"Principles of Journalistic Symmetry: Building News Networks Before and After the 'Publication' of News.**"**

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Abstract

This paper argues that particular realities of today's journalistic ecosystem— primarily the institutional breakdown of historically powerful media organizations and an increasing journalistic reliance on a variety of new technological artifacts— should lead researchers to supplement the traditional sociology of news paradigm that has emphasized the social construction of news and the unproblematic, routinized production of news stories. I argue we should extend organizational and framing research both forward and backward in both space and time. It would encourage us to concentrate on the means by which media organizations and ecosystems are assembled, as well as the way media outputs and "news objects" coordinate socio-technical action as well as engage in the framing of social reality. I elaborate this argument via an analysis of the Republican National Convention Independent Media Center, drawing on 8 years of participant-observation at one of the earliest online journalism and "citizen's media" organizations in the world. This analysis marks as a preliminary attempt to demonstrate the intersection between journalistic products (what we have traditionally called news "stories") organizational assemblage, and audience coordination.

Introduction

It is only a slight exaggeration to characterize the dominant focus within the sociology of news as the search for a meaningful correlation between *organizational structure* and *media frame*. By analysis of organizational structure, I refer to both the classic (Epstein, 2000; Fishman, 1980; Gans, 2004; Tuchman, 1972, 1979) and the more recent newsroom ethnographies (Boczkowski, 2004a; Cottle, 2007; Eliasoph, 1997; Klinenberg, 2005; Paterson & Domingo, 2008); by media frame I am, of course, referencing the numerous studies that envision "media outputs" as media frames, treating them as a functional analytic category (Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Entman, 1993; Gitlin, 1980; Goffman, 1974; Iyengar, 1991; Reese, 2001; Scheufele, 1999). In recent years, these dual foci have been supplemented, though not displaced, by efforts to ground particular news organizations more firmly in a "journalistic field" (Benson, 2004; Benson & Neveu, 2005) or new institutional matrix (Ryfe, 2006); by attempts to better integrate the role of culture or economic structures in the production of news (M. Schudson, 2005); and by

ethnographic work that finally takes technology seriously as a component of organizational structure (Boczkowski, 2004b; Hemmingway, 2008).

Recent real-world developments, however, may point to a particular need-- not to abandon the focus on stable news organizations and reality-shaping media frames, but to extend the journalistic-organizational-audience relationship both forward in space and backward in time. Prior to analyzing organizational operation, in other words, we should examine news organization assemblage; along with media frames, we can consider the way that news outputs coordinate social action. The rapid "decomposition" of the news industry (Downie & Michael Schudson, 2009; Free Press, 2009; Singer, 2003; The Project For Excellence in Journalism, 2008; V. W. Pickard, Aaron, Carig, & Stearns, Josh, 2009) has problematized the notion of routine institutional operation. Likewise, the increasingly powerful relationship between digital technologies, social mobilization and a deinstitutionalized digital ecosystem should encourage us to analyze news products as objects around which action is oriented as well as the framers of social reality.

To that end, this paper combines aspects of science and technology studies (STS) with 8 years of participant-observation at one of the earliest online journalism and "citizen's media" organizations in the world, the Indymedia network. It marks as a preliminary attempt to demonstrate the intersection between journalistic products (what we have traditionally called news "stories") organizational assemblage, and audience coordination. While Indymedia (both as an active organization and as an object of scholarly study) has been surpassed by dramatic changes at the heart of the journalistic field, this paper argues that a reexamination of key aspects of Indymedia's history can shed light on the dynamics of today's more wide-ranging media transition. Specifically, this paper examines the creation and operation of the 2004 Republican National Convention Independent Media Center (RNC IMC) through a scholarly lens that privileges both organizational construction and the coordination of audiences. I would argue that it is only in retrospect that we can begin to analyze the very real implications of this "first wave" of "citizen journalism" and digital media making that flourished in the first half of the first decade of the 21st century.

The Indymedia network, which began in 1999 and still exists in a truncated form to the present day, was one of these early citizen journalism organizations (though it itself did not describe itself in those terms), designed to allow both political protesters and everyday people to cover political events and issues journalistically by submitting their photos, text, and videos to websites consisting almost entirely of "user-generated content" (again, the term is an anachronism in this context and was never used). First launched during the 1999 World Trade Organization protests in Seattle, Indymedia was characterized by its strong political agenda, a decentralized, localized structure (with IMC's in more than 150 cities worldwide at the movement's peak), and its notion of radically participatory journalism. Owing, in part, to its protest-based roots (C.W. Anderson, 2009), Indymedia put an unusually strong emphasis on covering mass political mobilizations, called "convergences."

One of New York City Indymedia's most successful convergence-based projects was the 2004 Republican National Convention IMC, built to facilitate coverage of the party's political convention held in Madison Square Garden in August and September of that year. As described in a press release announcing the formation of the center:

> The Grassroots Media Coalition (*GMC) has opened an independent Media Center in Manhattan for independent journalists and media Organizations during the Republican National Convention. During the RNC, hundreds of journalists from around the country will work together in the IMC to produce coverage of the week's events that is more accurate and up-to-the-minute than that produced by corporations working out of the secluded Republican Party-sponsored press center in the Farley Post Office building. From August 27 to September 2, the IMC will offer breaking news and public commentary through the www.nyc.indymedia.org website; analysis and background information in hundreds of thousands of newspapers; in-studio interviews and live reports from the streets over a 24-hour webstream; and summary coverage of the days events through nightly television broadcasts. ("Press Release," 2004)

The specific details of the operation of this media center will be outlined over the course of this paper. For now, however, it might be helpful to briefly discuss the alternate theoretical lenses through which I might have chosen analyze these developments in New York. While the early-to-mid 2000's saw a spate of papers discussing "Indymedia," (Halleck, 2003; Hanke, 2005; Pickard, 2006a, 2006b; Pickerill, 2007; Platon & Deuze, 2003) most of this scholarship viewed these emerging media organizations through the lens of either "alternative media studies" (Atton,

2002; Benson, 2003; N. Couldry & Curran, 2003; Downing, 1984; Hamilton, 2000; Min, 2004; Rodriguez & Dervin, 2001) or, less frequently, as part of a scattered literature on media and social movements (Benford & Snow, 2000; Downing, Ford, & Gil, 2000; Ferree, Gamson, & Gerhards, 2002; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Gitlin, 2003). From an alternative media perspective, the 2004 RNC-IMC would probably be analyzed either as an oppositional cultural phenomenon or in terms of how the center contributed to various practices of "globalization from below." The social movement literature, on the other hand, most consistently identifies the value of various forms of movement media as lying in the creation of alternative "counter-frames," that set "up a symmetry between contrasting issue definitions, which grant different meanings to different issues, which are more or less able to attract public attention" (Marres, 2005). While both perspectives offer valuable insights into the operation of various forms of media, I believe they continue to isolate "alternative" or "movement" journalism in its own academic ghetto at a time in which arguably *all journalism is increasingly characterized by its fractured, alternative status*. This study advances a perspective that characterizes the (radical, it is true) Republican National Convention Independent Media Center as simply one amongst a continuum of decentralized media outlets; one that, in fundamental ways, contains generalizable structural characteristics along with its' deeply "oppositional" features.

Science and Technology Studies and Journalism

This paper argues that particular realities of today's journalistic ecosystem— primarily the institutional breakdown of historically powerful media organizations and an increasing journalistic reliance on a variety of new technological artifacts— should lead researchers to supplement the traditional sociology of news paradigm that has emphasized the social construction of news and the unproblematic, routinized production of news stories. Helpfully, the influential subfield of science and technology studies known as "Actor-Network Theory," (ANT) has already blazed this trail for us. While I lack the space here to fully engage with the various theoretical issues at stake in the adoption of this particular methodology (C.W Anderson, 2009; C.W. Anderson, 2009;

Nicholas Couldry, 2006; Domingo, 2006; Hemmingway, 2008, 2005, 2004; van Loon & Hemmingway, 2005; Turner, 2005), I want to highlight three of ANT's intellectual moves that I see as particularly helpful for media scholars. Actor-Network Theory:

(a) Concerns itself with both the production and opening up of institutional "black-boxes,"

(b) Focuses on the ontological labor of objects rather than their role as epistemological "frames" and, finally

(c) Blurs the lines dividing the various stages of the scientific process: between inside and outside science, and between "finished" science and "science in process."

Adapting these perspectives to media research would, I argue, extend organizational and framing research both forward and backward in both space and time. It would encourage us to concentrate on the means by which media organizations and ecosystems are assembled, as well as the way media outputs and "news objects" coordinate socio-technical action as well as engage in the framing of social reality.

--Fig 1 Goes Here--

The empirical data underlying this paper emerges from seven years of participant observation (2001-2008) with the New York City Independent Media center, one node in the worldwide Indymedia network and an active institutional participant in the organization of the 2004 RNC IMC. During my research, I loosely followed the principles of grounded theory, moving from broad questions to empirical findings, findings that in turn affect the questions asked and the subsequent research. It would be foolish to claim that there was a single research question and method motivating the period of research spent with the NYC IMC; rather, it was a long-term immersion in a particular set of practices and "modes of being" that shed significant light on the dynamics of journalistic production today. For this particular study, I focus on the time period between May 2004 and early September 2004 and draw upon a wealth of qualitative data,

including: personal observations and field notes from the 6 month period during which the NYC IMC organized the 2004 Republican National Convention media space; publicly accessible emails exchanged during the organizing period; web site data contained in the Internet Archive (http://www.archive,org); post-organizing follow up interviews with key participants; multi-media documentation of the organizing process; organizational meeting notes; and, finally, the content of the media coverage itself.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. I begin by discussing the foundation of the RNC IMC as an exercise coordinated assemblage of physical space, noting, in particular, the construction of the physical infrastructures that underlay the operation of the media space I then discuss the operation of the RNC IMC website (http://nyc.indymedia.org), focusing on the manner by which the website acted as an iterative inscription device (Latour, 1987; Latour & Woolgar, 1986), for both the assemblage and increasingly hierarchical verification of distributed news facts. Finally, I highlight the relationship between Indymedia's journalistic work and the "textmobs" activist coordination system. I conclude by showing how this brief overview of the RNC IMC's daily operations demonstrates the validity of a perspective that emphasizes the organizational-assembling, action-coordinating aspects of the sociology of news, and discuss the ways in which these admittedly idiosyncratic elements might be generalized when thinking about changing journalistic processes more broadly.

Assembling Journalistic Infrastructures

The "discovery" of the laboratory as a locus in process of fact building marks a turning point in the study of scientific practice. Once content to see science as the mediation between nature and society, between reality and the individual, sociologists of science could now focus on the material practices by and through which nature was transcribed, transported, and transformed (Cetina & Karin, 1992; Kohler, 2003; Latour & Woolgar, 1986; Star & Griesemer, 1989). In their own studies of journalistic fact building, sociologists of the news were able to largely bypass the debates that dogged students of science studies as they struggled to take this step "into the

laboratory." From the earliest studies of "social control in the newsroom" (Breed, 1954) to the most recent newsroom ethnographies (Cottle, 2007), much of the emphasis in analyses of journalistic work has *always* been on the physical space of news production. Rethinking newsroom scholarship in light of science and technology studies, however, can alert us to the fact that news-spaces are themselves constructed spaces. They can help us once again see the newsroom as a provisional apparatus that facilitates a particular organizational goal. While, in the era of "news modernism" (Barnhurst & Nerone, 2002) the existence of these constructed spaces appeared both uniform and unproblematic, the recent breakdown of the journalism industry can act like a crack in the earth's crust, exposing the *infrastructures* that are embedded in the operation of journalistic space. Above all, studying the practices through which a temporary media project assembled its digital newsroom can alerts us to what Bowker and Star have called the "moving target of infrastructure, and the breakdown of infrastructure that opens the 'taken for granted.'" (Star & Bowker, 2006).

The basic operations and purposes of the 2004 Republican National Convention Independent Media Center might be described as follows. Thousands, and possibly tens of thousands of activists would descend upon New York City in the last week of August 2004 to protest the policies of George W. Bush. As had been the case for the last half decade, at least a few the activists would want to document their own vision of the political issues of the day, and would want to produce media about the actual protests. They would, the thinking went, a centralized website on which to upload and distribute their media. They would also need a physical hub somewhere in New York City in which to assemble, network, and utilize a variety of electronic media-making equipment they might not already own (fieldwork, 2004). These so-called "convergence centers" (fieldwork, 2002-2004) were a common feature of anti-globalization protest events in the decade between the 1999 Seattle World Trade Organization protests (cite) and the election of Barak Obama.

Nevertheless: it is not inevitable, or even obvious, that a temporary activist media project like the RNC IMC would need to operate inside a physical space. Indeed, there is much about the media coverage produced by groups like the IMC that would make securing a real-world location

seem *less* desirable. Securing such a space is both time-consuming and expensive, particularly

in New York. Some activists expressed security concerns about having numerous activist-

journalists in a single space ("[imc-rnc-converge] space issues," 2004). What's more, much

(though not all) of the RNC media work was produced and distributed on the internet, which

would seem to render a physical location superfluous. The fact that these shoestring citizen

journalists put such an immense amount of work into securing a home for the RNC Independent

Media Center represents both a problem to be solved, and a testimony to the continued

importance of both newsrooms *and* infrastructures in the world of digital media production.

While we might choose to cut into the lengthy process of securing a convergence space

from any number of directions—deciding upon a location, coming up with registration guidelines,

determining a list of equipment needs, signing a contract, etc-- I have chosen to briefly focus on

the process by which citizen journalists wired their temporary media center to facilitate internet

use. The production and uploading of media from inside the convergence center necessitated

stable and widely distributed internet access. Group emails from the summer of 2004 noted that,

to secure internet access, space organizers arranged for the simultaneous installation of both

subscriber lines (DSL) and a fiber optic (T1) line ("[imc-rnc-converge] space issues," 2004). As

one Indymedia volunteer at the time remembers:

> We had to figure out how you want to get internet in the space. I think we had two DSL
> lines from Verizon. It might have even been donated or provided at cost or something.
> And then we had the T1 line from Verizon. We also looked into this wireless solution, but
> they would only do it with a year contract, which is stupid … We actually got lucky with
> that space because it was already internet ready. We ran the network cable in here and
> ran the cable all over the place … we didn't have to run wiring from room to room.
> Obviously, the wiring within the rooms was not setup the way that we needed it … It was
> sort of before everyone just expected wireless all the time. So we had to provide
> connections for laptops and we had to provide computers for people. That was actually
> another huge project - setting up a computer lab of 20 computers (interview, 3/12/2010).

The volunteer also noted that, in addition to the installation of wiring and the securing of

an internet contract through Verizon, additional equipment was needed to make the T1 line

usable. And a second piece of equipment was also necessary in order to manage the different

internet connections within the RNC space itself. Regarding the router, referred to in emails as

the "Cisco router":

> We needed a router, because there's a kind of Internet connection called T1 XM, which is supposedly very reliable. So we had one at the RNC space. But you needed this piece of hardware called a router to plug into the thing that comes from the telephone company, and it transforms it into something useful within a network … So this was probably a $3,000 piece of hardware. We knew that we needed it for, what was it, 2 weeks? If we didn't have it, the whole T1 would be useless. So we went on the radio to say does anyone have a spare one? So someone wrote to us and said, "Yes, I work for an Internet company. I have one. I can lend it to you." I think the guy didn't want us to know who he was. So I think someone was coming from Atlanta to New York for the protests, and was able to stop by and pick it up. But the guy who gave it to us was hiding. He just opened the door a crack. We just saw it from behind the door. We just snuck it through the door (interview, 3/12/2010).

In addition to obtaining this "Cisco router," which would "translate 1-speak into the

Ethernet which can be used by computers," ("[rnc-mediaspace] t1 router," 2004) volunteers also

needed to install a second router that would manage the different on-site internet connections,

and eventually succeeded by securing ownership of a fragile computer that was given the

affectionate nickname "Magic."

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--Fig. 3 goes here--

Figure 2 shows this second router, "Magic," while Figure 3 is an onsite, hand-drawn

schematic of the internet setup at the RNC IMC. According to interviews with and emails from

multiple IMC volunteers, among the many distinguishing features of "Magic" was that it would not

turn on if it was kept inside its normal metal case:

> Volunteer: Again, it was donated hardware. It didn't work if we put it into a metal case. There was obviously some short somewhere. So the entire Internet was running through this thing.
> Author: So, basically, if you tried to put the computer inside a normal metal box, it would just stop?
> Volunteer: It wouldn't go on.
> Author: So figuring this out is something that takes time.

Volunteer: Yes. Coming to the conclusion that this computer actually worked or not when inside the case takes a long time. And troubleshooting, that's takes a long time too. Well, the people working on the project were not experts in this particular area, so it takes time. (interview, 3/12/2010).

The tenuous materiality of the RNC Independent Media Space should now be obvious. In addition to tracking down a number of other, equally essential supplies[1], securing a lease, and managing a mailing list of hundreds of volunteers from around the world, volunteer technologists were dependent upon a T1 router which was transported in secret from Atlanta, as well as second router that would not turn on if it was kept inside its case. These are extreme examples, to be sure, but they are only two of many that might be chosen. Indeed, internet wiring is certainly a journalistic "infrastructure," in Bowker and Star's technical sense of the word (it exists in multiple newsrooms across the country and world) but its very temporality and fragility of it in this particular case helps draw our attention to aspects of journalistic assemblage are usually overlooked. These routers and T1 lines-- teetering on the verge of malfunction, needing to be found and transported in secret across state lines, needing to be installed and paid for-- highlight the deeply material objects that undergird the construction of online journalism's seemingly weightless, digital forms.

Indymedia Journalism and the Aggregation of News Objects

For RNC-IMC organizers, assembling location-based infrastructures was clearly subordinate to the production of journalism. Spaces were built in order to make journalism possible. But what kind of journalism? How did the RNC-IMC coordinate its network of decentralized citizen reporters, both organizationally and with regard to the production of news content? What was the relationship between physical space and editorial practices? The following section examines the actual journalistic work at the RNC-IMC, paying particular attention to the

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[1]An early list of needed supplies included: "4 computers [preferably Macs] with Photoshop; one flat bed scanner and negative scanner; power strips; film batteries; printer with good image capability; 3 computers for video editing, preferably with software already installed; external hard drive [preferably 120 GB]; 6 mini dv cameras; mini dv tape stock; digital-8 deck; firewire cables; power strips..." ("[rnc-mediaspace] equipment needs," 2004)

manner in which these practices were grounded in the infrastructural aggregates already discussed.

--Fig 4 goes here--

During earlier periods of protest coverage, Indymedia's citizen journalism methods were deceptively simple. "I'm pretty sure we distributed a high volume of paper cards [to would-be protesters], saying 'call this phone number'" If you have information about something that happened at the protest. "And so we had people sitting by the phone typing up reports that would come in over the phone," and entering them into our website's breaking and open newswire (interview, 3/19/2010). Only in retrospect does this method seem intuitive; the near-instantaneous transmission of news online is a recent (though now ubiquitous) phenomenon ,never mind the collection and distribution of that news by volunteers and, in many case, by strangers[2]

Information provided by protester-journalists was materially inscribed[3] on the http://nyc.indymedia.org website in a fashion that allowed for the visual display of facts and stories in a hierarchy of both importance and verifiability. On the far right side of the website was column labeled "Open Newswire," which consisted of reverse chronological order news and opinion submissions from anyone who had a story or news item to share. At the top of the center of the website, in a red-bordered box labeled "Critical Mass Arrests and Other Updates" were a series of time-stamped updates on the protests as they unfolded. While both the "open newswire" and the "breaking newswire" contained bits and pieces of news, they also differed in significant ways. The open newswire was "open," as the name implies, to anyone and everyone who had something to say, with content ranging from video, audio, and pictures of demonstrations to political rants to comments from "trolls." The breaking newswire, on the other hand, was directly controlled by editors affiliated with RNC IMC, usually located in a room at the convergence space

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[2] Much has been written about the use of unverified Twitter postings from Iranian dissidents during the "Green Revolution" protests of 2009-2010, and much of the newsroom debate surrounding these issues has been concerned with exactly this question: how to verify on the ground reporting done by strangers.
[3] I once again draw on Actor-Network Theory here, particularly Latour and Woolgar's notion of the inscription device. "Particular significance can be attached to the operation of an apparatus which provides some sort of written output … inscription devices transform pieces of matter into written documents."

called the dispatch center, which itself was equipped with a series of telephones and computers.

Its updates were far terser than the content posted to the open newswire. These updates

contained no multimedia, and directly related to the unfolding protests. Most importantly, perhaps,

they drew directly on the user-generated content provided by citizen journalists, all the while

subjecting this content to an initially ad-hoc (but eventually systemic) process of editorial fact

checking and verification:

> "When we got information you can't totally trust or is conflicting with other information then you make some calls. You call back people that called before and say, 'Where are you now? What are you seeing now? This is something we've heard.'" … Part of it was verifying and part of it was asking 'how important is this?' and 'is this news?' It's, like, this is a big news story, then you want to get it to all of your outlets as fast as possible. Obviously you want it verified, but if you've got verified information and it's of journalistic importance, you want to tweet it because it gets on the website as fast as possible. What I just called Tweeting, we didn't have that then, we used to call it breaking news or breaking updates. We'd put it in the center column in the breaking news box. (interview, 3/19/2010).

Moving news from the right-hand column to the breaking news box in the center column

signaled an increase in that news item's importance, veracity, or relevance, a hypothesis further

confirmed by the existence of a third category of Indymedia content, called the "center column

feature." (cite, fieldwork). The top feature in Fig. 4, located below the breaking news box, is an

example of this particular piece of editorial content. Headlined "First Notes on the Critical Mass,"

and authored by "NYC IMC," the post went on to report: "the first wave of posts on tonight's

Critical Mass have come in. The ride was New York's largest critical mass, with well over 5,000

bikes. Gathering at Union Square in the middle of Manhattan at 7 p.m. and departing at 7:30, oil-

free transportation stretched across all horizons around Union Square…" (NYC Indymedia, 2004)

The center column feature obviously marked an editorial consolidation, overview, and summary

of *already reported news content located on the open and breaking newswires*; in this case,

information about a particular bicycle protest called "Critical Mass". It also demonstrated an

additional layer of verification on the part of editors, who were once again responsible for the

decision to write and place an aggregated feature in the center column. The changing hierarchy

of news objects within the Indymedia reporting infrastructure was thus inscribed directly on the

RNC-IMC website itself. News reports and "journalistic objects" moved from the scene of the

protests, to a phone, to the web, to the breaking or open newswire, and, occasionally, to the

editor-controlled center column, in a pyramiding system of increasing veracity.

While the process by which website editors and citizen journalists worked together to

report news was somewhat formalized by the summer of 2004, an additional journalistic feature

of the RNC IMC— reporting on the protests via the utilization of real-time radio updates—was

new, and directly related to the previously analyzed infrastructure of the RNC convergence

space. As one Indymedia volunteer recalled, the fact that the "breaking news team" was

physically located in a dispatch room directly across the hallway from the room in which the IMC

was recording its live radio show allowed for online breaking news and radio programming to be

fused in a new way (interview, 3/19/2010). During earlier protests, Indymedia radio programming

was primarily confined to after the fact interviews with eyewitnesses and protest organizers

(fieldwork). During the actual protests themselves, on the scene reports were mostly confine to

text updates on the website. At the Republican Convention, the architectural layout of the

convergence space helped facilitate breaking radio updates in real time (fieldwork). As one

volunteer remembered:

> Indymedia had, as long as I had known, done an audio web stream. But, as far as I knew, there's never been an integration of [the radio stream with breaking news on the website]. I don't know when the moment was when we decided to do that, but I think it was the moment when we saw the physical setup of the space. It was like, "Well, radio is going to go in there and dispatch on the room right next to it." Oh, then I think it was also the Merlin phone system, which allowed us to rollover calls. I asked [another volunteer], 'Wait. Does this mean we can take our phone and put somebody on hold here, then they can pick it up..." You know, making it so our callers could get on the radio -- people were like, "Well, wait, so we can take a call in dispatch, put them on hold and then they can pick a call over at radio?" … So seeing the physical setup and having the phone capability and knowing enough about radio allowed us to really merge breaking news and the radio (interview, 3/19/2010).

Volunteers with the breaking news team could verify the newsworthiness of updates from

the street and "prep" callers who had important information to share for inclusion on the radio

show. Because of their proximity to the radio room, they could easily communicate with members

of the radio team to prepare them for incoming calls. And the utilization of the "Merlin" phone

system would allow for the rollover and transfer of calls from the dispatch room to the radio show, which would summarize and contextualize the situation for listeners. There was a relationship, in short, between the editorial processes of the RNC media center and the idiosyncratic infrastructures within which it was embedded. While it would be foolish to claim that the spatial layout within the convergence center, the existence of a functional T-1 router, or the use of the Merlin phone system directly determined the RNC-IMC's editorial output, entirely ignoring the role played by objects and infrastructures in the creation of particular forms journalism would be equally mistaken. By looking closely at a news organization engaged in the process of institutional assemblage—by "making strange" the journalistic infrastructures normally taken for granted—we can become more analytically sensitive to this relationship.

TXTMobs and News Net

In the opening pages of this paper, I noted that the sociology of news has traditionally focused the relationship between institutional structures and media frames. In the sections that followed I extended this notion of "institutional structure" backward in time, looking at the ways that news organizations themselves are assembled and the relationship between this processes assemblage and editorial processes. In these final pages, I would like to complicate the second half of the news sociology equation: the focus on media frames. As I noted in the discussion of science and technology studies, above, it might be useful to see journalistic products, less as epistemological *frames* than as *objects around which action can be oriented*. Without pressing the philosophical implications of this move too far, I would argue that this would supplement the strictly social focus of much journalism scholarship with a more object-oriented approach. Once again, the organization and journalism of the RNC Independent Media Center can serve as a compelling lens through which to view the empirical application of this theory.

In the previous section, I described the numerous pathways traversed by news facts in their journey from the street protests to the Indymedia website. One additional source remains to

be discussed, however, a source that only debuted a few weeks before the August 2004

convention. As described in one contemporary press account, many protesters:

> were equipped with a wireless tactical communications device connected to a distributed information service that provided detailed and nearly instantaneous updates about route changes, street closures and police actions. The communications device was a common cell phone. The information service, a collection of open-source, Web-based programming scripts running on a Linux server in someone's closet, is called TXTMob (DiJusto, 2004)

TXTMob marked a technological elaboration of previous "flash mob" technology that had

been used to coordinate loosely structured, relatively autonomous political and social events in

the years before the IMC (Rheingold, 2003). The service allowed users to register with various

protest oriented message groups, and receive and send "mass text messages" to members of

that group via their cell phones. Journalists with Indymedia both monitored TXTMobs as an

information source, and used their own TXTMobs group as an additional way to distribute news.

A supplemental service, launched just before the convention, even translated these text updates

into human speech that could be listened too by calling a telephone number.

--Fig. 5 goes here--

As one user of the TXTMob SMS service wrote:

> During the protests last week, before we realized that they were going to be relatively tame/peaceful, I did a little research on ways that I could receive instant updates on events. The old standard is to carry a transistor radio around, but that just ain't my style. Plus, I did not own a transistor radio, nor did I have any urge to acquire one. Then I found TXTMob (callalillie , 2004).

Or as a user of the service summarized:

> Through coordination with the TXTMob service, in particular the NYC Comms and Indymedia Dispatch team, nearly five thousand people in New York, and some around the country, received timely and strategic information to the personal, mobile computing device in their pocket or purse. (Ruckus Society, 2004)

Insofar as TXTMob updates simultaneously (a) framed breaking news events and (b) served as a guide for protesters, they served as a tactical media device (cite). At the same time, however, "editors at the IMC also were getting all sorts of [TXTMob] updates. And we would get them and seek to verify them. That's the thing. A lot of other text message loops did not have the same journalistic criteria like we had (interview, 3/19/2010). Indymedia editors would blast their own text messages through TXTMob, messages that would, in turn, be read by protesters. Just as the open newswire and telephone calls from the street were sources of journalistic information that could also be used for actionable purposes, so too were the SMS text messages collected, verified, and redistributed by Indymedia reporters and editors. "One of the reasons people do journalism is because you think that people having information will make decisions to act based on that information," one volunteer told me:

> If they have better information about the world around them, or if they have clear information about injustice, that will lead to people taking action that makes the situation better, that mitigates or eliminates that injustice, which is basically what we thought about why we thought it was important to get this information about what was happening in the street, why people were there, how people were expressing themselves, how the cops were responding to that. We thought that if we put this out on a website or a newspaper, that would help, and it would encourage people to do stuff. But if you can get that to people right away, like you can in an instant text-message, and they start acting and responding to it right away, that changes the parameters of your ability to have an impact. Exponentially I would say (interview, 3/19/2010).

In straddling the intersection between news provision and action-coordination, in a way that prefigured many of today's short-form communications systems like Twitter[4] and Face book status updates, Indymedia and the TXTMobs service called into question the bright analytical line between journalism and the tactical use of new technologies as a basis for action. These 166 character messages were, in short, more than just media frames. They acted as a series of real-time news objects around which group action could occur.

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[4] Indeed, one of the unknown organizational spawns of TXTMobs was a messaging service called Twitter, as several people familiar with the TXTMob project helped found the messaging service. See, for instance, Sagolla, 2009. The full history of these developments lies beyond the scope of this paper.

Conclusion

The story of the Republican National Convention Independent Media Center is obviously

an idiosyncratic one. Under what circumstances can it bear the theoretical weight I have assigned

it: as an example of organizational assemblage, the deployment of infrastructures, and the

creation of action-orienting media products? While I believe that the lessons contained in the

pages above might apply, in a-historical fashion, to the sociology of news more generally, I would

also argue that our current period of journalistic transformation makes this analysis of the RNC

IMC even more applicable to today's media organizations more generally.

The overall argument of this piece was that sociologists of news might wish to extend

their analytical gaze backward, in time, in order to examine the *assemblage of news institutions*,

and forward, in space, to analyze the manner in which media products served as *coordination*

objects as well as frames. As has been widely discussed in the news media trade press and in

"future of journalism" reports and conferences, one of the primary outcomes of the current

journalistic transformation has been transition from institutional sources of news reporting to

temporary, start-up, or project based media organizations. "Different kinds of news organizations

are being started by journalists who have left print and broadcasting, and also by universities and

their students, and by Internet entrepreneurs, bloggers, and so-called "citizen journalists," Len

Downie and Michael Schudson wrote in their definitive overview of the current state of the news

industry. "Many of the start-ups are still quite small and financially fragile, but they are multiplying

steadily" (Downie & Michael Schudson, 2009). As the authors of a similar industry report noted:

> In recent years, *lean and mean* entrepreneurial approaches have taken off. Boing Boing
> only has eight staffers and other sites, such as Tech Crunch and Talking Points Memo,
> have a small staff as well .. As large journalistic institutions shrink, salaries will inevitably
> decline and journalists will also have to produce more and take on more than reporting
> multifaceted (The Media Consortium , 2009)

This is not to argue, of course, that all news institutions everywhere will be continual

startup mode. Indeed, traditional, stable, long-term journalistic organizations like the *New York*

Times (and new entrants, like the highly profitable *Huffington Post*) will probably remain the

central actors in he news ecosystem. Even at organizations like these, however, project-based, modular news initiatives are likely to increase. And without a doubt, the overall composition of the journalistic field is shifting away from stability and towards institutional emergence and flexibility. In this environment, scholarly analyses of emerging organizations will be essential. These assemblages will be physical and virtual; they will contain digital infrastructures, fiber optic cables, contracts, financing, and volunteers. No matter what their composition, their often-precarious existence will need to be *explained* rather than *taken for granted.*

What about the second theoretical claim of this paper, the argument that scholars should see news products as objects that orient action as much as they see them as social constructs that frame reality? Does this argument apply only to movement media, to tactical media, or to media deployed during protests? Does such a perspective simply return us to the much maligned "effects tradition" of media research?

While an entirely satisfactory response to this question would require a longer theoretical diversion than current space allows, I believe a key virtue of the science and technologies studies literature referenced earlier is that it allows us to bypass the somewhat sterile debate about "media effects"; as if media products were simply rays that penetrated our brains and did or did not cause us to behave in a certain fashion. Obviously, this perspective is not wrong. I am simply arguing here that it is not the only way to think about what the media does, and why it matters. By thinking about media product as media objects around which action can be coordinated, I am arguing that we can see the action generated by the media as existing in parallel to a vision of the media that sees it as an entity through which individuals can coordinate – or, or course, choose *not* to coordinate. The media produced by the RNC Independent Media Center was neither a magic bullet nor a hypodermic needle; rather it was a hybridized mix of tactical and informational journalistic products which facilitated political action. In our era of fragmented, startup, deinstitutionalized journalism, such a perspective on the media is not only useful. It is also increasingly true to life. This is a fact which future sociologists of the news would do well to remember.

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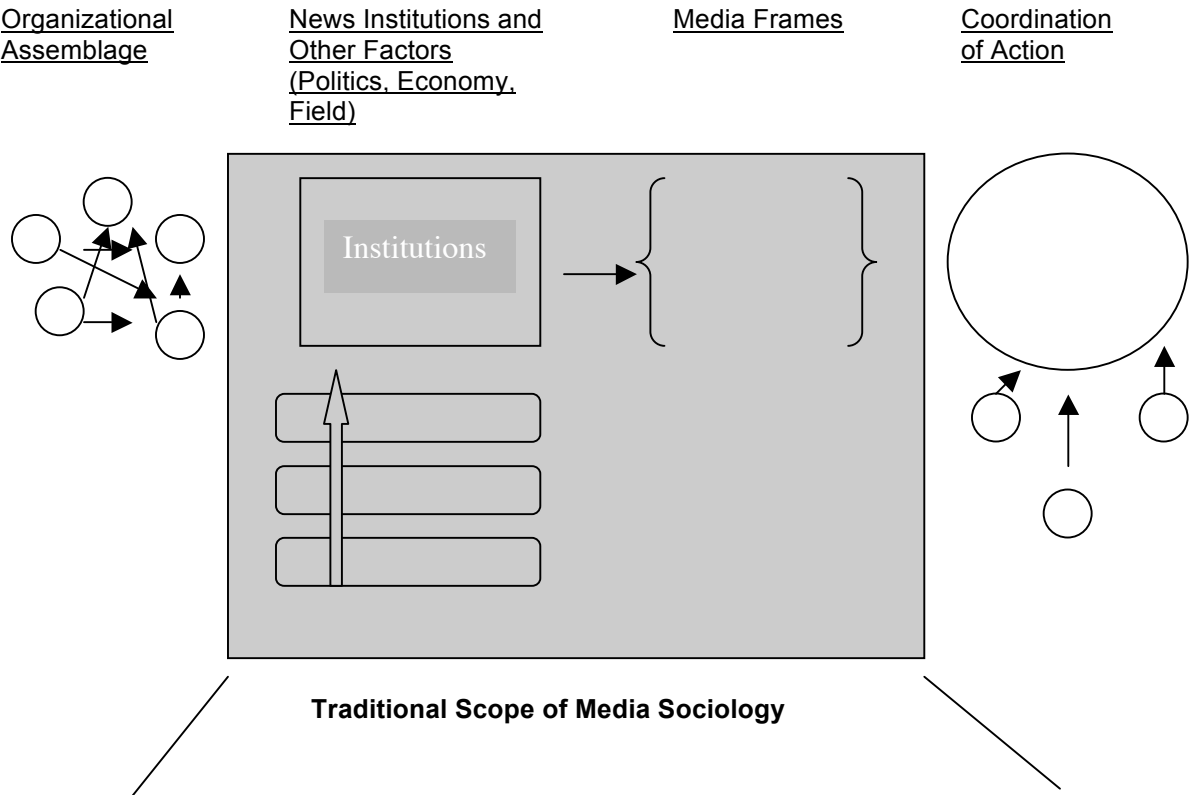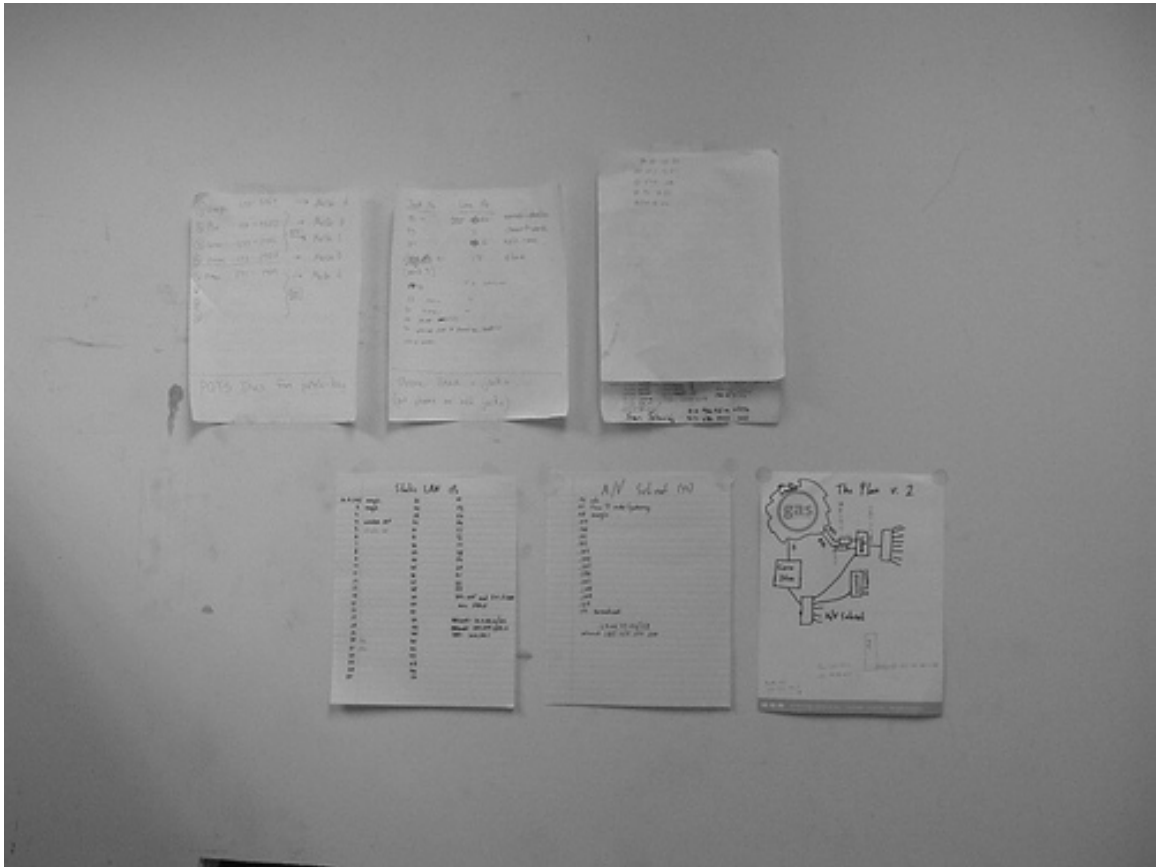
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Fig. 1

| Organizational Assemblage | News Institutions and Other Factors (Politics, Economy, Field) | Media Frames | Coordination of Action |

Traditional Scope of Media Sociology

Fig. 2

Fig.3

Fig. 4

RNC convergence

Working Groups

[Photo]
[Print]
[Sound]
[Video]

English ▾

Information

login
set preferences and edit your
own posts

info library
about us
contact us
editorial policy
how to use this site
imc hardware needs
rnc media convergence
rncwatch
support us
the indypendent
threat to peace poster

Search

search the site
Advanced Search

Media Centers

www.indymedia.org

africa
ambazonia
canarias
nigeria
south africa

canada
alberta
hamilton
maritimes
montreal
ontario
ottawa
quebec
thunder bay
vancouver
victoria
windsor
winnipeg

east asia
japan
qc

europe
andorra
antwerpen
athens
austria
barcelona
belgium
belgrade
bristol
bulgaria
croatia
cyprus
estrecho / madiaq
euskal herria
galiza
germany
hungary
imc sverige
ireland
istanbul

Create or login to a User account?

Critical Mass arrests and other news

1:29AM NYPD Public Information says: 264 arrests. They're all being held in Pier 57, going through the system. Person said that they are mostly getting minor tickets; DATs. Arrestees are going to be arraigned starting at 6AM.

1:21AM Central Booking says: They have a list of all the names of all the arrestees (so call if you need to: 212-374-3838). They will NOT be arraigned tonight because the judge has gone home. They are going to be transferred from Pier 57 to Central Booking.

Archived Breaking News

Featured Articles
Local News and Commentary

All sections ▾   All categories ▾   View

News :: RNCWatch

First notes on the Critical Mass

by NYC Indymedia   28 Aug 2004

The first wave of posts on tonight's Critical Mass have   timessquare1.jpg
come in. The ride was New York's largest critical mass,
with well over 5,000 bikes.

Gathering at Union Square in the middle of Manhattan at 7 p.m. and departing at 7:30, oil-free transportation stretched across all horizons around Union Square. First pedaling south down Broadway and then rerouting north on Madison and Sixth avenues, Critical Mass consisted of a 45 block long brigade of cyclists, skaters and pedestrians. The ride lasted about 2 hours, performed its traditional occupation of Times Square and rode past Madison Square Garden (MSG), site of the RNC.

Approximately 800 Critical Massers ended up at St. Mark's church in lower Manhattan, sanctuary for the protest and home to much of the organizing for the counter RNC mobilizing. Upon arriving at the church, the Critical Mass riders hoisted their bikes into the air, waving them overhead as they unleashed a long unified victory cry.

The celebratory mood at St. Mark's lasted only fifteen minutes though before police moved and began arresting participants. Critical Mass riders elsewhere were caught and arrested by New York City Police along the way. Several riders were taken down after passing MSG, dozens more were arrested at the Lincoln Tunnel.

Video of the evening being processed by the Indymedia Center right now shows the regrettably predictable violent nature of the arrests. Caught on tape are images of protesters being thrown off their bicycles, heads beaten into the asphalt, then cuffed with plastic flexi-cuffs. Pedestrians milling about also unfortunately fell victim to the cops, getting pulled off the street and arrested too. The latest reports put the total amount of arrested riders and bystanders at 250 people.

Stories: [1 | 2 | 3]

Photos: [1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6]

Audio: [1 | 2]

Video: [1]

NYPD Notice to Bicyclists

Corporate Media: [1 | 2 (video) | 3 (photos)]

Add a comment...

News :: RNCWatch

Listen in: Streaming webradio

by NYC Indymedia   27 Aug 2004

Several different groups are coordinating to provide webradio coverage for the Critical Mass ride tonight, and for the rest of the events during the RNC.

A-Noise is the NoRNC Sound Coalition and will be broadcasting live from New York. To listen to their stream, go to the website. They will also be taking live callers from the street: the on-air number in New York is 212-233-5767.

Portland Indymedia will also be broadcasting live tonight. Go to the Portland IMC website to listen to their stream. Their call-in number is 800-939-7973.

Also tune into Critical Mass Radio Network for programming throughout the next several days [note: CMRN is broadcasting the A-Noise Stream during Critical Mass]

Add a comment... (11 comments)

08/28 02:22 EST
Cmass: 23rd & 6th - 1 collision, 2 arrests, 3 bikes stolen

08/28 02:03 EST
Photos of arrests at critical mass

08/28 01:05 EST
Video: New York City Police Arrest Critical Mass Riders

08/28 01:03 EST
Explanation of the Law on When You Have to Give Your Name at the RNC Protests

08/28 00:54 EST
Huge Clock in NYC Shows Cost of Iraq War

08/28 00:45 EST
Breaking News and Photos: About 100 Critical Mass Riders penned in and Arrested at W.35th between 9th and 10th Avenues

08/28 00:41 EST
another banner drop--but it seems to be authorized!

08/28 00:33 EST
Undercover pig uniform this week...

08/28 00:29 EST
Selected Critical Mass Audio

08/28 00:21 EST
What's it take to HIDE an article??? And, who does it?

08/28 00:11 EST
Yet another banner action

08/28 00:06 EST
Pigs in Zen?

08/27 23:56 EST
911Truth Sat. & Sun events: Concerts, rallies, Edmonds!

08/27 23:53 EST
Virginia Rides in the RNC Critical Mass

08/27 23:50 EST
Breaking News for August 27th (Critical Mass!)

08/27 23:20 EST
Critical mass rocks NYC

08/27 23:19 EST
Call For Jail Support - Critical Mass Detainees

08/27 22:55 EST
Arrests at St. Marks

08/27 22:51 EST
Critical Mass Takes Times Square

08/27 22:51 EST
4 Interviews from Critical Mass, 8/27

08/27 22:36 EST
Critical Mass Video

08/27 22:19 EST
Critical Mass Ride + Arrest Photos

08/27 22:18 EST
Crit Mass ARRESTS at 34th Street

.Fig. 5

21:19:15 Fri, Aug 27 cm arrests at 34th/7th, 35th/Dyer by Lincoln Tunnel; possibly soon more at 2nd/23rd
22:03:33 Fri, Aug 27 Tape dropoff at NYCLU 520 8th Ave at 36th
01:48:52 Sat, Aug 28 nypd: 264 arrests, incl. 7 indy journalists (1 released). arraignments start at 6am at 100 centre st.
12:01:00 Sat, Aug 28 2 events - Women's March over BK Bridge to City Hall; Green Party Fest in Wash Sq Pk - call in to 212-233-5767
13:49:42 Sat, Aug 28 send pics from camera phones to ✉▸ nycrncimc@yahoo.com
15:28:13 Sat, Aug 28 Punkrock Protest Party $5 8PM tonight, southpaw, 125 5th av, bklyn: dead betties, shoplifting, syndicate, Aa.
15:30:34 Sun, Aug 29 jb If anyone sees police van #5305, please call in 212-233-5767.
17:01:17 Sun, Aug 29 jb 300 people at 45th and broadway; police about to arrest | meanwhile, Great Lawn is packed and festive
17:18:27 Sun, Aug 29 lulu videographers. For tape pick up by bike, call 917 774 1749
18:13:52 Sun, Aug 29 jb Media needed at 47th and 8th to document arrests
20:19:30 Sun, Aug 29 jb Tape runners available on the street until 9pm. Call 917-774-1749.
20:43:21 Sun, Aug 29 midwestmax jail solidarity demonstrators about to be arrested at pier 57. call dispatch for / with updates
22:46:46 Sun, Aug 29 jb call dispatch for updates on situation at university btw 12th and 13th, or just go there
23:40:48 Sun, Aug 29 jb next stop on mouse bloc: leonard skynard concert - @ crobar, 530 w. 28th btw 10th & 11th
09:23:14 Mon, Aug 30 lulu National Lawyers Guild emergency press conference today 10AM at the Criminal Courthouse at 100 Centre St.
09:43:22 Mon, Aug 30 lulu Still We Rise Coalition / Racial Justice 911 march and rally 1-6pm Union Square up Eighth Ave to 31st St.
09:46:27 Mon, Aug 30 lulu Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign march 4PM in Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza at the UN (45th St & 1st Ave)
09:50:40 Mon, Aug 30 lulu Poor Peoples Economic Human Rights Campaign march 4PM in Dag Hammarskjold Plaza at the UN (45th St & 1st Ave)
11:27:54 Mon, Aug 30 Puck ppl who were arrested and had their bikes seized are not getting these items back from 520 Kingsland in BKLYN
13:00:41 Mon, Aug 30 midwestmax need info on potential police picket on 40 fulton st. also: still we rise stopped by nypd at 5th av and 15th