Balancing mission and money - building sustainable electronic networks for civil

Case studies from the Association for Progressive Communications (APC)

Introduction

It was a special time in history. Non-profits were still figuring out the fax machine. No one had heard of the Internet. A few brave souls using modems and activists to string computers together. Information - and a shifting political tide - were beginning to flow over international networks.

News and passion trickled from the ANC headquarters in London to the far corners of South Africa. Meetings were planned and new social movements were conceived over a few modems and a 286 in Toronto. Lobbying tactics, grand visions and messages home emanated from a little computer room as thousands of environmentalists converged on the Rio Earth Summit. At the center of all this was an energetic band of computer activists calling themselves the Association for Progressive Communications (APC).

Today the information and communication technology landscape has changed. The Internet, let alone the fax machine, are standard tools of activists around the globe. And in this new environment, APC networks struggle to balance the values rooted in their history with the need for sustainable services.

From the beginning, APC networks were driven by a clear 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 non-profit organizations was the only way to make this happen. It is this mix of political vision and non-profit entrepreneurship that sets APC members apart from many other pioneers in the area of online 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 top-notch technical services, political independence and private sector partnerships.

This article explores the mission / money dance by looking at how APC members have built largely self-sustaining electronic networks for use by civil society organizations and projects. 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, which has been emerging for 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 model that at once supports civil society 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 during May / June, 1999 with long time staff at eight current or former APC member organizations. These included IBASE (Alternex) in Brazil, Econnect in the Czech Republic, INTERCOM - Nodo Ecuanex in Ecuador, EDNA Internet in Senegal, GreenSpider in Hungary, Pegasus / C2O in Australia, SANGONeT in South Africa and Web Networks in Canada.

Blazing the Trail For Online Community - APC in the Early Days of Online Activism

APC was founded by a group of seven organizations that had been providing e-mail and online discussion forums to non-profits since the mid-1980s. This group included IBASE (Alternex), GreenNet in the UK, Nicarao in Nicaragua, IGC (PeaceNet and EcoNet) in the US, NordNet in Sweden, Pegasus and Web Networks. Since it was officially formed in May 1990, the APC has grown to 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.

APC member networks share a common spirit and an approach to 'doing business' resulting from a shared history. In some ways, APC is a loosely affiliated group. Many members simply use APC to network content, find technical support and undertake the occasional joint project. But, all of the members started out with a dream of empowering civil society by making expensive technology cheap. They all offered the same basic online services before the Internet came on the scene as a public medium. And, as the Internet matured, they all faced the challenge of transforming and remaining relevant to the alternative communities they serve.

One of the most important common touchstones for older APC members is in the area of services. Even before coming together as a group, most of these organizations had already set up local or national bulletin board service (BBS)-style systems to support local or national activists and social movements. These systems included basic text-only e-mail, discussion forums and user directories. Users would connect directly to the system using terminal software like ProComm or Kermit, chatting and sending messages to each other once they were online. In some countries, users outside of the city where the system was located could connect cheaply using telco-owned x.25 networks. This was well before Internet connections were common.

While it may seem trivial from today's perspective, offering these services to civil society in the late 1980s and early 1990s was a big leap forward.

Few people had access to academic networks. Commercial networks like Compuserve and AOL were expensive and isolated from each other. Long distance phone and fax still relied on overpriced monopoly providers in most countries. The simple e-mail and conferences offered by APC members really did represent increased communications potential and decreased costs, especially for organizations working internationally. These services were the foundation of the work of early APC members.

Of course, there was more to 'the mission' than cheap communications. The APC and other early online providers offered a new way of working, and a new approach to building communities. This was especially true of APC's international discussion forums - or conferences. Similar to the chat rooms made famous on the Well, APC conferences provided a place for like minded people to gather, publish information and share ideas. APC conferences were based on store and forward technology that networked information in bulk using overnight long distance phone calls. Users accessed these services using a plain text interface from any terminal program. These conferences covered every possible interest area from women to the environment to peace. And, unlike many early online communities, the users of APC conferences came from all sections of the globe.

APC conferences quickly became a hub for information about social movements and important political events around the world. For example, conferences were a key communications platform for both the UN and NGOs before, during and after the 1992 Earth Summit (UNCED) in Rio. Huge numbers of official and unofficial documents were posted on APC conferences. These forums then doubled as a means to discuss the materials. At the same time, conferences were being used as a platform for organizing. Groups from around the world met online to prepare common strategies for Rio and to develop alternative policy approaches. Once on site, NGOs were able to maintain connections with colleagues at home through a series of computer centres operated by Alternex. (Sallin, 1994).

As this illustrates, conferences lent themselves to a seamless connection between content and community. Compared to other tools of the time, conferences provided a perfect mix of both collaboration tool and publishing tool. Granted, they were far from perfect on the publishing side. Uploads were painful and primitive, and there were no graphics or hyperlinks. But there was no better way at the time for activists to get messages out to the world. And, once a document was posted to a conference, discussion seemed natural. People would comment or add their own documents. Looking back, early APC conferences provided something today's 'portal builders' can only dream of - a focused collection of the best online content and opinion on a particular topic.

Building Sustainability - The Early 'Mission-Driven Business Model'

For most early APC members, this mix of cheap communication services, progressive content and community was the basis of the perfect mission driven 'business model'. All online services at the time, whether provided through commercial services, APC members or BBSes, were offered in the form of an 'account' which bundled dial-up access, e-mail and access to content. Users were limited to the content of the system they dialed in to, and e-mailing people outside your home system was either expensive or impossible.

As a result, the international e-mail connections, content and community provided by APC member networks were valuable enough that many NGOs were willing to pay for accounts. Well before the Internet exploded on to the public scene, a number of APC members had between 5,000 and 10,000 paying users each. At the same time, the service offerings were much more modest and required less staff and capital outlay than today's Internet services. This combination of user demand and reasonable costs meant that many APC members were able to build financially sustainable systems.

Despite the fact that this model worked well given the times, running a sustainable online service for non-profits was not as simple as plugging in the computer and selling accounts. At least some financing was needed as a foundation. Unfortunately, the idea of electronic communications was still a foreign concept to most of the donor community and funding was hard to come by. Web Networks, SANGONeT and a few others were able to get small start-up grants that paid for basic equipment. Other early APC members started on out-of-pocket money, volunteer labour and donated equipment. A few impassioned individuals with a lot of vision and minimal resources started these networks.

In typical APC style, Pegasus in Australia came up with an entrepreneurial response to this lack of grant money. Hoping to create a network on the American EcoNet service model, they turned to the ethical investment community for $AUS100,000 in start-up funding. A private corporation was created with the original investment and operated with a small staff on the board. While the company was officially 'for-profit', its aim was still to provide non-profits with online services.

In contrast, almost every other member of the APC is in some fashion a non-profit. Many started out as a project of a larger NGO. For example, Alternex was a project of IBASE (the Brazilian Institute of Social and Economic Analysis) and ENDA-Internet is a part of the larger ENDA Tiers Monde. Others, like INTERCOM in Ecuador, were created by a coalition of NGOs with a common need for communications services. Still others were started as independent non-profits driven by a small handful of committed individuals.

As well, there have been APC members who did not fit the normal mission driven sustainability model. Econnect in the Czech Republic started out by giving its accounts away, and ENDA in Senegal has always provided free or subsidized accounts to its existing project partners. There were also APC members who from the start tried to supplement the sale of accounts with other products and services. In its very early days, Web Networks sold computers, modems, desktop publishing, t-shirt design and t-shirts. Still, the 'dial-up e-mail and content account' was by far the most common business model for early APC members.

Looking back at this early period, it seemed that APC members had come up with a long lasting approach to balancing mission and money. NGOs needed the services offered by APC members, and were willing to pay a modest sum to receive them. And NGOs were using these services to bring about concrete social impacts. New environmental coalitions were being formed in Hungary. Censored communication was circulating in South Africa. Educators interested in human rights were connecting their students and classrooms around the world.

The model seemed almost perfect.

But in the mid-1990s, as the WWW emerged and the Internet became a household word, everything began to change very rapidly.

When New Technologies Get Old - The Internet Goes Mainstream

With the introduction of any new communications technology, there is a gradual move from utopian excitement to commodified stodginess. In the beginning, a new medium presents a great deal of opportunity and promise. But as a medium grows older, marginal players get pushed out and

standardized commodities begin to dominate the market. For example, early 'broadcast' radio was a boon for labour and political activists in the US. The hand built technology, lack of clear business models and lax regulations meant that anyone could be a radio station. But as radio became driven by the sale of sets, and eventually by the sale of advertising slots, RCA and regulators pushed amateurs - and activists - off the air (Marvin, 1988 and McChesney, 1995).

While the details differ, a similar pattern has emerged as the Internet begins to grow older. At the service level, the e-mail and dial-up of the early days have been replaced by low margin commodity IP services. These are offered by huge ISPs and huge, centralized WWW sites backed by venture capital and inflated stock values. This has put tremendous pressure on many small Internet endeavors - including some APC members.

APC members felt this pressure most acutely in the area of connectivity. As commercial ISPs became mainstream and dial-up prices dropped during the mid-1990s, most APC members started losing users - and revenue. Not only was it almost impossible to compete on price, but it was also difficult to differentiate APC services from those of commercial providers. E-mail was e-mail. IP was IP. Why pay more to a non-profit when these services could be found cheaper down the street? While this attitude did not represent a mass exodus, some APC members lost 10% to 20% of their users.

In addition to dealing with heavy competition in dial-up, APC members were faced with the huge costs involved in becoming a full service ISP and in moving from text-only to graphically based services. 'Keeping up with the Joneses' in the ISP industry meant that APC's early store and forward systems had to be abandoned and replaced with expensive dedicated Internet lines. It also meant setting up more local dial-up points of presence, hiring more support staff and building a better billing infrastructure.

This situation put serious financial and operational pressure on many APC members. In some cases, this was in the form of huge debt loads. For example, Web Networks was over $CDN1,400,000 in debt by the middle of 1996 as a result of capital and staff costs related to ISP service expansion. In other cases, APC members simply couldn't afford to become full ISPs until very late in the game. INTERCOM did not offer any kind of full Internet connection until 1997. Private sector ISPs had been providing these services in Ecuador since 1993.

While these pressures were significant, there was another issue that was at once bigger and more elusive- was there still a 'mission based' case for offering dial-up services? In the early days, activists couldn't get dial-up and e-mail from anywhere but an APC network. But by the mid-1990s large commercial ISPs had solved the 'access' issue in the big cities of most countries where APC exists. Rural areas and smaller cities still needed connectivity, but in most cases this was beyond the reach and resources of APC members. Of course, there were still real opportunities to compete for dial up users in a few countries - Senegal and Ecuador are examples. But in the countries where cheap commercial Internet connectivity was almost ubiquitous, what was the mission or business case for staying in dial-up? There have been many answers to this question, and they seem to be changing over time. In some places, the answer has been 'let's keep selling dial-up to subsidize other NGO activities'. In others it has been, 'outsource dial-up so we can offer activists a one stop shop for dial-up, information and specialized civil society hosting services'. In still others, APC members have decided to get out of dial-up altogether. Whatever the case, changes in the market forced the whole of APC to reconsider whether or how to be offering Internet connectivity.

At the same time, the APC conferencing system - an even more clearly mission-driven service - was starting to fray around the edges. The emergence of the WWW and more ubiquitous e-mail access quickly diminished the traditional 'one stop shop for social justice content and civil society community' value of the conferences. People no longer posted long documents and policy papers to conferences. They posted them to WWW pages. People no longer set up their communities in conferences that required all users to have an APC account. They set up mail lists that allowed connectivity between people using different ISPs. As a result, traffic declined dramatically in the vast majority of APC conferences during the mid to late 1990s. There are still hundreds of conferences that are used for private group collaboration - something the conferences are excellent for. But there are very few public communities still active in APC's conferencing system.

Of course, it makes sense that activists have moved to the WWW and mailing lists. The WWW is a better medium for publishing and e-mail distribution lists are more accessible. But the feeling of community and collective intelligence which came from sharing the same online space have been displaced as people have gone down their own path.

In sum, increased competition in dial-up and the decline of conferences meant that APC's almost perfect mission driven business model no longer worked. There was no longer a compelling reason to buy dial-up accounts from APC members, and the conferences didn't provide enough value for most people to keep their accounts open. By 1996, many APC members saw the writing on the wall and realized they needed to find a new way to deliver on the mission of 'helping members of civil society communicate and get their word out'. They also saw a need for new mission driven business models that would help them stick to the original dream of self-sustaining non-profit alternative communication networks.

Walking the Tightrope -- Partnerships with the Private Sector

As APC members tried to survive the changing Internet marketplace in the mid-1990s, many tried partnerships and contractual arrangements with private companies. Some solutions involved the simple outsourcing of dial-up in a straight trade of money for services. Other solutions involved complex plans to use the thriving Internet commercial market to fund mission-driven work. Whatever the attempted solution, there were some important lessons learned.

One of the most interesting APC private sector partnerships emerged at Alternex. From its inception, Alternex had been a project of the well-known NGO, IBASE. IBASE focuses research and advocacy around issues of social exclusion. Given the focus of IBASE, there have always been internal questions about whether or not Alternex was a proper fit. Information access was important, but was it a part of IBASE's core mission?

For almost 10 years, the answer to this question was 'yes'. But as IBASE's economic fortunes weakened and the Internet market took off, the tune changed. Despite concerns raised by Alternex founder and IBASE director Carlos Afonso, the Brazilian APC network was spun off into a private company in 1995. Majority control of the company was retained by IBASE, with a minority partner providing investment capital for expansion. The idea was that Alternex could continue to serve the NGO sector while at the same time making money from broader commercial demand for Internet services. The bulk of the profit would flow back to IBASE to underwrite its social research work.

Unfortunately, it didn't work out this way. As with many other parts of the Internet industry, the profit didn't flow instantly. IBASE was disappointed with this and started to get anxious. In addition, the mission-based activities of Alternex began to weaken. Commercial clients who could pay more demanded resources and staff attention, often leaving NGO clients neglected. Afonso, and others committed to serving NGOs, did everything they

could to fight this trend, but were outweighed by the imperatives of a bottom-line. Alternex was sold outright to its private sector investors in late 1997.

As this illustrates, balancing mission and money by setting up a private sector 'front' is a tricky game. The rules change quickly, and it is tough to hold onto the original political dream. Moving on from this experience, Afonso has gone back to the non-profit model to meet the Internet needs of NGOs in Brazil. In mid-1997, he joined the Information Network for the Third Sector (RITS) which provides low cost, cutting edge online tools for civil society. RITS is not as of yet a member of the APC.

Although the circumstances were slightly different, the situation in Australia also resulted in the 'disappearance' of an APC member network. Growing out of the social investment movement and a lack of grant funding for non-profit Internet endeavors, Pegasus had always been a private company. While social justice had always been key to Pegasus as a company, it could not avoid some of the trappings of private ownership. At a basic level, the original investors - no matter how large their conscience and commitment - were at risk. With two investors having provided Pegasus $AUS100,000 each, and a number of smaller investors involved as well, the risk was not insignificant.

As the Internet market and competition grew in the mid-1990s, the risks started to seem especially high. Other ISPs and Internet companies were receiving huge inflows of investment capital. In 1996, one Australian ISP claimed to be losing over $AUS500,000 per month just to build infrastructure and keep its market share. Another was swimming in paper wealth from an early Internet IPO. Pegasus just couldn't keep up on the investment front, and in turn could not pay for the management and technical expertise needed to compete. Given that Pegasus had decided to make a go of the commercial ISP game, this was a serious problem.

Feeling these pressures, the shareholders of Pegasus decided to sell to a large Australian ISP called Microplex in early 1997. While the deal was a straightforward commercial transaction, a great number of promises and assumptions were made about continuing with Pegasus' mission based activities. In fact, many of the staff believed that Microplex saw a market advantage in being able to effectively serve the non-profit community. Unfortunately, none of this was in writing. The more mission-focused staff and many of the NGO clients were asked to leave Pegasus within a few months of the sale.

As in the case of Alternex, a new non-profit called Community Communications Online (C2O) was formed immediately. C2O retained relationships with many Pegasus users and has been involved in a number of interesting projects with organizations like I*EARN (International Education and Research Network). It has also taken Pegasus' place as the Australian member of the APC. All this said, C2O has remained small and it faces a good deal of competition from other groups that serve the Internet needs of non-profits in Australia. It will grow, but it will take time.

A final example of APC member partnerships with the private sector can be found at Web Networks. In the mid-1990s, Web Networks faced a common business contradiction. New services were being introduced and revenue was expanding on a regular basis. But at the same time, paying a staff of 30 people and servicing the $CDN1,400,00 debt were crippling the organization. Inspired in part by the not yet unsuccessful Alternex experiment, the management at Web Networks went out to seek private investors for a spin off company.

Upon approaching one of the most promising investment prospects - Open Text Corporation of Waterloo, Ontario - Web Networks received a surprising response to its call. "We won't invest, but we'd be happy to buy you." Like many growing Internet companies, Open Text was searching for experienced programmers and technical managers. Web Networks had these.

The Open Text offer raised some obvious questions - how do you sell a non-profit? ... and keep its mission alive? The answer came in the form of a creative asset sale arrangement. Web Networks would sell over 90% of its assets and staff to Open Text in exchange for debt relief and an ongoing service supply agreement. It would retain its customers and services but would refocus completely on content development with non-profits. Most technical and billing services required by Web Networks would be provided by Open Text on a cost-recovery basis. From the perspective of a non-profit interested in getting out of the Internet tech business and into the Internet content business, this seemed perfect. In mid-1996, the agreement was signed and the new Web Networks moved its remaining two staff into a small office next door to Open Text.

What seemed like a perfect arrangement in the beginning, quickly became a bureaucratic nightmare. Web Networks had little control over its billing or customer service, and often found it hard to resolve technical problems. At the same time, Open Text was stuck providing a whole slew of ISP-type services which were not part of its core business (Open Text makes intranet software). The relationship quickly soured, Web Networks was seen as a troublesome charity case, and service quality plummeted. After only 16 months of a three-year service supply agreement, Web Networks and Open Text parted ways. Web Networks took its servers and billing infrastructure back in-house.

This was not the only major private sector partnership undertaken by Web Networks. At the same time as signing the deal with Open Text, Web Networks entered a connectivity outsourcing arrangement with PSINet. This was a more straightforward business relationship based on the bulk purchase of services from PSINet's core product line. Service was bumpy from time to time, and pleas to 'be nice to non-profits' with better prices didn't really work. But basically, it was a partnership that succeeded. Similarly, Web Network's e-commerce partnership with the Royal Bank (one of Canada's largest banks) has been based on the straight purchase of standard services. A significant bulk discount on Visa charges for Web Networks customers has been arranged, but the services are otherwise 'out of the box'.

All three of the major APC private sector partnership experiences point to one lesson: expect business to act like business. There can be valuable advantages to working hand in hand with a company. Such partnerships can bring services to the non-profit world at a lower cost or in a better package. But expecting a company to provide services it doesn't offer (Open Text) or expecting private sector investors to be driven by anything but the bottom line (Alternex SA and Microplex) is just not realistic. So, as long as both parties are getting something, and as long as non-profits are receiving better service, private sector partnerships fit well into the balance between mission and money. Where this is not the case, they can be very destructive.

Another lesson can be learned from the experiences of APC members in working with the private sector. These private sector relationships have shown that there is still a need for community-based networks. The private sector does many things well. Social mission isn't one of them. The IBASE example shows that the bottom line and corporate clients are more important for private sector than maintaining relationships and providing services to non-profits. The Pegasus example demonstrates that the corporate world can be downright ruthless in dealing with non-profits. Where private sector services fall short in providing services to non-profits, there is a place for groups like APC to provide a valuable service. But what should that service be?

From Pioneers to Platforms -- Civil Society in the Internet Everywhere Age

Amidst the chaos of competition in connectivity and experiments with the private sector, most APC members were asking questions about their mission. What will non-profits really need as the Internet grows? What are my users asking for? What can we offer that is different from the commercial Internet industry?

As with connectivity, the world of Internet content has been changing rapidly over the last few years. Huge portal and cable deals overshadow online communities. Huge web caches run by cable companies and telcos are undermining the 'inherent' technical openness of Internet technology. Ownership of 'eyeballs' on the Internet is consolidating, with over 35% of Internet time in the US spent on environments controlled by AOL or one of its brands (Hansell, 1999). In other words, the Internet is moving in the direction of traditional media. A few loud, well moneyed voices are slowly working to consolidate control of both content and distribution.

Of course, this doesn't mean that there is no longer space for activist voices and new content models on the Internet. Rather, it is simply becoming harder to be heard. It is also becoming more difficult to predict what will and won't be possible in the future. Nonetheless, it is still possible to carve out new and relevant spaces on the new media landscape for progressive voices. The window of opportunity for creating 'activist portals' and new tools for non-profits and other things still not imagined is still open. But it is clear that it will not stay open forever.

The changing reality in both content and connectivity have pushed many APC members towards a more 'content focused' mission. For example, the large majority of APC members have shifted their focus from getting non-profits onto the Internet, to making sure civil society messages are heard. Of course, taking this laudable goal of 'content enabling civil society' and making it work as a self-sustaining non-profit enterprise is not a simple task. In order to do this, APC members have tried everything from training to consulting to portal building to software development. Some of what has been tried has been useful. A little of it has been sustainable. And a lot of it can just be chalked up to learning. But as time inches on, some clear models are emerging.

The most obvious place to start on the 'content enabling' mission is with portals or hubs that lead to information of interest to civil society and progressives. Of the eight networks interviewed for this article, all but one stressed that their most important next step will be to create a non-profit information hub of some sort. INTERCOM and others in Latin America are working on a 'regional portal' dealing with key development issues. GreenSpider is creating a service called Civil House which will provide support materials for fundraising, non-profit marketing, and strategic uses of the Internet. SANGONeT is working with others to create an APC Africa site that will provide an overview of NGO news and donor information related to Africa. Common amongst all these projects is the desire to stake a high profile claim in cyberspace for activists and civil society.

The original push to create 'content services' grew out of the declining relevance of dial-up and conferences. APC members were seeking new ways to 'provide value' - i.e., remain useful - to their NGO users. In response to this, a number of APC members started offering 'content only' accounts for a nominal monthly fee. These started out as a way for people with non-APC Internet connectivity accounts to access the conferences. Over time, WWW-based services like the Web Networks 'Community' grew to include events listings, news feeds, jobs and other information of interest to users.

Not surprisingly, this approach didn't work the first time out. For the most part, it was premised on the idea that users should pay for content and community. While this approach worked in both the commercial and non-profit worlds during the days of direct dial services, it just didn't wash in the Internet era. People weren't willing to pay for information, and rightly so. The Internet had been built on an 'information wants to be free' ethos.

Over the last two years, there has been a shift away from 'getting information to NGOs' and towards 'getting NGO information to the world'. Through 'portal' projects like the ones mentioned above, APC members in a number of countries are trying to find ways to drive more traffic to sites run by their activist users. This happens in a number of ways:

- High traffic APC member sites are used to highlight the best content of their users.
- User sites are 'aggregated' into focused NGO directories and search engines.
- Users are provided with free listing services for events, jobs, press releases and other important information.

Through this approach, APC, its members, and its users are working collectively to break through the content consolidation on the Internet. As more and more APC members try to move into this role, and as they bring more and more NGOs into the fold, two clear strategies are emerging - aggregation and information sharing.

The 'traditional' wisdom in the Internet community over the past few years has been that aggregating or bringing together content is key to being seen on the Internet. To a great extent, this is true. To justify putting content on the Internet, it is necessary to bring a site or a project to people's attention, or at least make sure they can look it up in a central directory. This need has driven the huge stock valuations of companies like Yahoo, and has encouraged others to create hundreds of smaller portals or aggregation sites focussed on a specific industry or issue. In many ways, the sites being developed by APC members are simply applying this same wisdom to the NGO world.

But there is another principle in the emerging APC model - information sharing. Mainstream portal sites are about grabbing as much information as possible and organizing it within their own proprietary, siloed environment. Once they are set up, they do everything they can to win more market share than competing sites with a similar focus. While this model does produce useful directories, it misses one of the great lessons of the Internet: opening up and sharing information produces a more powerful end product.

Luckily, APC members have not been able to ignore this lesson. As they have moved towards creating aggregate sites, it has been clear that they cannot try to 'beat' other non-profit portals or hubs. Not only do these sites share similar political values, but more importantly APC users often run them. Umbrella organizations, international federations and even loose coalitions all have a desire to aggregate information produced in their sector. Building on the mission of getting civil society content online, APC members need to drive traffic both to individual WWW sites and to aggregator sites within their user base.

This is where the principle of sharing comes in. Most of the technology behind aggregation sites is about 'pulling' information. The technologies emerging within the APC - and within other areas of the non-profit sector - focus on a balance between push and pull. In an ideal world, this means not only that any APC user can feed their events listings to a central hub site with a lot of traffic, but also that they can grab events listings off the

central site to list on their site. The result is a 'community of information' similar to what existed in the old conferencing days. People have the autonomy of their own WWW site and the power of a collective voice.

There are two implementation approaches being explored for the creation of these shared publishing systems, or distributed portals.

The most straight forward approach simply allows a whole collection of APC users to share a single-purpose database. For example, two dozen users might want a way to automatically publish and manage action alerts on their WWW site. Instead of setting up new software for each organization, the local APC member would simply give them the HTML code they needed to hook into an existing database. The basic result would be the same - action alerts would be published on each NGO's WWW site using their own graphics and design. But, through sharing the same database behind the scenes, action alerts can easily be aggregated on a central site or swapped between sites working on the same issue.

This approach was developed by Web Networks in Canada, and is being extended for use across the APC by Econnect in the Czech Republic. In the Canadian case, a number of labour unions, social service organizations and international development NGOs have found 'shared applications' incredibly useful. For example - the Canadian Council for International Cooperation (CCIC) has instituted a three-tier system to collect information for its In Common anti-poverty campaign. As a starting point, the development education organizations that belong to CCIC can post local In Common events or alerts by setting up the application on their own site or by posting to the main CCIC site. Information from all members is then aggregated on the central In Common site, creating a small anti-poverty portal. The information posted to In Common is also fed to Web Networks' content editors and then on to the main Web Networks Community site. As a result, information is presented in a number of different packages that will increase its exposure and impact.

This shared application approach fits well with the original APC ethos of self-sustainability for crucial non-profit communications systems. In the Canadian model, each database - alerts, events, resources, press releases - is offered as part of a monthly WWW hosting package. The individual NGO's investment is still lower than building the database from scratch, and the value is higher. At the same time, Web Networks is generating an ongoing, mission-driven revenue stream to support its activities. It is not yet clear whether this model has either staying power or international applicability. Nonetheless, this approach again shows that mission and self-sustainability don't need to be mutually exclusive.

The other model for information sharing and distributed portal development is based on swapping data back and forth between sites using a technology called XML. Among other things, XML - or extensible markup language - allows WWW designers and database developers to embed information about the content of the pages that they are producing. For example, they may include information about the author, date, title and subject area. This makes it easy for other computers to grab selected pages and pull them back for local republishing.

The Institute for Global Communications (IGC) - which includes PeaceNet and EcoNet - is using XML to swap information with other non-profit WWW sites. For example, Action Without Borders - a non-profit job and volunteer opportunity listing service - has agreed to allow peace and environmental related listings to be pulled down and republished on the IGC site. As a result, the selected jobs receive more traffic (because they are in two places), the IGC site builds a better profile (with people looking for jobs) and IGC's users get more exposure (they are listed on the IGC site right beside the jobs).

This approach to sharing and distributed portal building also has value in terms of connecting APC to other large NGO networks. For example, APC, One World Online and others involved in the distribution of civil society information have started to talked about standards for the exchange of data via XML. This type of collaboration holds a lot of promise in terms of the broader goal of increasing the voice of non-profits online.

Making the Transition from Dial-Up to Portal

Of course, experimenting with how to aggregate and how to share has not provided instant revenue for the whole of APC. In fact, the transition away from dial-up and towards content in the mission-driven business models of APC members has involved a complex set of strategies. To ensure a stable income base, many members have relied heavily on developing WWW sites and online databases for NGOs. Others have focused on training and capacity building to help NGOs build their own sites. Others have continued to rely on dial-up to keep them going.

SANGONeT, INTERCOM and Web Networks have all moved heavily into the WWW site development side of things. Starting out with basic WWW sites, this area of work has tended to evolve towards database development and custom programming. In turn, it has also fed naturally into research and development for 'shared publishing' and other products. There is definitely a lot of mission related satisfaction in doing this work - each project results in another NGO WWW site getting online. But the real value comes from taking these individual contracts and feeding them into the shared voice that is emerging on APC hub sites. At the revenue level, these services have been key to keeping a number of APC members alive.

Training, capacity building and support services have also been important in the transition away from dial-up. Almost all of the APC members interviewed for this article were engaged in some sort of capacity building activity. For example, Econnect had been working over the years with environmental organizations opposing the construction of the Tamlin nuclear power station in South Bohemia [check location]. This included everything from providing e-mail accounts to training on how to get the message out. When the anti-power plant activists finally decided to blockade the construction site, Econnect was there with a local computer support center, a digital camera and help with getting news onto the Internet. This type of work has a clear impact in terms of helping NGOs get their word out online. While it is often reliant on donor money or subsidization from other services, most APC members remain committed to this type of work as a way to support and stay engaged with their users.

The other key service that has played a role in the transition away from dial-up has been … dial-up. Revenue from Internet account sales has been so essential to most APC members that simply dropping these services overnight would have been impossible. The most common strategy in transitioning away from providing Internet connectivity has been to outsource it to a larger commercial provider. While is not a perfect approach, it has kept cash flow moving as APC members develop new service areas like those described above. Four of the six current APC members interviewed for this article had outsourced some or all of their connectivity services.

Unfortunately, these outsourcing arrangements have not always allowed APC members to have the lowest prices. Dial-up bulk purchase packages from major ISPs tend to be designed for corporations with large sales forces or pools of mobile workers. Accounts are priced lower than retail but aren't really 'wholesale'. As a result, APC members like SANGONeT, Web Networks and Econnect who have taken this approach are left with limited margins or high prices. This in turn impacts their ability to provide high-quality NGO support. Also, continuing to offering sales and support for dial-up is a significant distraction from the development of new content services. The distraction was serious enough in the US that IGC sold the connectivity

side of its business in mid-1999 in order to focus solely on content work.

A few APC members have remained squarely in the dial-up market and see it as key to their long term strategy. For example, INTERCOM has been able to slowly build a sustainable and profitable connectivity user base. Connectivity prices in Ecuador are still almost twice what they are in North America and Europe, and thus INTERCOM has been able to compete on price and good service. At present, they have 200 users with a plan to grow slowly to a cap of 300 users once more phone lines are put in. ENDA also remains focused on connectivity and is able to compete effectively with other local providers.

There are also one or two APC members who are still able to trade heavily on the conferences as a way to keep users. In Hungary, GreenSpider conferences were central to building the national alliance of environmental NGOs. Quite quickly, the conferences became a place where these groups met and discussed ideas. As a result, there is still a strong connection to conferences amongst Hungarian NGOs. GreenSpider's content services are able to build from conferences as a base and add other services over time.

Despite a bumpy and confusing period in the mid-1990s, it seems that most APC members have begun to effectively reinvent both their missions and their sustainability models. The focus is clearly on 'content enabling' civil society, on making sure the word gets out online. There are still challenges in figuring out how best to do this. And of course, there are the normal challenges of running a technically focussed non-profit enterprise - marketing, bill collection, finding qualified staff and staying relevant to users. But collectively, and sustainably, a good number of APC members seem headed down the right path.

Learning From the APC - New Social Models for New Media

One might conclude that the role for community-based efforts exists only in the early days of a new medium. When communication mediums are new, there is always a gap that needs to be filled - and many opportunities present themselves. In APC's case, providing basic e-mail and connectivity to NGOs in the late 1980s and early 1990s was an obvious and important mission-based activity. But as the Internet market matured and these services became commonplace, there was a reduced need for specialized non-profit ISPs. Except in a few cases, continuing to focus primarily on these services would have been akin to running a community-based manufacturer of photocopiers or fax machines.

But the Internet allows community-based efforts to be aggregated and this will allow APC to be an active player in the Internet as it moves out of its developmental phase. There is a real need for community-based institutions that can help civil society get its messages out. Traditional commercial and state media are notoriously bad at providing space for alternative voices. While there have always been alternative media outlets, they have almost always remained on the margins.

The pioneers of community-based Internet services have a real opportunity to ensure that they are not marginalized in this new medium. The key to doing this will be to focus on building social and economic models of communication that can provide sustainable, high profile content platforms for civil society voices. Whether you call them portals, hubs, channels, shared web sites or virtual communities, these platforms will be essential if alternative media is to move beyond the margins in the convergence age.

A number of APC members, alongside organizations like One World Online and AMARC, are working hard to build these platforms. From these efforts, new methods of publishing, sharing and getting the attention of audiences are emerging. In some cases, these efforts have already produced great success stories. In others, they have fed back into the learning and new experiments which are popping up daily on the Internet.

One of the real tricks to making this succeed will be finding the right mission-driven business models to sustain the promotion of progressive voices on the Internet. The experience of APC clearly demonstrates that sustainable non-profit enterprise can work in the Internet arena. As the content of the broader Internet economy matures, APC members and others will have the opportunity to build on their experiences to create better alternative business models. In the meantime, the experiments - and the online activism - continue.

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