



Chapter XXVI

The Economics of Community Networking: Case Studies from the Association for Progressive Communications (APC)

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Introduction

It was a special moment. Non-profits were still figuring out the fax machine. No one had heard of the Internet. A few brave souls were stringing computers together, hanging modems and activists off the other end. The information — and the shifting political tide — were beginning to flow.

News and passion trickled from the ANC headquarters in London to every nook and cranny of South Africa. Meetings were planned and new social movements dreamed over a few modems and a 286 in Toronto. Lobbying tactics, grand visions and messages home all emanated from a little computer room as thousands of environmentalists converged on Rio.

At the center of all this was a band of computer activists calling themselves the Association for Progressive Communications (APC).

The APC is a global coalition of nonprofit organizations who supply Internet content and connectivity services to civil society. APC was founded by a group of seven organizations who had all been providing e-mail and on-line discussion forums to non-profits and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) since the mid-1980s. This group included Alternex in Brazil, GreenNet in the UK, Nicarao in Nicaragua, IGC (PeaceNet and EcoNet) in the U.S., NordNet in Sweden, Pegasus in Australia and Web Networks in Canada. APC now includes 25 member networks located on six continents.

From the beginning, these networks were driven by a clear political mission —

to help members of civil society get online and get their word out. They were also driven by the belief that creating self-sustaining nonprofit enterprises was the only way to make this happen. It is this mix of political vision and nonprofit entrepreneurship that sets APC members apart from many other pioneers in the area of on-line activism. In approaching the most common conundrum of alternative media — balancing mission and money — most APC members have tried to take the best from social movements and the business world. This has required a complex dance between internal democracy and customer responsiveness, low budgets and high quality technical services, political independence and private sector partnerships.

This article explores the mission/money dance by looking at how APC members have built valuable community networking projects that have been largely self-sustaining. This exploration includes:

- the early days of APC networks, when providing basic services like e-mail and discussion forums offered an excellent way to strike this balance;
- the difficulties that most APC members faced as they responded to the ‘Internet explosion’ of the mid-1990s;
- experiences with partnerships between APC members and private-sector Internet companies;
- the renewed focus on content, and on unique NGO Internet services, that have been emerging with many APC members during the late 1990s.

While the journey of most APC networks has been bumpy at times, the path they have taken points to a community communications model that at once supports political action and provides a financial base. This is a rare combination, and one well worth reviewing.

The primary source of information for this article is a series of interviews conducted with long-time staff at eight current or former APC members during May and June 1999. This included Alternex in Brazil, Econnect in the Czech Republic, EcuaneX in Ecuador, EDNA Internet in Senegal, GreenSpider in Hungary, Pegasus/C2O in Australia, SangoNet in South Africa and Web Networks in Canada. Additional information was gathered from other documents outlining the experiences of the seven founding APC members, and from a broader pool of literature about the Internet and communications.

Blazing the Trail For On-Line Community— APC in the Early Days of On-Line Activism

Since it was officially formed in 1990, the APC has grown to become a network of 25 organizations serving over 50,000 civil society users. Each member is an independent organization that provides Internet-based services to non-profits and activists within a particular country or region. In many ways, it is a loosely affiliated group that works more separately than it does together. Many members simply use APC to network content, find technical support and undertake the occasional joint project.

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