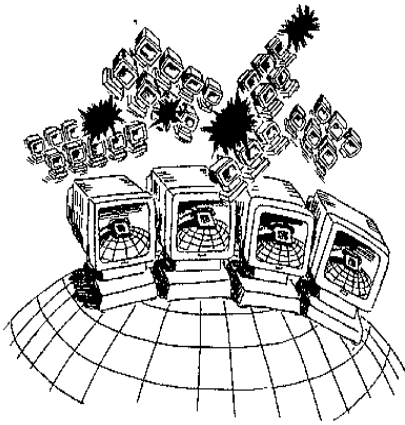


Association for Progressive Communications:

Empowering the Community in the Information Era

by Amalia Souza and Karin Delgadillo



APC's goal is to provide advanced, inexpensive communications technology and technical expertise.

Technical shortcomings that APC tries to overcome in its daily operations and partnership:

Access to a telephone

Band Width

Everybody talks about "Internet". And also the Churches are more and more interested in using the new telecommunication possibilities for their interests.

Moving somewhere between great enthusiasm and sceptical disapproval, many of us are still looking for ways how to make the best out of the new technological developments. In the following article, two collaborators of APC, a network involved in development communication, give some orientations in the jungle of electronic mail, online services etc.

APC, the Association for Progressive Communications, is a worldwide partnership of 21 member computer networks in all five continents that links NGOs working for peace, sustainable development, environmental sustainability, conflict resolution, social and economic justice and universal human rights, among many other progressive themes. APC provides communications and information-sharing tools to over 50,000 activists, educators, nonprofits and NGOs in over 133 countries. Founded in 1990, APC coordinates the operation and development of this emerging global network, being meanwhile the largest computer communications network in the world dedicated specifically to NGOs and to enhancing their effectiveness, organizational ability and capacity. It also exchanges e-mail and selected conferences with over 50 partner networks worldwide, many of whom are expected to become full APC members in the future.

In 1995 APC was granted Consultative Status, Category 1, to the United Nations Economic and Social Council - ECOSOC, which is the highest category for an NGO within the UN system.

A network dedicated to enhancing NGO communications

APC's goal is to provide advanced, inexpensive communications technology and technical expertise in both developed and developing countries so that NGOs have an effective vehicle by which to coordinate and to distribute information. The APC networks serve as a communications infrastructure for NGOs worldwide. The two primary components of the APC infrastructure are

- 1) the information that flows through the APC Networks, and
- 2) the technical expertise that allows NGOs worldwide to easily access the system from their office or home.

Telecommunications Technology: Shortcomings

It is very important to emphasize at this point that there are some definite shortcomings with this technology that APC tries to overcome in its daily operations and partnerships with networks and civil society organizations around the world.

- a) Access to a telephone: ten of the most industrialized countries, with 20% of the world's population, concentrate 75% of the world's telephone lines (Girard AMARC 4/1996).
- b) Band Width: Depending on the capacity of local infrastructure in different countries, and the number of user — right now growing exponentially —

connections can be extremely slow due to limited capacity of the physical infrastructure.

c) **Information Overload:** once an inexperienced person makes a connection with a regular commercial Internet service provider, the possibilities are so vast, that „surfing the Net“ moves quickly from a thrilling to a frustrating experience. Besides the enormous amount of information available, there is little guidance in finding information, which often means wasting great amounts of time wading through lists, and WWW pages searching with little success. When a useful list is found, most are not moderated facilitated, which deluges the receiver with lots of garbage among few useful topics.

Information Overload

In most of the South, connectivity time is expensive, and in Africa, for example, one must pay both for the information sent as well as the information received. Exchange of data is done by most providers using Fido technology, or UUCP most recently — i.e. international telephone calls to providers that serve as gateways to information (GreenNet, APC member in UK is a major gateway for most of the African and Asian networks). If one is not careful, s/he may end up paying fortunes for unsolicited mail sent out by those in the North who pay almost nothing for their connectivity and are not aware of this problem.

d) **Veracity of information:** the Internet is an anarchic space where any individual can produce information. Anybody can post whatever they want to on the Internet, and because there are so many millions of people using the Internet, it's a lot of work to find out if what they've posted is true.

Veracity of information

e) **Language Barrier:** Most of the communication throughout the Internet is done in English. This is a major drawback for potential users in the majority of the world, which means once more, the elite in each country may be the one to hold all of the information and communication power.

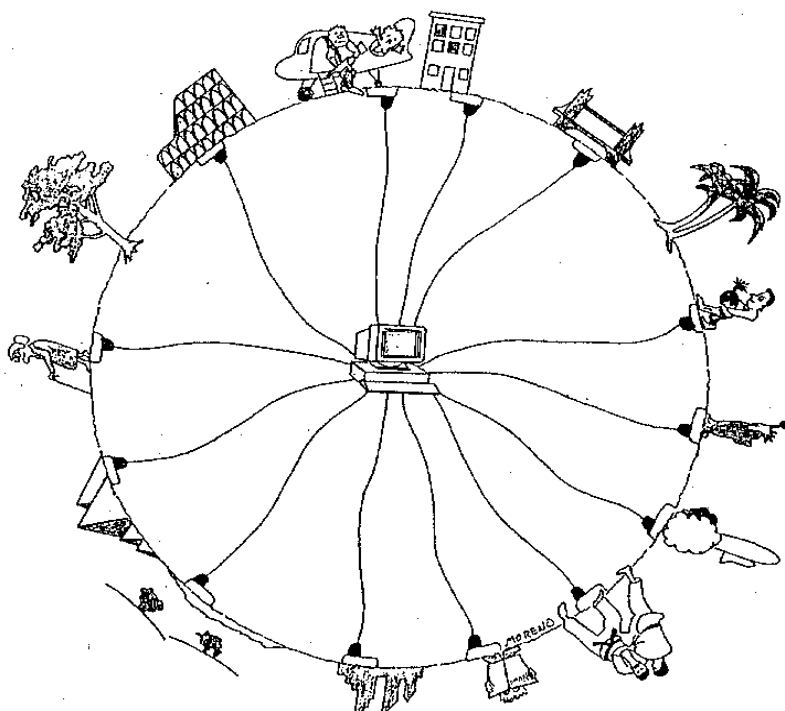
Language Barrier

What Can Be Done To Overcome These Problems:

a) **Access to a telephone:** There are many alternatives to overcome the lack of access to a telephone. An interesting one is to combine a ham radio system to a radio modem with a computer. This experience has been very successful in making Internet based information available in the most remote areas of the Venezuelan and Ecuatorian

Amazon through projects developed by the Andean University, and EcuaneX (APC member in Ecuador) respectively, as well as rural villages in Cuba through a project of Tinored - the Cuban NGO dedicated electronic network. Another possibility is the use of satellites that pick up and deliver information a few times a day in remote areas of Africa and other regions of the world.

b) **Band Width:** There are many effective ways to communicate through the Internet that users are not always informed of by their Internet Service Providers which can both free up bandwidth for the growing number of users, as well as save users time and money. Offline readers and text based communications take up little connectivity time and don't overload the systems, improving data exchange speed and



BIBLIOGRAPHIE

En plus du livre “@t ease with e-mail, a handbook on using electronic mail for NGOs in developing countries” signalé dans l’IB 2/1996, page 11, nous voudrions mentionner ici un certain nombre de livres “intéressants” sur le sujet avec leur brève présentation par l’équipe de la Librairie TEKNE (7 rue des Carmes, F-75005 Paris. Tél.: ++33.43 54 70 84. Fax: ++33-44 07 07 39 - Cette librairie TEKNE offre un service de vente par correspondance) dans “Médias. Le livre des livres” (Paris, 1996):

L’ANNUAIRE DU WEB. Paris, Simon et Schuster, Macmillan, 1995, 650 p., 229 FF.

Une présentation thématique des milliers de serveurs Web référencés. L’ouvrage est vendu avec une disquette de connexion sur Internet.

LA BIBLE INTERNET. Par Frédéric Mora, Paris, Addison-Wesley France, 1995, 360 p. + disquette, 198 FF.

On trouve dans ce manuel: les commandes pour micro-ordinateurs et grands systèmes courants (Unix); les astuces, les usages et coutumes des “communautés” connectées sur Internet; les adresses incontournables.

GUIDE INTERNET. Par Laurent Viegnes et Michel Marecaux, Paris, Micro Application, 1995, 258 p., 78 FF.

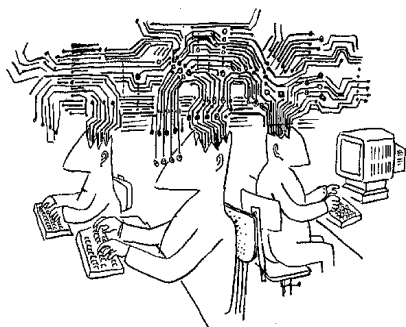
Voici une compilation enthousiaste d’adresses Internet pour vous permettre de trouver vous-même les informations nécessaires en partant d’une destination ou d’une préoccupation afin de faciliter vos déplacements virtuels et réels. Ce guide consacre ses quatre premiers chapitres à l’aspect géographique de la recherche pour la France, l’Europe, les Amériques, ainsi que le bassin indien, l’Asie et le Pacifique. Les neuf derniers naviguent entre les domaines suivants: transports et réservations, change et commerce, contacts, langues et cultures étrangères, météorologie, cartographie et histoire, statistiques, informations et bases de données, sports et loisirs.

L’INDISPENSABLE POUR INTERNET, autres réseaux et BBS. Par Thierry Platon, Paris, Marabout, 1995, 571 p., 58 FF.

Ce livre rassemble: tout ce qu’il faut savoir pour se connecter aux réseaux du monde entier.

INTERNET POUR LES NULS. Par John R. Levine et Carol Baroudi, Paris, Sybex, 1994, 352 p., 98 FF.

Ce guide à utiliser comme un dictionnaire, se présente de façon simple, claire, et même avec un brin d’humour. Six parties indépendantes présentent le système Internet, les modalités de l’échange du courrier électronique, les services en temps réel que propose Internet, les outils de la navigation, les petits trucs pour résoudre ou éviter les problèmes courants d’utilisation, et de nombreuses informations utiles (listes des fournisseurs de connexions à Internet, sources de logiciels Internet...).



effectiveness. On the other hand, the dominant softwares, like Netscape for example, are very resource-intensive that are being developed for people who like looking at pictures, more like TV and advertising, than for people who need to get information. It’s easier to avoid all the hype and time-wasting when using a text interface (especially where resources are scarce and connectivity is expensive).

c) Information Overload: One solution is for users to affiliate with specialized providers. In the case of APC, it connects over 50,000 NGOs and individuals working with progressive issues and themes. So it is by nature, a self-selected forum of information producers that carry institutional name and accountability. Both graphic and text based interface are available at users choice in most places, where Internet is available and user’s and equipment capability permits, and text only where it is not. Text based interface is extremely important in countries where limited equipment is available, and where the objective of users is to communicate with like minded organizations and not necessarily „surf the Net“. If that is an option, however, it is easier through an international NGO forum such as this, to locate relevant information through the links provided. APC networks provide a front door to the Internet, with connections to information most relevant to the work of NGOs, so they waste less time.

Another important feature of APC is the online public and private conferences. These are shared thematic virtual spaces where, for example, a message posted in Russia is automatically mirrored throughout the other APC members and partners into the same kind of virtual space. This makes it possible for like minded organizations all over the world to share information and articulate action through a very organized space. Public conferences are those accessible to all APC users in all the connected systems. Private conferences are those used only by a certain group for internal communication, despite geographical location, and not accessible to those not belonging to this strict group of people/ organizations.

d) Veracity of information: This is a difficult issue. The only security is to belong to a closed or specialized circle, where information can be verified. This is one of the advantages of APC. It offers a like-minded community of people working together on social change issues, so trust is less of a problem.

e) Language Barrier: This is an important discussion happening throughout the countries whose native language is not English. One way to deal with it, again, is by developing communication groups, which also can be identified as language groups. But it does not solve the ultimate question that, to make your information known to most of the world, you must write in English.

There are many attempts to develop all kinds of software that support multilingual systems, with some successes. APC, given its international and therefore multi-lingual needs, puts in a lot of time in supporting its users to communicate in their own languages. APC conferences are carried out in over 15 languages, including Spanish, Portuguese, Estonian, Servian, Macedonian, Croatian, Bosnian, Slovenian, Russian, English, Swedish, German, Polish, French, Esperanto, etc.

The example of the Algerian Sahara refugee camps

Eusnet, one of IPANEX’s members, a federation of networks in all regions of the Spanish State, and newest member of the APC Networks, has just participated in the development of the first APC partner in a refugee camp, in the Algerian Sahara.

This project originated to try to help solve two main problems:

- Grave isolation of Saharan organizations such as the Association of Families of Emprisoned and Disappeared Saharan from the rest of the world. As well, aid organizations in the region met great difficulties in communicating with their headquarters and partner organizations outside and vice versa.

- In 20 years living in the desert, under extreme hardship, there was no means of communication among the five main refugee settlements: Dajla, Smara, El Aaiun, Ausserd and 27 of February.

With local authorization, two projects were presented to the Regional Government of the Autonomous Community of Navarra:

- to create a communication network via radio to support the work of CO.SA.R - Saharan Commission for the Referendum;
- to create an electronic communications node in the Tindouf Algeria refugee camps.

This project meant the opportunity for Saharans not only to communicate with the world, but among themselves. And for this, a wide variety of apparatus were brought in, initiating a year long story of trial and errors that culminated in a combination of ham radio, short wave radios, transmitters, basic broadcasting stations, walktalks, antennas, modems, computers, cables, batteries, recharges, solar powered generators, electricity run generators, etc, implemented in a variety of combinations. All this equipment was brought in at different times, mostly on Charter flights, as roads are closed to foreigners.

Some time ago, APC received its first e-mail from there, and it was one of success:

"After many problems, during the last week we are testing a net communication of the node rab.w-sahara.eus.gn.apc.org, that is working slowly but surely..."

"We are really happy because this will allow to us to start working with groups travelling here (I was this morning with a group which support the Saharans from Swiss, who were really interesting to use this system). Also to send and receive information from the rest of the world."

"During the next days we will have meetings with many groups to work with the net, and improve their works using the e-mail. Especially we will open accounts for the group of women working to support their rights, for an association of families of Saharan political prisoners, for the CO.SA.R, who will bring an exact information about the Saharan point of view in the delayed process of the Referendum, etc, etc."

"We will try to continue the works during next months, in order to offer to the rest of APC users the possibility of a non-commercial and social node here. By the moment, this is an experimental node that CAN RECIEVE AND SEND e-mail and few APC newsgroup information."

"Of course this is a project to establish an independient node, not to create a subnode for the rest of the time !"

"To contact Sysop of the node: khalil@rab.w-sahara.eus.gn.apc.org."

Overcoming boundaries to reach people

As it is easily observed, APC has reached an important level of international credibility, and has accomplished much in terms of support for NGO networking worldwide. However, as opposed to what one might think, APC is not a super-structure formed by wealthy networks. It is a small NGO operating on very limited resources. Its real strength lies on its goals, and the incredible commitment of its members to supporting civil society's strengthening of its communications abilities. The commitment to the principles of APC by its members also plays a great role.

In summary, APC is a network dedicated to people and their struggle for a better, more just and habitable world. While the means are challenging and difficult, and often expensive, the end justifies every effort.

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Cette traduction de l'édition américaine 'The Whole Internet' s'est adaptée aux réalités françaises pour offrir à l'utilisateur de base un guide pour accéder aux fabuleuses ressources d'Internet et apprendre à naviguer facilement dans le Réseau. En début d'ouvrage, un guide oriente le lecteur entre les différents chapitres, en fonction de son degré de connaissance ou de pratique d'Internet.

NETSCAPE ET LE WORLD WIDE WEB POUR LES NULS. Par Paul E. Hoffman, Paris, Sybex, 1995, 328 p., 110FF

Facile d'accès et plein d'humour et de combines, ce guide pratique permettra à chacun de se familiariser à son rythme avec le World Wide Web et l'un des logiciels d'accès à ce réseau tentaculaire: Netscape.

PUBLIC ACCESS TO THE INTERNET. Par Brian Kahin et James Keller, Cambridge (États-Unis, Massachussets), The MIT Press, 1995, 390p., 180FF.

Cet ouvrage présente les modalités d'accès à Internet, la sociologie et la culture d'Internet, la mise en place de communautés sur le réseau et en particulier au travers de l'éducation, l'émergence de nouvelles catégories d'utilisateurs. Le dernier chapitre aborde les problèmes des prix et des services.

TOUJOURS PLUS SUR INTERNET POUR LES NULS. Par John Levine et Margareth Levine Young, Paris, Sybex, 1995, 362p., 120FF. Ce guide présente un grand nombre d'informations pratiques sur l'Internet et particulièrement sur les nouvelles méthodes de connexion.

WORLD WIDE WEB. Guide pratique de Netscape et Mosaic. Versions Windows et Macintosh. Par Denys Bondeville, Paris, Eyrolles, 1995, 320 p., 135 F.

Ce guide donne trucs et astuces pour accéder rapidement à l'information sur Internet par le Web, et à optimiser la configuration de Netscape et Mosaic en fonction des différents besoins: récupération d'images, de son, de vidéo, accès à d'autres services...

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