CONSCIENCE HAS AN ONLINE VOICE

Alternative pressure groups now have their own network to break the stranglehold on information enjoyed by the military and multinationals. Kevin Townsend logs on

GABRIEL ... *Time to take information to the people.*

The answer to the question, "What have Greenpeace and Friends of the earth in common?" is easy: they are both environmental pressure groups. But if we include Amnesty (US), Oxfam (US), Novosti (Moscow) and rockstar campaigner Peter Gabriel, the question begins to look like a conundrum. In fact, the answer is still easy: it is Greennet.

Greennet is a London-based network that aims "to provide organisations working for working for the environment, peace, human rights and sustainable development movements a communications capability as good as that available to the government, military and multinationals."

That's no small task – but just consider its importance.

Government, for example, has at its disposal a massive information machine with immediate access to television, radio and newspapers to put forward its own interpretation of the facts.

The odds seem to be against the fragmented and disparate pressure groups, who exist to ensure that the public gets an alternative viewpoint to the all-too-faceless "ministry line" of officialdom.

"Information is power," says Gabriel. "Much of the information grew in the womb of the military and the multinationals. It is time to take it into the hands and homes of the people, and make it accessible to those working to improve the world."

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Pressure group campaigners and sympathisers tend to express themselves in passionate and extreme terms, but the problem of the imbalance in the distribution of information is very real in most societies.

The typical doomwatch scenario of information technology sees computers serving a labyrinthine otiose bureaucracy to conceal, distort or withold crucial information that is in the public interest, or gathering of information to no-one's benefit but that of the civil service and the security agencies.

Whatever the truth of this sort of picture, activist pressure groups have now decided to turn the power of information technology to their own ends and fight fire with fire. Co-operative international collaboration is creating a data network to collect, collate and connect information from a variety of sources, to yield both a better understanding of the facts and to make those facts readily available to the public and the media.

Enter Greennet. Greennet is part of the first global computer network designed specifically for environment, peace and human rights group. Together with Peacenet and Econet in the US the three networks formed the international Association for Progressive Communications.

Greennet itself is a non-profit organisation able to ensure minimum costs with maximum communications potential. Users can be found as far afield as the USSR and Chile, Taiwan and Cyprus. They have inexpensive access to bulletin boards, databases and worldwide experts.

Greennet also comes in useful in the UK. Remember the car that crashed into a lorry carrying a nuclear cargo a few months ago, says Bob Hallewell, computer manager at Friends of the Earth.

"When we first heard of the accident, it was a minor news item that was getting smaller by the minute, but using Greennet to gather expert opinions and then get those opinions to the media fast we were able to ensure that the public knew what had happened. ITN got there, by helicopter, in time. But by the time the BBC arrived, it had all been cleared away."

Computer resources and capabilities are important in their own right, but it is Greennet and the international sharing of resources and data which the pressure groups see as most important – using computers for rather than against the environment. Together with Peacenet and Econet, it supports more than 3,000 subscribers representing 1,000 organisations.

Funding is currently about one third from grants, one third from users' fees, and a third from other enterprises.

Greennet offers its subscribers three main online facilities: electronic mail, public and private conferencing, and access to databases. The electronic mail facility, which is one of the cheapest around, offers subscribers access to leading authorities on ecological or humanitarian issues through out the world.

With the remorseless pressure on the planetary environment everywhere, and on human rights in so much of the world, the supporters of activist groups see Greennet, backed by the individual PCs of thousands of humanitarian and environmental groups throughout the world, as an 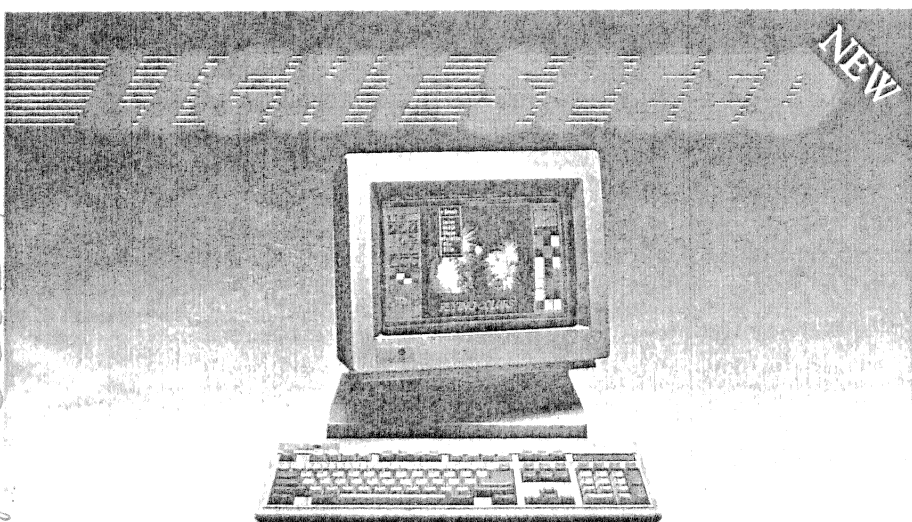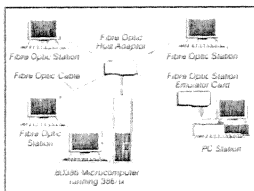essential part of their campaigning strategy.