

# **Social Netwar, The Independent Media *Network*, and the Necessity of Decentralized Organizing**

by

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(draft: please do not quote without prior written consent. Thanks)

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The mutual-aid tendency in man has so remote an origin, and is so deeply interwoven with all the past evolution of the human race, that it has been maintained by mankind up to the present time, notwithstanding all vicissitudes of history. It was chiefly evolved during periods of peace and prosperity; but when even the greatest calamities befell men – when whole countries were laid to waste by wars, and whole populations were decimated by misery, or groaned under the yoke of tyranny – the same tendency continued to live in the villages and among the poorer classes in the towns.

Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid, A Factor of Evolution*, 1903

## **Abstract**

The Independent Media Network (IMN) and the movement challenging rampant global capital are engaged in a social netwar. The information age of the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century has enabled activists to work together globally while maintaining local autonomy. The power of this movement arises from its structure; namely, a decentralized network capable of instant communication, collaboration, coordination and action (C3A). The implications of this movement are profound and amount to what has been called an “‘associational revolution’ among nonstate actors that may prove as significant as the rise of the nation state.” Indeed, state policy makers are taking careful notice at whomever “masters the network form,” and are frantically calling for “counternetwar [and the improvement of] civil-military, inter-service, and intramilitary coordination and cooperation,” and the need to create “networks to counter networks.” The success of an anti-capitalist movement against state and market forces will be predicated on the ability to acknowledge, adapt, and expand the organizational paradigm of decentralized networks globally.

## **What is Social Netwar?**

In 1993, long before 9/11, 1999, the now famous date on which massive protests erupted in Seattle challenging the policies of the World Trade Organization, RAND corporation analysts John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt coined the term “netwar” in their well known essay “Cyberwar is Coming!” which described “societal-level ideational conflicts waged in part through internetted modes of communication [where] hierarchies have difficulty fighting networks.” Their study of netwar was continued after the Zapatistas made their presence known on January 1, 1994 in a study entitled “The Zapatista Social Netwar in Mexico” (1998).

RAND, the infamous “think tank” associated with high level planning documents such as the Pentagon Papers, is considered to be one of the most valuable private analytical institutions by state and military strategists. In this context, Arquilla and Ronfeldt describe the dangers that “Social Netwar” could mean for state and market forces:

First, the information revolution is favoring and strengthening network forms of organization, while simultaneously making life difficult for old hierarchical forms. The rise of networks—especially “all-channel” networks, in which every node is connected to

every other node — means that power is migrating to nonstate actors, who are able to organize into sprawling multi-organizational networks more readily than traditional, hierarchical, state actors can. This means that conflicts will increasingly be waged by “networks,” perhaps more than by “hierarchies.” It also means that whoever masters the network form stands to gain major advantages. Second, as the information revolution deepens, conflicts increasingly depend on information and communications matters. Conflicts will revolve less around the use of raw power than of “soft power”— that is, media-oriented measures that aim to attract rather than coerce.

It is important to emphasize that “netwar should not be reduced to, or confused with, Internet-war.” Fundamentally, a social netwar concerns the organizational paradigm chosen by “nonstate actors” who merge various “organizational, doctrinal, and technological phenomenon” together. In the case of activists from Seattle to Quebec, it was the incredible network of bioware (i.e. people on the ground in each city) and hardware and software (i.e. the communication network built in cyberspace) that made the network function efficiently. In describing the network topology, Arquilla and Ronfeldt write:

The organizational design is flat. Ideally, there is no single, central leadership, command, or headquarters — no precise heart or head that can be targeted. The network as a whole (but not necessarily each node) has little to no hierarchy; there may be multiple leaders. Decisionmaking and operations are decentralized, allowing for local initiative and autonomy. Thus the design may look acephalous (headless) at times, and polycephalous (Hydra-headed) at other times, though not all nodes may be “created equal.” In other words, it is a heterarchy, or what may be better termed a “panarchy.”

Harry Cleaver, in his article “The Zapatistas and the Electronic Fabric of Struggle” (1994), writes, in response to Arquilla and Ronfeldt, that “their discourse on threats to institutional power, especially that of states fits within an older discourse on the contemporary problems of ‘governability’.” Cleaver is referring to the Trilateral Commission Report on *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies* that was published in 1975. Throughout RAND corporation documents on the subject of Social Netwar, they repeatedly refer to potential strategies for counter-netwar, as we’ll discuss soon, and consistently acknowledge that “hierarchies have a difficult time fighting networks.” The new global social netwar being waged by activists is no longer just a crisis of democracy, but a crisis of hierarchy itself.

In the context of the current movement it is important to understand who, or more accurately what, threatens institutional power. In the case of the Zapatistas, they relied on the solidarity of “global civil society” which, as Cleaver defines, “is conceived as that part of society dominated by neither state nor market and often best represented by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), e.g., human rights, environmental, consumer, women’s groups.” The current movement for global justice, in the context of the Seattle effect (the rippling of protest which has occurred since November 30, 1999), has enormously increased the size and scope of “global civil society” to the point of directly challenging the most powerful institutions on the planet; including, but not limited to, the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and various governments. Most importantly, it is not one organization that is credited with successful challenges to multinational capital but rather “cross-border networks and coalitions” who identify “more with the development of civil society (even global civil society) than with nation-states, and [use] advanced information and communications technologies to strengthen their activities.”

While many activists have been involved in local and global struggles for years, it wasn’t until the information age firmly took hold that the speed of communication made de-centralized networks a serious threat to state and market forces. It is this speed which enables activists to be informed directly and instantly without mainstream media filters. According to Cleaver, “The Net provides new spaces for new political discussions about democracy, revolution and self-

determination but it does not provide solutions to the differences that exist; it is merely a means to accelerate the search for such solutions.”

The use of the term “Social Netwar” by RAND analysts to describe the involvement of individual activists and NGO’s in the case of the Zapatista movement is not surprising. If they take the threat of a social netwar seriously, then their clientele have a lot to lose. Most activists consider their work to be framed in the context of justice, whether revolutionary or reformist. Regardless, it is the discourse of war terminology that activists need to take seriously because the response by state forces has been framed accordingly.

## **Counter-Netwar**

Because “social netwar is fundamentally antiestablishment,” it is of no surprise that RAND analysts have already warned state policy makers of the need to develop counter-netwar strategies where it will take “networks to counter networks.” Such strategies include “tactical decentralization” and “the development of very effective interagency mechanisms and operations, since the interagency arena is where networking may best occur in the government world.” What is more disconcerting is their suggestion that the U.S. Army may need to be “increasingly called upon to provide ‘knowledge assistance’ to allies for public and press relations, psychological operations, and the restructuring of command, control, communications, and intelligence (C3I) functions in response to netwars.” In fact, that is exactly what happened in Washington D.C. during the demonstrations against the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

According to Intelligence Newsletter based in France, “reserve units from the US Army Intelligence and Security Command helped Washington police keep an eye on demonstrations staged at the World Bank/IMF meetings” and that “the Pentagon sent around 700 men from the Intelligence and Security Command at Fort Belvoir to assist the Washington police on April 17, including specialists in human and signals intelligence.”<sup>1</sup> Frank Morales, author of “Report on Federal Anti-Activist Intelligence Network,” writes that “according to the report, information on the protest movements is collected and stored by six Regional Information Sharing System (RISS) centers funded by the Justice Department’s Bureau of Justice Assistance” and that “RISS also act against any political activist group deemed to be a threat and over the last year has found itself focusing on anti-globalization groups.” Borrowing RAND terminology, RIIS is the ideal government “interagency mechanism” that can be used for counter-netwar.

It is no surprise that the definition of RIIS fits neatly in with the recommendations of RAND analysts. Their website describes RIIS as a program that is “composed of six regional centers that share intelligence and coordinate efforts against criminal networks that operate in many locations across jurisdictional lines” that “serves more than 5,300 member law enforcement agencies in 50 states, two Canadian provinces, the District of Columbia, Australia, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico.” It seems that “anti-globalization groups” have been included in the company of “criminal networks.”

The initial rumblings of the U.S. government’s intent on keeping track of high-tech networked activists can be traced back to at least 1997. Shortly after the MRTA seized the Japanese Embassy in Peru, the BURN! Collective, a free speech media collective, and Arm The Spirit, one of the users on BURN!, posted MRTA communiqués on their website as primary source information. The reaction of law enforcement officials is insightful in the context of social netwar. Linton Weeks, author of “The path to revolution,” which appeared in the Washington Post (Jan. 9, 1997, quotes John Russel of the Justice Department: “There are First Amendment considerations and there are legitimate law enforcement concerns. [We would like] to find a legal and acceptable procedure [to discover who is posting the information].” Weeks continues and

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reports that “several law enforcement agencies, including the FBI, ATF, and DEA, are planning a joint meeting soon to discuss the proliferation of such rabble-rousing pages.”

What is most disturbing about Russel’s comments is that he does not define “legitimate law enforcement concerns.” In the context of RAND analysts suggesting the need for greater military involvement in social netwar, combined with the presence of U.S. Army reserve units on the streets of D.C., we are witnessing a continued attack on U.S. civil rights legislation. Specifically, we are seeing the erosion of the Posse Comitatus Act that prohibits the use of the Army in civilian law enforcement. This Act embodies the traditional American principle of separating civilian and military authority and currently forbids the use of the Army and Air Force to enforce civilian laws. Because social netwar is a global phenomenon that directly challenges the authority of the traditional nation-state, we can expect to see state agencies continue to violate their own laws in order to wage a global counter-netwar. Ironically, the more that nation-states must violate their own civil rights laws in order to counter a social netwar, the more that may contribute to the erosion of their legitimacy.

Writing in response to the media frenzy over the internet’s ability to out flank the commercial press in the case of MRTA communiqués, Andrew Flood wrote, “We are sitting at a very old chess board called class society where 5% or less of the population can see the whole board. Maintaining this advantage for the ruling class in the face of the threat of new technology is what 'Netwar' is all about.”

### **The Independent Media Network**

For years activists have been calling for the creation of media that is independent of market forces that demand profitable returns from their products; in this case, products such as demographically differentiated minds whose attention is garnered for advertisers. When activists first realized the potential power of the internet, media collectives and activist groups were quick to take advantage of a decentralized communications network. Indeed, because of nature of the Internet, many of the early net activists were very anarchistic in nature. Groups like Spunk Press (spunk.org), the BURN! Collective (burn.ucsd.edu), Tao (tao.ca), various “infoshops” (infoshop.org), among others, were quick to take advantage of network capabilities.

Jason Wehling, in his article entitled “Netwars and Activists Power on the Internet” (1995), asks, “who best can exploit a system that ‘erodes hierarchy’ and requires the coordination of decentralized, autonomous groups in cooperative actions than anarchists and libertarian-socialists?” It is no coincidence that a number of the organizations mentioned above were closely involved in the so-called Zapatista social netwar that Arquilla and Ronfeldt studied. In the context of the modern global social netwar that activists are currently engaged in, the development of a global Independent Media Network (IMN) is crucial for people on the ground challenging the multitude of state and market forces which are destroying the planet. The organizational paradigm of early activist groups was the precursor to one of the most successfully coordinated media projects to date: the Independent Media Center (IMC).

### **The IMC**

The Independent Media Center (IMC), and its model of media production, sprouted out of the demonstrations against the World Trade Organization in Seattle. Less than one year later there are now close to forty Independent Media Centers worldwide. The success of the IMC model is no doubt attributable to both the organizational and technical advances made possible within the information age. The IMC model can be described, in the words of Arquilla and Ronfeldt, as a network with “little to no hierarchy [where] decisionmaking and operations are decentralized, allowing for local initiative and autonomy.”

In terms of the social network, one of the most powerful elements of the IMC model is its organizational structure on the ground combined with its ability to distribute information on the internet. It is the multi-dimensional characteristics that must be emphasized where “people, as well as databases and processors, [are] resources on a network.” The elements that characterize the IMC are precisely those elements that are needed to build an effective movement against rampant global capital, and are capable of resisting a counter-network attack. Such elements can be placed into four main categories: 1.) The IMC is participatory, 2.) The IMC movement is a not for profit movement, 3.) The decision making structure of the IMC is based on direct democratic principles, and 4.) The IMC is decentralized and committed to local autonomy. It is these characteristics that have profound implications for a globally networked movement and can potentially challenge traditionally static, one-way media outlets (i.e. the commercial press).

*Participatory:* The IMC is participatory not only in the sense that amateur journalists can have access to a global open publishing system, but that those within the local community can volunteer to participate in media production (e.g. audio, video, print, internet). The ability for amateur journalists to make media combined with reader interactivity of the website provides an analytical framework for immediate feedback on events as they occur, that can arguably help create a consensus for “global civil society” to challenge destructive state and market forces. As Wehling wrote in 1995:

We should attempt to coordinate the dissemination of solid analysis of important events. In this way members of the activist network will not only have the advantage of up-to-date information of events, but also a good background analysis of what each event means, politically, socially and/or economically as the case may be.

Only because of the information age is it possible for a person to provide their own analysis and feedback on events half way around the world as they occur. The potential for coordination and collaboration that leads to *immediate* action is phenomenal.

*Not-for-profit:* The IMC is a not for profit movement that has the potential to focus social debate outside of traditional market forces that provide information as a commodity. Because independent media is not beholden to advertisers and investors, it has the advantage of creating a forum for debate that is mostly independent of market pressures. While volunteer labor and resources certainly have its limitations in terms of challenging for-profit media corporations, it has major advantages in the fact the labor is decentralized across a network. This implies that if one node within the network has limitations, other nodes can provide resources to make up for the loss.

*Direct Democracy:* That the IMC is organized according to direct democratic principles is not only a value in itself, but is also a mechanism to resist the effects of a state sponsored counter-network. For example, creating multiple leaders with no formal hierarchical status empowers members on the ground while simultaneously not providing a “precise heart or head that can be targeted.” Furthermore, the development of consensus decisionmaking and the creation of affinity groups within each IMC allows for small groups of media activists to maintain a sense of autonomy even within their own locality. The affinity group structure makes infiltration less effective, but not necessarily less difficult.

*Decentralized:* The power of the IMC lies in the fact that each node within the network is decentralized. As Arquilla and Ronfeldt discuss in their writings on social network, it is this characteristic which most directly challenges traditional hierarchies, both state and market oriented. As the network grows so does the knowledge of the power of that network. Arguably, the more decentralized the network is, the more capable the independent media movement can effectively capture the attention *and participation* of “nonstate actors.” It is the participation of so called nonstate actors that frighten elite policy makers and potentially can engage millions of people in “discussions about democracy, revolution and self-determination.” Indeed, the global

independent media movement is to capital and hierarchy what the printing press was to the French aristocracy before the French Revolution.

### **Decentralizing and Expanding the Network**

The building of a redundant, decentralized scalable network is critical to the survival of an independent media network *and* the movement for global justice. The more that information is centralized within the network, the more vulnerable the network is to a counter-netwar attack. Strengthening the social and digital fabric of the network so that it is far more resilient to counter-netwar should be a priority for activists within the network. Because the network is two dimensional in the sense of its social and digital core, *node strategies* should be developed in both areas.

As a counter to what military strategists call command, control, communications, and intelligence (C3I) functions, activists will need to think about communication, collaboration, coordination and action (C3A) functions. C3A functions will involve our multi-organizational networks, irrespective of nation-state boundaries, that can quickly and efficiently react to destructive state and market forces. As Cleaver put it, "we must abandon the perspective of command and control in favor of consultation and coordination." The development of C3A functions is a *social node strategy* where human relationships are created and/or expanded upon in the real world. Because hierarchy is counter-productive to the power of networks, some examples of C3A functions which compliment the "all-channel" network topology would include consensus decision making structures, affinity group organizing, regional encounters (modeling the Zapatista encuentros) and spokes council meetings.

By increasing our communication, collaboration, and coordination, the more effective our actions will be against state and market forces. Since Seattle, there has been tremendous growth in the experience and knowledge gained from globally coordinated actions that have contributed enormously to C3A functions. It is important to emphasize that it is human social relationships that build networks. The enhancement of C3A organizing strategies will be the determining factor for the success of any activist network project.

Developing *digital node strategies* to defend against counter-netwar will be equally important. In the context of social netwar, such strategies would include the decentralization of information servers, the increasing use of encryption and the building of redundant and scalable networks. Concomitantly, the sharing of resources and code will be essential to help those who are new to the network. An effective node strategy should also consider security as one of its highest priorities, especially for people who are in extreme authoritarian states where the penalties for participation in global solidarity actions are severe.

One very important development in terms of network topology is the emergence of FreeNet. Ian Clarke, the initial architect of FreeNet, defined it as "a distributed decentralized information storage and retrieval system." The value of such a system in the context of social netwar is staggering for global activists. Because "power is migrating to actors who are skilled at developing networks," it will be essential for activists to take advantage of systems that will emphasize anonymity and decentralization. FreeNet is positioned to do just that for information created, stored and distributed within the IMN. According to FreeNet's website ([freenet.sourceforge.net](http://freenet.sourceforge.net)), "freenet is completely decentralized, meaning that there is no person, computer, or organisation in control of Freenet or essential to its operation. This means that Freenet cannot be attacked like centralized peer-to-peer systems."

### **Conclusion**

As long as there is a global movement that challenges the destructive policies of capitalism, there will exist a permanent state of "social netwar." The counter-netwar being waged by state agencies is only going to increase with the deployment of state sponsored networks and

it will be critical for movement participants to think carefully and strategically when organizing in the coming years. The ability to strengthen “global civil society” will depend upon the effective use of decentralization tactics, enhanced C3A functions, and the acknowledgement of the power of a new organizational paradigm; namely, linked autonomous networks. For elites, the “crisis of democracy” has not vanished, but has been accelerated with one additional caveat, the emergence of a crisis of hierarchy.