

Third World activists are using global connections to pressure the powers that-be and even save lives. Bangladeshi photographer Shahidul Alam has little doubt about the subversive potential of the Internet in his country.



'Come out, we won't shoot.' The sound of a police megaphone jolted us to attention. After they left our flat in Dhaka I went up to the roof to try and find the person they thought we were hiding. I found no-one, but the raid made us realize that the nine-year-old dictatorship of General Ershad was feeling the pressure.

Running Drik, a photo library set up to promote a more positive view of developing countries, we were already in the business of disseminating information. Up to this point we had managed quietly to distribute our photographs abroad through helpful friends. Now the need was more urgent: we had to prevent further bloodshed. We couldn't phone or fax since none of us had an overseas line. Two days later in December 1990, when General Ershad did finally step down, we began collecting the money for the line.

The need came quickly. The new government elected a few months later turned out to be less than democratic after all. So in 1994 we decided finally to take the leap into high-tech communications. We linked up with TOOL, an overseas NGO, and set up our own electronic mail network, called DrikTAP. There was no way we could afford faxes, let alone telephone calls and mail was much too slow. Now with an ordinary telephone line we could send messages overseas cheaply.

We soon discovered that others were keen to join into e-mail too, so we began to offer it as a service to local NGOs and activists. UNICEF and the Grameen Bank were amongst the first to join. Grameen was in the business of giving loans to the poor and had a wide rural base. UNICEF had field offices all over the country. They used the network to link up all their offices country-wide. Then Drik began to send photographs via e-mail. Something that could only be done earlier by big Western agencies like AP, AFP and Reuters.

Now our little network was beginning to connect to other like-minded groups and Drik was

becoming known as an organization out to change the way the poorer countries were perceived. Our 'bulletin boards' were useful for everyday things like renting a flat or locating an expert but crucial when we needed to stay in touch in times of danger.



Two months later the Bangladeshi feminist writer Taslima Nasreen received a death threat from Islamic fundamentalists and was charged with blasphemy by the Government. We needed to move quickly - to create national and international pressure so Taslima could come out of hiding to alert PEN (the international writers support group) and Amnesty International and the campaign took off. Our fragile network was working. Later one of our members showed us how to use traditional 'search engines' to locate human-rights groups and Bangladeshi 'news groups' overseas (Bangladesh.Soc.Culture is a good one). We knew things were going to get rougher politically and we needed a way of getting information out fast and cheap. If some of us got arrested, others could mobilize enough pressure to stop us simply 'disappearing'.

Our network became more popular by the month. Major NGOs, universities, research groups, UN agencies, even government organizations and embassies all joined. Conferences on a wide range of subjects sprang up: music, child rights, job applications, even buy and sell. We had begun talking to each other and to learn to be comfortable with the medium. We started to use Bangla (albeit in Roman script) so we could at least speak our own language. Overseas friends were posting our human rights messages in the popular Bangladesh news groups. When police raided the university to arrest student leaders the news was round the world in hours. Letters to the Prime Minister poured in from all over giving us some breathing space and sparing some lives.

Realizing how fragile our link was (a single telephone line connected up all our users, local and overseas) we campaigned for treating e-mail providers as special clients requiring quality lines. Though we were the leading e-mail provider in Bangladesh, DrikTAP was not fully legal - we had no 'official' government permission. On the other hand we were surprised that despite the amount of critical information we were pumping out over the network we had not faced any direct censorship. There had been doubts when one Drik worker was attacked and wounded and again when our telephone line had been cut for a week. But on the whole we were getting away with it. I suppose shutting down the largest and most popular e-mail network in the country was something even the Government was reluctant to do, particularly with an election looming.

Gradually we began to find other uses for the technology. We set up training programs and eventually an e-mail club where we would meet and discuss problems. We would share the responsibilities of the network and decide collectively on future plans. It was a strange mix. The computer whiz kids and the computer illiterate, both came. Those comfortable with the technology took turns training newcomers. Political activists took on the role of lobbying for extra telephone lines and Internet access.

When Drik could no longer cope with the demand for technical support many of our more experienced members volunteered to help out answering queries. Some set up a system so users outside the capital could access the network using local calls. We began to work more as a family and the network took on a more human shape. We put up a notice for help from a local school that was struggling and a doctor offered his services. Others provided teaching aids, some gave money.

However, e-mail is still very expensive for most Bangladeshis - even local elites. A computer costs as much as half a year's average salary and a modem costs more than a cow, never mind the price of a telephone line. So we began performing like an electronic post office. People come in with a floppy disk; we send their e-mail and they come back later to collect their reply. And not everyone who uses the service is an activist.



Our oldest user, Golam Kasem, had just turned 103 and had never seen a computer before. I would cycle over to his house in Indira Road with a printout of a message from his grandson in Canada and next day peddle up to collect his reply. I remember the frail old man, straightening up the computer printout and adjusting his thick glasses as he held the paper by his tungsten lamp.

There are some areas though where we totally failed. Our 'bulletin boards' were entirely dominated by men and many of the jokes were sexist. Some even racist. When a woman user objected to a sexist statement the men retaliated viciously. A few loud voices dominated the bulletin boards. The technology was new to many people. Often private mail would get posted accidentally on a bulletin board, sometimes with embarrassing consequences - making the system scary for novices.

On the whole however, DrikTAP has become a powerful way of talking to the outside world. And, more importantly, to each other. When our 'node' in Bangladesh grew bigger than the one in the head office of our Northern partner in Amsterdam we argued, for political reasons, that the head office should be in the developing world. Last July we proposed relocating the head office of our global network in Bangladesh. In a small way we were witnessing a shift in the balance of power.

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On-line Lifeline

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