

# Eat The State!

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Politics with Bite

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## FBI Attacks Seattle IMC

by Geov Parrish

During last month's raucous Quebec protests against summit negotiations for the Free Trade Area of the Americas, a stunning side story surfaced in Seattle--a disturbing government attack on media freedoms, Internet free speech and privacy, and the rights of ordinary people seeking alternative news sources.

The target of the attack was Seattle's Independent Media Center. The IMC, housed in a downtown storefront on 3rd Avenue, is a collection of media activists (including ETS!) that came together during 1999's WTO protests. Its groundbreaking live reports and streaming media from the streets of Seattle have since morphed into 54 IMC web sites around the world. Traffic is heaviest during big anti-free-trade protests. For the FTAA, over a dozen IMC sites, including Seattle's, produced a massive number of reports from the scene of protests in Quebec and several other cities.

But at the weekend's height, on Saturday evening, April 21, the Seattle IMC storefront was visited by two FBI agents and an agent of the Secret Service, bearing a sealed court order. The court order contained two provisions. First was that the IMC (at an IP address that turned out to be incorrect) hand over "...all account records and system/accounting log files and supply the Federal Bureau of Investigation with...All user connection logs for [the IMC] for the time period beginning April 20, 2001, to the date of this Order for any connections to or from [the IMC]. User connection logs should contain the following: 1. Connection time and date; 2. Disconnect time and date; 3. Method of connection to system (e.g., SLIP, PPP, Shell); 4. Data transfer volume (e.g., bytes); 5. Connection information for other systems to which user connected via, including: a. Connection destination; b. Connection time and date; c. Disconnect time and date; d. Method of connection to/from system (e.g., telnet, ftp, http); e. Data transfer volume (e.g., bytes)."

In other words, at the peak of user activity during the Quebec protests, the FBI sought the identities and browsing histories of not only the Seattle site, but 35-40 other sites also hosted from the Seattle IMC's computer--detailed data on 1.25 million hits over a 48-hour period.

Secondly, the order demanded that the IMC "...not disclose to the user of said electronic communication service, nor to any other person, the existence of this Application and Order..." Hence, as reports started to

[es for](#) spread that night of the agents' visit to the storefront, IMC activists were  
[ers](#) under a court order not to themselves report or discuss what had  
happened or why.

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They were also powerless to counter the version of the story which appeared in an error-laden story heavily attributed to "federal sources" two days later in the Seattle P-I--and, last week, in a short but even more erroneous summary in The Stranger. The visiting agents claimed that their investigation sought the identity of the person or persons who posted, on the Seattle IMC site (which is open for anyone to post on without screening), documents stolen from a Canadian government agency, including classified information relating to President Bush's Canadian travel itinerary.

The only problem, according to the IMC, is that there is no such post. The closest was two articles, one in French and one in English, posted on the Montreal IMC site, containing portions of documents purportedly stolen from a police car in Quebec City on April 20. The documents detail police strategies for hindering protests, and appear unrelated to Bush.

Even if the Montreal document was the focus of the investigation, and was illegally obtained, publishing it should be protected free speech (think Pentagon Papers); a media firm's source of material relevant to a criminal investigation should also be privileged information; and the Privacy Protection Act should also protect Internet user identity.

After six days, the gag order was lifted, allowing the IMC to belatedly offer its side of the story, but plenty of damage was already done. While the IMC was silenced, "federal sources" were free to spread misinformation to the P-I. News of the FBI visit spread quickly during the FTAA weekend--resulting in a sharp drop in posts to the IMC. Even if the feds don't get the data they want--IMC lawyers are negotiating to narrow the order's scope--they've already succeeded in suppressing coverage of events in Quebec. As the Indymedia model spreads, state attacks like this must be prepared for in the future.

And when they happen, don't expect help getting the story out. Almost no local media outlets covered the FBI/IMC story--let alone covered it accurately--let alone raised the media freedom issues involved--let alone spoke out. If the feds had sought the sources or audience of, say, KOMO-TV, the effort would have made headlines. The silence when a well-established but overtly dissident local outlet is targeted tells us all we need to know about whose side our "objective" corporate media is on.