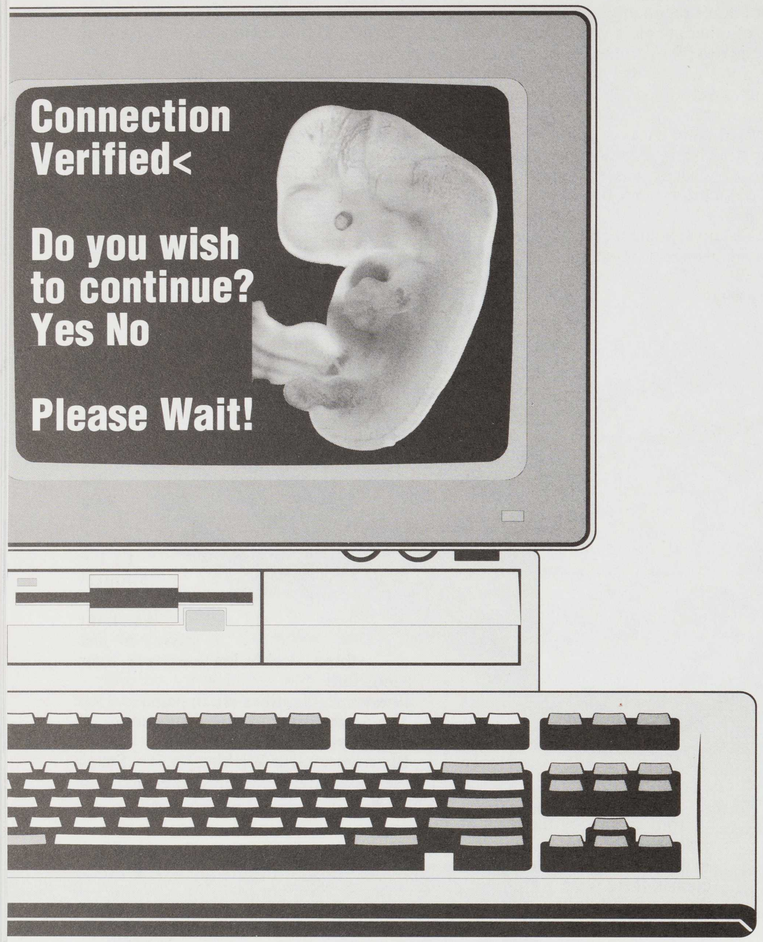
Pro-life strategy in the Information Age



Days before Operation Desert Shield became the now-legendary Operation Desert Storm, it is reputed that the Central Intelligence Agency, not U.N. forces, fired the first "shot."

The story goes like this: Days before the withdrawal deadline imposed by the United Nations and repeatedly articulated by then-President George Bush had elapsed, the CIA discovered an ordinary computer printer among non contraband electronic components destined for shipment from Turkey to Iraq. CIA operatives introduced a "computer virus" into one of the printer's components, a non-volatile memory chip, and allowed the shipment to proceed unimpeded to its destination, the headquarters of Iraq's military command.

At midnight, January 15, 1991, the deadline passed; U.N. forces began mobilizing aircraft; and the little "computer virus", having spread itself throughout Iraq's military network as soon as the ill-fated printer was attached, "woke up". The entire free world watched as Iraqi anti-aircraft guns fired blindly into the nighttime skies and General Schwarzkopf reported that Iraqi troops were "just waiting in the field" for U.N. soldiers to come disarm them.

Even as U.N. troops and aircraft advanced, battlefield information continued to pour in for analysis by Iraqi commanders. But thanks to the little computer virus, the computer terminals responsible for displaying that information had all gone black. So the story goes, anyway.

In reality, early air attacks on Iraqi radar and air defense, not to mention radio jamming combined with the allies' cutting of the Kuwaiti phone link to Baghdad, did more damage than the virus but the lesson is the same. In a military engagement, no matter how much firepower you have, it's wasted if you can't communicate instructions to and get information from the field.

Anyone who has been involved in pro-life work for any length of time can plainly see the parallel here. In the three-plus years I've been in pro-life work, hardly a week has gone by that I haven't heard someone express frustration over our inability to communicate with each other. They usually end up blaming the media for stifling news that would favor the pro-life cause.

It is time to get the pro-life movement into the 20th century. Author George Grant writes in *Grand Illusions, The Legacy of Planned Parenthood,* "We need to develop national information networks. This is the information age . . . there is no need for us to depend on the national media any longer . . ."

I often wish that I could develop some pro-life strategy that would deliver the silver-bullet knockout punch we want. Almost every pro-lifer has dreamed of that. Alas, I don't have what it takes to develop such a plan either. But I do know about communications and information systems — I've been building and maintaining them for 15 years — and it's that topic I want to discuss here.

Today almost every political and social action group in existence knows the value of good computer-aided communications and information networks. Whereas, a few years ago such technology was only available to corporate giants or the federal government, activists today can take advantage of a simple technology in use now for over ten years, the electronic bulletin board system or "BBS".

Greenpeace's global computer network is considered the one to beat. Less because of its technical features than because of the way its membership uses it. With its network alone Greenpeace can mobilize its members anywhere in the world. The Skinhead movement also started using computer networks about four years ago to further facilitate their reprehensible agenda. Former Skinhead Greg Withrow, who now lectures for the Anti-Defamation League, told an audience in 1989 that "with the use of computers, the Skinheads are closing ranks . . . [their computer network] helps turn vague political yearnings into action by allowing users to collaborate, discuss tactics and draw up agendas".

Not surprisingly, our most vociferous opposition uses them too. The ACLU's Center For Reproductive Studies (CRS) keeps "dossiers" on pro-life figures and groups and makes that information available to sympathetic authorities when it serves their purposes. Recently, the CRS, located in New York, downloaded information about Houston pro-lifers to Puerto Rican pro-aborts in advance of the arrival of a pro-life contingent. That information was used to launch a suit by abortion proponents in Puerto-Rico which was aimed at keeping the potential rescuers busy fighting the courts for most of their trip.

Elements within the National Organization of Women are also experimenting with electronic bulletin boards to facilitate recruitment and collaborate at a grass roots level. Presently, they lack some of the sophistication needed to accomplish this on a grand scale but they are gaining.

As you might have guessed by now what you are reading is an argument for change. Pro-Life America also needs to be able to move information across the country as well; to communicate safely with other pro-life leaders and effectively with the pro-life grass roots.

To address the issue of rapid dissemination of information and secure communications a few pioneers have undertaken the task of launching such "information networks" on behalf of the pro-life cause. Still, we need more. Essentially, such networks allow users of common personal computers to communicate with other personal computer users in much the way the popular Prodigy or Compuserve networks do. It's the modern-day equivalent of the 18th century town meeting. Although such networks tend to come and go with the enthusiasm and financial resources of their operators (sysops), I believe that pro-lifers and especially pro-life leaders should reconsider their interest in this neglected resource.

By way of example, the LifeLink Foundation launched its computer network in 1990. LifeLink performs all of the tasks described above: that of providing a conduit for communications and dissemination of relevant pro-life information exclusively for pro-life organizations. Organizations seeking membership to LifeLink must make written application and pass rigid verification requirements. LifeLink has been networking pro-life organizations this way for almost three years now and is finally beginning to find its niche. Several pro-life organizations have begun using LifeLink to facilitate their communication needs and to exchange information in digitized form.

I know of three itinerant rescue groups who use "electronic mail" of the type available on most electronic bulletin boards like LifeLink and Parnet, a network which grew out of the Lambs Of Christ, to keep in touch with their headquarters and sister groups while on the road. Their example makes a good case for this type of communications. Many pro-life groups do not maintain their own phone, and most do not maintain an office outside of someone's home. Electronic "mailboxes" commonly used on any bulletin board network are probably one of the best uses for this medium for the average pro-lifer. E-mail, as it's commonly called, can find the recipient even if the sender of the message has no idea where they are.

A natural outgrowth of this resource is the exchange of virtually any type of information in digitized format. Some organizations have begun disseminating their newsletters this way. Life Advocate Magazine and The Wanderer have also begun using this method to receive article submissions electronically. LifeLink is cooperating with Pro-Life Action League and American Rights Coalition to make abortion malpractice and maternal death information available on-line. Other databases designed to track the activities of abortion profiteers state-to-state are being discussed by many network operators as well.

For all of its apparent complexities, a well-done network is actually very easy to use, and virtually all use same sort of "computer virus" detection system. Pro-life organizations can use LifeLink's proprietary communications program, which resides on the member's personal computer, to access the network regardless of their level of computer expertise. Likewise, an emerging network of pro-life BBS's, representing a collaborative effort of previously stand-alone systems, is combining forces to create the first publicly-accessible, national pro-life information network. With an emphasis on standardization for ease of use, "Life America Network" will allow members of the public, pro-life and otherwise, to discuss the pro-life issue in a public forum on a network administered singly by pro-life people. The new network allows users to communicate with L.A.N. via whatever software they are already accustomed to and will carry news about pro-life events, confrontations between pro-life and pro-death forces and other developments in the battle for the unborn. In this way, the pro-life cause will be better represented in the burgeoning on-line community. Members even enjoy the availability of technical assistance with mundane computer tasks like word processing and "Windows" from fellow members. Life America Network will be on-line September 1.

Occasionally, someone will ask me, "Why do we need this type of communications? Whenever we need to talk to someone, we just pick up the phone and call."

In expectation of heightened tensions between pro-life and pro-abortion forces, we'd better see the need. Telecommunications of this type provide us with the most cost effective way of reaching others around the country or around the world. What can be said in a 20-minute phone conversation can be transmitted in text form in two minutes, encrypted, if necessary, and sent to members in multiple cities if desired for the price of a postage stamp. Also, telecommunications provides us with an opportunity to make use of good, "military-grade" data encryption software to "scramble" private messages and sensitive information. (Good data encoding software can be devilishly difficult to use.) For right now, know that the further underground the pro-life movement must go during the next few years, the more we will need to reach this level of sophistication. Finally, the economical nature of such national messaging networks has already begun allowing disparate pro-life groups and pro-life activists, whose tactics do not ordinarily allow them much interaction, to find and come to better understand each other, which is probably the greatest benefit of all. ■

Pro-life organizations interested in membership to LifeLink can contact David Powell at 918-355-5512.

Want to reach Life America Network?

The public can contact Life America Network for information about pro-life events or just to discuss pro-life issues with others.

Set your modem for 1200 to 14,400 baud, 8 data bits, 1 stop bit, no parity (8-1-N) and call one of the host cities listed below. More cities will soon follow:

Lancaster, PA
717-394-9063

Seattle, WA
206-744-0174

Wichita, KS
316-529-1400

Easley, SC
803-859-2229