

Interviewee: Jeff Perlstein

Affiliation: Independent Media Center

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Interview Summary:

Jeff Perlstein, Director of the Independent Media Center in Seattle, discusses the importance of the community's ability to create and control its own message, rather than having the voice of the people represented solely by large media conglomerates. The IMC has been concerned with the growth of the Internet and the digital divide, he explains, and is working to provide media content to communities all over the world. While the Internet provides the backbone of the IMC's distribution process, the organization works with community media to relay information to as many people as possible. Perlstein describes how the IMC began, the role it played prior to the Seattle anti-WTO protests, the challenges of covering the fast-moving protest activities, and his experiences during November 1999.



MB

This is Miguel Bocanegra. It is October 15, 2000. I'm here with Jeff Perlstein, Director of the Independent Media Center in Seattle. So Jeff, can you talk a little bit about yourself and how you got involved in the issue of the WTO and media organizing; just a short bio of yourself and sort of a history of the IMC?

JP

Sure. As far as the WTO, I've been involved in a lot of social justice organizing here in Seattle around the prison industrial complex. What else? Involved in community-based media projects, really kind of media as an activist tool, and also as an opportunity for self-expression and self-determination in our communities, under-represented communities especially.

As far as the WTO stuff, I saw some flyer – I was at some other meeting – that there was this city-wide gathering about this thing, the WTO, that was coming to town. This was way back in January or February before the WTO. I had really never really heard of thing before, and so I kind of got schooled in what was going on. Of course, I knew a whole lot about multi-national corporations and structural adjustment, but that was my first exposure to the actual World Trade Organization and their policies, and also the organizing that was starting to emerge around the city.

As I went to those monthly meetings and started to hear more about the mobilizations that were happening and learn more about the policies of the WTO and became further and further concerned about their policies and the impact on communities locally, nationally, internationally, I'd also begun to see how many folks were coming to Seattle, get a sense of that, and see these meetings grow and grow and talk to people nationally, that they were all coming here. I began to recognize that someone who has done independent media projects and activist media projects, that we couldn't just let CNN and CBS be the ones to tell these stories, and so that we needed to develop our own alternatives and our alternative networks. That's where, really, the idea for the media center came from was just the necessity for communities to be controlling their own message, to really be saying for themselves their concerns, and that we needed an alternative opportunity to do that. So we set about to create a community-based people's newsroom. That's where the idea came from.

There's a much longer history of People's Media that I could go into, but...

MB

It would be good if you could talk about kind of the history of how the IMC developed and maybe how it came out of, how the WTO, how it worked within the WTO process.

JP

Sure. Just to back up a bit, I like to always give props and respect to the media projects that have come before, that have been part and parcel of movements for social justice, because it's a long history and the IMC didn't just come out of nowhere. You read it everywhere from Radio Venceremos to Liberation News Service in the sixties here in the States, to the Zapatista's use of the Internet in '94 and since then, to a project called Counter Media that I was involved with in '96, which was, again, a citizen's media initiative.

That was around the Democratic Convention in Chicago, and it was kind of the kernel of the idea for the IMC. It was a very small scale. It was a bunch of media activists who were out shooting video and documenting what was going on in the streets that the networks weren't covering. And on and on.

Paper Tiger TV, Deep Dish TV, all the activist media over the years that have really supported these struggles and people's concerns, but outside of the corporate realm. So all of those – the groundwork that they had laid over the years really paved the way for the IMC model, which was really tying all of these people all over the country and even internationally together in a network that would be powerful and vibrant and really be like media for the movement sort of thing.

To get more specific about the IMC in particular, I mentioned that we had this notion that we couldn't just wait for the networks to cover this. This was going to be a very important event, and it was right in our own backyard. It

was coming to our town, so we had a responsibility to provide some sort of platform, some sort of framework, for all these people all over the country to plug in and do their good media work.

We set about to do that really with only about eight weeks before the WTO. We had no organization. We had no space. We had no funding. We had no staff. What we did have was these relationships, like I said, with the people in New York, the people in the Bay Area, some people in Austin, Texas, who all were very excited about the idea of us coming together, of really amplifying our impact and bringing the resources and passion and skills that each of us could to really be a vibrant network and to provide a true alternative voice out there.

So that's what folks did. People pitched in, on really short notice, locally, nationally... Somebody said, "Well, this is what I can do. I can bring an editing deck, since you guys don't have one. And everybody can use it." "We'll bring a bunch of camcorders, and we can help rent satellite time." Everybody was doing their little piece so that in an amazingly short amount of time, with, like I said, amazingly little resources, we were able to do a significant amount as far as hooking up with each other and getting the word out, through the web, through community-based radio, through public access TV stations we broadcast to every night, which had never been done before. All sorts of stuff – through print publication daily, and through all these different modes and mediums of communication.

We were especially concerned, too, with, especially the last few years, the way the Internet has really grown and how access by a certain segment of population has also grown, that there were lots of opportunities there for being a truly global project and having global reach at relatively little cost, as well. We were really concerned about what's been called a digital divide, and the question of access. Who's getting access to the Internet? How does that play right into a lot of the things we were trying to be an alternative to, right? Was that based on an economic divide, which is related to race, class, gender, etc.?

So we set about to really do this somewhat innovative, what we're calling linking of high and low technologies, or old and new technologies. So the Internet and the website was like the backbone of our distribution.

For example, we would post audio files, video files, text and photos, all these different mediums, to the site, then we hooked up with, like, a community radio station, cable access station, even community-based organizations internationally who could pull down, for example, say, in their office – they had an Internet connection... So here's a good example, actually, Radio Havana pulled down the audio feed, because they had an Internet connection in this office, and then they rebroadcast it on the FM dial, and people all over

the island could hear it; nine million people could hear it who never necessarily had to see the Internet.

Another way, also, with the print files, what we did, we posted them in a format on the site. So we kicked out a daily print publication called *The Blind Spot*, and we only had the money to run off like 2,000 hard copies each day. It's kind of expensive to make hard copies, and we gave those away for free in Seattle each day, highlighting stories that the mainstream media was missing or completely ignoring, and really, highlighting local activists and the national and international activists, their perspectives. Activists in Brussels, for example, pulled down those files, and they printed out 8,000 copies and handed them out in the streets of Brussels. So, again, that's 8,000 folks that didn't have to check out the Internet, right?

So it's really finding out where these different points, these nodes, are around the world and nationally, who do have an Internet access, and they can ripple out the impact wider and wider with an attempt to, like I was saying, go beyond, address the question of the digital divide, and really, as much as possible, be accessible to the majority of the world's people.

MB So how did the IMC as an organization become formulated?

JP You mean, like the idea, or the structure, the process?

MB Just the structure itself and the idea itself. How did that come about around the WTO process? Did the whole process kind of spark it, create a reason to develop this medium? Can you explain how that happened?

JP A little bit, yes. Having been, like, in the independent media world and activist media world, there had been a lot of discussion about this need for network, the need for us to have a powerful, vibrant network, and there could really be a true alternative to the corporation's network, a people's network.

Marcos, in '97, actually, made a call to this free media, called Freeing the Media Conference in New York. It's about a 10-minute video communiqué, and he actually is very explicit about this need, the need to have a network of resistance, the people's resistance, that is strong but also allows for people's autonomy, from different sites and location.

MB Are you talking about Marcos, Commandante Marcos?

JP Yes. Sub-Commandante Marcos. Thank you. Some people had been talking about this for quite a while, right? So what we really saw with the WTO was an opportunity. It was really seizing the moment, because, again, we were recognizing how many people were coming here and how much of the world's attention – there was so much media attention was going to be here. It was a

real opportunity to be a spark, to be a catalyst. To make the most of this opportunity, of all these resources coming together, all these people – activists, but also these media makers that specifically related to the IMC who were coming from all over the place who rarely see each other face-to-face; they were often doing our own projects, and how we could really, again, maximize the impact, and then folks could leave when they went home. They could take this model, and the idea was to make it a replicable model they could then take with them.

Each place that people went back to, and each place that these, basically, wherever there needs to be resistance, the capital, especially in these big manifestations, these big events, when people come together, the resources come together, we document it, an alternative, and then some of those resources stay behind, so we're building all these points in this network that develops and stays around for hopefully a long time. Also we're building the personal relationships, not just a virtual world.

Although we are all linked now. There are over 33 media centers now since November 30th, in 10 countries or continents, and they're all linked by this website, IndyMedia.org, which we spent a lot of time and energy designing in certain ways, which maybe I'll talk about a bit. But also a real emphasis as well on the physical spaces, because one of the whole points is that we need to reclaim space for ourselves, for people to interact and to come together and dialogue and exchange, and that that can happen in the virtual realm, but most powerfully happens when we're face-to-face, so that these physical locations are linked by this virtual connection.

Let me know if I'm just going on tangents and stuff.

MB

Can you talk a little bit about the process itself. You said that you started organizing about eight weeks prior to the actual protests. Can you go through the timeline of events that occurred with IMC, the first eight weeks to November 30th through December 4th?

JP

Really the idea for the IMC, as I was saying, was kind of brewing and had been brewing for years in different forms. People had been talking about this sort of model or modes and networks. It was around Labor Day that I first had the idea that we really needed to do this here, and we couldn't let the opportunity pass, and started to email people, actually, all around the country who I knew had done independent media for quite a while. I just figured that somebody must be doing it. It seemed so obvious and so important.

I kept getting these emails. I didn't want to step on anybody's toes, either. I frankly was just interested in plugging in and doing some radio interviews and stuff.

Everybody kept saying about this email thing, “No. It’s a great idea. Why don’t you run with it?” People from all over saying, “Why don’t you run with it?” And I’m like, oh, okay. It took a few weeks, actually, just to make sure that we weren’t reinventing the wheel, that there wasn’t something already out there. That brought us about to mid- to late-September, when we had the first meetings and gatherings. We called people together, people that had been in independent media projects that we knew locally, and then people who had come to town, who had started doing WTO-specific organizing. Then, also, people that we organized, grass roots organizers who hadn’t done media stuff so much that we thought might be interested.

We started convening these weekly meetings to come up with some ideas about how we could move forward collectively, and how we could address the needs and address this vision. It became pretty clear that we were overwhelmed very quickly as to how ambitious this was and what we were trying to do. We also recognized the importance of having a physical space and a pretty centrally located one, which was a real challenge. Like I said, we had no money. Most of us weren’t fund-raisers or anything like that. We were grassroots activists.

Very quickly people started getting very involved, and people started, in an amazing way, saying, “This is what I can do. This is what I can contribute here.” A tremendous number of people, and this is only two or three weeks after the first meeting. The first meeting maybe had 15 people. The next week we had maybe 30. The next week we had 40, 50.

So about up to mid-October, now, we’ve got about 40, 50 people who are plugging in in some way. That’s locally. Also, myself and a few others were keeping in touch with folks nationally and internationally, putting out the call and getting an overwhelming response, absolutely overwhelming. People all over the country, saying, “Yes, we’re coming, we’re coming. This is what we can bring. We can bring three cameras,” or “We can bring this high-end digital video, editing deck,” or “We’re going to raise money for this.”

So the collaborative process was really fully underway, I’d say, in about mid-October. Part of that, a really key moment, was that I made the trip to a conference in mid-October in Austin, Texas - Public Grassroots Media Conference, and it was actually a really huge, I think, pivotal moment, because it was the only face-to-face opportunity that we had to meet up between the time of the idea and the WTO, with independent media makers from around the country. It was just kind of like, we found out about it, and I was like, “If we’re going to make this happen, somebody has to go and pitch this to these folks and get them on board.”

Essentially, this project became the talk of the whole weekend. It was basically like this, we ended up doing workshoping on how we could make

this go with all these people who had done these things for years. Paper Tiger has been around for 25 years doing activist media in New York, and they've got the experience. People from Free Speech TV, from Boulder, showed up. They were there with two people, and they basically said, "Well, we'll design the Internet, and we'll provide all the resources for the web stuff."

That was a really key aspect, and folks from Accion Zapatista, based in Austin, were providing a lot of the ideological framework, a lot of input on the process and the importance of process and how the Zapatistas have put that at the forefront and also a reclaiming of space and keeping this decentralized network, and this whole idea of "one no and many yeses," that we all can come together in these moments from one unified 'No' to globalization, to global capital, to confront power from above, but that the model and the process has to have ways for people to express their different yeses, their different identities, their different ways of expressing themselves.

So the whole process was really, that was the thread throughout. It really was important as well is that happened in Austin, was very significant, that's the place it was from.

So the whole project really accelerated then, after this meeting in mid-October, to the point where when we got back to Seattle, people had been really psyched and we actually located a space downtown that a local non-profit owned - LIHI - Low Income Housing Institute. What they do is they buy abandoned buildings, or not abandoned buildings and set them aside for formerly homeless folks or low income folks to be self-managed. Again, it is this idea of people controlling their own space, having a sense of autonomy.

There was a certain fit there, and also they are very much activists in their orientation. They really liked the idea of the project and they have this storefront down on Third Avenue that had just been sitting there, nothing going on with it for a few years. They said, "Look, you can use the place for two months. Get up to speed," because it was just like a junkyard in there. They said, "If you clean all the junk out, and you redo the walls and you paint the place, then that will be in exchange for rent for the months." It is a big place, like 2700 square feet, with high ceilings and an ideal location, right in the heart of downtown. We couldn't really ask for much better.

Pieces are starting to come together. Everyone is bringing a different part to it. Still no money, though. This is late October. We're about a month away and we have about \$1,500.00 donated by one group early on. At this point, also, we're starting to see in Seattle is people subdividing into different groups, different affinity groups almost, to take on... There's a video team. There's an audio team. There's a print team starting to happen. There was a print team that didn't really come together until about the week before, which is a whole other story. People dealing with volunteer coordination. Another team dealing

with security. Another dealing with housing for out-of-towners, and stuff like that.

We are having these general meetings weekly, and we're starting to have these sub-meetings that are happening almost every night of the week to make this thing go on. We're starting to have phone conference calls, people nationally, to really figure out how all these pieces are going to plug in and hopefully make some sense when the week of WTO hits.

Right around the first week of November, we're still pulling all these strands together and trying to get people involved. Also, I was one of the people who was kind of a liaison with different community organizations here in Seattle that I had some prior relationship with from organizing. I was checking in with them about how they wanted to play a role, or how we could support the work that they were doing. Frankly, that didn't happen as much as it needed to in retrospect. That would have happened a lot more.

MB

What kept some of those coalitions from ... are you saying that they weren't as effective?

JP

I'm saying that because we were a new project and trying to make it go in eight weeks and probably far too ambitious for what we had in place, that the relationship with local organizers, local organizations, wasn't as strong as it could have been, and in my mind they should have been. So we checked in with folks along the way.

The reality was also that most of those organizations were maxxed out running their own projects, mobilizing as much as they could, and everyone was kind of full on, sort of fast forward. To spend a lot of time figuring out how to relate to a completely new project, like the IMC, was a whole other challenge. It was a lot of brain space and people resources.

In most cases, people were saying, "That sounds good. That's interesting. Make it happen, but we can't really contribute many resources that we have at this point. We're maxxed out trying to do what we're trying to do."

And then I was going to these big monthly meetings that I mentioned earlier that were happening at Kane Hall at the UW. These meetings were now growing to, like, 500, 600 people that were coming out, making announcements about what we're doing, just letting people know about the opportunity and that they should drop by.

Actually, I found out in retrospect that a lot of people who ended up playing significant roles in the project, that's where they first heard about it was kind of like me making announcements, like a minute at the end of those big

meetings at Kane Hall, which is funny, because I had no idea. Sometimes you don't know 10 months later how people got involved or came to the project.

So early November, we finally got the space, and not only were we maxed out just trying to make the media side of things happen, but now all the same people are having to pitch in to like sheetrock the walls and paint the floors and put in plumbing and wiring and assist full on, like, immersion in this project. So many people really put their lives on hold. A lot of people cut back their hours at work who were there late in the night trying to make things happen.

Finally, second week in November, we got a check from an anonymous donor, about \$10,000. All along the way we'd been figuring, because we didn't have any money in the bank, we had certain ambitious plans, but what we had to figure out was kind of contingency plans. This is what we want to raise. We want to raise \$40,000. We wanted to rent satellite time to the cable show. We wanted to buy certain basic equipment and stuff.

So we had to set up this plan. If we got \$40,000, this is what we could do, but if we got twenty-five, this is what we'd be able to do. If we got ten, this is what we'd do. We were committed to still making the project go in a bare bones way if we had to, but to really outline how the sense of scalability of how we could move forward and how we were going to prioritize money and resources if they did come in, which was really important, I think, too, instead of just, once the money showed up, everyone kind of just like clamoring for kind of pieces of pie, this different teamwork.

MB

This anonymous donor – was that ever questioned? Did anybody ever wonder who this was? That's a lot of money to give anonymously.

JP

We had some folks who were hitting up big donors that they knew; not big donors, but just talking to people that they knew. There's this thing, Social Venture Partners, which is like a lot of ex-Microsoft people who have money and stuff like, and they do it for social justice causes; they do it for oppressive causes, I shouldn't say social justice causes. So my guess is that it came from someone in that realm, someone who had obviously a bunch of money, but really believed in the project.

Then we also got, another week later, we got \$10,000 coming through the Tides Foundation, so another donor, but coming through Tides. That's one of their projects. They administer philanthropy for activist organizations. So the word was getting out, especially nationally, as all these different people who were involved were talking it up and trying to raise money.

Deep Dish TV, which is out in New York, and what they've done for years – the network was started actually during the Gulf War, was they recognized the

complete media consolidation during the Gulf War and how there is such a narrow thread of information that was coming out. Their idea was to basically break through that blockade by producing video of the issues, of the critical issues about what was really going on, and then loading it to cable access station satellite so it would play on community access stations all around the country.

Deep Dish has done that in a bunch of different occasions. In '96, as I mentioned, in the Counter Media Project I was involved with, they did a similar thing. They raised money for the first time to do a nightly installment all during the week, each of the five nights during the week, and they would be broadcast to be seen all over country on cable TV. So, again, people didn't necessarily have to have the Internet. If they knew about it, they could check it out on cable TV. They raised money for us to buy the satellite time.

As all these pieces are coming together, and also starting around early to mid-November, a lot more people were starting to come into town. There were all sorts of activists who were showing up from their different cities who were coming to spend a month in Seattle, really organizing and putting things together. So we benefited from that as well at the media center because there were lots of people who had the time and interest and skills who plugged in and were really excited about the opportunity, also.

We're up to about November, and finally we've got some money rolling in. We have solid core people. There are about 50 people who are running with all sorts of different projects that they were going to plug in and make things go. We actually got another space donated in Queen Anne that was going to be the video house for the video editing, because they were going really need to be crunching video all the time, 24 hours, in order to produce this nightly satellite broadcast, and then also logging all the footage coming in each day from the streets from all the videographers that were going to be out there.

As all this is happening, we're still in crisis mode in a lot of respects. For example, we don't have a point person for the print team, and it's getting to be like two weeks ahead of time. The audio team is some guy from out of town who basically really wanted to be security and communications and just kind of stepped in to help out, and we're finding out that while lots of people were going to bring camcorders and videos, like high-digital video – the video team was stacked with resources – the audio team, we couldn't even pull together two mini-disk recorders or even like little hand-held tape recorders.

The phone system – we didn't know if the phone lines were going to get in in time, so there is this huge panic, since so much that we were doing was relying on the web. It was like our backbone of distribution. If we didn't have phone lines in, and especially DSL lines in, really high speed stuff, because we were going to be maxxed out, we were going to have tons of computer

terminals going, we were going to be editing video that we were absolutely relying on that. We didn't have a copier lined up. Just real basic stuff.

We were having an argument – I should say discussions – about whether we should bother to paint the floor or not, because that meant that we were going to have to pick everything up and move it out, and we were going to lose two days. We were to the point where two days was like two weeks in any other point in your life.

We were needing money, still. Most of the money that had come in had been spent on infrastructure and basics, and so there was another discussion about whether we should have a benefit, whether we should have it at the space. The only time we could have it was going to be the Saturday, two days before the week of WTO, and the only place we had it was to have it in the space which we were about to try to make into a newsroom for hundreds of people.

So raising all these questions. Do we have a benefit and bands and music?

Then there was a real concern, and there were lots of very real concerns, but two that I want to mention, especially. One was the question of participation and representation, who were we seeing come in the door to participate in this project, because it was an all-volunteer project. It was short notice. People, like I was saying earlier, lots of local organizers were really involved in their own campaign projects they were going to plug in.

We were finding that we were, the majority of white folks involved, progressive activists, white folks well-intentioned, but there was a real question and concern because the intention of the project was to be an opportunity for under-represented groups, groups who not only aren't seen in the media or misrepresented in the media, but may not have access to media production resources. Kind of by default, most of the people that were getting involved were people who did have access to this stuff, people that did have some prior relationship with media making or had the resources in some way to gain access if they wanted. That was just the way it was playing out, because who had the “free time” to get involved and to devote so much time to this project in such a short timeframe.

It was a real – hopefully I'll come back to that later, but a real question of even critiquing within this progressive movement, how questions of privilege play out. Even if we seek to be an alternative and in some ways were, that there needs to be an internal critique as well, and that privilege is based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, even. So the question of how to be a really heterogeneous group is a fundamental question that the media centers continue to grapple with, as many progressive projects do, I would say.

That was one question, and that was really related to one of the many issues. I was talking about the emphasis on process, right, because from the beginning, the idea was that we wanted to create an alternative, a new model, and a model of media-making, but a model for relating to one another that was going to not be replicating the hierarchy that is present in our society. If we're interested in building a new society free from domination by trans-national corporations, but also free from domination by lots of NGOs, for example, well-intentioned NGOs, who have lots of resources and end up being reformists or liberals, what's the process for doing that? How do we relate to one another in the physical space? How do we relate to the people internationally as we're trying to get these images and messages out to make sure that these representations that we're projecting at the world aren't mirroring the systems of oppression in our society, because we all that internalized at some level, is how to really check ourselves so that we're not representing that. We're putting out what we think is an alternative.

These were really critical questions that we were grappling with and continue to. A little more functional question we were grappling with was how we were going to get people to check out the material. It is all well and good to come together and make a bunch of media, but if nobody sees it...? It's like if the tree falls in the woods, no one can hear it.

We didn't have an advertising budget to let people know, and we were relying on the web and its certain strength that it has, trying to address some of the weaknesses. One issue with the web is it relies on people coming to the website to find this material. So people needed to know that it existed. They needed to know where to go to find it. Not only didn't we have a budget for advertising, but we didn't have a pre-existing web presence. It wasn't like people had been accessing this web address, IndyMedia.org, before. It never existed.

This was a real dilemma, because the site and the way it was designed, which is absolutely innovative and unique, and I'll talk about that some, perhaps, the site didn't even come on line until the day before the WTO week.

I should say that one of the huge successes is that even though it came on line the day before and we didn't have any prior advertising, it still got one and a half million hits on the site that week, which was more than CNN's website that week, and we know that they have a bunch of advertising money. In some ways, I think what that speaks to is, first of all, the deep, deep desire and need for this sort of information, for this sort of network. People who did find out about it, friends, through the different links of all the partner collaborating organizations, it was resonating so deeply with them that they were letting everybody they knew check it out, and it just rippled and rippled and rippled outwards, expanding.

So that's one part of why it was successful, I think, in the short term. Part of it was also these networks where we weren't trying to be in charge, the Independent Media Center. We were very clear that we were trying to facilitate all these pre-existing organizations' and individuals' work, and so it was participatory in that regard and I think that people really, then, felt a powerful investment in the project, where they wanted to let everyone that they knew and all their networks that were significant find out about the project. So in all those different websites, they were all putting links; they were all referring to it.

That was kind of the alternative networks that pointed to it. The part of it is just complete circumstance is that things got pretty crazy in Seattle that week and pretty exciting, and the world was watching. People were speaking their voices powerfully, and that made for really compelling news, compelling coverage. I think that people around the world had some sense that this is an historic moment, that there's a shift happening here. That also just brought so many more people to check this out. We were able to really seize that opportunity through the use of different mediums.

Also I should mention that we had like a press team or a media team that was interfacing with the mainstream media, so kind of pitching the stories that we were covering to the mainstream media, be on talk shows and interview stuff as more and more we were getting all these calls. We didn't really expect it. We started to get ABC Nightly News showing up at the door of the IMC wanting to do a piece on the media center, the new model. And CNN and Christian Science Monitor all of a sudden, intrigued by all this.

That helped as well. While I always like to place prime responsibility for our success and the attention on the grassroots folks, we also need to acknowledge that it was certain attention from the mainstream media that really got the word out to a broader audience. One of the key aspects is that we actually got featured on Yahoo.com's main page, I think the second day of the week. That brought a tremendous number of people that wouldn't otherwise have heard about the project.

MB

Can you talk a little bit about the actual week of the WTO, and how the events, like you said, made for a dramatic scene, for actually the IMC to be the one to check out. What was the mainstream media not doing that you guys were able to do and that people were going to your site instead of the CNN site?

JP

Starting with Sunday, which was N28, I guess, that was the first day that we actually opened up our doors to media makers to come in and sign in and to be involved. We had this whole sign-in sheet that had expectations for behavior in the space – how to be respectful to folks you were working with,

expectations for use of the space, equipment, to anti-oppression work, all this sort of stuff.

We ran off about 80 of these little IMC packets before they came in the door, and we ran out of them within the first hour and a half, so we had to run down the block and make passes. We actually signed in over 450 people that week with these passes. That's one thing that was starting to happen was we realized on Sunday that the numbers of people coming into town who were mobilizing were just beyond anything we could have imagined.

So that allowed us to put about 100 videographers out in the street with camcorders. That meant that our coverage was in a lot of ways much more comprehensive than any of the networks who had maybe two camera people on staff. We had 100 camcorders out there and 300 sets of eyes out there watching stuff and coming in and filing reports up to the minute and bringing in footage.

A real quick story is that we heard from some network folks later in the week that they actually started looking for intersections where they saw people with the IMC passes. They were bright green, obnoxious bright green. Because if they saw enough of those people around, they knew something was happening at the intersection, so it was their way of identifying what was going on around town as they saw all these IMC people clustered around. It was like the information network, a communication network that they were using.

That's a lot of what I think was so compelling during the week is that not only were we out in the streets talking to people, which is one thing that the mainstream media wasn't doing. They were talking about people; we were talking with people, and handing people the microphone and letting them talk for themselves, inviting people into studio act and audio streaming, like, audio studio that we set up. This audio stream was going out live on the Internet. TV stations all over the world were playing it.

Giving people the opportunity to be directly engaged was part of what was the draw for people who checked out the site. Part of what was going on was a lot of focus has been on what happened on the streets that weekend. That's really important, but it's also important to recognize there were teach-ins happening all over the city. There were forums and discussions that were taking place everywhere about, not just critiques of globalization, but also alternatives to it.

One of the things that the IMC was doing is it was reporting from those forums and teach-ins, giving some context to what was happening, because that's one thing when we've assessed the mainstream media coverage, that they weren't really able to provide context. They didn't really have a sense of why people were so upset. They didn't really have a sense of what structural

adjustment was about, or they weren't willing to report it. Probably some of both.

I'd just like to say, too, that we were giving that balance of what was going on in the street, and how the resistance was manifesting, but also these vibrant discussions that were taking place as well. Both of those things were happening each day. Sunday there were several rallies that really started bringing a whole lot of interest and energy. People really had a sense that Tuesday was going to be a very big day.

Monday rolled around and there were all sorts of marches and mobilizing. There was a real palpable sense that Tuesday was going to bring something that we've never seen before. Nobody knew what that was going to look like, necessarily. Then to move towards Tuesday morning, we were starting to get reports from way early in the morning. A number of Independent Media Center folks were out with the Direct Action affinity groups. Some had paired up with Labor groups. Some had paired up with the People's Assembly from the South End, so we were trying to cover all the different aspects of what was going on, but because of Direct Action stuff, people were assembling really early in the day, right at dawn.

We were getting very early on Tuesday a sense that the people in the streets were actually shifting the balance of power, really, at least in those hours. We were starting to see that the police were very frustrated. We were starting to see that the people, and this was even before 10 am, that the positions that a lot of the Direct Action people had taken up were very solid, strategic positions, and that in order for the police to move, there was going to have to be a whole lot of commotion going on.

By noon we were starting to see the police really clamping down and gauging a lot of brutality, being very frustrated. It was very clear by their behavior how it was playing out. We were also just starting to see this convergence of all these different sectors. Like I was saying, students coming from the different colleges and universities, labor coming from the stadium. I had a sense that this was really bigger than any of us had anticipated.

With the response by the police that we were capturing on film, very graphically, there was a sense that this was not going to be able to be ignored, really, by mainstream media, even, as much as they wanted to keep a very narrow message on the media, a very tightly controlled flow of information. So folks, the press media team, really went into overdrive to start conveying and working with the mainstream media to make sure that the protesters' or the activists', the community's method was really understood and could get that out, and doing all sorts of talk show interviews and all sorts of things. They got on radio and everything, to really get the word out as widely as possible.

As the afternoon played out on Tuesday, there was an increasing sense that the City government felt that the talks were in crisis. There was talk of a curfew that was going to come up. That was actually announced.

We were getting in the IMC all sorts of reports. We actually had our own walkie talkie dispatch system so that the different video teams could report back on what was going on and that information could be posted, so people running in and out filing reports could know where to go, and so we could get our coverage going as fast as possible, which was quite challenging with the chaos.

As information was coming in, we were getting a sense that there was going to be a serious clampdown and trying to figure out what to do about that. So lots of the media team stayed out in the field, trying to do as much as they could, be there to witness whatever was going to take place. As people are very familiar with at this point, there was a very graphic display of brutality that we were able to capture, on video, but then also in lots of articles and postings, and also able to really counter a lot of the misinformation that the police department and the officials were putting out.

A really significant example is the denial that they were using rubber bullets. All the networks are carrying this denial just from the Police Chief, as if it's law; as if it's the word of God. But yet, we're posting numerous photos of people holding rubber bullets, huge welts all over their bodies from rubber bullets. We're rolling videotape on the site and we're posting that evening. We're releasing all sorts of first-hand accounts from people in the street that weren't making it onto the networks countering specific instances of disinformation.

While it isn't specifically about the issues surrounding globalization, I think it's a powerful example of the need, once again, for us to be confronting power, speaking truth to power, and the usefulness of media as one tool that we have; not as the answer, but as one.

Then just quickly I'll talk about how the curfew played out that night. It was pretty interesting at the Media Center. We got an announcement that it was going to happen, and that people were going to be cleared out of the downtown area. As I said, we were positioned right in the center of downtown. It was very unclear whether the Media Center was going to be cordoned off, within the cordoned off area. A lot of people had to make a decision about whether they were going to stay there for the night or whether they were going to take off.

There was also a lot of concern that, if the curfew was happening and we saw the police lines extending closer and closer towards the IMC, the potential for us to be raided, actually. The reason we thought that is because there started to

be a huge police line in the street right in front of our door. This was right around five, five-thirty. Also, in the alley behind us, which is our only other entrance/exit, there were two police vans. They were in riot gear and they had come out of their vans. They were standing around in the alley, right in the back.

There were these, like, little mini-tanks that were out in the front door, shushing people along and clearing them out of the downtown area. It even came to the point where they actually sprayed and tear gassed the front of the door of the Media Center, because we had security people posted there, trying to keep the flow in to a minimum.

Not only were we pulling some people in who were being beaten up by the cops; not necessarily IMC people, but just folks we were seeing being hurt, we were pulling them in, and we had some medics inside, but we had to pull our security people inside, because they got, like I said, sprayed by the police right there. They were knocking on the door and asking to come in, and asking for us to let out, to hand over some of the people that we brought in who were injured. So there was a real concern that the place was going to get raided.

At this point the Media Center was packed, because lots of people had been seeking refuge from being swept out of the downtown area. There was a very tense hour, hour and a half there where we were waiting to see what was going to happen, if they were going to come in or not. As it turns out, they did not. We think a lot of that has to do with – maybe they didn't want to at all, we don't know, but also the fact that from inside that space, we were posting all these stories that were going out to the world. The cops were in the front of the door. The police had tear gassed people in the front, showing video of it, and we're running like eight cameras in their face right at the front door as they were traveling around, which seemed to be a bit of a deterrent to them.

Then they said that if there are people that you want to leave for tonight, we'll let them go now, but they can't come back, because there's going to be a curfew. They won't be able to come back to this area. It was a pretty emotional moment, because we didn't know what the plans were by the police. We were all pretty exhausted and really emotionally kind of distressed from the events of the day. It was this tearful good-bye to a lot of people. We decided to just run with a skeleton crew that night in the center and basically send everybody home to get some rest and at least get them safe back in some different houses so that they could come back into the streets and document stuff the next day.

So we basically emptied out the place. There was like eight of us who stayed overnight, kind of just like sleeping in there and running stuff and keeping it and holding it down a little bit.

That brings us through Tuesday night pretty much, at least the view from inside the Media Center.

Wednesday we were heartened and overwhelmed to see people come back in huge numbers again, back to downtown. People were undeterred, and more than undeterred; they were emboldened by the taste of freedom that people had in the streets and the sense of solidarity that people had gained in those moments of crisis, those moments in the face of brutality from the authorities. People were supporting each other who may not ever have had conversations before. Talk about coalition building. You can talk about having meetings all you want, but having that kind of lived experience of supporting each other in a moment of crisis was incredibly powerful. I think we saw the effects of that play out during the rest of the week, actually, of how people then – not across the board, but certain groups then were supporting each other in a way that they may not have planned to at the beginning week.

There was a significant amount of contentiousness building up to the WTO about building a coalition, what the priorities of the coalition should be, and was it a rejection of the WTO or was it some kind of reforms that we could have? This was an ongoing tension that went on for months and got very heated in a lot of instances. To see people who just a few days before had said they weren't going to work with each other because they couldn't resolve some of these tensions, walking hand in hand, and sleeping out for hours and bringing all sorts of blankets and stuff for each other for the rest of the week, really spoke volumes to how we can come together in moments.

Not to say that there weren't flaws to those coalitions, too. Sorry. I'm drifting a little bit.

The massive support and kind of influx back into downtown, and kind of a recommitment by people to express their views and concerns was tremendously heartening to everybody and really gave us the sense that this was more than about one day and one action. In a lot of ways it provided the momentum to not just move through that week really strongly, but also to move beyond that. All sorts of mobilizations have happened over the last year, and it continues to happen.

I just wanted to quickly touch on – there were lots of memorable events during the week, but one was the public hearing that happened Thursday night. Because of the incidents that happened on Capital Hill Wednesday night where the police really started just going off on a lot of people who were citizens, hadn't really been involved in the protests, who weren't considering themselves activists, that really politicized folks in those neighborhoods.

I think, the average folks, if you will, who then were demanding accountability from the City Council, so they had this huge hearing Thursday

night at the library. We had people there covering it. It went on for six hours or something like that. They actually had to cut off the speakers, because they gave people three minutes, but still it went on for more than six hours and they didn't get to everybody. So they had to announce that they were going to have another one a few days later. That was just tremendous to see how people were speaking up. We were getting these calls from the library to the IMC that they needed us to run more tape, because all the videographers were running out of film and batteries.

The other big moment for me from what I saw was the jail solidarity in the presence of people at the jail, supporting those who had been arrested, sleeping out and being a presence and demanding their release, and also making the connection between the people who had been arrested and these actions where people have been arrested the week before for living their lives in the South End, or living their lives downtown or on Capital Hill, and making connections, finally, for a lot of people, I think, between the brutality that happened to activists and the brutality that happens everyday in lots of communities here and internationally.

I think those connections need to be made a whole lot more. For some folks, that was kind of a "ah ha" moment when the light bulb went on. I think there needs to be more of that.

So that's a part of what we've seen since Seattle, I think, is the growth of these international mobilizations and confrontations with these transnational corporations, so, for example, the IMF and World Bank actions of confronting them in April in D.C., the Republican National Convention here in the states, in L.A. and Philly, the actions recently in Prague in September. In all these places, people have seen it appropriate to carry the IMC model on. Actually, we've been overwhelmed by the interest and demand by people to really make use of this tool and to plug-in and keep this dialogue and these connections going.

I feel really encouraged by this, because I think that the IMC has played a key role in the flow of communication information for the movements for global justice. If we're not communicating with each other, it's very hard to build an international movement or even a local movement if we're not talking to each other across our communities and across these divides, so the flow of information and culture is absolutely essential for us to be working with each other and dialoguing and connecting.

Now, in the last 10 months, we've seen the growth of now 33 IMC's in over 10 countries in over four continents to the point where, even a lot of these smaller actions a lot of people may not be familiar with, our local communities and activists have called for IMC's that are now part of this network linked by the website and linked by our relationships with each other.

For example, even this past weekend in Austin, there was a gathering of Fortune 500 which I didn't hear about anywhere else, but people in Austin were like, "Hell, yeah. We're going to come together. We're going to make sure people know about this and get it out."

And the actions in Melbourne, Australia, where they confronted the World Economic Forum and shut it down. They called for a media center there. It's happening all over the world, and one thing we're recognizing, most of the Media Centers at this point are in the U.S., Europe, Australia, which is problematic, right, because we're talking about a truly global movement that's not really global yet.

[Tape Ends]

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