

we now interrupt your regularly scheduled propaganda by Nuno Andrade

Alternative news sites like Indymedia and MediaChannel are trying to interrupt the message you're getting from mainstream newspapers and the network news. In the process, they just might end up redefining journalism.

Guess which headline appeared in *The New York Times*?

- ["U.S. Planes Bomb a Red Cross Site for Second Time"](#)
- ["Defense Dept. Confesses "Bombing Red Cross On Purpose"](#)

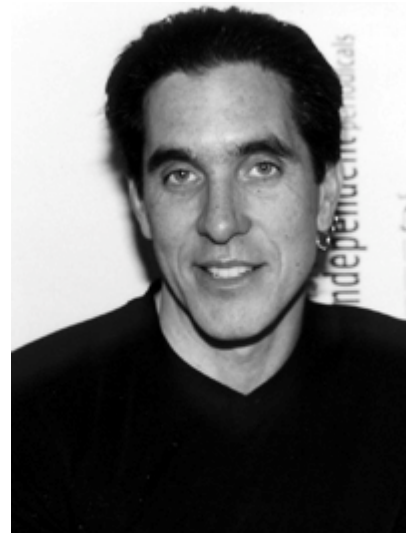


Not the second one. It's from the alternative media website, [Indymedia](#), which did no firsthand reporting, but picked up the story from a short-lived *Washington Post Online* column by [William Arkin](#) and an NBC report from one of its network correspondents. Both cited an unnamed military source saying the bombing had been deliberate. The still-uncorroborated information was big news at the end of October on alternative websites like *Indymedia* but barely reported in the mainstream press.

Indymedia's report appeared Oct. 30 in its ["Newswire"](#) section, an open publishing system that allows visitors to submit content and readers to respond to it. The site's intensive handling of the information points up a central difference between mainstream and independent media, especially on the Web.

As John Anner, executive director of the "antidote to monopoly media," the [Independent Press Association](#) explains, the purpose of the independents is to investigate events in greater depth and to air subjects the mainstream press is "too uncomfortable to talk about."

Aliza Dichter is senior editorial producer for [Mediachannel](#), a non-profit website dedicated to "global media issues." She thinks alternative media have the advantage of being free of many of the profit-driven corporate pressures that bedevil mainstream publications. Those pressures, she says, contributed to the media's failure before Sept. 11 to cover the conditions overseas that helped bring on the current crisis. Unlike the alternative press, she says, "corporate media didn't give enough attention to complex issues of geopolitics and perceptions of U.S. foreign policy overseas and [to] international stories."



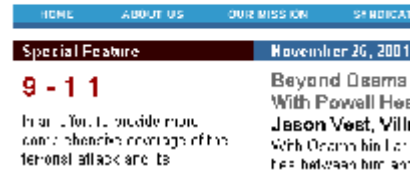
John Anner.
Photo: Denise Macias



She emphasizes how "greater information control" during times of war often leads to a "narrowing of views" on the part of corporate press and government-supported media. This "narrowing," she thinks, often results from profit and advertising pressures. Added to that, she says, is a heightened sense of patriotic duty, a need to be supportive of the administration.

Although Web publications are not altogether free of some of these same pressures, Dichter thinks the Internet provides "an incredible opportunity." Its immediacy and potential for interaction allow a kind of journalism that otherwise could not exist. Discussion on message boards and newsgroups also plays an important role. "[The Internet] will transform the way we consume media because we shape it," she says.

Omar J. Pahati, an associate editor at [AlterNet](#), thinks alternative media are vital in the preservation of democracy. "Alternative media are pursuing the views that are suppressed, whether by government pressure or public sentiment," he says. "It is our role to defend the democracy by making heard dissenting views, alternative analysis, and consideration for those at the wrong end of the American gun barrel."



This is critical in times of war, he explains. "The people have a right to know whether [the] grave and violent actions [of war] are justified." He acknowledges that propaganda is an integral part of the war effort on every side, but says the reliance of mainstream media on government sources can be a handicap. "The military will always use information as its most powerful weapon, shaping a culture that supports war," he says. "Alternative views are an antidote to this; we fight propaganda with alternative points of view."

Websites such as *AlterNet* provide a place where people can both acquire such information and communicate with others. "Before the Internet there were few places to disseminate these voices on a massive scale," Pahati says. "Because of the Web, voices that were once highly localized are now heard nationally and even internationally."

Preston Peet, who wrote a piece for [Disinformation](#), headlined "[War is Hellishly Profitable](#)," thinks the convenience of the Web is the source of its strong appeal. "[With the Internet] there's the added benefit of placing links within one's articles [that] lead directly to supporting information [and] to all pertinent information," he says. The ease with which readers can communicate with writers and editors is also an advantage. "It is often easier to contact a writer [that is] published online and pose questions to them as they often supply an e-mail address or link, which isn't often the case with a newspaper or magazine," he adds.



That said, even avid proponents of the form don't see it as the last, best hope for better journalism. Jeremy Lynes, who contributed a piece to *Disinformation*, "[The War on Ourselves](#)," cautions that although Web sites such as *Disinformation* are a valuable resource, they may also serve to propagate rumors, such as the unfounded report that footage of Palestinians celebrating in the streets after the Sept. 11 attacks was actually archived videotape from the Gulf War. The erroneous information appeared on the *Indymedia* site and spread rapidly by email.



Nick Mamatas.
Photo: Peter Berberian

Nick Mamatas, a contributing editor at [Disinformation](#), is not bothered by charges the alternative press lacks any pretense of objectivity. Though this can hamper credibility, it also can be seen as a strength. "The objectivity that mainstream media holds so dear is a myth," he says. "What journalists are taught is objective is simply the path of least resistance. The role of alternative media is to present information with a point of view," he says, "one that is explicit rather than [hidden] by the smoke and mirrors of 'telling both sides of the story' or 'balanced reporting,' which most often means taking government press conferences at face value."

Even reporters for mainstream publications find themselves paying heed. "I represent mainstream media, but I represent mainstream international media," says Arturo Zampaglione, New York correspondent of the Rome daily newspaper, *La Repubblica*. In his reporting, he won't quote from most alternative online sites without independent confirmation in the way he quotes from, say, *The New York Times* or *Wall Street Journal*. But, he says, "Somehow alternative media helps me to put [events] into context or to ask questions of the mainstream media. ... It gives me some doubts; it gives me some ideas so that I'm more careful."

At the same time, Zampaglione points out, what starts out as alternative media can, in time, be absorbed into the mainstream. For example, he now will quote from [The Drudge Report](#) without an independent corroborating source. "The definition of mainstream has become complicated, especially online," he says, adding that online, there are even substantive variations between the print and Web versions of the same mainstream publication. What results in a correction or retraction in the print version of a publication, Zampaglione says, is just an updated page on its website. "You'll never see a retraction on the online news system," says Zampaglione. "The story is corrected. That's it."

Web counterparts of mainstream media do not share the problem alternative publications have in attracting an audience. "On the Web, the audience has to come to you," says Dichter. "It's not like radio, where [people] might chance upon your station; they have to see a link or know the [Web] address," she says. And mainstream media websites often advertise to attract visitors. "A site like [CNN](#) gets not only promoted on every *CNN* [television] newscast, it also gets pushed and linked [to] from AOL, Netscape, Yahoo!, etc.," she says. "*Mediachannel* and other alternative media don't have anywhere near that outreach."

Yet to Peet, the sheer breadth of information access the Web provides more than makes up for its downside. "There is so much information at their fingertips that has never before been possible without spending days in a library," he says. "It still takes a little work to get to the info, but it is available [and] like any info, people must be discerning, and use their minds when reading online. But this goes for libraries too."

So, did the United States intentionally bomb a Red Cross warehouse in Afghanistan? Without official attribution, the mainstream press isn't saying. The alternative press, not only can, but has. Whether you believe the story is up to you.

This article originally appeared in [ReadMe](#).