

What am I going to do?



Photo: chekov

[Tweet](#) [1]

Internet publishing and me go a long way back.

The day before yesterday was the 20th anniversary of the [birth of the web](#) [2] - and I've had a ringside seat for the great majority of its history. I witnessed its explosive growth through several generations of technical evolution. Between 1995 and 2009 I was involved in a succession of politically inspired Internet publishing projects. I worked in a variety of roles - from setting up infrastructure and writing software to editing, moderating and writing content. This experience has given me a pretty good idea of what works on the web and, less fortunately, a lot of experience of the pitfalls that web-publishing projects can fall into. The particularly frustrating thing about these pitfalls is that people repeatedly fall into the very same holes with each new generation of technology. Eventually, the frustration got too much and I burned out completely - I still can't hear the word "indymedia" without instinctively adopting a foetal position.

"I still can't hear the word 'indymedia' without instinctively adopting a foetal position"

So, this time round, in trying to tell my story on the web, I put a lot of thought into coming up with a publishing plan that will hopefully allow me to avoid plunging merrily into one of the holes that I know so well. Rather than being a precise pre-defined plan as to exactly what I'm going to publish and when, I've adopted a set of principles to guide the journey.

1. I'll publish the story in serial form over the course of a year

The web is much better suited to short material than to long texts. The trend towards shorter, more concise and more fragmentary information snippets has been constant since its birth. I have a fairly long story to tell and, while I'm not going to go the whole hog and divide it up into a series of tweets, I'm going to try to present it in bite-size chunks that can be comfortably read on a screen.

I also want to avoid the prospect of a story that goes on for ever, so I've given myself a time limit of a year. Whatever I can tell in that year I will, everything else I'll have to leave out. By the 30th of April 2014, I will have completed the story - what I do with the website afterwards I'll leave as an open question.

2. I'll publish material on a regular basis

People are creatures of habit and don't easily follow stuff that is irregularly produced. This is particularly important on the web where the competition for attention is so intense. Therefore, I'm going to make a big effort to publish new material on a regular schedule. My initial goal is to publish at least one new substantial installment each week - and to publish less substantial material at least every second day (I have lots of minor material based on stuff I've published in the past that will decorate the main narrative.) Which brings me to my next point.

3. I'll publish material in a number of different themed streams

The mainline of my story is a narrative detailing my journey through the far left political movements of the last two decades that is half-memoir, half reflective theoretical analysis. However, in addition to that, I plan to publish several more in-depth topic-specific narrative threads. These will cover areas such as Africa & the global South, media analysis, the inner workings of various strands of the anti-globalisation movement (the anarchists, indymedia, reclaim the streets, the anti-war movement, the summit protests and so on). I'm going to do it like this because some people might only be interested in the overall high-level reflective narrative and won't particularly care for the tedious details on these topics. I'll try to separate them out as best as I can and put in place convenient methods to allow people to easily follow only those strands that they are interested in. As I say above, there will be one substantial update per week from the mainline story.

4. I'm going to avoid talking about topical events and current affairs as much as possible

I'm interested in publishing more analytic, reflective material and while I have all sorts of strong opinions about current affairs, the government, abortion legislation and so on, I'm going to keep them to myself as much as I can. If the history of internet discussion tells us anything it is that it is easy for such discussions to become all-consuming and for them to take up far more time than they merit. The Internet does not need another commentator complaining about the government. That base is well covered.

5. I'm going to make every effort to make the material accessible to a general audience

Most discussion in both science and politics is full of jargon. While jargon is undoubtedly useful in certain contexts, as often as not it does nothing other than to exclude those from outside the inner circle. I sincerely believe that most people are more than capable of engaging with reasonably complex ideas if they are accessibly presented. This means that I'm going to try to make my language as non-specialist as possible. Given the subject matter, some of the material will, inevitably, be a little bit complex and a little bit abstract, I'll try to break it down into everyday language and accessible concepts. I'll also try to situate the theoretical parts within the overall narrative and provide a mix of simple anecdotal memoirs to go alongside them. Finally I'm going to try to make sure that

everything is presented as attractively and professionally as I can. For whereas nice images and elegant design are often not at all important to people who have deep interests in politics or science, they are very important for most people.

6. I'm going to make extensive use of technology to enrich the narrative and make it easier to follow

My story is largely text based - I am convinced that written text is still by far the best way that we have of communicating complex ideas. However, it would be foolish to dismiss the obvious success of the various technical enhancements which have driven the evolution of the web. They can clearly add immensely to the attractiveness of material and the ease with which people can engage with it. Therefore, I'm going to roll out a large number of technical enhancements to the site as I go along. Some of these will be basic and fairly boring - I'll need to introduce anti-spam measures pretty soon and I'll need to add various sections (e.g. "About Me") to put structure on the material. Others will be more interesting - video, audio, interactive maps, animated graphs, slideshows and so on. Meanwhile, I'll also add technical features which will make it easier for people to follow the various different thematic threads that I publish.

As I add technical features, I'll try to provide some commentary as to why I'm adding them and what I hope that they'll bring to the narrative.

For starters, with this, my second post, I have added a chronological listing of posts to the right-hand column. On day 1, the site was just a single web-page with a comments box. By adding the listing of recent posts, I've transformed it into what is effectively a blog. I've also added a link to a RSS feed, in response to a request in the comments. As I go along, I'll add more and more features and the site will gradually transform from blog to a fairly elaborate web site incorporating all sorts of stuff. Many of these features are already in place and lurking beneath the surface of the site - I spent 6 months building out the technical infrastructure before I went live. In terms of exactly what features I'll add and when, I'll decide as I go along - and these decisions will be driven by the narrative rather than being introduced for their own sake.

7. I'm going to try hard to avoid acrimonious debate

My seventh and final guideline is an important one! One of the unexpected characteristics of Internet communication is that it seems to be very good at producing acrimony, snarkiness, polarised 'debates' which quickly degenerate into slugging matches and general mean-ness. I've seen far too much of this in the past to have any interest in engaging in such pointless arguments (I have not been without fault myself on occasion in the past either!). To some extent the format that I have chosen for telling my story is designed to reduce the opportunity for such arguments: it's hard to disagree with my historical account of what I thought in the past and what mistakes I made. Still I'm sure the Internet will turn up some people who will do so enthusiastically. In general, I'm resolved to avoid getting into polarised debates. I will try to respond to comments and questions and disagreements as long as they are civil, but I'm probably going to be fairly busy publishing the core material, which is my focus, and my time will be limited. I apologise in advance if I don't get around to responding to everything that I would like to.

Now, I think that I've provided enough of an introduction to my plans and I should now get onto telling the story itself. Before launching into the narrative, however, there is one background detail that I would like to explain - the story of my name. I'm sure that everybody I've ever met has wondered how on earth I got such a name but most people are too polite to ask, and I've never actually told the full story before. That will be the subject of my next post which will appear here on Monday (I'm going to take a wee break over the weekend to drink beer and celebrate the fact that I finally got this website launched).

Links

[1] <http://twitter.com/share>

[2] <http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,2418330,00.asp>