



The Global Commons

by Brock N. Meeks

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EEKS BEFORE THE MAINSTREAM PRESS discovered that Saddam Hussein and most of his air force were hunkered down in bunkers built to withstand a nuclear blast, details about the bunkers and their construction were available thanks to a thriving "alternative press" corps. This worldwide group of journalists, using a network called PeaceNet, consistently scooped the major news-wires and networks during the Gulf war.

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illustration by Brad Hamann

Using PeaceNet as its prime distribution channel, this alternative press corps, cobbled together from the peace movement's own "thousand points of light," worked tirelessly to provide a different perspective on the war.

PeaceNet is just one of the networks that operates under the auspices of the Institute for Global Communications (IGC). And during the war PeaceNet acted as a corner of the global commons where information is stripped clean of censorship. IGC itself is a conglomeration of networks and organizations, a fabric woven from electronic data-exchange networks — the information-

age equivalent of duct tape and baling wire. In operation since 1986, IGC and its various networks have dealt with issues from saving the rainforests to exposing human-rights violations across the globe. But it was during the Gulf war that IGC's biggest network, PeaceNet, burst on the scene with real impact.

“We went from zero messages on our Middle East conference to having to start five new conferences just to handle the increase in message traffic,” says Howard Frederick, director of PeaceNet.

As the networks stumbled over themselves in search of talking heads and Middle East experts, PeaceNet was busy fielding the comments of hundreds of grassroots experts, mostly members of peace movements who had spent their adult lives working for peace in the Middle East. Suddenly, they found themselves turning to the only central source for information dissemination they could think of, PeaceNet.

“These are the hands-on organizers of the peace movement,” said Frederick. “For the first time in history we’re seeing the creation of the ‘Peace Movement Intelligence Network.’” A central clearinghouse for information about the peace movement, for the peace movement, by the peace movement.

An ominous testament to PeaceNet’s effectiveness was brought to light recently when it was learned that law enforcement agencies, both local and federal, were calling PeaceNet offices and pumping its staffers for information regarding the activities cited by its users. When the staffers began referring all calls to their lawyers, the police started logging on themselves, using PeaceNet to track certain activities and planned activities of peace activists throughout the country. The San Francisco Police Department checked in daily to get advance warning of peace demonstrations.

According to Frederick, the alternative press is going to “pool its efforts, using PeaceNet as its distribution vehicle, to create the world’s largest, most comprehensive source of news and information” of and by members of the alternative press corps.

Recently the fifth-largest news wire service, Inter-Press Service (IPS), signed an agreement with PeaceNet to become a dis-

As the War Goes, So Goes Truth

tribution center for its news stories. The Pacifica radio news service has also signed on with PeaceNet to help distribute the text of its broadcasts. Amnesty International uses PeaceNet to distribute all sorts of reports and “Action Alerts” concerning new and continuing struggles to free political prisoners.

“Within five years we’ll be the world’s largest alternative news source,” said Frederick. Few doubt his word.

Others are creating news services with inspiration and encouragement from PeaceNet. A prime example was *WARNEWS*, a publication that grew out of the frustration and censorship *San Francisco Examiner* columnist Warren Hinckle encountered when he wrote an antiwar piece for the paper.

Hinckle found his inspiration on PeaceNet. He contacted a group of journalists, authors and cartoonists to create the war’s first opposition publication. He chose PeaceNet as the vehicle to electronically distribute the newsletter’s contents (cartoons, charts and graphs excepted).

IPS will scan various conferences that abound on IGC networks and pick up story ideas from the information uploaded by the users. “There’s no better source of information,” says Frederick. “Because we’re getting input from around the globe, from people living and dying in countries that are in the headlines.”

Beyond News

The insights of world correspondents filing stories from war zones are the glitzy, sexy part of PeaceNet. But there is much more beyond the news. There are some 10,000 subscribers worldwide on IGC’s networks. During the Gulf war alone IGC was processing about 30 new subscriptions a day.

PeaceNet is only one network carried on IGC. Other networks include EcoNet (an environmental network), ConflictNet (for those working on family mediation and conflicts), and HomeoNet, which deals with the homeopathic arts. There are also hundreds of specialized groups that marshal their collective resources via IGC networks.

The British American Security Information Council (BASIS), with offices in London and Washington, monitors NATO policy

and weapons development, strategy and planning, important meetings, research, and general peace-movement news relating to NATO issues. Members of BASIC correspond via PeaceNet and keep each side of the Atlantic up to date on NATO activity.

Organizers of the more than 3,400 local nuclear-free zones throughout the world meet on PeaceNet to share information on the creation of other nuclear-free zones. National nuclear-free-zone offices post their newsletters here, creating a kind of living database of resources.

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of IGC is the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), which IGC founded. "Back in 1987 IGC helped to develop an international cooperative effort that would link like-minded groups via the computer," says IGC director Geoff Sears. "At the time, the only additional member we had was GreenNet, based out of London." Short pause. "But we've come a ways since then."

Actually, PeaceNet pre-dated IGC. "PeaceNet's been around since '86," Sears says. "IGC was formed shortly thereafter, so in a sense you have a situation where the child spawned the parent."

APC has networks in Canada, Sweden, Australia, Brazil and Nicaragua. And Moscow and Germany will soon be added, says Sears.

Before Americans learned how to pronounce "glasnost," members of PeaceNet were forging ahead with their own plans to open Soviet society through the use of electronic communication. They did this through agonizingly small steps, using "appropriate Soviet channels," as former PeaceNet director Mark Graham says. By hooking up first with Soviet scientists, members of PeaceNet developed a kind of "track-two diplomacy," wherein ordinary civilians began to talk about how to solve the problems of the two superpowers.

Lessons were learned from those early days, when the Soviets could only reach PeaceNet for a half-hour a day under the watchful eye of the KGB. Today those involved in APC have turned track-two diplomacy into an art form. Across the globe, ordinary citizens are bypassing the often mind-numbing bureaucratic red tape and

communicating at the most needed level of all: person to person.

For example, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Nicaragua use their network to share information, not only among themselves, but also among other Central and Latin American NGOs, which use their local networks as gateways into the larger framework of IGC.

Out of the Dark

Yes, the rain forests of Brazil are in peril. But Brazil has other problems. Thousands of homeless children roam the streets of Brazil's major cities. There is no social welfare system to speak of in Brazil. The current answer to Brazil's homeless children problem: vigilante groups simply kill them rather than push the government to house them.

Outrage? Sure. Unnoticed? Hardly. A group known as IBASE (Brazilian Institute of Social and Economic Analysis), which focuses on socioeconomic analysis and deals with just this sort of problem, is one of the first groups to use Alternex, the network installed by IGC in Brazil.

Their success has encouraged other NGOs to follow suit. "Results breed results," says Sears. Until IBASE hooked up with IGC, the NGO was struggling to make efficient use of data communications, "but the weight of paying the 'data freight' internationally was killing them," says Sears. "So we created Alternex."

The collaboration between IBASE and IGC amounts to a multi-host PC-based "store-and-forward" system linked to IGC's international computer network. In July 1989, only a few months after approval of the project, Alternex was operating 24 hours a day. Today, more than 130 individual and group users in Brazil and abroad participate in the network, and this number is increasing daily. Users pay a monthly fee, equivalent to about US\$7.50, which includes one hour of on-line connection. This connection runs approximately \$5 per hour, cheaper than nearly all other electronic mail services.

Track-Two Diplomacy

EcoNet

Just as PeaceNet harbors the frontline troops of the peace movement, EcoNet

is home to groups such as Greenpeace and Global Action Network (GAN).

Environmental groups use EcoNet as a central clearinghouse for information dissemination and discussion. GAN, for example, uses EcoNet as a vehicle for distributing information you can take to the street. Courtesy of GAN you'll find *The Action Guide: A Guide for Citizen Group Action*, online in full text. It's a kind of do-it-yourself "how to fight city hall" for environmental issues.

During the hoopla of Earth Day, EcoNet served as a vital information center for coordinating hundreds of "green days." In recognition of all that work, EcoNet was honored in 1990 by Renew America's "Searching for Success" as the most extensive environmental computer network in the world.

Some would say that the darker side of the environmental movement is "ecoterrorism." Last year during Redwood Summer, a combination strategy session and headquarters for Earth First!, lively debates took place online via EcoNet about the virtues or hindrances of the "monkeywrench" actions encouraged by Earth First!. The conference quickly became a downloadable "do-it-yourself" manual on ecoterrorism.

If all this sounds like a group of radicals romping through the ethernet, here's a counterpoint: US and Canadian state and provincial fish-and-game administrators, major colleges and universities involved in wildlife conservation hang out on EcoNet. These users discuss conservation and environmental protection, national forests, parks, seashores, wildlife refuges, Bureau of Land Management districts, conservation offices of foreign governments, and sources of audiovisual materials, periodicals and directories.

IGC's mission is "to spread technology and information equally among as many as possible": the info-rich giving to the info-poor. "It's more like sharing with the 'info-poor,'" says Sears. "We're very careful not to perpetuate the 'U.S. knows best' stereotype. There's a lot of things we can learn by watching how [third world countries] use computers and information."

But does a computer network help the

farmer in Burkina Faso to improve his life? When Sears is asked this question he barely flinches, and answers: "It doesn't." And he leaves no room for follow-up questions. He's shifting gears, maneuvering the conversation. He acknowledges that the technology is out of the reach of most; computers are still expensive.

"Is [price] really a problem or just an obstacle to hurdle?" asks Sears, and he launches into a sound bite: "You have to think of IGC as being close to the top of an 'information chain.' The networks support grassroots NGOs. The computers help them do their job, which is to help people. The networks are an augmentation, not some kind of miracle drug. Bottom line, people still have to do the work, still have to get out into the field. But now they have better information, they get it faster, and can share it internationally."

Listen to the Children

If there is a sobering, stabilizing focus in these troubled times, it is the thoughts and comments made by children. They hear from the adults that our world is on the verge of eco-detonation, and they fear that one day the air will simply "dry up." And they hear of war: bombs dropping, chemicals that kill. And they wonder, "Will I die?"

They ask questions that cannot be ignored. Is there a place for the children here? They are the next generation of activists; they will inherit a legacy of greed and complacency.

Recently, this letter, written in a childish hand, found its way to IGC:

Dear PeaceNet,

We are a group of 5th and 6th grader gifted students who attend a magnet school in Miami, Fla. We are (through class discussion and projects) learning about how to become peacemakers. In our gifted center we have already learned a lot about becoming peacemakers, such as, being aware of what is going on in the world, and being open minded; however, we would like more information. Could you please send us some information on becoming peacemakers. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Future Peacemakers of America

So it goes: track two, second generation. Right on schedule. ■

Dirt Farming Via Computer

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