

APC 1990-2010 CELEBRATING TWENTY YEARS NETWORKING ONLINE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

During the 1980s in an increasingly militarised world and in the face of a proliferation of nuclear weapons a number of people networks emerged to connect activists. They had experience in international collaboration in the non-profit world and a deep commitment to making advances in communications available to movements working to make the world a better place.³

In 1987 people at later APC member GreenNet in the United Kingdom began collaborating with their counterparts later known as the Institute for Global Communications (IGC) in the United States. By coincidence the two national networks were using the same computer systems. They made the first non-profit transoceanic computer link. Communications focused on peace, human rights and the environment. By 1989 networks in Australia, Brazil, Canada, Nicaragua and Sweden were exchanging information with each other and with IGC and GreenNet. In May 1990 these seven organisations founded the Association for Progressive Communications to coordinate the operation and development of this emerging global network of networks.

“Widening the user base to grassroots activists [...] was the priority of [APC],” said Viv Kendon, formerly of GreenNet. “We wanted to show what you could do with email – crisis response to rainforest logging is the most-quoted early success.”

Today APC remains committed to making the internet serve the needs of global civil society and working to ensure the internet is free and open.

³ www.apc.org/en/node/10678

THE HISTORY OF APC

APC may have been founded in 1990 but our history begins almost a decade before.

1982

Intensification of the Cold War and the threat of nuclear war.



A “documentation for action” movement emerges as NGO International Documentation Centre (IDOC) brings together organisations and activists from four continents – including future APC members – who use information for social change.

The internet is used primarily by the military and academia.

Central America is racked with conflict, often supported by Ronald Reagan’s conservative US government.

Commercially owned email services exist but it is impossible to send email from one network to another.

The activists working with IDOC create Interdoc, a network of like-minded organisations working with information and alternative media. At this point they communicated mainly using fax and regular mail. People physically travelled around transporting and sharing databases of information and software on disks.

The few NGOs that have PCs are using them for documentation only.

1985

PCs with 64 kb RAM and two disk drives of 120 kb are the latest technology.

Mitra Ardron, a peace activist, founds GreenNet to pioneer the use of email by the environmental, peace and social justice movements. It is the UK’s fourth ISP.

1986

Powerful Sun computers are considered "military equipment".

Without knowledge of what is going on in the UK and unaware of Interdoc, Mark Graham and Michael Shuman set up PeaceNet in the USA.

Interdoc members begin to communicate electronically with one another, including internationally, using Poptel/Geonet, a progressive but commercial bulletin board and email network.

1987

South Africa is still under apartheid rule.

The Institute for Global Communications (IGC) is formed to manage PeaceNet and EcoNet, the world's first computer network dedicated to peace, environmental preservation and sustainability.

It is the height of repression under state of emergency.

GreenNet and IGC discover that by pure accident they are running the same kind of computer. Scott Weikart, PeaceNet's technical director, packs up a 300 MB disk with all the software and flies to London. The first non-profit-owned intercontinental communications system is created. GreenNet and IGC pick up email, forward it and offer e-conferences (online discussion forums).

WorkNet in South Africa (later APC member SANGONeT) is providing email and bulletin boards to connect anti-apartheid liberation organisations in exile with people inside the country. The labour movement organises consumer boycotts of South African goods using APC networks.

The name "Association for Progressive Communications" is invented in musician Peter Gabriel's New York hotel room.



Photo via Flickr by Daviddmuir

1988

Mitra Ardron defines the central characteristic of the "typical APC network user" as "a commitment to a future for the planet that works a lot better than the present."

1989

From apartheid South Africa to Asian ecologists, from peace activists in San Francisco to women's groups working in Eastern Europe, the online conferences make it easier and cheaper to inform and take action worldwide.

Through APC conferences CARNet provides alternative information about the wars and insurgencies in Central America.

Collaborations begin between APC and UN for the Earth Summit in 1992. APC provides e-conferences. The whole idea is that information is enormously powerful, and having access to information and being able to participate in the discussion is crucial.

1990

APC is founded by seven APC members (or nodes) in Australia, Brazil, Canada, Nicaragua, Sweden, UK and USA in May at an Interdoc conference in the Netherlands. What makes APC unique is its founders' vision of global communications free from commercial influences.

Over 200 APC e-conferences deal with a wide variety of subjects. Some only share information, others allow for discussions.

1991

Collapse of Soviet Union



Photo via Flickr by Patlet

Russian activists set up APC node GlasNet, providing the emerging civil society with access to information and cheap communications.

South Africa begins to repeal apartheid laws.

Email links are set up between Cuba and APC networks. They call the Cuban servers three times a day to deliver and collect email.

War in the Balkans breaks out.

1992

Eastern European NGOs are desperate to connect with one another and abroad, but costs are prohibitive.

An attempted Russian coup is reported on APC networks thanks to GlasNet coverage of the events that change the face of global politics.

UN Earth Summit in Rio influences all subsequent UN conferences and makes the need for environmentally sustainable development acceptable to all governments.

APC node ZTN connects more than 1,700 peace, human rights and humanitarian workers and journalists from all countries in the Balkans war through 150+ e-conferences.

US gov't legalises export of computer chips and software to former USSR.

APC provides first ever online communications centre for NGOs and UN delegates in Rio. Info posted onto APC conferences is accessed around the world and picked up and reprinted in NGO newsletters and magazines worldwide.

1993

The World Bank cancels plans to fund the controversial Namada Dam in India after activists organise throughout India and beyond using APC conferences.

The APC Women's Networking Support Programme (APC WNSP) is founded and prepares for Beijing.

APC nodes encouraged by Jagdish Parikh establish AsiaLink to provide start-up funding and technical support to small hosts in Asia working with social movements.



1994

Nelson Mandela elected president of South Africa.

APC networks provide over 17,000 email accounts (an organisation usually shared one email address) and 94 countries are using APC networks.

NGOs use the internet in preparation for the 1995 UN World Summit for Social Development at a time when Bill Gates says "we have nothing to win from the internet."

Over 50 email hosts in Africa, Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, and the Caribbean are providing civil society organisations with email and e-information using the Fidonet gateways in London, Toronto and San Francisco. APC partners with the UN's Sustainable Development Networks Programme to extend these links even further into developing countries.

APC provides email and other e-services at UN International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo.

APC receives consultative (Category 1) status to the UN.

1995

Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing

Many women's rights activists get their first email training in Beijing from a 40-woman APC team from 25 countries, many from the South. It is a powerful message to the world – there is no innate barrier to women using computer technology.

1997

APC's mission is formalised in South Africa.

1998

The first legal threat to freedom of information online. Two APC members in the UK and South Africa are threatened with legal action by transnational company Bivwater for a news article in their online archives. Thirteen APC members mirror the threatened content.

APC makes a formal commitment to free and open source software.

2000

APC WNSP co-coordinates WomenAction 2000 to bring an NGO perspective to the UN Beijing+5 review. They survey 1,000 respondents online to produce a strongly worded NGO declaration. Official declarations promote ICT as a way of enhancing NGO participation in global policy making.

APC continues to highlight the lack of basic access in many regions. We co-lead the "Internet Access" track at the second Global Knowledge conference influencing the agenda of government-related development agencies, companies and NGOs involved in the development and ICT field.

2001

Turning point for the "new economy" and the crash of the internet hype.

Internet censorship and government preoccupation with "cybersecurity" mount.



11 September 2001 attacks

New vision statement for APC: "APC works to achieve a world in which all people have easy, equal and affordable access to the creative potential of the internet to improve their lives and create more democratic and egalitarian societies."

APC women's programme begins testing a gender evaluation methodology (GEM) for ICT initiatives in 25 projects worldwide.

APC organises "internet rights" meetings in Asia, Europe and Latin America. Internet Rights and Policy Monitors are set up and a Rapid Response Network to mirror threatened sites is formalised.

APC and partners launch ItrainOnline, a portal which collects training materials on ICT for social change.

2002

The first APC Africa Hafkin Prize is won by the Fantsuam Foundation, a small microcredit scheme which goes on to be a key reference in Nigeria.

The first APC Internet Rights Charter is published.

APC runs first ICT policy training workshops in Africa and India in the run-up to WSIS.



Photo by APC

The GenARDIS project begins to provide small grants to improve agricultural initiatives by women through the better use of ICTs, eventually disbursing over € 300,000 in direct seed grants over eight years.

2003

World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) – Phase One, Switzerland

Maps of internet sites show that APC is the central civil society knowledge-sharing hub in a vast web of WSIS-related websites.

APC publishes an "ICT policy handbook for beginners" together with a trilingual ICT policy training for civil society curriculum with a section on advocacy for positive policy change.



2006

There is still no broadband fibre connectivity down the entire East African coast, and access is very expensive.

APC is nominated by peers to address post-WSIS deadlock. The resulting working group proposes the unique multi-stakeholder format of the Internet Governance Forum, allowing non-government people a voice in discussions like there is in no other UN-run space.

First Internet Governance Forum held.

The second edition of the APC Internet Rights Charter is published and translated into 20+ languages.

First ever Take Back the Tech! campaign to end violence against women is launched.



APC brings together stakeholders to break the potential monopoly on the East African Submarine Cable System and lower the price of bandwidth. The Fibre for Africa website is launched.

UN estimates that 95% of violence online is aimed at women.

APC and UNDP convene a workshop in 2006 on "open access", and the signing of a NEPAD protocol on the proposed EASSy cable indirectly causes a downward trend on prices of undersea cable connectivity a year later.

CATIA advocates in Kenya triumph as Kenya approves an inclusive ICT policy and legalises voice over IP.

2004

APC moves into specifically national policy advocacy in five countries using "network animators" to stimulate multi-stakeholder dialogue as part of the Catalysing Access to ICTs in Africa (CATIA) programme.

APC begins training 100 technology enthusiasts in Africa to set up community wireless networks.

Karen Banks and the APC WNSP are awarded the Anita Borg Prize for Social Impact.

2005

World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) – Phase Two, Tunisia

APC declares the internet a "global public good" in a seminal paper.

WSIS ends in discord as governments disagree on how to run the internet.

The Tunisian government clamps down on freedom of expression and sabotages civil society events at WSIS. APC and partners enlist the support of foreign diplomats, secure high-profile exposure for local human rights advocates and denounce the attacks in the international press.



Beijing +10

APC women's programme begins to focus on ICTs and violence against women. The change in strategy engages more women in the politics of ICT and deepens our understanding of how ICT policy affects women's rights.

APC is shocked by the scarcity of information on how ICTs impact on women and critical women's rights issues. GenderIT.org, the world's only portal on gender and ICT policy, is launched.

The world's first Gender Evaluation Methodology (GEM) for ICT initiatives is published in English, Spanish, French and Arabic.

2007

Many Latin American and Caribbean countries elect left-wing governments which take more active roles in telecoms (as opposed to the liberalisation trends of the 90s).

The first edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) analyses citizen participation in ICT policy processes in the wake of WSIS.

The community wireless training developed in Africa is replicated in Latin America and the Caribbean, forming a lively eighteen-country network connecting indigenous communities, rural backwaters and impulsing university networking courses.

2008

Ecuador enshrines "communications rights" in the Constitution.

A number of APC members who became involved in ICT policy during 2002-2005 have become key players in their countries.

APC leads the preparation of proposals and lobbying of the Ecuadorian assembly ahead of the new Constitution.

Survey identifies APC as the most relevant actor in Latin American ICT processes after the UN Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC).

First regional IGFs co-organised in East Africa in Kenya and in Latin America in Uruguay.



First Feminist Tech Exchange (FTX) trains over 100 women's rights activists.

APC has trained people from 680 organisations in technology for social change and ICT policy since 2004.

2009

Peru regulators assure net neutrality.

Dominican Republic is first Latin American nation to include a "gender perspective" in all state ICT projects.

UN talks on climate change at Copenhagen fall apart without agreement.

As a result of APC policy advocacy, Peruvian regulators force operators to drop plans to offer a two-tier internet for those who can and can't pay.

The government of the Dominican Republic chooses GEM as the tool to design and evaluate all their ICT policies. The DR is leading the gender and IT track in the regional eLAC2010 plan.

We begin our biggest ever women's rights and ICT project in twelve developing countries, as part of Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 3, to promote gender equality and empower women.

APC carries out first-of-their-kind studies of the situation of violence against women and ICTs in twelve countries and how legislation or lack of it hinders or helps women.

2010

Every 30 months the amount of information that can be transmitted over a wireless internet connection doubles.

GISWatch 2010 tackles the pressing issues of ICTs and climate change and e-waste.



Prof. Peter Willetts argues that if not for the APC decisions of the 1980s, the internet would not be the public and open platform it is today.

APC begins research into spectrum regulation as a possible way to bring affordable broadband to millions of people currently living with poor connectivity.

APC awards USD 240,000 in small grants to projects working to end violence against women using technology.

Sana Masood is runner up in the International Red Cross Young Reporters competition for a digital story she created about an acid attack survivor at an FTX workshop in Pakistan.

2011



Arab nations overthrow despotic rulers.

APC launches the "Connect Your Rights: Internet Rights are Human Rights" campaign, including a dedicated edition of GISWatch and a defence of human rights and women's rights activists working online.

APC publishes EroTICs, our groundbreaking research on the real lived experiences of women around the internet and sexuality.

The internet is frequently filtered or blocked in many parts of the world.

APC and partners publish a gender framework critical for research on filtering and security issues.

WHAT'S NEXT? IT DEPENDS ON WHAT HAPPENS IN THE WORLD AND ONLINE. VISIT WWW.APC.ORG