Using FaxModems and E-Mail as Tools of Social Change

By Carl Davidson
Networking for Democracy

Faxmodems, E-mail, LANS, BBS conferencing--all the high-tech buzzwords of modern telecommunications can sound very intimidating and alienating to the average union organizer or neighborhood activist working to save their jobs or protect the local environment.

Yet communicating with other people is the heart of what organizing is all about. In modern society, it's a complex task that has grown far beyond the ability of speaking and listening well. The skills we learn in making the best use of a wide variety of tools for communicating can often spell the difference between success and failure, victory and defeat.

Just think about trying to launch a campaign today without the telephone, mailing labels or a Xerox machine. These devices have only become widely in the last three or four decades. When they first appeared, they seemed almost magical. But now, learning to use them is no big mystery and operating them seems as natural as breathing in and breathing out.

In the same way, there is no inherent reason why we should look at today's new tools negatively. With a little training and practice, anyone willing to make the effort can learn to use the basic instruments of telecommunications. Learning to drive a car, especially in a big city, is probably more complicated and difficult; yet almost all of us managed to do it because the rewards were great.

For an organizer, the rewards of combining computers with telephones are far greater. Instead of being limited to voice messages, your phone line can now be used to transmit the text and graphics files generated by computers. That means entire documents-- newsletters, position papers, grant proposals, agendas, mailing lists, leaflet designs, press packets, even photographs-- can be sent or received by any location with a telephone jack and a computer.

Some might object that you can do the same thing now for the price of a postage stamp, and it goes anywhere the post office will take it. Yes, and it's also true that a horse-drawn carriage can take you anywhere a car will, and then to some that a car won't. But the big difference between electronic mail and the regular mail--or, to use the lingo, between "E- mail" and "Snail-mail"--is a vast savings in time and energy.

E-mail travels at close to the speed of light. Depending on the lines and services used, it can be delivered anywhere in the world in a matter of minutes or hours. But the speed of delivery, while attractive, is not necessarily the most important feature of this new method of communication. Of greater significance is the form of the messages.

E-Mail arrives as text or graphics files that can be read by your computer. If it's a draft of an article or position paper, you can immediately begin editing it or changing its size of appearance for publication in your local newsletter without having to re-type the whole thing. If it's a memo for collective discussion, you can add your comments and pass it on immediately to someone in another city. If it's a mailing list, you can print all or some of the labels without having to re-type

the names and addresses over again. If it's a leaflet layout, you can make changes in the design or replace lines without having to cut and paste.

While these benefits of E-mail are immediate and apparent, the early obstacle to its wider use was the relative difficulty in making the connection between the two computers over the phone lines. To someone with a little knowledge about baud rates, serial ports and communications software, it was easy to do if there was someone with the same knowledge at the computer on the other end at the same time, ready to "synchronize your watches," so to speak. But since this is rarely the case in our kind of low budget, non- profit offices, the potential for using E-mail often remained dormant, even if the equipment was available.

Today this obstacle is easily overcome. The solution is to subscribe to an on-line computer networking and conferencing service such as PeaceNet.

What exactly is PeaceNet? Start by thinking of it as the electronic equivalent of renting a mailbox at your local post office. But unlike the post office, your E-mail box at PeaceNet is "on-line." First, that means you don't have to go there to check or pick up your mail; you dial up your box with your phone and computer. If there's something in the box, you can simply read it on your computer screen or "capture" and "download" it to the disk drive on your computer. Second, being "on-line" usually means being available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Unlike Snail-mail PO Boxes, you can get into your E-mail box at any time, day or night, as often as you like, without leaving your office.

Who can put mail into your PeaceNet E-mail box? First, any of the 10,000 or so progressive activists who are also Peacenet subscribers. From within PeaceNet, it's easy and quick. They can send any computer file to my E-mail address, which, in my case, is "cdavidson." If someone isn't a PeaceNet subscriber, but uses another network, such as the InterNet, which links faculty and students at almost all universities, it can still be done but it may take a few hours. An InterNet user can still reach me by using a longer address, again in my case, "cdavidson@igc.org." This tells the InterNet to connect itself to PeaceNet through a "gateway" called "igc.org" as soon as it can, and then put the mail in my box.

The bottom line of all this for us: you no longer need two computer nerds in two offices working at the same time to link up two computers over the phone lines, synchronizing their ability to exchange data, each and every time you want to send stuff back and forth between them. Instead, you only have to set up the office computer's ability to call into PeaceNet once; in doing so, you automate the procedure down to a few simple keystroke combinations. Thereafter, just about anyone can can use the computer to call in--the lingo is "logging on"--and then pickup their E-mail or send E-mail to someone in another office.

The person you're sending to doesn't have to be "logged on" to PeaceNet at the time or even in their office; the mail will stay in their box until they check it and take it out. If it's an urgent matter, then you simply call them up on the old-style voice phone and tell them to check their E-mail box as soon as they can for the stuff you sent them.

If all this sounds great, hang on to your hat. PeaceNet is much more than a glorified electronic postal system; while important, E-mail is only a minor part of its services.

PeaceNet also provides electronic conferencing. Think of this as going to your local post office and renting not only a mailbox, but also a conference room. Not only does your conference room have a table, chairs and a blackboard and bulletin board. It also comes equipped with file cabinets, phones, and newswires and fax machines. The file cabinets are full of useful information; the fax machines are pre-loaded with the fax numbers of the major national media and every member of Congress.

Now think of your post office as housing not one conference room, but 500 of them. In each room a series of presentations is going on around a different topic related to social change. In some rooms, it's one speaker after another droning on in an unrelated fashion. But in others, the discussion is lively, with much discussion and debate. In some, the top is so hot and so many people want to get in on it that the group breaks up into smaller sub-topics in other rooms.

With PeaceNet, you can bounce around from one room to another, just listening in. Or you can get into the discussion yourself. Or you can note the names of the speakers and talk with them privately outside the room.

If your group wants to obtain a PeaceNet conference room to publicize and get a response to its own ideas, it's possible to set one up. It's also possible to get a "private conference." This means that the only people allowed in are those on a list of E-mail names supplied to PeaceNet ahead of time.
The editorial boards of various publications whose editors are scattered around the country, for example, often use private conferences. In this way, they can read, debate, criticize or reject articles without having to all is in the same place at the same time. In fact, one way to look at such a conference is as a "perpetual meeting" that goes on 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Each individual in the meeting, however, can come and go as he or she pleases. In addition, there is a complete written record of everything said that anyone can respond to at any time without waiting for the chair to call on them.

All of this has immense practical use, especially for progressive groups trying to work together over long distances or even in a local area where scheduling is difficult. It also has many revolutionary implications for theories of democratic organization, especially in the sphere of flattening leadership hierarchies and empowering individuals and groups at the base.

One of the most democratic features of PeaceNet, finally, is its low cost. There is a $15 initial sign-up fee. After that, it's $10 a month, which includes one hour of access time per month. It usually takes less than five minutes to check and get your mail, or send mail to someone else. After the first hour each month, your access time is billed a $5 per hour at night or $10 per hour during the day. Over a year, a small office using mainly the E-mail services can figure an average of $20 per month. The phone call to log on is simply the price of a local call, even if your sending mail to someone in Australia. It's a bargain no matter how you look at it.

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