Indymedia legacies: technopolitical strategies and offline intersectionalities in Brazil and Spain

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Introduction

The Indymedia network is a global grassroots media network whose origins can be traced to protests against the World Trade Organization in 1999 (Downing 2002, 2003; Kidd 2003; Milioni 2009; Lievrouw 2012; Wolfson 2013). Originating in Seattle, the movement quickly catalyzed, spreading to over 100 global sites with IMCs or Indymedia Centres serving as a staple of mass protest convergences. The network itself is recognized for its open-editorial platform, which expanded into a global phenomenon, as well as its prefigurative combination of technology use and organizational strategies (Hanke 2005; Pickard 2006). The hacker ethic and free culture politics of their hybrid online and offline spaces (Fuster Morell 2012) has left legacies in technopolitical movements (Toret et al. 2013) operating to this day, particularly those in Latin America and Spain (Gerbaudo 2012). In this paper, we shift away from a platform-centric analysis to discuss the legacy of Indymedia in countries not often focalized as either being part of the network or even in aspects of alternative media literature, namely: Brazil, and Spain. These countries were chosen based on a need to fill in gaps in the literature regarding adaptations of horizontal media practices that are being established in "peripheral" spaces like Latin America and the so-called "Global South of Europe". We use intersectionality theory to account for multiple axes of oppression such as race, class and gender (Crenshaw 1998) within and across media activist groups who put intersectionality into practice through anti-oppression politics (Breton et al., 2012) as well as to shine light on the key axis of global location (Collins and Bilge 2016). It is important to discuss the ways in which these legacies map unequally across the globe, and at the same time to acknowledge that perspectives of the global South do not play out in a socially or geopolitically deterministic way.
Though Indymedia plays a part in this global phenomenon and is mostly known for its decentralized democratic processes (Atton 2003; Giraud 2014; Milioni 2009; Wolfson 2013), it is not exempt from the internal oppressions that Costanza-Chock (2012) warns us against. They warn us that "open" processes tend to favor individuals whose privileges of race, gender, and class allow them access to time, digital literacy, and socialization that foregrounds public speaking. It is important to mention that, although horizontality and consensus-based decisions are goals that are at times made difficult by informal power structures (Freeman 2013), they are also processes that originated in feminist and anarchist movements and were created with the knowledge that goals need tools to be achieved (Sitrin 2006), and have since spread to movements world-wide (Rodríguez and Moreno 2016).

Besides being the focus of this paper, Indymedia fits into a broader phenomenon that (Sitrin 2013) calls "new social movements". These movements often embrace technology as a core element of the pursuit of social change, creating a shift in communications, organizational structures, and media strategies (Lievrouw 2012). Local issues become connected to global movements, with ICT's making possible the potential for global mobilization across multiple digital platforms. These emergent conditions allow movements to organize around multiple issues at once, in meta-issue organizing that benefits from intersectional perspectives, as media and movement activists strive to consider the way multiple, converging issues influence and shape each other. We therefore offer an analysis of the impact of technological innovation on social movements while at the same time considering the ways in which these same movements come to terms with both exogenous and endogenous intersectional inequalities within their organizational structures and practices. In other words, we seek to examine the ways in which digital media impacts the fight against social inequalities as well as, more particularly, the struggles to operationalize horizontality within anti-authoritarian groups. One of our goals is to challenge the reductionist academic binary that situates ICTs as either deterministically revolutionary or intrinsically complicit with capitalism (Treré et al. 2017). We argue that, while digital media are immensely important in terms of "exogenous" practices that engage technopolitics, they are less relevant to "endogenous" struggles toward horizontality. In other words, technology is crucial to anti-authoritarian meta-issue movements, however, when it comes to the ideal of horizontality and the procedural means for attaining it, intersectional struggles take place in similar ways and using similar socio-technologies as were used before the 21st century. In this paper we will illustrate our methodology, following with the theoretical framework in which we situate concepts such as intersectionality, technopolitics and horizontality. The data discussion will begin with the Brazilian interview analysis and end with the Spanish analysis, both divided into sections of "exogenous" inequalities and "endogenous inequalities".

**Methodology**
This research is based on data-sets from two empirical research projects that comprise 37 semi-structured interviews in Spain and Brazil. One data-set was generated by a horizontal intersectional feminist collective in Canada called the Media Action Research Group (MARG), (mediaactionresearch.org), of which both co-authors are currently members. MARG has developed a Participatory Communicative Action Research methodology, as activist-researchers co-researching with and as media activists toward transformative social justice (Jeppesen et al., 2017). This first data-set consists of interviews conducted in 11 countries in 2016-2017, of which we here analyze those from Brazil ($n = 10$) and Spain ($n = 7$). The second data-set is derived from a project on protest media ecologies (Trerê et al., 2017) and consists of semi-structured interviews conducted in three countries in 2015, of which we here analyze those from Spain ($n = 20$). The interviews were audio-recorded, the recordings were transcribed and subsequently comparatively analyzed using NVivo.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study situates *horizontalidad* in grassroots autonomous media practices (Sitrin 2006) and consensus-based decision making (Atton 2003, 2015; Jeppesen et al. 2018; Sierra-Caballero 2018) within the intersectionality theory framework (Collins and Bilge 2016; Jeppesen et al. 2018). As defined by Sitrin (2006: 3), "*Horizontalidad* is a word that has come to embody the new social arrangements and principles of organization of these movements in Argentina. As its name suggests, *horizontalidad* implies democratic communication on a level plane and involves--or at least intentionally strives towards-non-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian creation rather than reaction. It is a break with vertical ways of organizing and relating". We aim to fill a gap in the literature between *horizontalidad* and understudied informal intersectional hierarchies in alternative media projects (Costanza-Chock 2012; Freeman 2013; Sitrin 2006, 2012) on one hand, and technopolitical practices within media activism (Ascacibar 2017; Garcia Sanchez 2017; Kurban, Peña-López, and Haberer 2017; Sierra-Caballero 2018) on the other. Scholars’ approaches to alternative media commonly range from a focus on the horizontal participatory processes of production to a focus on content critical of dominant narratives (Fuchs and Sandoval 2015). The need to create our own narratives and circulate critical ideas and political analysis is well summarized by the Indymedia maxim, "Don't hate the media, be the media!" This continues to be relevant in the interviews with media and movement activists considered in this paper as they emphasize a combination of the two approaches named here--horizontal participation and critical content. Many have also focused their comments on intersectional practices of *horizontalidad*.

*Intersectionality* as a theoretical approach is attributed to feminist women of colour, whose identities were not fully comprehended by a feminism exclusively focused on gender. As
described by Collins and Bilge (2016: 2), intersectionality involves understanding human experiences through complex, overlapping structures of power. More specifically, it is defined by the awareness that the organization of power in society is shaped by many axes of oppression that combine and influence each other in any given moment. This perspective allows us to expand our analyses of race, gender, or class in order to better represent and challenge the conditions of production of social inequality. We have found this to be a necessary approach given that some of the scholarship surrounding radically democratic media movements ignores internal power dynamics caused by intersecting oppressions. Though some are of the belief that horizontal participatory processes benefit all equally, Sitrin argues otherwise:

Our relationships are deeply affected by the power dynamics of capitalism and hierarchy, which operate in our collective and creative spaces, especially in how we relate to one another in terms of economic resources, gender, race, access to information and experience. We see this arise often in our meetings, assemblies, activities, and actions. While usually not intentional, power based in various sorts of privileges often comes up and can silence others in a group or movement. As a result, until these fundamental social dynamics are overcome, the goal of horizontalidad cannot be achieved. Simply desiring egalitarian relationships does not make them so. (Sitrin 2006: 3-4).

The infiltration of social inequalities into horizontal and prefigurative movements, as described above, is interpreted in this paper by the term "endogenous inequalities". It refers to the process of horizontality and to the self-consciousness over privileges it requires. "Exogenous inequalities", on the other hand, refers to the dynamics of oppression that occur in general society, which are commonly the object of social movements' desire for change. Most of the projects interviewed for this paper followed a blueprint of strategies against exogenous inequalities created by the 15M movement in Spain, the Indignados, called technopolitics or tecnopolítica. As conceptualized by Toret et. al (2013: 20), it describes the subversive use of technology by 21st-century social movements in combination with offline legal and political tools. According to the authors, technopolitics enables connected multitudes to create and modulate collective action. Though the concept originated in and remains primarily confined to Latin America and Spain (Kurban, Peña-López, and Haberer 2017; Sierra-Caballero 2018), it defines a process that is not confined by geography: the generation of new forms of power through the subversion of ICTs into political tools. From its origins in the 15M movement, technopolitics has always been strongly linked to free culture movement's values (Treré et. al 2017). In fact, Eva Giraud (2014) attributes many of the Occupy movement's online and offline technopolitical practices (such as listservs and physical media tents) as being underpinned by methods derived from Indymedia. Technopolitics is as much about political strategies in the context of contemporary technology as it is about power and agency in the digital age. It is particularly relevant when combined with prefigurative (Downing 2001) methods of
organization, which involves the practical application of radical values as a means for projecting an ideal future into an organization working in the present moment.

Discussion

1. Brazil
   a. Exogenous inequalities

When it comes to exogenous inequalities challenged by our interviewees, the Brazilian activists mention the need for geographical centrality in order to achieve credibility in their media work. In a large country with a history of colonialism, the divide between the "centre" and the "periphery" seems to be ingrained in activists' imaginaries (Sunkel 2007). Members of Midia Ninja, a free communications network seeking new forms of information production and distribution based on new technologies and a collaborative work logic, talk about this issue when discussing the challenges they faced to solidify the movement. The prefigurative organization of Media Ninja involves a live-work space where members share material and immaterial resources in a collective manner. While this model has its own inherent benefits and challenges, one reason for its success could be the autonomy provided by the group's use of technology. The creation of new, critical narratives is also made possible by the lack of a capitalist-modeled structure. In the words of [BR-MN-02]:

Since the beginning we knew that the traditional media would not understand what we were doing, and when they understand they would probably not like it because it's something that works in another logic - it's like, collective, collaborative. And at the same time, Brazilians have a very strong relation with the internet. Since Orkut, since ICQ, MSN, it's a huge country. [...] So, this whole digital culture thing helped collectives to exchange information and develop their work very fast.

In the excerpt above, the activist describes how Midia Ninja rejects the mainstream media's ethos by producing content in a collaborative, anti-capitalist logic. This rejection is shown to be connected to the group's use of technology, since the internet provided the autonomy necessary to reach a large audience that would provide the movement's momentum. When asked about their inspiration for a project that appears radical under both subjective and objective analyses (prefigurative politics and radical content), [BR-MN-01] says:

I am proud of being a part of Ninja because I'm livestreaming a future that everyone tries to push aside all the time: as women, as black people, as fat people, as the LGBT community, as [people] from the hood, as [people] that have no money, that decided to live
a different way. They are always trying to push us aside and I'm working somewhere that's giving me space.

Terms like "social hacking" and "livestreaming a future" characterize a technopolitical approach to Midia Ninja's social practices. In this sense, ICTs appear to be an integral approach towards exogenous social inequalities, as they suggest that livestreaming and other digital media are integral to their intersectional approach to external oppressions or exogenous inequalities based on gender, race, LGBTQ+, poverty, social location, and body size. This intersectional technopolitics approach is further integrated into processes used toward horizontality, which will be considered next.

a. Endogenous inequalities

Despite challenging exogenous social inequalities, groups that propose a horizontal form of organization must have structures in place to prevent the occurrence of informal elites as well as the internal reproduction of external power structures. These internal reproductions are what we call "endogenous inequalities". In accordance with feminist and Latin origins of horizontality (Sitrin 2006), Brazilian activists mostly described empathy as being specifically relevant to their prefigurative politics. [BR-MN-01] mentions encouraging the members of Midia Ninja to have conversations about intersectional oppressions and feminism. In her words, she says:

I realize that women have different timings, so I cannot push people to understand what I think they are going through because we have differences between us. I am a black woman. I am a black, fat woman. I'm a black queer woman. So, it has very, very different experiences for a white woman for example, or for I don't know, a lesbian woman or a transgender woman. Of course what I have to do is provide a healthy environment for them to empower themselves on their own account, but I cannot push it.

In this quote, the importance of empathy in the Midia Ninja household is attached to respect for diversity and can be seen as a tool for female empowerment. Despite saying that she will not push feminist views onto women, [BR-MN-01] also asserts:

I can push it for the men, I will push down their throats if I have to and with them, this is another action. We talk to a lot of the guys and we are trying to make them understand, like sometimes we make fun or joke about this. Whenever they are being sexist we will point out immediately and never let it go. That's one thing, if you make a sexist joke we will probably make fun of you, right at that point.

From this, we understand that empathy is combined with a policy of collective self-surveillance when it comes to individuals who are in more privileged positions in Midia Ninja. Whenever members notice that they are reproducing social inequalities within the group,
conversation and humor center inappropriate attitudes so as not to establish unhealthy precedents. The combination of empowerment and the awareness of privilege are also seen in feminist magazine collective Revista AzMina. [BR-AZ-01], a white woman, says that:

If somebody invites me for an interview, I say ‘Oh, I can't, talk to [name].’ Because maybe the media won't have a black woman talking, they'll invite me instead. And then she goes there and she's brilliant because she's a brilliant speaker. So, she's great and people see how great she is, and then the next time they're going to invite her instead, you know? So, that's what we do, we change places - it's not always the same person who goes to these interviews on TV or on lectures in universities and etcetera.

The situation described above is a prefigurative horizontal strategy called task rotation. It seeks to prevent members who experience privilege from overcoming the public face of the collective. Often times, the perceived leadership role of communicator to the outside world can lead to the creation of an informal elite (Freeman 2013). To [BR-MN-01], these conversations about power and social privilege work because there is an understanding among collective members that horizontality requires listening to people who are in different positions than one’s own. To her, this understanding is further enhanced by the goal of the project to tell stories from an anti-oppression point of view.

2. Spain
   a. Exogenous inequalities

Our data for Spain was gathered through interviews with activists from Xnet, a project focused on digital rights and online democracy. The group's current structure emerged out of the anti-austerity movement of 2011, also known as 15M. Activists mention facing exogenous inequalities related to geographic location differently than Brazilians. Understanding geopolitics as an axis of oppression in Spain involves understanding the complexities of a historically imperialistic country that is now considered to be on the "periphery", otherwise known as the "Global South of Europe". [SP-XN-03] speaks of her experiences in the social movements of France, where being a young woman from the South who did not speak French delegitimized her knowledge of collective political strategies. Aware of the intersecting inequalities surrounding her, she describes Xnet's policies for preventing their further reproduction:

There's a lot of cautiousness with not having ethnocentric views. We always try to remember and reflect that [Spain] is on the periphery of Europe, but there is the Global South there and there are mechanisms of exploitation that also come from [Spain] in connection with South America. We try to recover a lot of the history of South America because for example they went through this debt issue very very strongly in the eighties. And there's the de-colonial point of view, which is strongly embedded in social movements
in Spain because we have taken a lot from South American movements. We see them as movements we've learnt from, so there's always been a lot of respect.

As seen above, the Spanish activist is aware of the dual position of her country in global relations. Despite its colonial and imperialistic past when it comes to Latin America, the relationship between the Spanish movement and Latin American ones is that of respect and of collective exchange. Besides being a project with an anti-authoritarian prefigurative approach, Xnet remains a primarily digital movement. This is exemplified by [SP-XN-03] when she says:

Communication is not a layer you put on top after the strategy, it's always intermingled and it is inconceivable to build a strategy without communication. It's one of the big pillars. You even see older people now with smartphones, and using technology has been a very big process of education.

The quotation above shows that in their fight for net neutrality and the free culture movement, Xnet members see ICTs as being more than a tool in the project's repertoire. This is in accordance with Spanish social movements' profound embrace of technopolitics (Treré et. al 2017) as more than a series of technical tools, but rather, as strategies for social change in and of themselves. One particularly relevant exogenous inequality that occurs when talking about technopolitical movements is the capitalist hegemony of the internet. This drives activists to be aware of the content they share on platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, as acknowledged by [SP-XN-02]:

On the one hand, many of our contents are owned by super big technological companies like Twitter and Facebook; on the other hand, our point of view is that you have to be where people are. It's like, if you have a demonstration in the street and there's nobody there, your message will go nowhere. So for example if people are in the mall, even if you hate the mall, you have to go there and demonstrate there. So for us Facebook and social networks work the same way. You must be aware that Facebook is making a business with your data, so what you put there is not private anymore. We use them as campaigning tools but also are aware of all the bad, the dark side of these platforms. We also know that there is no other option right now.

As seen above, while Xnet seeks to challenge this capitalist online structure, it cannot exist without the mass mobilization provided by privately owned social media. For this technopolitical movement, the internet itself is a space of political dispute. In this sense, the creation of autonomous platforms such as Indymedia can be useful solutions, even if they don’t permanently resolve the difficulties.

b. Endogenous inequalities
When it comes to endogenous inequalities, the historically feminist politics of care are as relevant to the Spanish project as the Brazilian ones. For [SP-XN-03], the anti-austerity movement was conscious of the need to make horizontality a process as well as a prefigurative goal. She describes the use of the multiple strategies used to confront internal hierarchies:

15M was in many ways a very feminized movement. It was care-taking and respect when we were talking to each other, facilitation and debates and different methodologies to work out different decision making processes. All this became a part of the DNA of many of the collectives that evolved out of 15M, so when we have our assemblies or we organize days for strategizing, this is all organized by the group. Usually some are better, we call it 'Federation of Skills', some are good at communication, others are good at logistics, others are good at content making. Everyone self-organizes and we've never really had to work out how to access those resources, they are just there as part of a collective, common resources."

The quotation above evokes the technopolitical origins of the 15M movement as well as two important aspects of this legacy: the policy of empathy and the collective use and creation of resources. When describing 15M as a "feminized movement", the activist understands that these are processes historically attributed to the feminist movement. The description of decision-making methodologies and debate facilitations also For their horizontal processes, Xnet members employ a methodology called "fork culture". In [SP-XN-01]'s words:

[The fork culture] 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 diverse, and both will be valid. Another thing we do is work in a transparent manner: everything you do you share it with the others in open lists, so everyone can follow your work. If everything is going fine you just keep going with your work. If maybe you don't agree with that, you can intervene and say I think we should discuss this point of view, I think you are not going in the right direction in this issue. And then we discuss it, either in the mailing list itself or if it comes to that, a meeting. It usually gets resolved through discussion, and if there's a breaking point, there's the fork. Always the fork. If you don't agree with me, try something else. If it works we can go that way. If it doesn't, then don't just push back the work of other people."

In the framework described above, diverging viewpoints and opinions are able to coexist as equally legitimate. The "fork" creates a transparent environment wherein endogenous inequalities are less likely to form given the fact that no individual has the authority to lessen the value of another's work. Despite originating in open-source programming culture, the fork is used as an analog feature of conciliation when it comes to social
movements, facing issues that preceded the digital age. This is, perhaps, the most important tool described by the Spanish movement when facing endogenous inequalities.

Conclusions

Technopolitics is a predominant political strategy of the movements we interviews, and can be seen as a legacy of Indymedia. On the one hand, exogenous inequalities are being challenged by the projects interviewed by a subversive use of technology and ICTs. This does not implicate digital technology is intrinsically revolutionary given the fact that the internet is still subject to capitalist hegemony as is the offline world. On the other hand, endogenous inequalities cannot be fixed by the use of technology because horizontality still faces analog human challenges; similarly to when Freeman first wrote about it in the 70s. However, challenges to the process of horizontality are being faced by these movements by developing their own innovative tools as much as they are adapting tools left by those who came before, Indymedia included.

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