

Anarchist News Interview

Uncivilized Podcast Interviews ANews

Artxmis Graham Thoreau, chisel, thecollective

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I can't help but open with our usual: hello, everyone, this is Artxmis with the uncivilized podcast. For those that do not know, the uncivilized project has come to an indefinite hiatus and has been taken offline. The original hiatus began out of a lack of interest on behalf of the creators. The taking down of the podcast happened because some members of the group behind the project feel intimidated by the trump's administration's growing venom towards anarchists and other "unamerican" elements. Before these decisions were made, I reached out to thecollective, an anonymous coalition that helps manage and moderate the site, and we were able to do an asynchronous interview. What you will read is the text version of that interview. Much love & many thanks to members of thecollective who participated and were very patient for this to come together.

Uncivilized and unapologetic

- Artxmis

What is the origin of ANews?

thecollective_1.8: Around 2004 or so Aragorn! created ANews largely in response to the increasing moderation, disappearance of anonymous comments, and sectarian publishing decisions of anarchist news content happening over at infoshop dot org with chuck0. Aragorn! created and worked on the ANews project on their own for over 10+ years, reading every single comment, posting the majority of the stories, and covering all the technology behind it all, including hosting the website on servers and equipment built and maintained by anarchists (largely him again!). The content management system (CMS) behind the website has always been and continues to be Drupal.

What was the motivation?

chisel: aragorn! started it in response to some of the decisions made by chuck 0 re: moderating infoshop. a! wanted a forum that was less sectarian, more open, and more able to be self-critical. and probably one that was less leftist, as well. and one that had more humor.

thecollective_1.8: While not wanting to speak for Aragorn!'s motivation other than saying that I think a large part of it was the idea to have a place to share and discuss anarchist content, from the controversial to the usual suspects. At the time, the other English language anarchist news websites out there were continually going tango down while e-begging for cash, that never seemed enough to keep the lights on for a few days. At the same time the most popular anarchist

news website at the time was moving over to registered user only comments and with that a more strict moderation of comments. This can be thought of as a sectarian approach to the anarchist news idea, which is the opposite of what ANews started off as (and continues to be!).

Related to the motivation of ANews is a former project called Angry Nerds, which will always hold a fond place in my heart as the origin story of the timeless logo of “boxy the box cutter.” After the 2001 attacks on the Twin Towers in New York City, Aragorn! and friends started the Angry Nerds project, which is known today as Anarchy Planet.

<https://anarchyplanet.org/>

ANews can be thought of as the news aspect in this planetary configuration of media and mediums.

My own motivation: I’ve been around the website since the earliest days and have for many years held down one of the oldest registered accounts on the various iterations of ANews, as it updated, crashed and burned, and upgraded through the years. After many years of caring for ANews worker(Aragorn!) soon retired from the front lines, and I along with some others were invited to join thecollective, a bite-sized group of anarchists who curate the tubes.

“As of this date (August 17th, 2015) Worker has officially resigned as the figurehead and moderator of anarchistnews.org. Worker will no longer be the operator of this site. That task will now be passed to an editorial crew named thecollective.” - worker

Who were the “main movers?”

chisel: aragorn! did it by himself for like ten years. then he got people to help him. there are two people who are of the original first team of recruits, and a few newer folks.

thecollective_1.8: Aragorn!

Angry Nerds, which is now known as Anarchy Planet.

Friends.

Anarchy!

society!

What are the guiding principles or motivations? How have they changed?

chisel: aragorn!’s principles were to let people say what they wanted (to respond to articles that spun information in egregious ways, for example), and to get into real conversations with each other in the comments—which could include people being mean. humor is a guiding principle, but that at least has been minimized over time, because humor is easily weaponized by people who are not actually trying to be funny, much less *being* funny. put another way, humor is too subjective for how social media has developed. humor that is saying something hard and true and complicated requires some level of trust on both sides, which social media works against. that’s how it seems to me anyway. aside from the humor complication, i think we’re pretty much in line with the principles anew started with. how those principles are manifested now has changed because the world has changed, but what that means in practice is we remove a few more comments than we used to.

thecollective_1.8: The ideas behind ANews have not changed much. I think there were guiding principles and motivations since the origins of ANews, but I believe that these phrases were termed and thought of differently, and I would lean towards using more of a lexicon of “words, ideas, and inspiration” over the terms principles and motivation. Since 2005 or so the main tagline has read:

“The goal of anarchistnews.org is to provide a non-sectarian source for news about and of concern to anarchists. It is also to provide a location for community moderated discussion about such news.”

How does ANews contrast to other anarchist news outlets? How is it similar?

chisel: main difference afaic is we have not only comments, but anon comments. while obviously no site will ever be anarchist in form, letting people talk to each other—and not be just lectured at by articles—is important to me. and we’re stringent about the anarchist criteria, or maybe we define anarchist differently from other forums. or both.

thecollective_1.8: Some contrasts: The tagline of being non-sectarian and posting a much wider variety of anarchist texts and articles that usually don’t make it up on other anarchist counter-information. There is also space for all-sorts-of-commentary on all the anarchist news and not just the things we might favor on our own. You can register a user to post articles or leave a comment and also fully interact with the website without an account, anonymously. We do our best to not track user information and purge data related analytics. We also allow users to connect to the website via apparatuses like Tor and virtual private networks and don’t use more technical corporate things like CloudFlare behind the scenes to monitor it all. Of all the other anarchist news outlets, I think we try to bring the most humor and feature it in the project, so that means we probably laugh and smile the most, good or bad.

I will try not to speak for other projects, but on a basic level I see similarities between ANews and other anarchist counter-information projects in our passion for distributing and archiving anarchist news around the world.

How did the people around ANews come together? Was there a shared history or did the project bring you all together?

chisel: a little of both.

thecollective_1.8: There have been some shared experiences over the years that have brought us together along with the project introducing new participants to each other. Over the years, it has been important to have an initial face-to-face (f2f) connection before inviting someone new along. The project has largely been participants from North America over the years, but not always and at times not everyone’s first language has been English. Since taking over for the retiring ANews worker, thecollective has ebbed, flowed, and meandered downstream with the years, growing at times and decreasing in other moments. Some of thecollective have been around since the beginning while other people are seasoned crafty veterans alongside the neophytes of thecollective.

What has been the biggest success of ANews?

chisel: continuing to exist as something separate and different from the other options. being a statement of and forum for a kind of anarchist thinking that didn’t exist when it started and currently supports smaller projects of similar ilk (montreal counterinfo, for example), and allows for people to talk across tendency lines, even if that doesn’t happen as much as it could.

thecollective_1.8: Off the top of my head, I think the biggest success of ANews has been it’s longevity with over 20+ years as an anarchist counter-information website. Outside of the superlatives, over time the project has had moments of success, depending on how one might define it, that to be an accurate retrospective would really need a deeper dive into the memory of ANews past, present, and future.

What has been the biggest failure of ANews?

chisel: when a! stopped doing the rollers and images with humor, because he got tired of people not getting them/complaining about them. i know that's not the kind of failure you meant, but it's the thing that comes to mind.

thecollective_1.8: For as long as ANews has been around, it's not really a popular anarchist website or known and used amongst anarchists. I think part of this is because ANews has had a bad reputation for upsetting and angering various anarchists and groups via the content posted and shared over time and space.

On another note, in the 2015 resignation of worker text, Aragorn! writes:

"My greatest disappointment in running anarchistnews.org is that it has witnessed this degradation of interesting activity of anarchists. The Internet does not inform interesting activity, it kills it stillborn. Most new anarchists fear the attention of the broader anarchist community because it almost never comes off as supportive (and when it does it tends to be in the style of NGO shit sandwich rhetorical kindness). The Internet is now at the center of how we communicate with each other and it means our communication is worse than ever."

I would tend to continue to agree with these sentiments. I've always been frustrated by the way anarchists communicate with each other online, and maybe I'm getting old, but especially over the most recent years, pandemic and all.

Another failure some may consider is that of funding, at least compared to anarchist projects that have really made bank from donations. Real anarchists have day jobs and that has kept ANews going for a longtime by individuals and close friends. Within the last few years, Anarchy Planet, the hosts behind the website created a way for people to donate money towards helping keep the anarchist infrastructure up-and-running.

Alternate question: Has it, in some way, not reached a goal that was intended for it?

chisel: it has been subsumed (probably not the correct word) by the times. many things have changed since it started, including SO MUCH more communication via online forums, and while anew remains meaningful as an anarchist project on anarchist infrastructure, i wouldn't say that either the mods or the users are being visionary about how to deal with this new tool. but transitions and knowledge take time. so i guess i'd say that the goal has changed, and the original deeper goals are much harder to achieve.

thecollective_1.8: On a personal level, I always like to think that some of my biggest failures can lead to some of my greatest successes. I also think about ANews this way and consider it to be an ongoing life project. My goal and I hope part of the rest of thecollective's goals for the website are to have fun doing the project, find humor, share anarchist ideas, and create the anarchy we want in the world.

How does Anews relate to projects such as The Anarchist Library?

chisel: Well, the anarchistlibrary dot org was a!'s idea, and he started it with a couple other people. so i'd say the projects started and continue as sisters. obviously the library is more useful to and used by a huger audience, so anew is the scrawny bluestocking sister. XD. metaphors!

thecollective_1.8: The Anarchist Library is younger than ANews by a few years, but have gone on to be our much more popular friends that sometimes invite us along to hangout. Throughout the years of the ANews Podcast, we have often featured readings from the library and link to the library in various places on ANews. ANews has sometimes posted texts directly from the library

and the library has also sourced many texts originally from ANews. The library also features a link to ANews in the footer of their website, which we are grateful for. Zooming out and looking into the larger scope of Anarchy Planet, one can think about ANews as a news source and the library as an archive of a lot of this news, along with other texts not specifically featured on ANews.

Some folks are not fans of their comments being deleted, calling the mods “authoritarian” – how do you balance an anarchist ethos with moderation? Is there any tension, at all?

chisel: there is all the tension. each of us could probably write a book about our thinking about moderating, and specifically moderating for anew. here’s my book, or the beginning of it i guess. as is stated on our “about us”, each mod will have a different idea about how and what to mod, our goals for comments don’t necessarily align, and we have different levels of patience for what we think is funny, and also different senses of humor (although we align on humor a lot, i think). we have the conversation about what, whether, and how much to remove on a regular basis, usually because one of us did something another of us disagrees with, but sometimes because a thread pokes us by going too far down a category of simplistic, or too mean, or both. and we know, again, that it’s confusing for users. it’s confusing for us too sometimes. best i can do personally, is compare it to getting to know a person. the site has a character. if one hangs around, and especially if one comments, then we’ll get used to each other. relationships take time. this is why things are slightly different for anons than for consistently named users. when sir einzige or lumpy or emile says something ridiculous, it stays up because the comment is adding to the information pool about who those users are, for future reference. anon by definition has no history and no future, which is what makes posting as anon appealing and sometimes important. i will also add that comments are also removed when they’re only name calling. comments that are one person calling another person stupid or nazi or fascist, without explanation, are beyond meaningless. they are numbing and stupid-making.

thecollective_1.8: “The ANews collective are the cops of anarchist counter-information” – probably some disgruntled anonymous commentator. It’s a difficult balance and there has always been tension and ongoing conversations about what it means to be an anarchist website that allows anonymous comments. Each person in thecollective brings their own experiences to the table and behind the scenes we are often chatting about why a comment was left up or taken down and letting it ride or changing our minds. Overall, I believe that the comment moderation has continued to be light and in-line with my original perspective of the website when Aragorn! created it. There have been times over the years and continue to be, with different people in thecollective, who have varying ideas about the comments. I try to rarely remove comments and it mostly comes down to one-liners (no effort troll post) and general terribleness.

Related to question 8, and perhaps this will be answered by it: What do people seem to misunderstand about the function or role of Anews?

chisel: i don’t really think in those terms, but if i had to respond (and i don’t! so i’m making a choice here...) sigh. anyway, i think there’s something that is hard to follow about a social media forum that doesn’t act like other social media forums. one that is in some conflict with itself (see above), and that doesn’t mean to act like everyone is functionally the same, including the moderators. but that’s a pretty minor thing. i think mostly people get what anew is. for good and ill.

thecollective_1.8: There are probably a handful or so of misunderstandings about ANews over the years. Starting from the project being solely based out of friends living in California. We are spread across time zones and the majority concentration of us throughout the years has varied. Of note, in the recent past, ANews was largely based out of the east coast, and I think people consider ANews to be west coast (east coast > west coast).

I think there are many more misunderstandings about ANews, but perhaps for another time.

Has ANews faced legal trouble for what it hosts, despite its disclaimer it isn't responsible for the content or reflect the views of the collective?

chisel: we have been approached by police to take down a story that was already months old.

thecollective_1.8: Years ago, an article about an action in Canada was posted that included a photograph. This in turn lead to agents from Canada knocking on one of the ANew's collectives door in the USA. After contacting our legal team, we took down the photograph to avoid further troubles.

We recently added a disclaimer to the website About Us page, it reads:

"Official Disclaimer

For those who need the obvious to be stated in simple words: anarchistnews.org is not responsible for what is said in comments, whether on- or off-point. Also, the views expressed in the comments do not represent thecollective or anarchistnews."

What does the future of AnarchistNews look like? Both the site we've been discussing and the general notion of anarchist news in general?

chisel: for anews, the future looks black and purple with yellow highlights. we can argue over the shade of yellow. ;) as for anarchist news as a category, the pendulum of anarchist popularity might be swinging back. kinda depends on how scared people get and how much more repression there is. but anarchist thinking exists regardless of the popularity of the word, maybe especially when repression is worse. so i guess it depends on what you mean by news that is anarchist.

thecollective_1.8: I think that anarchist media not being controlled by Big Tech is important for creating a space for the future of anarchist media. It's exciting to see the growth of regional counter-information websites and translation projects around the world. To keep these kind of things going, projects will need long-term funding and support.

I would love to see more reportbacks about actions and events from a specific anarchist perspective appear in the world. Related to this idea of reportbacks, is that anarchist media getting away from the mainstream media outrage cycle.

In terms of ANews, I'm pretty stoked about the new website upgrade recently and opportunities in the garden of forking paths to share and provide a space for inspiring anarchist conversations and ideas. I'm ever thankful and appreciative of all the friends I've made along the way by working on the ANews project, they have had an enormous impact on my life and my anarchist ideas.

Appendix:

ANews 20 year in review - a comment from ANews that was not originally included in interview:

Hello,

In March 2004, worker – the OG ANews administrator posted a message on the newly created ANews website asking for an editorial collective. Some might say, it took fast forwarding to the year 2015, of August, for worker's call-up for participation from 10+ years earlier to be answered.

Of course, prior to the collective when Worker was traveling, sometimes they would ask a friend of ANews to hold down the fort, or at least that happened once from memory.

“As of this date (August 17th, 2015) Worker has officially resigned as the figurehead and moderator of anarchistnews.org. Worker will no longer be the operator of this site. That task will now be passed to an editorial crew named the collective.” - worker

I’ve been part of the collective since 2015 and maybe a bit before that, but I don’t recall exactly. I do know that it was really exciting to have a behind the scenes look into ANews, help the project, and converse with friends about anarchist stuff. Back in 2004, I remember using the website and registering an account, and slowly but surely as Infoshop dot org became more of a desert I started visiting and reading the news from Anarchist News dot org. Even before I was part of the collective, I was patiently leaving some comments, adding articles over the years, and following closely along. The idea of a place to share anarchist ideas and have conversations about such ideas and things was and continues to be close to my heart.

As The Time of Reading All the Comments closed and the provocation of such tasks was bestowed upon the collective, the baton was passed along to a group that has changed over the years, but largely remained. The rollers stopped, the images became all ANews stock, but the anonymous comments remained like newspaper boxes in the street for a bit. There have been a number of the collective anarchists since then, internationally as well as based in North America, a handful remain from the start, some have left, and new friends have been joined. ANews has largely been associated with North America, even though the website has covered anarchist ideas from around the world, unlike many other locally focused counter-information. ANews has always been associated with the West Coast, but silliness aside, we’re actually more East Coast nowadays (east coast > west coast).

Since 2005, ANews has had the goal:

“The goal of anarchistnews.org is to provide a non-sectarian source for news about and of concern to anarchists. It is also to provide a location for community moderated discussion about such news.”

The tagline of being non-sectarian and posting + providing a space for commentary on all the anarchist news and not just the things we might favor in our time outside ANews is one aspect that I really find importance in. Ideally, I would hope that ANews provides a little bit of everything that anarchists are doing in the world, no matter your specific ideas, and if not one can easily submit their own articles for publication.

A common refrain one might hear about ANews is that “the comments suck!” ANews doesn’t keep logs and allows anonymous comments that could come from anywhere, like Tor, so yes – the comments can be bad and there are definitely a handful of specifically dedicated trolls, state actors, or just disgruntled anarchists trying to yell into the void that will bombard the website with their adverse musings. For the most part moderation is light and you can read more about it in the About Us, or genuinely inquire.

Overall, the general layout of the website hasn’t changed dramatically since 2015. A new iteration of ANews is quickly incoming that may or may not change much of the layout, but will greatly impact other areas of the website functionality. I’m most interested currently in creating

a more beautiful and useful calendar of anarchist events around the world, and improving the overall usability and aesthetic of the website; along with some possible other features for registered users (emoji reactions, up/down user rankings of things that everyone will complain about and suck, but could be a fun experiment, and more!).

In the 2015 Topic of the Week: The Resignation of Worker – worker wrote about their greatest disappointment with ANews:

“My greatest disappointment in running anarchistnews.org is that it has witnessed this degradation of interesting activity of anarchists. The Internet does not inform interesting activity, it kills it stillborn. Most new anarchists fear the attention of the broader anarchist community because it almost never comes off as supportive (and when it does it tends to be in the style of NGO shit sandwich rhetorical kindness). The Internet is now at the center of how we communicate with each other and it means our communication is worse than ever.”

After resigning from reading all the comments, worker had more moments to sit in the back seat and focus on other anarchist stuff, but worker did still participate in the workings of ANews until their passing in February of 2020, they were just part of the larger group known as thecollective. Since Aragorn! walked on, thecollective has continued to say hello & goodbye to familiar faces and friends along the way. Outside of the podcast notes and participants, thecollective is largely anonymous and is not the previous-known face of Aragorn!

-thecollective_1.8

The Anarchist Library
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