

Indymedia UK – Grassroots Migration News

Ian Cook

Indymedia is a grassroots, independent media project available in 190 locations, usually consisting of an on-line news site; collectives also often run workshops and training in journalism, produce a print version of the site and organise film screenings. The Migration page on the UK site is both news resource on migration issues and, as anyone can be an Indymedia journalist, it is a place where migrants can write about the issues that are affecting them.

Abstract in italiano

Indymedia è un progetto mediatico indipendente disponibile in 190 diversi luoghi. Solitamente è costituito da un sito di notizie on-line, ma i collettivi che ne fanno parte organizzano spesso anche workshop di giornalismo, producono una versione cartacea del sito e organizzano retrospettive cinematografiche. La pagina “Migration” del sito inglese rappresenta una risorsa di notizie sui temi della migrazione, ma anche un’opportunità di partecipazione per gli immigrati, che possono scrivere sui temi di loro interesse, grazie al fatto che chiunque può diventare giornalista Indymedia.

Area Media

Kind-category of project (News Resource) On line

Kind-category of actor *Voluntary Network of autonomous Individuals*

Country UK

Year 2001-

5 key-words *news, open-publishing, migration, web, activist, grassroots*

Description of the project

Indymedia as a project was started in November 1999 as a way for members of the anti-globalisation movement to report on what was happening during the protests in Seattle USA, during a meeting of the World Trade Organisation. It has since spread to many different places across the globe, including much of Europe with around 190 active outlets.

In a broad sense anybody can publish on Indymedia; there are no “writers” as anybody with access to a computer can post on the site, but there are editorial guidelines which are drawn up through consensus within the local collectives.

A taste of the political slant can be realised from the mission statement on the UK site,

“The Indymedia UK website provides an interactive platform for reports from the struggles for a world based on freedom, cooperation, justice and solidarity, and against environmental degradation, neoliberal exploitation, racism and patriarchy. The reports cover a wide range of issues and social movements - from neighbourhood campaigns to grassroots mobilisations, from critical analysis to direct action.

We aim to live up to the following principles:

*Indymedia United Kollektives works on a non-hierarchical basis
We reject all systems of domination and discrimination
We acknowledge that the struggle for a better world takes many forms. The focus of the
Indymedia UK collective is on grassroots politics, actions and campaigns
Indymedia United Kollektives does not have any ties with political parties or larger NGOs
We understand that by lobbying there will be no radical change. As a collective our attitude is
assertive, and where necessary confrontational
Inherent in the mainstream corporate media is a strong bias towards capitalism's power
structures, and it is an important tool in propagating these structures around the globe. While
the mainstream media conceal their manifold biases and alignments, we clearly state our
position. Indymedia UK does not attempt to take an objective and impartial standpoint:
Indymedia UK clearly states its subjectivity.”*

It is hard to give more precise details about the aims and objectives of the migration page as because of the collective nature of the UK site, it is both broad and fluid, dependant upon which individuals are posting on it. As it is run by a network of individuals there may also be many radically different viewpoints among them. For instance some might believe in a “no-borders” position, whilst others might want to strengthen the UK’s commitment to providing a safe haven for refugees but not open up the UK’s borders completely.

The migration page has been particularly active over the past few years as the British government hardens its anti-asylum stance. This has also led to many migrants themselves using the site to report on the issues facing them. In this sense it has been useful as both a resource for migrants, as they can read about other people in similar situations across the country and as an outlet for them to air their experiences of being a migrant in the UK.

1.1 When and how long: structure and steps of the project

The first post on migration was in 2001 (entitled *Chain of Border Camps Across Europe*). It took a while for the site to pick up momentum with the stories only being written on the subject around every six months or so for the first two years. However, after this the frequency of reports has increased with posts now averaging more than one per week.

This rise in popularity could be explained in many ways including the overall rise in popularity of the Indymedia site, increased use of the internet, more “militant” action by migrant supporting groups, greater confidence (or desperation) amongst migrants or increased pressure by the UK government upon asylum seekers and refugees.

The project is ongoing; the migration page, like the rest of the Indymedia site, is growing in popularity slowly, as knowledge of the site spreads.

Place and context

The issues of asylum, and more widely immigration, are “hot topics” in the UK. Much of the reporting is criticised by those on the left as being bias, xenophobic and in some cases out-right racist. An example of this criticism

can be found in tabloid newspapers such as the Daily Mail or this example taken from the Daily Express,

“A FIFTH of all children living in Britain are born to foreign mothers under Labour’s open door policy on immigration.

Such births have soared by more than 50 per cent in the past decade and experts last night warned that high immigration levels posed a threat to Britain’s “core culture”.

Ministers now face renewed pressure to impose strict limits on marriages arranged overseas and to prevent racial “ghettos” dominating our cities.”

Think-tank MigrationWatch UK, which calculated the startling trend from Government figures.’ www.dailyexpress.co.uk

The views of the migrants themselves are very rarely presented in a positive light in the corporate media (a term used amongst the Indymedia collectives to distinguish themselves from the media owned by large businesses or wealthy individuals). It has also been argued that the right wing press in many cases sets the agenda for the migration debate.

Target

Migrants: both to read and write their stories.

The British Public: in an attempt to “redress the balance” of the perceived anti-immigrant bias in the corporate press.

Methodology

The website is maintained by a group of ‘techies’ or technical experts, who volunteer their time to keep the web page running.

As Indymedia relies on ordinary people to write the news effort is put into increasing awareness of the site. Workshops are regularly run to help people improve their journalistic or on-line publishing skills.

From discussions (which can be seen on the open mailing lists) it becomes clear that writing stories for the migration pages (or indeed any pages on the site) are either upwards spiralling or downwards spiralling trends. That is to say that if stories are regularly updated then more and more people read the site and so write stories of their own.

Authors, funding and networks

Funding

Unlike many other news sites, Indymedia does not receive any money through selling advertising space. Indymedia relies on donations by individuals or on money raised at events, such as music or film nights to cover its running costs. This can often lead to technical problems, as much of the hardware is second-hand and old. Sometimes it takes a considerable amount of time for stories to appear on the site or for stories, which are deemed inappropriate, to be hidden because of, for example, server problems.

Networks

The migration page is often written on by campaigning groups (e.g. National Coalition Against the Deportation of Refugees), by activists attending demonstrations or actions in support of migrant rights and by the migrants themselves. Therefore the networks are already in place for spreading the use of the site. Usually people want to have a wide a coverage as possible for their events and so if they already will be publishing press-releases then it is not so much extra effort to convert the information into 'news' and post it on the site.

Strengths

The site is empowering for migrants because it allows them to express themselves, especially regarding their political involvement as migrants in the UK and in the case of asylum seekers and refugees regarding their 'fight' to stay in the country.

It covers the issue of asylum in a way that the mainstream press cannot. This could possibly be because of the freedom of the journalists to publish what they want (as long as it comes under the editorial guidelines) and so they are not restricted the wishes of rich owners.

Because most people post on the site under pseudonyms it is often unknown which writers are migrants and which are not. This can be useful for migrants as people will not hold any pre-conceived prejudices about the quality of a migrant's English.

Critical points

It is hard to monitor exactly how many migrants publish on the site. This is particularly the case because people post anonymously. However for migrants who are in the middle of an asylum claim, it may prove harmful to 'rock the boat.' Furthermore, as there has been harassment of Indymedia journalists by the police many feel it is best to hide their identities. Incidents such as the seizure of the UK Indymedia server in 2003 (by the FBI), further heightens the feeling amongst some journalists that they want to hide their identity.

Some people have suggested that the site is run "by anarchists for anarchists" as points of view which do not fit in with the editorial guidelines are often removed. This criticism is a little unfair however, as people of many different

political persuasions read and post on the site. Reports of actions or demonstrations are nearly always kept on the site no matter what their origin, as long as they are not being used as a vehicle to promote a certain political party or are racist and offensive.

Conclusion: what is “exportable” in the project

Themes

That there are many people within the general public who are sympathetic to the challenges faced by migrants and that they are willing to set up and maintain projects which support the greater understanding of the migrant community.

Furthermore, it can be seen that migrants can be proactive in improving their own situation when there is a model which allows them to do this. It seems that migrants are happy to openly talk about their situation and become politically involved in their new country.

Methodology

Collective consensus based, non-hierarchical projects can be successful. Despite some obvious tensions which exist on the lists there is a clear and reasoned debate which collectively works to improve and maintain the content of the site. There are problems, but they are usually resolved in an adult and calm manner. The list also does not rely on one or a small group of individuals to maintain the frequency and quality. Because of this there is no real problem when some people (because of other commitments etc) do not work on the site as there are enough people to keep the page running well.

OTHER COMMENTS

120 migrant detainees on hungerstrike in Campsfield Immigration Removal Centre, near Oxford, went on hungerstrike to protest against conditions. Here is a letter some of the hungerstrikers wrote for the press. It was published on the Indymedia Migration UK pages but, as far as this author is aware, nowhere else in the national press.

16 June 2006

I would firstly like to thank all the people who have shown concern for the way that Campsfield House and other detention camps are being run in the United Kingdom.

As a detainee in Campsfield I would like to confirm that all that has been said in the media was absolutely true and it would be greatly appreciated by all detainees if you could publish this letter.

I would like to bring to the attention of the government and other parties that this strike has nothing to do with the change of management at Campsfield. We are trying to deliver a message to the government. Please see below some of the main points which have led to the hunger strike:

Detainees are in a worse position than prisoners. This is because a prisoner knows the length of time of their sentence whilst detainees are innocent people who are kept in these detention centres indefinitely. Some people have been in detention for a few months but others have been confined for more than 2 years with no knowledge of when they will be released.

Most of the people in detention are genuine Asylum Seekers who have fled their country of origin because they have been persecuted, tortured, or face death. The government knows this but they pretend that they don't understand.

These Asylum Seekers need protection but instead of listening to them, the government wants to make them scapegoats for the illegal immigrants in this country. The government appears to like people who come to the country, commit crimes and tell their lies, but if you tell the government the truth they say that you are fabricating things in order to remain in the country.

The government knows that some countries are not safe, yet they are forcibly deporting genuine Asylum Seekers back to them to face death. At the same time, non-genuine asylum seekers, who are willing to be returned to their countries, and even offer to purchase their own tickets in some cases, are being detained in these centres, or even released back into society. Where is the logic and fairness in this?

I would like to ask Tony Blair and his government how they can keep responsible people in detention for more than 3 months without a just reason? Their policies are destroying us psychologically and killing us slowly. I personally feel that I am unable to stand it much longer and so this government should not be surprised if something happens to me soon.

Some of the officers are lovely, caring people, but we want to highlight the approach of other officers who talk to us as though we are the scum of society and racially abuse us. One officer has had many complaints made against him but he remains in his job, free to abuse his trapped victims, knowing that he is safe. Even, maybe unsurprisingly, one of the Immigration Representatives is a racist, but detainees' complaints fall on deaf ears.

We are treated as slaves. The government's own laws state that failed Asylum Seekers must not do either paid or unpaid work yet they have us working in their detention centres, painting, gardening, clearing tables and mopping floors in return for £3 or £5 vouchers redeemable only in the detention shop. No minimum wage in detention. What is this new civilised slavery? This is government hypocrisy that allows for the exploitation of the people they round up and force into these centres.

Campsfield staff even tried to give vouchers to detainees if they agreed to end their hunger strike. They also used vouchers to try to bribe detainees to disclose the names of the people who organised the strike. One of the hunger strikers who has been given paracetamol, instead of treatment, for the last two weeks for severe tooth ache, has been refused pain killers since he started the strike.

The medical facilities in detention are bizarre. Sleeping tablets are given to people who have rashes. One detainee who has a bullet lodged in his knee has been refused an operation to remove it. The letter refusing his treatment was written on 27 April, yet he was only given it last week. Detainees who complain of serious illnesses are given paracetamol.

The food served up is the same every day. Sometimes the previous day's food is reheated the following day. You have a choice – chicken and rice, or chips with curry or gravy.

The man who climbed onto Campsfield's roof on Monday 12 June 2006 was a Somalian man who had been living in this country for more than 10 years. He was an Asylum Seeker who

had been given British citizenship and was living in Milton Keynes. He was arrested at a tube station as a suspected terrorist and put in prison for a year. After finishing his sentence he was kept in prison for a further 4 months. When he asked why he was being kept in prison he was transferred to Campsfield Immigration Removal Centre on 9 June 2006. He climbed onto the roof with a rope and plastic bag. He wanted the government and public to know that he had British citizenship and he was going to hang himself if he wasn't released. Campsfield management called the police and ambulance services and a compromise was reached before he came down from the roof. None of us know what became of this man or where he was taken to by the police.

Campsfield's refusal to allow journalists into the centre is an admission to the public that the detainees confined behind the barbed wire are not being treated humanely. The British government talks about human rights and the way that other countries should treat their citizens but where are Britain's human rights?

We want the government to stop its hypocrisy and release the innocent people they herd into their detention centres.

Yours sincerely Campsfield Detainees

LINKS

The Indymedia UK migration page:
<http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/topics/migration/>