

We the People, IndyMedia, and the Neoliberal Project

By [Richard K. Moore](#)

Global Research, October 20, 2004
20 October 2004

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

We the People and the Internet

Consider for a moment how important the Internet has become as a source of news and analysis. Over the past ten years, email lists and websites have evolved into a formidable alternative to commercial media. They provide people all over the world with timely eyewitness reports on developing events, along with a broad range of analysis and opinion. For many of us, the Internet has become our primary source of information. By selecting our specific sources on the basis of demonstrated reliability, we can get more accurate and complete news than that provided by the mass media, and we can find out about events that the mass media does not or will not cover. In my own case, I tune into commercial news media these days only to keep track of which spin angle is currently being sold to its mass audiences.

Equally important, the Internet has facilitated a global renaissance of public awareness, thinking, and participation. Discussion groups abound, supported by email and websites, on every conceivable topic and expressing every conceivable viewpoint. These discussion groups are linked by informal forwarding networks, so that particularly enlightened pieces of analysis or research soon find their way to the desktops of millions of interested readers worldwide. The Internet serves as an open global university, enabling academics, independent researchers, and ordinary citizens around the world to learn from one another, challenge one another's thinking, and pursue lines of investigation that are ignored in official academic circles and by the mass media's version of 'public discussion'. Thousands of ordinary people have been able to find their voice, and an audience, as active citizens with ideas to contribute to the commonweal.

The Internet has proven to be particularly useful as a facilitator of grassroots activism. Existing groups are able to stay in touch and make plans, and new activist groups have proliferated as people have been able, assisted by Internet connectivity, to gather together online and discover their common interests and objectives. The anti-globalization movement in particular has demonstrated the power of Internet to enable large, diverse groups of people to coordinate their activities on a global scale and mount some of the most impressive protest events the world has ever seen. In the follow-up to such an event, people around the world are able to promptly learn the truth about what happened at the event, particularly as regards the police response. Meanwhile in the mass media one sees only repeated pictures of a few violent demonstrators, and one hears only one-sided, official reports.

How different all this is from the days before the Internet! In those days one could get

alternative sources of news and information from fringe publications and public radio stations, but this was a much narrower channel than that provided by the Internet, and it was largely a one-way channel. Ordinary citizens could write letters to an editor, or phone in to a radio studio, but this cannot be compared to the kind of in-depth participation enabled by the Internet. Grassroots activists were severely constrained in those days. Coordination was limited to what could be accomplished in local face-to-face meetings, and I can recall long, frustrating meetings being devoted to the problem of raising money for postage to send out a simple political mailing. Today such a 'mailing' goes out for free with the touch of a button to an audience of thousands, and recipients can-and do- respond with their own ideas and insights.

To put it in a nutshell, the Internet has enabled an awakening of ordinary people as intelligent thinkers and participants in our political environment, transcending such massified concepts as 'the public', 'the consumer', or 'the Sierra Club member'. I suggest that participation, and being heard, are the critical contributions that the Internet brings to us, as compared to what we can get from books, documentaries, articles, public broadcasting, etc. The Internet is helping We the People to wake up.

Elites and neoliberal globalization

With some irony, the same ten years which have given rise to the Internet phenomenon have also ushered in the era of neoliberal globalization. While the Internet has facilitated democratic activism from below, neoliberalism has brought us an upsurge of corporate activism from on high. The global economy is a capitalist economy, and such an economy must keep growing, year after year, or else it collapses in a global depression. We don't need to subscribe to Marxist doctrine to know this-we can read about it every day in the financial pages. Corporations follow a law of the jungle: grow or be eaten. CEO's and politicians must deliver growth or they'll be out of a job. Unfortunately for capitalism, we happen to live in a finite world with finite resources. After two centuries of unprecedented growth and development, it becomes every year more difficult to squeeze out still more corporate profits than the year before.

Neoliberalism and globalization represent the global elite's desperate attempt to keep the capitalist machine going as long as possible. As room for real growth diminishes, corporate growth is being achieved increasingly by cannibalizing the rest of society: corporate subsidies are increased while social services are cut back; Western economies decline as jobs are relocated to wherever the cheapest labor can be found and exploited; government budgets are impoverished due to tax breaks for corporations and the wealthy; third-world nations are forced into dire poverty and civil war by IMF policies. Such measures achieve corporate growth while they impoverish the world's people, destabilize our societies, and destroy our life support systems.

Our ruling elites, fully committed as they are to capitalism, have no choice but to pursue this neoliberal path. They know full well that living conditions are going to get much worse and that people are eventually going to get fed up with the program. They know that the anti-globalization protests have been only the tip of an iceberg of discontent. They know that Venezuela under Chavez could be tip of another potential iceberg: it provides a prototype of what could become a widespread and effective third world rebellion against global capitalism. The Internet is the tip of yet another iceberg: it represents the potential for people generally to wake up to the reality of their oppression-and to begin finding their common purpose as members of an intelligent species who must see to their own survival.

When we see the neo-Gestapo police response to peaceful demonstrations, and when we see the one-sided media reports, we may feel frustrated at the seemingly unassailable power of the entrenched regime. But elites know, even if we don't realize it yet, that keeping the population under control is going to be an increasingly difficult task as the neoliberal program continues. They anticipate a crisis of control, and they have been systematically preparing themselves to deal with that crisis.

'Terrorism' and civil liberties

We can find an elite articulation of this crisis of control in a report published in 1975, the "Report of the Trilateral Task Force on Governability of Democracies". Harvard professor Samuel P. Huntington contributed an essay to that report entitled, "The Crisis of Democracy." In this essay, Huntington tells us that democratic societies "cannot work" unless the citizenry is "passive." The "democratic surge of the 1960s" represented an "excess of democracy," which must be reduced if governments are to carry out their traditional domestic and foreign policies. Huntington's notion of "traditional policies" is expressed in this passage from the report:

To the extent that the United States was governed by anyone during the decades after World War II, it was governed by the President acting with the support and cooperation of key individuals and groups in the executive office, the federal bureaucracy, Congress, and the more important businesses, banks, law firms, foundations, and media, which constitute the private sector's 'Establishment'.

By 1975, the amazing postwar economic boom was already beginning to run out of steam. For three decades, it had been relatively easy to achieve economic growth as global markets were opened up and developed throughout the 'free world'. Growth would now be more difficult to achieve—and within five years of the publication of Huntington's essay, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher had launched the neoliberal project in the USA and the UK. Neoliberalism is the elite's solution to the problem of achieving continued growth, and as early as 1975 elites realized that this project would need to include the suppression of grassroots democracy.

Grassroots democracy has been traditionally enabled in the West by codes of 'civil liberties', as exemplified by the American Bill of Rights. Freedom of the press, of speech and assembly, and protection against unreasonable arrests, searches, and seizures—these are the rights that enabled the "democratic surge of the 1960s". In order to "reduce" this "excess of democracy", civil liberties would need to be curtailed—and that is precisely what has happened in the ensuing years. Huntington's "The Crisis of Democracy" might have been more candidly entitled, "Why We Need to Get Rid of the Bill of Rights".

The means by which civil liberties have been undermined have been numerous and varied. More aggressive police tactics, militarized police units, and the so-called 'War on Drugs' have led to erosions of civil liberties both by legislation and administrative policy. But by far the most devastating attacks on civil liberties have come in the form of so-called 'anti-terrorist' legislation. Particularly in the USA, with the post-9/11 Homeland Security apparatus and the Patriot Acts, the Bill of Rights has been in principle totally abrogated. Anyone, American citizen or not, can be seized anywhere in the world and imprisoned without charges, without access to legal representation, and without relatives even being notified. This kind of thing has not yet happened on a mass scale domestically, but the precedents

have been set and there has been no appropriate criticism of these developments in any of the global mass media, nor an appropriate response by the courts.

There has been a striking pattern in the way this anti-democratic legislation has been introduced.

We will be briefly examining three particular episodes: the bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma, the bombing in Omagh, Ireland, and 9/11 itself. In all three cases—and this is typical of other episodes as well—an unprecedented ‘terrorist’ event occurred, and immediately afterward we find that a comprehensive anti-civil-liberties package just happened to be drafted and ready for enactment. And in each case—in the immediate aftermath of the ‘terrorist’ event—the draconian legislative package was passed virtually without debate. Furthermore, each of the ‘terrorist’ events occurred in highly suspicious circumstances.

Let’s consider first the suspicious circumstances.

The destruction of the Oklahoma Federal Building was supposedly the result of a fertilizer bomb set off by the lone psychopath, Timothy McVeigh. In fact, that reinforced concrete structure could not have been so thoroughly demolished by such a fertilizer bomb, and seismic records clearly show that two explosions occurred, not just one. The seismic record certainly casts doubt on the official story, but perhaps even more doubt is cast by the suppression of the second-explosion event in the mass media, and by the fact that the evidence (the destroyed building) was promptly carted away before any forensic analysis could be carried out.

There were other anomalies as well, such as the presence of an unusual number of FBI and FEMA agents in and around the building in the days leading up to the blast. And again, it is not so much these anomalies that arouse suspicion—perhaps they could be explained—but the fact that the anomalies have been suppressed in the media and no real investigation was ever carried out. If the event was truly the surprise act of a renegade terrorist, why would there be any motivation for officialdom to suppress the facts of the case and promptly destroy the physical evidence? Why wouldn’t officialdom want to delve into the evidence and anomalies and make sense of them, if for no other reason than to help prevent future such incidents? And why, at that particular time, did there just happen to be a comprehensive anti-civil-liberties package all ready for introduction to Congress?

As someone who has been living in Ireland for several years, and who has been tracking the Northern Ireland peace process, I was suspicious about the Omagh bombing as soon as I heard about it. It was completely outside the box of the IRA strategy and tactics of the time. The IRA had long-previously abandoned anti-personnel terrorism and had shifted to attacking economic targets, with every effort expended to minimize casualties. And indeed, as the peace process had advanced, the IRA had ceased terrorist activity altogether. The Omagh event—more deadly than any that had occurred during the painful years of ‘the troubles’—made no sense whatsoever in the context of Irish Republican interests or strategy. Soon after the event it was reported that the ‘Real IRA’—the alleged perpetrators—had long-previously been infiltrated by an undercover FBI agent. A few years later it was revealed that British Intelligence had prior knowledge of the bombing and did not inform the local authorities. Again, the circumstances were highly suspicious and, again, the event was immediately followed by the enactment of a draconian anti-civil-liberties package in the Irish legislature, a package that just happened to be prepared at that particular moment, and a

package that was passed virtually without debate.

The 9/11 events were so suspicious that over 40% of New York City residents now believe that the White House had prior knowledge of the attacks and intentionally allowed them to proceed. The number of anomalies is truly staggering, and I'll mention only a few of the most striking ones. The most obvious is the failure of interceptors to respond to the hijackings. It is normally routine in America for interceptors to scramble within minutes whenever a flight is off course, even if there is no evidence of hijacking. On 9/11 four planes were known to be hijacked, and over 40 minutes went by with no interceptor response. There have been attempts to explain this anomaly in terms of a NORAD exercise that was being carried out, but that explanation is completely inadequate and it raises more questions than it answers.

Perhaps the most compelling physical evidence, contrary to the official story, is the manner in which the Trade Center towers collapsed. The videos of the collapses look exactly like professional demolitions, the buildings collapsing inward, in a perfectly balanced way. Eyewitnesses, including professional fire fighters, reported hearing multiple explosions throughout the buildings, and seismic records indicate a strong blast at the base of each tower prior to its collapse. Elaborate simulations have been presented in the mass media that attempt to explain that the first tower collapse could have been caused by heat from the burning fuel. Not only is that explanation unconvincing, but it could not apply to the second tower, which was hit on the side instead of the center of the structure. And the explanation certainly could not apply to the third tower—which collapsed in exactly the same way as the others and which was not even hit by a plane! All of these anomalies have been ignored by the mass media, and once again the physical evidence was promptly carted off and destroyed.

We began this section by looking at an elite perspective on civil liberties, as expressed by Samuel P. Huntington in 1975. Huntington's essay gave us a context in which to understand why the termination of civil liberties is perceived by elites as being necessary to their continued operations. Let us close this section by examining an elite perspective on the events of 9/11.

In 2002, a think-tank, "The Project for the New American Century", wrote a report, "REBUILDING AMERICA'S DEFENSES Strategy, Forces and Resources For a New Century". This initially secret report, prepared by the same neoconservative clique that now dominates the White House, calls for a transformation of American foreign policy to enable the total domination of the globe and its resources. Indeed that transformation is now being carried out, and in the 2002 report (now available on the PNAC website) we find the following passage:

Further, the process of transformation, even if it brings revolutionary change, is likely to be a long one, absent some catastrophic and catalyzing event - like a new Pearl Harbor.

The events of 9/11 provided exactly that needed "new Pearl Harbor", the events occurred while the White House was under the control of the authors of the report, and the events were immediately followed by the adoption of the most draconian anti-civil-liberties legislation that the world has seen since the days of the Third Reich. And as usual, the anomalies of the event have not been officially investigated—and the draft legislation just happened to be ready when it was needed.

The IndyMedia case

On October 7, several of IndyMedia's Internet servers were seized in the USA and the UK. Rackspace Managed Hosting issued the following statement in response to queries by IndyMedia representatives:

In the present matter regarding Indymedia, Rackspace Managed Hosting, a U.S.-based company with offices in London, is acting in compliance with a court order pursuant to a Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty (MLAT), which establishes procedures for countries to assist each other in investigations such as international terrorism, kidnapping and money laundering. Rackspace responded to a Commissioner's subpoena, duly issued under Title 28, United States Code, Section 1782 in an investigation that did not arise in the United States. Rackspace is acting as a good corporate citizen and is cooperating with international law enforcement authorities. The court prohibits Rackspace from commenting further on this matter.

Here's IndyMedia's own statement, from their UK website (<http://solidarity.indymedia.org.uk/>), 19 October, 2004:

Indymedia is a global media network that provides open space to publish challenging, independent reporting, with emphasis on political and social justice issues. The Indymedia network is based upon principled mutual aid and voluntary participation, maintaining openly accessible newswires with the capacity for anyone to publish texts, images, audio, and video.

On 7 October, 2004, hard drives from two Indymedia servers were seized from the London office of a US-owned web hosting company, Rackspace, at the request of the US Justice Department, apparently in collaboration with Italian and Swiss authorities.

The seizure of the hard drives in London shut down an Indymedia radio station and around 20 different Indymedia websites including those serving Ambazonia, Uruguay, Andorra, Poland, Western Massachusetts, Nice, Nantes, Lilles, Marseille, Euskal Herria (Basque Country), Liege, East and West Vlaanderen, Antwerpen, Belgrade, Portugal, Prague, Galiza, Italy, Brazil, UK, and parts of Germany Indymedia.

Although the hard drives were returned on October 13, the particular legal framework under which the seizures took place is unknown. One week after the seizures there is still an almost total information blackout from the authorities in the UK, US, Switzerland and Italy. Indymedia still has no confirmation of who ordered the seizures, who took the hard drives, why the seizures took place, or whether it will happen again.

IndyMedia, perhaps more than any other single Internet player, symbolizes the anarchistic power of the Internet as a facilitator of democratic empowerment. Born out of the 1999 Seattle anti-globalization protests, IndyMedia was a spontaneous response to mass-media obfuscation of what was really happening on the ground. IndyMedia has since evolved into what one might call a "people's media network". It is interesting to compare the structure of IndyMedia with that of a commercial media network, such as CNN or Sky.

In both cases, there is a central clearing house and there are local outlets and local reporters. But while the commercial media centralize their editorial policy, IndyMedia leaves editorial policy up to each of the local outlets. Indeed 'outlets' is not really the right word:

each local IndyMedia site is an independent media operator, focusing heavily on local issues, and using the local language. As we can see from the list of websites affected by the mysterious seizure of servers, IndyMedia has a truly global grassroots presence. Activist groups around the world have come to depend on IndyMedia as a source of information and as a means of distributing their own reports and event announcements.

What was the point of this seizure-and-return exercise? The immediate effect on the Internet was negligible. IndyMedia had other servers and their operations were only temporarily affected. We might be tempted to shrug off the entire affair, and that is what is frightening. For what the IndyMedia case was really about was the setting of a precedent. A high-profile Internet publisher was attacked, no agency took responsibility for the attack, no charges were filed, and we are supposed to accept that as normal procedure in our so-called 'democracies'. Indeed, the attack on IndyMedia can be seen as an attack on the highest profile Internet target that was available. If IndyMedia can be attacked, then who is safe? The servers were returned this time, but who can say what would be their fate next time? This is the threat that is being conveyed to us: "Watch out folks, we can take you down anytime we please, and there is nothing you can do about it."

We the People vs. the Elite Regime

The threat posed by the Internet is the possibility that democracy might raise its ugly head. People the world over might realize that capitalism and economic growth are strangling the planet and enslaving most of the world's people. The threat of the Internet lies not in its current role as a means of information distribution, but rather in its potential role as a radicalizing agent among the masses of the world's people. Ultimately, it is the ability of Internet to help people find their common purpose that frightens elites. They want to set the clock back and disable our new-found people's media.

This threat to the Internet must be seen in the context of a decades-long program of dismantling civil liberties, in support of the neoliberal project. In response to their threat, we must of course do all we can to maintain what few civil liberties remain. But that is not enough, that is only a stop-gap holding action. Our appropriate response is to redouble our boldness, use the Internet to its full potential, and begin figuring out how the regime can be dethroned.

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