GreenNet volunteer Tim Brenan: "Facts can be shared throughout the world."

Carl Hicks looks at a growing information network for activists

Behind the green door

The global struggle by activist groups for peace and human rights is being given a tremendous boost from a small, second-floor office in North London.

There GreenNet, a non-profit making organisation, is developing a growing computer network to help organisations like Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth to develop fast, efficient, and shared information facilities throughout the world.

Founded in 1985, the group's objective is "to provide to the environment, peace and human rights movements a communications capability as good as that available to the government, military and multinationals."

Previously, alternative pressure groups had tended to view computer technology as a suspicious tool developed by, and for, big business. Now, with its US sister groups PeaceNet and EcoNet, GreenNet serves over 3,000 groups and individuals in more than 40 countries.

In the UK, this network is organised and maintained by a full-time staff of only three, supported by funds from users, and grants from sympathetic organisations.

Technical co-ordinator Jeremy Mortimer explains: "The main problem was, and still is, showing groups that such a system can be an invaluable asset and that it isn't very expensive. Previously they relied on a human network centred around newsletters and conferences.

"We provide the means for that network to operate more quickly and on a greater scale. Our intention is to create an international information network as wide as possible and as soon as possible."

Already the number of GreenNet users is doubling every four months. And in the next three months node computers will also be established in Sweden, Brazil and Canada to expand the network.

The key to such rapid growth is the vast store of information users can access. Large and small pressure groups can pool information and on-line conferences can be held on any issue raised by a user. The system also provides a number of news clipping services on topics of interest to the groups.

For instance, on a typical day:
● A solidarity group in London can update itself on the latest events in Nicaragua;
● A peace researcher exchanges details on a strategy paper with activists in Colorado and California;
● A group in Germany asks an energy campaigner in London for details to use in a local radio interview; and
● Greenpeace updates local members on details of a conference being held in Wales

One *untypical* day was September 17, when a military convoy thought to be carrying nuclear materials collided with a car driver in Somerset. At the same time, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament was holding a major conference in Scotland.

Using GreenNet, CND representatives were quickly able to correlate advanced details of the accident from press agencies and TV broadcast scripts. The pressure group then issued an immediate response to the incident through the network, and transmitted a press release using its electronic mail service.
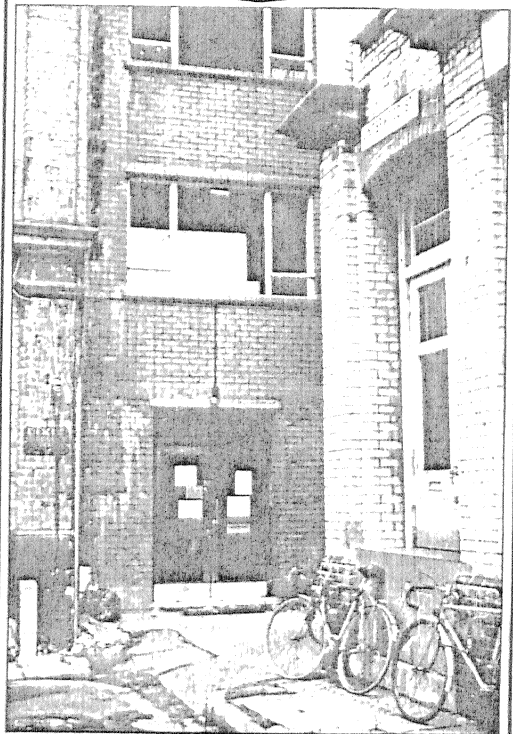
Meg Beresford, CND's general secretary, says: "We were very impressed with GreenNet. In an emergency situation, we were able to formulate and issue a considered response quickly.

"This is a good example of the new technology we need to use to make us more effective. There is an absolute need to complete on equal terms with the organisations and industries we are fighting against."

GreenNet volunteer Tim Brenan explained that such media coverage is crucial for activists. "Because of the speed with which CND were able to give a response the story quickly escalated from local to national news – it even got ahead of the Olympic games coverage," he says.

"Activists no longer have to wait

PLANS FOR PEACE

GreenNet is part of the Association of Progressive Communications Networks (APC). This is based on a number of node computers linked together with low speed dial up or X25 access.

An essential part of the network is its flexibility, allowing new developments to use the latest technology. At the moment the nodes are based on Plexus minicomputers, but by the end of the year, IBM compatibles using the latest Intel 386 chip technology will be in place at GreenNet's office in Underwood St, London NW1 (pictured above). These will run Unix V.3 and will be able to run multiple nodes at one site as the network expands.

Because of its aims to help organisations in Third World countries which lack a complete network infrastructure, GreenNet is working on a number of development projects involving the use of portable nodes and using media such as satellites and pocket radios.

Jeremy Mortimer says that the workers within APC provide a technical back-up service to all users. Also, if a group in another country wants to establish a new node, GreenNet and PeaceNet will provide assistance in development and integrating software packages.

"The plan is to establish a technical development group organised internationally to help in the construction of new nodes throughout the world. We hope to add up to 20 more nodes within the new five years," he says.

for the next day's *Guardian* to find out what has happened."

But GreenNet is not only for large organisations such as Greenpeace, CND, the Green Party, or Friends of the Earth. Brenan stresses that small, local activist groups can easily afford to use the system.

"Users pay only £5 per month for the system and there is a connect charge of 9p a minute. On average a user's bill is about £10 a month. There is a massive amount of useful information being amassed by people working for a safer, more equal world.

"A lot of that was often circulated in maybe 100 newsletters. Now facts and action plans can be shared and pooled with similar groups throughout Britain and the rest of the world," he says.

GreenNet workers emphasise that it plays no part in organising campaigns.

"We exist to ensure that campaigning groups have an efficient infrastructure to allow them to work for a better world more efficiently.

"We can only be seen as a threat by people who are paranoid. How can we be a threat when all we do is provide wider access to information for more people? Anyone can subscribe to the system," says Mortimer.

Unfortunately, that paranoia does seem to exist in some places. Commenting on demonstrations by US students, who were protesting at US troops in Honduras, retired Major General John Singalub said: "The demonstrators might have been part of PeaceNet, a computer linked network that can mobilise protestors nationwide. This gives you some idea of the forces working against us."

Up until now, the establishment has taken little notice of GreenNet's activities. But it remains a worry that if GreenNet succeeds in giving the alternative establishment "a communications capacity as good as that available to the government, military and multinationals", the big three will start to take a close look at ways of restricting its activities.

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