Indymedia UK was created in 1999, right after the first Independent Media Center was set up in Seattle in November that year to allow participants to the anti-WTO demonstrations to report from the streets. But it emerged from an earlier website, created by a group of activists to report from the occupation of the City of London in June 18, 1999. Since 1999, the website has kept growing, incorporating technological developments and responding to the organisational needs of social movements.

This interview recounts the birth and developments of the Indymedia London website and of the group running it. It was collected between February and November 2008 using the method of online asynchronous interviewing, and is part of an extensive research project on emancipatory communication practices carried out in the period 2006-2008.

The interviewee is a London male activist with a university degree and a background in street activism. He has been involved in Indymedia UK since the very beginning. He does not wish to be identified by name to protect his privacy. Maqui is his activist nickname.

SM: How would you describe Indymedia?

M: I personally believe that Indymedia is not about representation, but about engagement. It is action, and whilst it often renders conflict visible, it also offers communication channels that help connect lots of movements. In this sense it could also be seen as an organising tool and space for debate and experimentation that may be able to play a role in helping the development of new political concepts and forms of organising. Indymedia is just part of a web of uncountable experiments focusing on building up grass-roots autonomy. It is therefore an intrinsic part of those ‘movements’, and I think it can have a role in helping new waves of activism into whatever future we may encounter collectively.

SM: Why did Indymedia UK start?

M: The main motivation right from the start was the realisation that the so-called grass-roots ‘social movements’ needed new networks of communication that could not only work as a platform to project discourses and practices to the ‘wider world’, but also that the way these networks were created, run and developed, mirrored, as much as possible, the direct, participa-
tory, collective and autonomous nature of the emerging social movement(s) themselves. A single call to action, the occupation for over 10 hours of the City of London in June 18th 1999, prompted some people to think about the need for autonomous media production. This was seen, on the one hand, as a way to provide the ‘new movement’ with a clear and unmediated voice but to do so by incorporating the new emerging technologies and possibilities the internet was increasingly offering. On the other hand, it was also understood as a form of action in itself: direct action. The main motivation was very political (as opposed to a ‘mediatic’ one). For us the production of autonomous media was (and still is) a form of direct political engagement.

SM: What happened in that June 18th?
It was that Friday when the first form of autonomous, collective and participatory form of media was created here in London. A website went up called j18.org, and its content was created by the participants in the actions themselves. It wasn’t Open Publishing as yet, but it was as open as the technology available then would allow. An open media centre was created near to the location of the action. People would go back and forth from the action to the media centre carrying in films, photos, reports, audio interviews, personal experiences, and those would be manually uploaded to the website. (...) As it happened, the website also served a more ‘organisational’ function by default, which is the sort of “collateral” function of Indymedia and other alternative media during mass actions and mobilisations.

All this seems now almost irrelevant (...) But back then it really was a revolutionary tool, and an experiment of how this ‘possible other world’ could look like. Soon after that a group of people started to meet up regularly to learn, exchange, debate and build upon what had already been achieved on June 18th 1999. (...) One of the main (few!) things this group had very clear right from the start was that we didn’t want to become the ‘journos’ of the movement. We were much more concerned with creating infrastructure. If the ‘movement’s’ physical spaces (social and convergence centres for example) were so central to the building and projection of that emerging wave of dissent, why would not be the same in the ever increasing electronic arena? It quickly seemed obvious to us that both the real and electronic spaces were legitimate areas of conflict, and that one could not do without the other. We always have seen them very inter-linked.

SM: How did the June 18 group get involved in Indymedia?
M: Technology kept developing, and the internet increasingly became more and more prevalent in people’s lives. First came Open Publishing. A code mainly written in Australia (called Active) that for the first time allowed anyone with a computer and internet access, and from anywhere in the world, to publish content to the web through the Indymedia websites that were blossoming all around the globe. I don’t think that saying that Indymedia is the ‘mother of all blogs’ is an exaggeration.

Then came Seattle and the first Independent Media Centre, as it was being called then. The mobilisations to stop the 1999 WTO round took everyone by surprise, but the fact of being able to log onto a website and see the events unfolding in real time, unfiltered, and first hand was mind blowing. What we had been talking and dreaming about, suddenly was in front of our eyes, as by magic. We could not believe it, and the possibilities that first wave IMCs offered us were unlimited. For us finally technology and politics were talking the same language, and so the links between the physical and electronic spaces were becoming real. (...) A few days later we had registered the domain indymedia.org.uk.

SM: What has changed since 1999?
M: Obviously Indymedia has been changing and developing since 1999. New sets of editorial guidelines have been introduced so to try to accommodate the increasing presence of the project, both in terms of hits and in the numbers of people contributing to the Indymedia websites. The back office (email lists, wikis, irc rooms, life meetings, etc...) are also becoming more complex. As more people
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