, frantically spinning in ever decreasing circles, or has completely capitulated and signed up to the doctrines of the global elite. It is for this reason that we increasingly find ourselves, often unwillingly, cast under the media spotlight. Despite its minuscule size and negligible influence, the anarchist movement is increasingly the only source of real ideological opposition to the seemingly inexorable march of this corporate world order. Ours is an opposition that goes to the heart of the problem and rejects the system in its entirety. Most importantly, our opposition has steel. We do not shy away from confrontation with the state or with corporate power. We do not respect their stinking laws. We are a flag of principled resistance to their entire world-order and this is why they come looking for us in order to vilify us. And it is because of the depth of our opposition that we should always seek to prevent the various fools looking for a job in a city-council or parliament chamber from speaking on our behalf. We should always seek to speak for ourselves and let our difference and resistance be known.

Conclusion

The various filters of the propaganda model of mainstream media do effectively ensure that the media will be overtly hostile to anarchists and will publish material that is as damaging as possible to us. However, there is an important limit on how far they can go in their

Another factor is that the act of refusing to talk to journalists is very commonly used as corroborating evidence of the evil and sinister nature of anarchists ('shadowy' is a favourite adjective). Furthermore, given the open and public nature of many anarchist organisations and events, it is in practice impossible to ensure that there are no journalists present. This especially holds true for public protests and demonstrations but also extends to public meetings. In this context, attempts to filter out journalists will only succeed in rooting out the more honest ones who are willing to admit their occupation and are much more likely to write less offensive stuff, while the tabloid journalists who are 'infiltrating' the public meeting will simply adopt some guise and remain.

I should also add that attempting to physically attack or intimidate journalists is counter-productive and self-indulgent. It obviously ensures that they have good material with which to attack you and the rest of the anarchist movement. It has exactly zero effect on the dominance of the mainstream media, which the attacks are presumably aimed against. Journalists, particularly photographers, do often act in an extremely provocative way, pushing cameras in protestors' faces and so on. In this case it is quite likely that they are attempting to provoke a response. As an anarchist you are part of a collective movement and you have a responsibility to your comrades to learn enough self-discipline not to fall headfirst into this simple trap like an idiot.

Another important disadvantage of the strategy of not engaging with the media is that there is always somebody there who will happily talk on your behalf or about you and normally misrepresent your ideas to suit their own agenda. This can be a liberal protest group who will happily weigh in to the scare campaign in order to gain a bit of publicity for themselves, or more commonly one of the poisonous varieties of Leninists who will use the opportunity to promote one of their own cult-recruitment sessions, advertised as a rival protest.

the news content of the media tends to tailor itself to the needs of advertisers. For example, a publication that tends to be very critical of large corporations will soon find it difficult to attract advertisers.

Political Pressures

Media companies generally depend upon their relationship with centres of political power. This is especially the case with state broadcasters, where the government of the day often has the power to fire senior figures who insist on presenting information in a way that is deemed unfavourable to the political power. When the BBC made a small, routine mistake in reporting on the Iraqi 'dodgy dossier', the chairman was forced to resign after a government witch-hunt — despite the fact that the content of the report was substantially accurate. The mistaken detail was apparently serious enough to cause heads to roll at the BBC, while the mistake in going to war with dodgy information was not serious enough to prompt any internal action by the state!

Political pressure is also applied to commercial media who depend on access to information from the state (e.g. invitations to press briefings, leaks from government and security sources...) to fill their pages. Political parties and other powerful groups employ large numbers of people whose job it is to put pressure on media companies. For example, Alaister Campbell, New Labour's press secretary, used to phone the BBC to complain about their coverage on the Today programme every single day, regardless of the content. The reasoning behind this was that it would cause the BBC producers to shape the news in advance, as they knew that anything unfavourable would be the subject of strenuous and wearying complaints. Similarly in Ireland, IBEC employs several full time PR staff who spend much of their time harassing journalists and lodging complaints when they think that any coverage has been 'unfair' (code for anything that is critical of them or their members).

Finally, most states have various pieces of legislation which effectively discriminate in favour of corporate-owned media. Strict libel and copyright laws and the attendant risks of costly court action can be very effective means of excluding non-commercial radical publications. For example, in Ireland the libel laws allow the victim to sue the distributor. Easons, the company which exercises near monopoly control over print distribution in the country, thus requires that all distributed media should pass a costly legal check before it can be distributed. This effectively excludes virtually all radical and non-commercial publications.

Sensationalism and 'infotainment'

As the central task of the media is to deliver audiences to advertisers, the educational value of the content is a much less important consideration. The news media, therefore, tends to present information in as 'entertaining' a way as possible in order to maximise market share. This focus on 'infotainment' lends itself to sensationalist reporting, designed to catch the attention of the public rather than inform them. Thus, a fantasy about a shadowy group plotting a major atrocity at a protest is much more likely to grab the headlines than an examination of why the people concerned are protesting — despite the fact that the former generally has no informative value whatsoever.

Soundbites

The focus on sensationalism and entertainment lends itself to short segments composed of 'sound-bites', designed to be digestible to the lowest common denominator among the audience — meaning somebody with little attention-span and no knowledge of the subject. As a result, it is extremely difficult to introduce any concepts that fall outside the 'accepted wisdom' on a particular issue (the accepted wisdom being roughly equal to the points of view that

protest's success. See the box beside for an outline, or the online version of this article for full details.

Non Engagement

Several groups within the anarchist and broader anti-capitalist movement have adopted a position of eschewing all contact with the mainstream media, refusing interviews, avoiding photographers and even on occasion physically repelling over-inquisitive reporters. In the UK the Wombles and other anarchists have adopted this policy, after a long history of the media inventing plots as evidence of their utterly evil and sinister nature and mounting witch-hunts against individuals. A broad consensus emerged in much of the direct action movement in London that there was little point in talking to the media as it made little difference to their coverage — they would stitch you up regardless.

However, there is a serious problem to this approach. In general, journalists are only interested in talking to anarchists when anarchists are doing something that is destined to attract media coverage. This means that they are going to write about you whether you talk to them or not. Refusing to talk to them whatsoever means that they pretty much have carte blanche to make up whatever they like. They don't even have to take the trouble of picking a two-word quote out of your half-hour interview to fit in with whatever fantasy they have constructed to sell papers. In general, it is probably true that including comments from real and named people rarely makes an article worse from our point of view and it often makes it better. For one thing, as soon as they include quotes from a real person they have to start worrying about libel laws. If they are just writing about anarchists in general, they have no such worries. Despite their policy of non-engagement, the fact that they are named after a fluffy toy and the fact that their worst atrocity has been pushing a policeman, the media has still made the Wombles sound like a gang of crazed terrorists.

inherent hierarchical model that is assumed will start to rub off on us and we will emerge from the experience damaged internally, even if we do manage to put across a good public face.

Individual anarchists often have very personal problems with the media. As soon as any named individual is publicly associated with "anarchism" in the media, they become a target for character assassination by the gutter press. These types of attack can be vicious and can be very upsetting for whoever has put themselves forward. They can also lead to serious problems with parents or relatives and employers. It is not unknown for people to lose their jobs and seriously jeopardise any chances of future employment as a result of such attacks.

Taking part in the media spectacle that surrounds summit protests can have corrosive effects on the politics of the group. Even when people have a strong commitment to acting as a delegate of the group and not becoming a leader, they can become entranced by being part of the spectacle. Media exposure affects the ego. A desire for publicity and celebrity is a very common feature of our culture and people can become addicted to it. It is a very flattering experience to have hundreds of thousands of people seeing your picture or reading your opinions in the media. The lure of the media spectacle is dangerous for groups as well as for individuals. A key aim of anarchist activity is to break down the division between the actors and the spectators in society. Getting a few positive stories about anarchism among the celebrity features, while useful, is far less important than the task of building alternatives.

We need to develop structures that allow us to engage with the mainstream media on our own terms. The question of how we can do this was one that was explored in depth by activists in DGN, during the run-up to the Mayday 2004 protests in Dublin. Despite the fact that we were caught unprepared by the biggest media smear campaign that we have ever experienced, we managed to develop a model for dealing with it which eventually proved crucial to the

are most favourable to advertisers and owners). Accepted wisdom can be repeated indefinitely, but any sound-bite that contradicts it tends to sound crazy. For example, if you were to state the fact that the US is a leading terrorist state on US television, most viewers would assume you are barking mad. On the other hand, anybody can say that "Cuba is a terrorist state" and it will be accepted by most without a second thought. Thus, in the era of the sound-bite, it is virtually impossible for anybody who has an opinion markedly different from the mainstream to present their ideas in a way that will appear credible.

The position of reporters

In line with developments across the board in modern capitalism, the internal structure of many media companies has changed quickly. The number of full-time news staff has declined sharply and they have been replaced by freelancers, either working on short term fixed contracts or with no contract at all. This has led to a situation where editorial staff have less and less time to research news stories. As a consequence, much of the content is cobbled together directly from press releases and other such pre-packaged forms. Furthermore, without the time to adequately investigate any issue, content is considered newsworthy only if it can be squeezed into a well-known angle. Any news item that does not fit into one of these cliches is just "not news". Protestors can be presented as violent hooligans or harmless utopian hippies but otherwise they can be ignored.

The increasing preponderance of news-staff who work in insecure positions has also contributed to the decline in the quality of news content. Working in a highly competitive environment, with future employment depending on breaking of high-profile stories, the temptation to embellish and sensationalise stories often proves irresistible to those who are desperate to establish themselves in the industry. Attending a public meeting where reasonable people

discussed plans for a protest is a story that is unlikely to grab the front pages. On the other hand 'infiltrating a secret meeting where fanatics plotted to bring chaos to the city' might.

Self-censorship

Possibly the most insidious factor that shapes the mainstream media is what Chomsky calls 'self-censorship' or the 'internalisation of values'. This refers to the process whereby media workers internalise the filters that apply to the publications that they work for. This creates a situation where many will strenuously proclaim their freedom to write whatever they like and deny the existence of any censorship of their work. In general, journalists start on the bottom rungs of the media ladder, producing commercial features or lifestyle pieces. By the time they rise through the system to work on more politically sensitive pieces, they will be very familiar with the dominant ideologies espoused by the publication and industry that they work in. Anybody who fails to internalise the correct values will either fail to rise, or will face so much turmoil and conflict that they will be driven out.

For example, it is unlikely that the editors of Ireland's Sunday Independent have to refuse too many articles on the grounds that they are too sympathetic to Sinn Fein. Anybody who finds themselves in a position as a political writer for that publication will already know well that only criticisms of Sinn Fein are likely to be published. Furthermore, it is likely that only those writers who demonstrate a personal dislike for Sinn Fein will ever be given a job as a political commentator.

of anarchists can become a story, with an angle that focuses on the irresponsibility of the tabloids.

In some cases sympathetic interviews, that would be unthinkable in most circumstances, can get by editors in an atmosphere of tabloid hype. In 2004 anarchists in Dublin, Boston and New York received positive exposure in parts of the mass media during the hype surrounding major protests. In all three cases the positive coverage was dwarfed by the negative. We had "anarchists planning to gas 10,000 Dubliners" on the front page of the Irish Sun. But the outlandish scare stories were generally produced by the police and printed by "crime correspondents" dependant upon them. There is nothing that anarchists could have done to avoid these. However, the audience for the positive coverage that anarchists managed to achieve probably rivalled that which they could reach through several years of distributing their own publications. By engaging with the media in a careful, planned and intelligent way, they at least managed to turn the slanders to some good.

Anarchist Pitfalls

But even if we do try to influence how the media portrays us, there are major pitfalls for anarchists who decide to talk to the media and unless the groups and individuals involved are well prepared, it can turn out to be more damaging than helpful. The media are used to dealing with traditional hierarchical organisations, whose spokespeople are also normally leaders of their organisation. The media tends to identify this spokesperson with the organisation and focus as much on their personality as their politics. For most hierarchical political organisations this is not problematic, as they both want and need to build up the personal profile of the leader. They also have the advantage of being able to produce statements and responses at short notice as they rarely have to seek a mandate from their organisations to do so. If anarchists attempt to engage with the mainstream media on its own terms, we will find that the

can attract any honest coverage at all, we will probably reach more people in a single blow than we would with years of our own publications. Therefore, we simply can't ignore the mainstream media and concentrate on our alternatives, rather we should look for intelligent ways in which we can attempt to influence the coverage that we receive.

When I say 'influence', I do not mean that I think that anarchists will ever receive anything other than shamefully dishonest and hostile coverage from the media as a whole. However, Rupert Murdoch has yet to emulate Stalin's control of information. There are opportunities that we can exploit. Although almost all professional journalists do labour under the same structural conditions and within the same corporate framework, there are big differences in their ethical and professional standards. There are some journalists who will not set out to deliberately distort what we say and will make some attempt to portray an accurate representation of our goals and aims. There are even some rare ones who have somehow retained their ability to comprehend or even sympathise with our ideas despite the mind-numbing and narrowing experience of working in corporate media.

Furthermore, it is worth bearing in mind that the media is divided up into several sectors and there are significant differences between them. Local media and upmarket newspapers can't get away with the same indifference to fact that the tabloids enjoy. This is not to say, however, that 'serious' broadsheet newspapers are much more likely to paint an accurate picture of anarchists than tabloids are, or that state broadcasters are any more likely to sympathise with us than Rupert Murdoch's news channels are (although news is far from an accurate description of their content). However, the different sectors of the media can sometimes be played off against each other. The broadsheets and state broadcasters like to engender a sense of superiority in their audiences. When the tabloids whip up scare campaigns, spaces can open in the more respectable media for us. Suddenly, a realistic portrayal

Part Two: Building Alternative Media Institutions

For all of the reasons given above, anarchists and other radical critics of the current social order are never going to be given a fair hearing in the mainstream media as it is now constituted. On balance, the media coverage they receive will be overwhelmingly negative. They will be ignored, belittled, mocked, misrepresented, slandered, vilified and abused. There is nothing that can be done about this in the short term — it is a consequence of the structure of the entire industry and is outside of popular control. Therefore, in the long run, the most important task is to create alternatives; media that is not controlled by powerful corporations; that does not depend on advertising revenues; that primarily aims to inform rather than entertain; that is independent from political pressure coming from the powerful.

In the past there have been many extremely successful examples of people doing just that. There is a long tradition of radical grassroots publishing with roots that go back at least as far as the late 18th century, when Thomas Paine's pamphlet The Rights of Man was influential in popularising the ideas of the republican revolutions and uprisings around the world. During the 19th century, a workers' press flourished, producing numerous popular daily newspapers in new industrial towns in Britain and the US. In 1930's Spain the anarcho-syndicalist CNT produced over 30 daily newspapers, including the national best-seller. Sadly, with the growing importance of advertising revenues and the decline of radical workers' organisations, alternative, non-commercial publications found it impossible to compete with the corporate products and their number dwindled. Generally only those publications which were run by well-organised and committed political groups survive today. Their circulation is mostly tiny compared with the

mass distribution that the workers' press achieved many decades before.

New media technologies such as television and radio that were introduced in the course of the twentieth century tended to be even more tightly controlled by government and large corporations as they require greater capital investment. Today, there are only a small number of community radio stations and public access television channels that are truly independent of corporate and state control, and they have tiny audiences and minuscule resources to cover news stories when compared with the corporate competition.

To appreciate the marginality of non-commercial media today, consider the example of Ireland. In terms of print publications, it is only the newspapers, magazines and 'zines produced by small left wing groups and individuals that are fully independent of the various filters in the propaganda model. There are less than 100,000 copies of libertarian publications and maybe twice that number of Marxist and other radical publications distributed in Ireland each year. This figure is easily surpassed by every single issue of several corporate Sunday newspapers. In other media, such as television and radio, the situation is worse still. A couple of community-controlled radio stations compete against a huge array of state and commercial offerings with vastly greater resources and audiences.

However, the situation is not entirely hopeless. No matter how hostile and powerful the mainstream media is, radical political movements can still overcome the barriers put in their way. For example, in the 1970's Sinn Fein claimed to be able to sell up to 45,000 copies of their newspapers1, An Phoblacht and Republican News, each week . Although their populist nationalist politics are hardly radical, their military campaign was in full swing at the time and they were utterly reviled by the mainstream. Despite the fact that the corporate world wouldn't touch them with a barge-poll, they managed to build an impressive network of supporters to distribute their ideas to a mass audience.

our media is produced — participatory, democratic and open to radical opinions — represents a paradigm shift from the passive consumption that is usual with mainstream news. People are used to reading news that is written to appear as if it is written by an authoritative, objective and well-informed writer, with careful balance between the various opinions represented. In general, since they lack access to alternative points of view and are not aware of the forces that shape the process of news production, most people will tend to accept that these articles are genuinely objective and balanced. When they encounter alternative publications, they will tend to see them as biased and 'unprofessional' and will not trust the information that they carry. Therefore, even if we can succeed in making people aware of our alternatives, only a minority will be won over at first. Therefore, we have to reconcile ourselves with the fact that the vast majority of people are going to continue to get their news about the world from the mainstream media. This is something that we simply have to accept for the moment. We wish it was otherwise, we work towards changing it, but it exists and we can not forget that.

We also cannot forget that as anarchists we are attempting to change society. We are not interested in creating our own little niche cut off from the mainstream where we can live outside of the confines of capitalism. Nobody is truly free as long as one person is enslaved and even though it is sometimes possible for small groups of radicals to create their own cultures cut off from mainstream society, when you consider that this space only exists in the West due to the extreme exploitation of the poorer parts of the world, it is quite clear that for us to withdraw into our activist bubbles would be a clear denial of anarchist principles. We have a responsibility to try to convince as many people as possible of our ideas and this means that we have to do whatever is possible to reach those people. Every time an anarchist is quoted in a mainstream media outlet, no matter how atrocious the article, large numbers of people probably learn for the first time that anarchists exist. And if we

ourselves to the fact that only a small minority of the population, even in the richer parts of the world, will have sufficient access to the Internet to make it a viable source of news, no matter how high the quality of the material that we produce. If we want to change the world, we need to win over large numbers of people who will never have access to the Internet. So it remains of paramount importance to produce and distribute information in traditional formats. The Internet gives radical left wing movements access to a huge range of ideas and information. The process of distributing this information back into the real world through traditional media is a crucial part of the cycle. Newspapers, radio shows, leaflets, magazines and so on will be with us for a long time yet. Many Indymedia collectives and similar Internet projects are already addressing this problem and are making great efforts to transfer the information from the internet onto the streets, through printable pdf news-sheets, screenings of downloaded video productions, running radio shows and stations and hosting workshops, but the distribution of information from the Internet back in to the real world will remain the bottleneck for the a long time to come.

Part Three: When anarchists swim in the mainstream

Having stressed the paramount and primary importance of building an alternative media that is open, democratic and transparent, it is important that we recognise our limitations at the current time. An article that is published on Indymedia or in Workers Solidarity might be read by a few thousand people at best. An article that appears in the Irish Independent might be read by a few hundred thousand. A story that appears on national television news might be seen by a million.

Building up audiences for our media is a very important task, but it is one that will not happen overnight. The model by which

A more recent, if limited, example was seen during the recent campaign against the bin-tax in Dublin. The mass opposition to this tax was completely ignored by the mainstream media for three years. During this time the campaign distributed hundreds of thousands of leaflets and newsletters to Dublin households, through an impressive network of volunteers. By the time that the government decided to act to crush the opposition to the tax, large swathes of the city had been won over to support the campaign. The huge leafleting network was crucial in creating a common understanding of the issues among large numbers of workers across the city. The mainstream media did eventually start to cover the campaign, but only when the city was on the verge of being shut down by the campaign and then their coverage was a good example of how the media can act in unison when the interests of the powerful are threatened. Virtually every single piece of coverage in the mainstream media was overtly hostile to the campaign. Yet, despite the media smears, the long process of building a campaign and distributing information was strong enough that it took the full might of the state to crush it.

However, it requires a huge investment of resources for radical groups to be able to create and distribute their own media. In general the time, money and energy involved means that it is only relatively coherent, well organised and committed groups who are capable of reaching large numbers. This is one area where anarchists have often fallen down, especially in comparison with authoritarian socialists. Very few anarchist publications reach large numbers of people. Indeed anarchists often mock Trotskyists for their concentration on selling newspapers. Certainly the politics that their papers advocate and the forceful recruiting that tend to accompany their sales pitches deserve to be mocked, but not the fact that they sell newspapers, which is simply part of the hard slog of trying to build up alternative media.

However, the situation is not entirely depressing for anarchists. For one thing it is possible for anarchist organisations to expand

the circulation of their publications significantly with hard work and organisation. For example, the circulation of Workers Solidarity has increased by a factor of at least ten within three years. Now about 6,000 copies are distributed, mostly delivered door to door, every two months. In addition to the publications put together by organised groups, advances in technology have created something of a boom in DIY publishing of anarchist zines, mostly assembled by individuals or small groups of friends. Although these publications normally have very small circulation and tend not to be aimed 'outwards' at the general public, together they do serve to circulate ideas and debate among a wider group than would otherwise be possible. But most importantly, the development of the Internet has created a new distribution and publication method for radical media, one that has yet to fall under the absolute control of corporate or state power and one that is particularly favourable for anarchists.

Revolution in Cyberspace?

Despite the overblown hype about the potential of the Internet to replace all traditional forms of communication, its emergence has still had important effects. It has significantly reduced the costs of distribution of information to mass audiences, thus lowering the financial barrier to entry in the industry. This has allowed organisations without huge financial backing to attract large audiences to their sites without the need to depend heavily on advertising revenue. For example, the web site of the WSM probably attracts significantly more traffic than many of the mainstream political parties in Ireland, despite the fact that we are thousands of times poorer.

The inherently trans-national nature of the Internet has had important effects. By allowing people to communicate without any penalties for physical distance, radical political currents, which were previously too geographically dispersed and thinly

registered users. Most sit somewhere in between, removing disruptive content and personalised abuse, but allowing input from all political points of view as long as they do not contain hate-speech such as blatant racism, sexism or homophobia.

Although communities like Indymedia do eventually aim to challenge the mainstream media as the dominant way in which people inform themselves about the world, it is obvious that we are a long way from there. However, given their apparently utopian principles, their networks have flourished and grown. Although there are huge differences in the quality of the information produced on Indymedia sites, some of them have managed to become important sources of news in certain fields. For example, although the audience of Indymedia Ireland is undoubtedly mostly confined to people with left wing sympathies and it has in no way managed to become a real alternative to the corporate media for most subjects, with 50–100,000 hits on an average day, its reach dwarfs that of other radical publications. When radical political movements are particularly active in the real world, during campaigns, protests and disputes, the local Indymedia sites become invaluable sources of news that easily rivals the coverage of the corporate media. For example, in Ireland, Indymedia provided the best source of information about the anti-war movement, the recent battle against the bin tax and the mayday anti-capitalist mobilisation and during all of these periods, the readership increased enormously, peaking at 900,000 hits on Mayday 2004. Similarly, the New York city Indymedia site provided unparalleled up-to-the-minute coverage of the protests there during the 2004 Republican party convention to appoint George Bush as their candidate for the presidency.

However, while it is clear that communities like Indymedia are extremely useful in distributing radical information to large audiences and the Internet continues to be an extremely powerful communication tool, it is important to remember that the vast majority of the world's population have either severely limited access to the internet or none at all. For the forseeable future we must resign

inate the position of members with particular privileges that allow them to regulate the distribution of information. However, there have been several hugely successful examples where this principle is taken to its logical conclusion. Communities like Slashdot, Kuro5hin, Indymedia and Wikipedia are entirely managed by the community that uses them, and these communities number many thousands.

Indymedia is of particular interest to anarchists due to its political roots as well as its open participatory nature. It was born in Seattle in November 1999, during the famous protests there against the WTO and has remained heavily influenced by the radical libertarian ideas current in the global justice movement. Today, it has expanded to be a global network of open publishing news sites, with 150 collectives of varying size in over 70 countries. "Open publishing" means that all of the users of the site produce the news collectively, rather than it being a job of a small group. The members of each collective are responsible for enforcing basic editorial guidelines and choosing which articles to highlight as 'features'. The network of collectives agree to a basic set of goals and principles as part of the process of joining. These network wide agreements amount to a statement of basic anarchist organisational principles — emphasising democracy, accountability, openness and non-hierarchical structures. However, beyond the basic agreement of principles, the collectives are autonomous. This creates a great diversity within the network, which is particularly obvious when examining the editorial policies of the various different Internet sites. Some sites, predominantly in the US, practice a policy of free speech, where all contributions are automatically distributed, irrespective of their political point of view, which normally has the unfortunate consequence of a large amount of the content being made up of deliberate disruption and abuse. Other sites apply much tighter guidelines, even going as far as banning hierarchically organised groups from distributing information through the site, or only allowing participation by

spread to form themselves into effective movements, have been able to come together and organise in cyberspace. The global anti-capitalist movement, which exploded onto the TV screens in Seattle and Genoa, had a long incubation period on the Internet before it was capable of coalescing in the real world. The anarchist movement too owes much of its current growth to the Internet. Not only have anarchist ideas been revived in their traditional bases, they have spread all over the globe, often carried by popular websites and mailing lists to countries without any anarchist tradition, or one that was long dead.

The Internet's trans-nationalism has also allowed non-corporate media to somewhat circumvent the various legal impediments that states have devised to impede radical media. National copyright and libel laws are difficult to enforce when the website is physically hosted in another country. As an international entity, there is no single legal system which has authority over the whole Internet. Unsurprisingly, the US government have been taking steps to remedy this. They have effectively attempted to legislate for the entire Internet, through the promotion of multi-lateral agreements, like the treaties on intellectual property rights agreed at the World Trade Organisation, or through unilateral measures like the Digital Millennium Copyright Act, where the US attempted to prosecute foreign companies for breaking US copyright law. Although such legal control is still limited, it is a constant threat to free communication on the internet. History tells us that the more that states can legally control the information distributed on the Internet, the more dominated by the corporate sector it will become.

In addition to its low financial barrier to entry and its transnational, geographical distance-collapsing nature, perhaps the most important development of the Internet is a consequence of its fundamental communication paradigm. Traditional media facilitate few-to-many communication. This means that a relatively small number of people produce the information, while a large number of people consume it and there is a clear division between

the two. This model is favoured when there is a relatively high cost involved in producing and distributing the information. In the early years of the Internet, this was the predominant model for web sites, with sites being managed by individuals and small groups and passively consumed by viewers.

However, unlike a newspaper or a TV broadcast, there is virtually no cost involved in adding and distributing new information on the Internet. There are few of the same constraints on the size and volume of the information distributed. This feature has facilitated the development of many-to-many communication models, sources of information created by participatory, voluntary communities where the lines between consumer and producer of the information are blurred. This type of community stretches back to the birth of the internet and has migrated through the various Internet communication tools from usenet newsgroups to email lists to the World Wide Web.

Probably the most impressive child of the Internet is the free software movement, a vast and nebulous community of computer programmers, spread all over the globe, who use a production model that is much closer to pure communism than to capitalism — the vast majority of work is voluntary and the products are given away for free. This community is responsible for much of the software that runs the Internet itself and its creations have been crucial in the development of internet communities where information rather than software is the product. With the development of software tools to facilitate the creation and distribution of information by large groups of co-operating people, enormous repositories of information have been developed by ever-growing communities. The increasing sophistication and ease of use of the tools has been closely followed by larger, more diverse and more sophisticated examples of community organisation.

Radical political currents have been able to take advantage of these developments. In the English-speaking world, it is almost certainly true, if difficult to measure, that vastly more information written from a radical left-wing point of view is distributed electronically than on paper today. The nature of the Internet's communication model has also meant that those political movements which are more libertarian in their organisation, with considerable autonomy within broad agreements on principle, and more democratic and participatory in the way in which they produce information, have tended to take advantage of this opportunity much more effectively than the traditional, authoritarian left. Highly hierarchical groups are organised so that a small number of specialists produce the information, or at least closely scrutinise it before distribution, which is more suited to traditional few-to-many communication.

Many of the collectively produced, politically radical information sources on the Internet are intended for a particular niche audience and serve mainly as a means of developing the community internally, by providing a forum in which people with similar views can identify each other, get some sense of themselves as a collective movement and develop their ideas through debate and argument. Bulletin board systems, like urban75.com and enrager.net, based in the UK, are good examples. Although these communities are very useful, they aren't aimed at a general audience and will never compete with the corporate world as a primary source of information about what is happening in the world.

Other communities have taken the first steps towards taking on the corporate media. Sites like Znet, and commondreams.org gather together a wealth of high quality radical analysis of current affairs. While these sites have a large number of contributors, they still generally rely on a small group of people to choose what to include and what not to.

Some Internet information communities have attempted to go beyond this and facilitate as wide an involvement in the process of information production as is possible. Due to the fact that different participants have different level of commitment to the goals of the community, it is probably impossible and undesirable to ever elim-