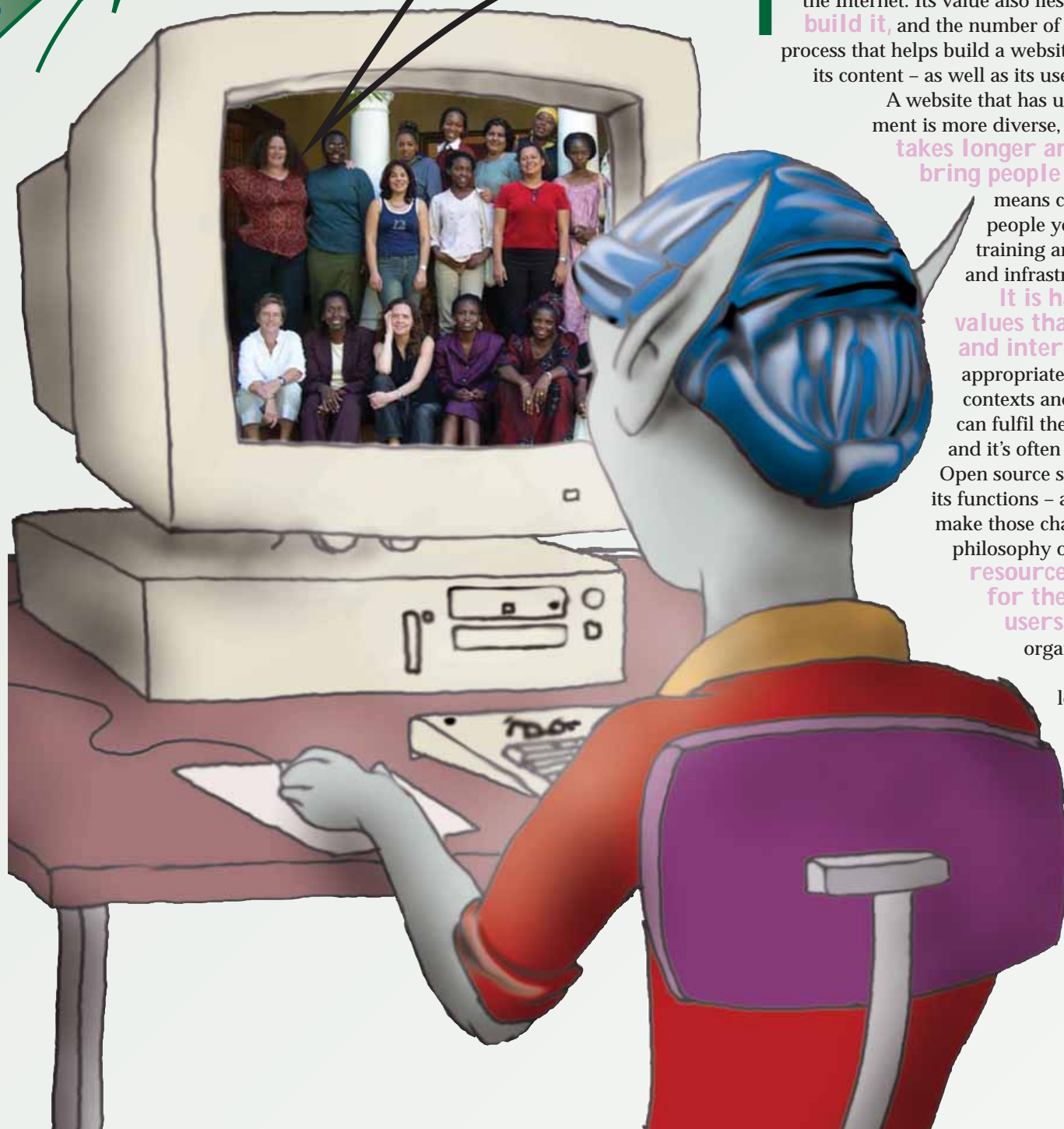


do
all shout
at once

by Sally Shackleton



For non-governmental organisations and institutions concerned with social change, the value of a website starts way before it joins the billions of websites on the Internet. Its value also lies in the **collaborative process that helps build it**, and the number of voices that are reflected in its content. While the process that helps build a website is not visible, it does affect the tone and scope of its content – as well as its usership.

A website that has used **many voices** in its planning and development is more diverse, interesting and engaging. However, it is harder, **takes longer and requires a more concerted effort to bring people together** to build a collaborative website. It also means confronting exclusion and building the skills of the people you would like to engage with, through appropriate training and education and through other activities in policy and infrastructure development.

It is hard to find tools that facilitate the values that non-commercial, information-driven and interactive websites demand – tools that offer appropriate technology for our needs, that are relevant to our contexts and that we can appropriate. Open source software can fulfil these needs – because it's affordable and adaptable, and it's often designed with a collaborative process in mind. Open source software gives users access to the code that controls its functions – and, if you make changes to the code, you also make those changes available to other users at no cost. The philosophy of the open source movement is that **the resource is shared, that it is built collectively for the benefit of other users and potential users**. This philosophy suits many NGOs, civic organisations and alternative news producers.

One example of open source software for development initiatives is the Association for Progressive Communications' ActionApps. The Association for Progressive Communications (APC) is an international network of civil society organisations **dedicated to empowering and supporting groups** and individuals working for peace, human rights, development and protection of the environment, through the strategic use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), including the Internet.

ActionApps was developed for the use of NGOs or non-profit organisations, as a content management tool that accommodates collaborative web publishing. The complaints that many alternative website managers have is that they do not have control over their websites because they have had to outsource its development and

updating. They also have to juggle many tasks – the time it takes to keep a website up-to-date is challenging, as well as the time and investment it takes to develop new content. A tool like ActionApps assists organisations because it allows:

- a site to be updated using only a browser from any computer
- updating without a knowledge of html
- updating in a few minutes
- adaptation of the tool to suit the look and feel of a site
- the sharing of content with partners without any extra work
- more people in an organisation or field to add information to one website (with a username and a password)
- for the inclusion of features such as a comments page or a calendar to a website.

For Women'sNet, the **most important feature of any tool is the control it allows the user over their content**, and whether it allows for a collaborative approach to website building. In 2001, for the World Conference Against Racism, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, Women'sNet, as a member of an African network, APC-Africa-Women, and the global Women's Networking Support programme of the APC, set up a website on which to publish a bulletin on gender at the conference. The process required that more than one person be able access the website in order to add their articles, and that more than one editor have access to new articles. We also needed to be able to update the site from the Women'sNet cyber café at the conference, and we needed to update the site daily.

The first time Women'sNet used ActionApps in this way was for the Intersections Bulletin. Since this experience we have used the tool in working with other organisations and for managing content on our own website. The tool has proved **particularly useful when we have developed news sites that require constant updating and where collaborative content is essential**.

At the end of March this year, women from across Africa working for gender equality using technology came together to increase their skills. The African Women's Electronic Networking Training (Went) was organised by the Association for Progressive Communication's Women's Networking Programme's regional Africa Women Programme (AAW). Working with women in Africa and all over the world, APC-Africa-Women focuses on African women's empowerment through information facilitation, regional support, lobbying and advocating around

gender and ICTs, delivering ICT training, conducting research into gender and ICTs and participating in regional and global events.

The Went Africa 2003 training workshop aimed to build the capacities of women and their organisations to utilise new information and communication technologies in social development work and policy advocacy.

Women'sNet spent two and a half days training participants on using ActionApps in their work. All women at the training, although not technical experts, were able to use the tool by the end of our session. And while many still would experience additional infrastructural problems, the tool offered a solution to many of the obstacles they experienced with their websites and content management.

Open Source Software like ActionApps **allows us to all shout at once – and be heard**. It allows for more voices to make content and for the smoother implementation of the collaborative web building essential for a more diverse website. And, while it may require more effort and take longer to build content in this way, it is the start of **changing the Internet into a place of diversity rather than exclusion**.

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- APC Africa-Women:
<http://www.apcafricawomen.org>
 - Intersections:
<http://www.apc.org/intersections/>
 - ActionApps:
<http://www.apc.org/actionapps/>

References

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