

Interviewee: Anriette Esterhuysen

Interviewer: Bu Zhong

Date: June 14, 2017

Location: Geneva, Switzerland

Transcriber: Fan Yuanyuan

Abstract

Anriette Esterhuysen is a human rights defender and computer networking pioneer from South Africa. She has pioneered the use of Internet and Communications Technologies (ICTs) to promote social justice in South Africa and throughout the world, focusing on affordable internet access. She has been the Executive Director of the Association for Progressive Communications since 2000 until April 2017, when she became APC's Director of Policy and Strategy.

In the interview, Anriette shares her opinion on what is internet, discusses her experiences on anti apartheid and human right fight, and how she involved in networking information and internet areas.

0:12

AE: surface the father of the internet and we don't, we don't, I mean, believe that this narrow definition that internet protocol is when it all started because they were networks around the world, using store and forward, UECF, Fidonet, we were using different technologies particularly in developing countries. And those network started to be connected to the internet, but people in the internet didn't consider us to be part of the internet.

BZ: right right

AE: so I will say that I'll say that when you ask me. So I challenge this whole notion about the internet be invented in the United States

BZ: maybe we could start from there. That's fresh. You know, We're talking about here. I put everything on my ipad here so... that's very

AE: you know there was something like Bitnet, you do know about Bitnet

BZ: yes absolutely.

AE: Bitnet didn't use the internet protocol, but it was an electronic. There's something called JUNET which was an electronic communication network.

BZ: during actually Hong Kong's occupy central. The government, they were worry about the government will shut down the internet. So when they come in as a protest to communicate each other, they don't use that technology, they use the bluetooth which is like an, you know, just like, so this text messages or hey what's happening

over there the policeman is coming down from the backward, you know you have to worry about those kind of things. So they use that kind of things that were not going to track down even by the government. So they have a lot of use of this thing, this is what you mean by...

AE: no no, these were, these are, these are just, I'm not a matter computer scientists or computer engineers but these were ways of forms of electronic communications that were international using telephony but that we're not using internet protocol, TCP/IP

BZ: okay so how about we start with this. You know like what you said is there, why you think like the people have a lot of misunderstanding about what internet is, some people said internet is a media, some people said internet is a platform, some people even said that's all social connections in over happening, even you can think that's a society, or virtual society. You know you want add virtual a lots, that's real actually in some way. So how you like to define, you know what's your **issues and where ahead**

02:49

AE: I would define it in quite, I suppose a simple way, as a network of interconnected networks that people use to communicate to, which can take the form of transferring data, sending messages, sending images. But I think that's the fundamental characteristic of it, from my perspective. I think the fact that now people identify Facebook as the internet. I find very disturbing actually, because I think some of the capacity of this medium to allow this interconnection between different networks and around the world, identifying the platforms as being this network, I think really diminish this what the power of it is. And also think the fact that it should be a tool that everyone can use and that is really available to everyone. It shouldn't be colonized by corporations or by platforms in this manner, or by governments for that matter you know.

04:05

BZ: that's very good. So why you thinking like the people were thing like social Facebook that could be, enough to be internet, would be everything. So you are believe like, you know, some people may lose the vision of what the internet should be, or we end up in, we use so much about social media, will begin to identify one of the social media I use too much twitter, I began to believe twitter is everything. So we began to have a tunnel view of what's internet really should be.

AE: you know I think I'd put it differently. I think that there's a paradox in making technology more user friendly, it, which is a paradox that exists elsewhere. You know let's say in making the delivery of fresh meat, to people more streamlined more accessible, you end up with a situation where people go to supermarkets, they buy packaged meat, they consume it in large quantities, with no conception, really, that there is an animal that has been killed that might have been grown in a, if it was a chicken, in a chicken factory without overseeing daylight. So I think that's the

situation of the, with the internet, as the technology has become more user friendly, as the relationship between the user and the application and the content that you interact with becomes more streamlined. You, as a user, lose more control, and also more understanding of how the technology actually works and much what is behind it. So for some one of my age, when I first started using electronic communications I used a modem, I used to three hundred baud modem of a very poor quality phone lines in Africa. And I knew exactly what was happening when I was sending a message from South Africa to Bangkok. Because I know that I had to connect from my phone line with an exchange which then would connect with exchange in London, and that exchange in London would connect with our partner in Bangkok, who would then store the message there, until my colleague, someone else in Thailand phoned the exchange for Bangkok.

And the tool was much harder to use, it was much works inaccessible and there was provider infrastructure. But those who did use it had a much better understanding of what it is and what the processes is. And I think that the fact that platforms now make it so easy and they streamline that. It's good I think what is what is concerning is that we have two or three monopolies who were who seem to be the ones that people identify with the internet. And I think it is, you know I think I see the internet as a global goods, as a public, as a commons and therefore I think people should be able to relate to it as those comments not just as either Google or Facebook or twitter

07:42

BZ: So I take a look of your experience and your career, and you start this very earlier, in earlier '90s. And you already getting involved yourself, like you know to understand in especially you know in South Africa, and as a pioneer and do so many things are especially ICT. My question here to you is, if you like to divide into your career into several major stages, how would you like to divide that, you know what kind of stage and you're working on, and you also use the ICT technology to defense human rights and that's uh that's approach, and also women's rights, you know, so how do you like to divide your career stages.

AE: that's very interesting question and I've never done that before. No one's ever asked me that question. I would say that for me the most important thing at the time, but I was born in 1960 in South Africa, I was born into a Apartheid South Africa, I was born into a very unequal society, in which the majority of the population did not just have human rights, they were, they were actively deprived and actively repressing. And I became involved in a Apartheid politics quite an early early stage in my my mother also was an activist.

So for me that was the most important thing. I think as a young person going to university and in my first years of work, and somehow I think I made the connection with after I graduated I worked in a uh that was essentially human rights organization and it was in the 1980s in a context of censorship, very extreme censorship and surveillance. And I made the connection between information and change and information and right. So in my work at that time, just **for largely** human rights work

in the sense of, I'm trying to change powers in South Africa, tried to establish democracy and equality. I started working with information as a tool and discovered this movement around the world, which was known as anti apartheid, which was a movement of organizations in the global south using information for action, information for social change, many of them are librarians, and many journalists, and many were involved in democracy struggles, such as in the Philippines for example, Thailand, Brazil, Central America at the time. You know, this was the 1980s.

10:43

And at the same time digitalization and automation became very critical in the library and resource and archive sector. So after finishing my first degree, I did the post graduate degree in information science. So computerization and indexing of text was something that I then worked in university libraries, I worked in NGO libraries. And the next step, so these two things came together. My work with information on managing information and the emergence of automated information management, and library indexing classification, and document management systems. The importance to be involved in social change, but the importance of communication between people who are working for social change, people that are working in solidarity with one another, so the anti apartheid movement was supported by solidarity organizations around the world. And because communication was so difficult under apartheid in South Africa, I discovered, through working with colleagues in this sector, this new way of communication, which was called email and bulletin board systems. And that's really, and I would say that my career certainly in the 1980s in the 1990s were absolutely about that, about how to use these emerging tools, to use them for people that had a real express need to communicate, that were finding it difficult to communicate, either because of repression and censorship, but also just lack of means, lack of capacity to communicate, being in the **global cell**, being marginalized, being people whose voices are not generally listened to, and that's how it came together, and the internet only happened kind of midway through that whole process, but we had an established network long before the commercial internet became available

12:56

BZ: you mean the internet in South Africa

AE: not just in South Africa. As APC the organization that I'm still looking for, I wasn't working for APC then, but I was connecting through APC. So APC was made up of these notes around the world. That we're using different technologies, some were using bulletin board system, some were using Fido net, **the latest this surface isn't part of it**, and some were based in the US. So they would have started using so called internet sooner. But what it was a movement of people who had the technology and the skills to board and manage the technology, with people who had an active need to share, and a desire to share and exchange information on social environmental issues.

13:47

BZ: what year was the internet introduced to South Africa.

AE: officially, the internet was introduced to South Africa in the 1990s, and I know it was on my birthday actually. If you look it up on Wikipedia, think it was 1994, 1993? (same as china). You should look it up on Wikipedia. (I do have a... you know, it's here) I think it is, do you have a... so by the time the internet was the... that's my own personal history in that, but the... so we were, we APC, we had our own network infrastructure, and we actually provide connectivity to African universities before the internet came to Africa. But once the internet did, it was primarily through the academic networks, and we were then able to benefit from that, we were, even though they were so politically, a very uncertain situation, because South Africa was only liberated in 1994. And the people who ran the academic networks even though they were formerly part of the apartheid regime; they were good people who cared about connectivity. And they gave my organization at the time SANGONeT. We were not for profit network. They had us at least a line. So we were the first non-academic entity to connect to the mainstream internet, prior to that we connected through a system of phone calls to London using UUCP, and we would then have a phone call during which we exchanged information and that's... so it was more like a post office type system, and digital using analog phone lines, a system of sharing information. It was very robust and in fact that system continued to be used in Africa until the early 2000. Because... and I always say this when I do teaching in the African school on internet governance, on the history of internet in Africa that, when the mainstream internet arrived in Africa, it actually set back African adoption by ten years do you know why I say that?

16:17

BZ: en.. no

AE: because by the mid-1990s, many countries in Africa had electronic communications networks that had bulletin boards or news groups that they had some form of public discussion, and they could transfer email and files. These all worked on different technologies. But what they had in common was they were storm forward so what does that mean? It means that you make a phone call, you use quite efficient protocols to transfer data and then you save up the phone call. If you had very poor quality phone line, you could still do it, because you could use a high quality model that had good error correction capacity, and you did not have to... even searchers, you could use ways, you could use ... what's the other early search tool? Gopher? So you did not need a permanent connection to the internet or to any network, to search information, to talk to people, to share files and communicate. Then the internet happened, and the World Wide Web happened, and the technologies were developed in the global north by countries who have excellent talent telephony infrastructure. And they were developed in such a way that you had to have a permanent connection to the network, totally marginalized the majority of people in countries where they did

not have fixed line telephone infrastructure, which could then easily be handled the permanent connectivity that you needed through a modem that was affordable. And all once, it moved to the system of leased lines, digital lines that type of connectivity so Africa, that's why it's taken Africans in particular, but not only also parts of Asia and south America. It's taken them so long, because they did not have the basic telephony infrastructure that support it, the use of network tools that required a continuous unbroken permanent connection. You still have that the dependency on the cloud marginalizes people who don't have cheap connections.

18:44

BZ: Right, right. So you know, after you got involved in the internet, you became extremely active in so many **france** women's rights and human rights there, so how you, how do you think about, you know, how you can managing that, you know, could be so..., actually so early starting 1994, you know you've already been there

AE: well it's, you know as I said to you, I was from the 1980s. I was involved in working to support political change in South Africa, the anti apartheid struggle in South Africa was one that brought different movements together, the woman's movement the labor movement. So... and they needed to communicate with one another. And then from that, I would say the next phase would have been so this is I would say probably from 2000, was more about looking at development and development issues. Because once we did have a regime change in South Africa, the challenges, the political challenges and the social challenges changed. I would say it takes difficult, that's my work, you know, that's what I do, I either... I've always managed to be in my living even if it's not a very good living. But in work that I feel it's important and it's always been linked to information and communications, either for rights or for development.

20:15

BZ: let me understand you better. You know, you were born into...you were born into the system of apartheid, you know, you are there, you know white people get more privileged at there, black people were not, **expecting** get it easier. So... that's have been there for so long. You are white or if you're black, I will say oh my gosh, this is not fair system to me. You are born like white, and the system had been there for so long, how at that kind of young age even say, oh this is not fair, you know, how?

AE: but you know I think that, I think any system that... but is built on taking away the rights and discriminating against some people also dehumanize others. So even if you're a beneficiary of that, I was privileged person in South Africa, I was a white South Africans and I had. I was born with the privilege that comes with that, in a society that's based on racial segregation. But it does not mean that you are not personally affected by it. I would say that to me it seemed firstly obviously wrong. I think any white South African of my generation who did not see that what was

happening around them was wrong.

BZ: they just take it for granted

AE: yeah, I think they are just not taking responsibility; they're not willing to look around them. I think they, and nowadays people often say they didn't know what was happening, but that's absolute nonsense, you can't not know what's happening in a society like that, particularly in the 1980s. Because there was a lot of violence and a lot of police brutality, and you were exposed to it as an ordinary citizen. So I think, for me it is, I actually, you asked me how did I... to me it's more surprising that not more people did not realize that this system was wrong and had to be changed. Yes, my parent, my mother herself had you know, she was a Christian. She is very, she is she's still alive, very devoted to the values of Christianity. And so even though I'm not a practicing Christian in that way, I think her values definitely did influence me, but it was very I don't know if you know, I think it really was a very brutal society. (that's right). You could not pretend that you did not see what it was. It just like poverty, know you can go to India and you see a lot of poverty was very deliberate. You, if you were a university professor, you would still not be able to marry a white person, if you were, so in fact the racial segregation laws was so sophisticated that there was a special category for Chinese people, another category for Japanese people, and another category for people of Malaysian origin who came as slaves, and another category for people who were descendants of indigenous communities, it was, and then for people of African descent. It was a very complex system that clearly did not put people's humanity

23:51

BZ: So that's why, and you are, you know sort of like, why are aware you know the rights of...

AE: absolutely, that's why I was aware, and also the movement which the ruling party now in South Africa was very much part of the movement to challenge about it, which started roughly in the 1950s, was a nonracial we used the term nonracial movement, so it was made up of people of all racial groups. But obviously the majority were black South Africa to were the ones that were most effective.

BZ: this come back to your work, you know, starting in 1994 you involve so many things there, always this year, what are those and you know, accomplishments and you feel most proud of?

AE: um I think to connect our...to be connected to the rest of the world. I was under very involved in networking information, information for change in South Africa, exchanging videos, you know, was a lot of what we did, because so much material was banned, banded literature sharing news that was band. So that was very powerful for us to be able to do that. But then becoming part of a global community and I think

learning about the rest of the world, I think if you live in a country that has its own problems, and there's a tendency that you become very insular, and I think for me the combination of finding people with similar political and social values, but also similar struggles was for me, and you know, I remember for example going to one of the early APC my organization meetings in Bangkok, I think in 1995. And I met a young Chinese man who was living in Indonesia, who told me of their experiences in Indonesia when Chinese communities were being attacked and killed by Indonesians. And to me that was, it was just an affirmation that it is important, that these struggles are we have to, you know, we have to challenge these human rights violations that the discrimination that we have in South Africa is not only happening in South Africa that these tendencies, these ways of violating people's rights can happen anywhere and everywhere.

BZ: In so many different ways there, as the fundamental mechanisms are the same.

AE: but I think that's for me the power, you know the world now is so connected, that I think we forget how empowering that is, that when I was in my teens late into my twenties to be able to know what's happening in other parts of the world, and have relationships and communications with people and travel. It was really very special (right, connection is actually power), connection was very, now we take that connection and for granted, but it was it was very, to me that was a real monster to learn what other people are experiencing and what's happening in other parts of the world. not just by reading about it but by talking to people

27:19

BZ: how do you think like your work bring the impact to, not only South Africa, you know to maybe to some other community, like you tell your story, sometimes you tell your story to another person in Bangkok. That's also part of a message there, you know and you share ideas here you know downstairs and we saw, you know there have events like, you know they're... so people refugees were having their story and that's also powerful there too. So what kind of work you think you did have a real social impact.

AE: I think that I cannot take credit for this myself, but I would say that I became part of the Association for Progressive Communications, and we are networking a movement. And to me we really did have enormous impact, because we worked of people all over the world. We work with both technology and content and activism, and so that I think was very significant for us. I think also it means that we bought this community of people who were early adopters of mainstream internet ones that became more available, and who were able to very quickly identify the opportunity or the potential of an interconnected network, not just for our workers, activists but for development, for building capacity, for strengthening governance, for education. So if you look at the history of the APC network, you'll find that while many of them started working around human rights struggles, environmental sustainability struggles

in 1992 the earth summit was when we first started working with the United Nations, to bring in the voices of some society around the world into the negotiations. But to evolve into, not just working the challenge government, but also to work in partnership with governments, to address problems whether it was an educational and agriculture or in transparency or public participation. So, and I think that has been transformative for us because I think that the force, the digital divide is so huge, that if we didn't build this **co-world** of people with technical skills and information management skills who were working in partnership with one another, but also with developed organizations and with government in many places, that adoption of the technology in developing countries would have actually being even slow up. And you'll find that if you look at people who are early adopters in developing countries, many of them pass to APC. And our partnership with the United Nations I think was also very strategic for us, because it meant that while there was a civil society character to the network, because you worked with the United Nations developing program, we did have a relationship with governments, because UNDP also worked through governments, and that was important, because we were able to encourage and support governments in their obtain of technology and of the internet.

31:07

BZ: how do you define yourself, you know, your work, you know, this is the career you chose. All these kind of years there, if you want like to have a chance to redo it (what would I do) what do you like to do, or what do you like to undo?

AE: I would be an engineer or a lawyer. I think that the, I think the, you know, the, I think what has been wonderful for me about my career, so I've done so many different things. You know, I have worked, I was a self supporting student. So I worked, I've worked as a supermarket cashier, I've worked on farms, I've worked on the production line in factories, I have done clerical work, you know, I have done so many different types of work. And I'm, and then I discovered this world of information and communications. I do have specialized skills in it, but I think the fact that I am a generalist has been very useful for me, and that I pick up technology skills very easily. I did have to run an internet service providers and that was a great experience, because it was running something that was like a business even though it was a not for profit. But there're also limitations to being a generalist I think, I do sometimes feel that to have **hot** skills and...

BZ: But do you think you are an activist.

AE: I'm an activist. I do think I am an activist. I wouldn't, you know, I wouldn't, the term activist is a, I'm not sure that term applies always and at all times. I think I see myself now as somebody who believes that this technology has potential for social good, but that there are many ways in which its developing and being appropriated that are limiting that potential, and to challenge that, you need to work at multiple levels, you need to look at the policy level and regulation level, you need to look at

human capacity, and you have to look at sustainability as well. I think people involved in the internet and internet development and technology development in general, are far too uncritical of their own potential to actually **whose harm**, harm to the environment, harm to social relationships. I think, so for me, I wouldn't say that I am an activist on any particular issue, I think I see myself as somebody who's very actively engaged in internet policy and development and with the goal of trying to always maximize its potential for good.

34:18

BZ: I know, and you know, you have like a, you know, a lot more to contribute in your career, but if someday, you know, you talk to your daughter's children, oh you know, your grandma did this related to the internet. Well, you know, I believe they take internet for so granted in there, you know, so what message you'd like to give to, to them?

AE: well I think the first message that I would like to give, I don't know if it's one that will make sense to them. But to me it's very important that we don't look at the internet as this thing that was invented in the United States. And then exported to the rest of the world. That was not my experience, (okay) so I had been using electronically enabled communications for many years before the think of the internet happened. And I think that is a vital component of the internet. Now there were people in India, in China, in Thailand and the Philippines, in Australia, all over the world actually who were part of this network and if they weren't engaging of technology in that way, the appropriation of mainstream internet would have not happened. So to me that's an important message and then I would say that message was that my mother was part of that history of the, some people sometimes called the internet with a small "i", the internet which was an internet of people and networks who were working together around the world for a social purpose, and who were collaborating with people in the United States, but they weren't from the United States, so it really is a global tech level network.

36:15

BZ: global thing, yes years ago, I worked there. That's right. So we were we are still you know, sort of really have a consensus on this one. There is not like the previous media technology usually like phone, like the color TV always from developed country and then spread around the world. Color TV, you know, and popular in 1950s in the United States, was the rest of the world began to pick it up like 1980s, you know, something like that. Talking about the internet and world began to believe everybody at the starting line, we are starting at the same thing, actually people in different area use technology differently, like the mobile pay M-Pesa were so much developed in Kenya, instead of like, I will pay no... many people don't use it, you know still like that one, so people like to use technology so differently, in Kenya there is a big reason to use of M-Pesa, is they don't have good banking system

AE: and also you have something like GSM which was not used in the United States. (right). It was already all over the world before it was adopted. Then you had something called mimitel in France, I don't know if you remember that. So Europe had kind of developed its own ways of computer communicate, computer enable communications, which then proved not to be sustainable or effective. I think the beauty of the protocols, and this is the value of the work that Vint Cerf has done and Bob Kahn, is that they invented this protocol which was so... which was based on the notion of **entire probability**. And I think that is, so when these other networks wanted to become part of the global network. They had created these protocols which really enable that, and that is the power of these things

BZ: That's wonderful. Do you think I have anything not ask you?

AE: I don't know, we haven't, I'm not sure what you want me to say. I think no... I think I would say, maybe just to, when you do your oral history project, talk to people and keep in mind that different people have very different histories in different experiences. So if you were talking to universities, if you're talking to universities in Africa, you'll get their experience, if you're talking to governments you'll get their experience, talking to civil society, to journalists. And I think that it's... I mean it supposed to demonstrate the personal relationship, that people have with the internet as well. It's very shaped by what they do with it, and when they started using it, and there is never just one history.

BZ: that's absolutely right, you know, this is why we need 500 people to tell the story about their perspective of the how internet shape of us, and also I hope like the young people will have the wisdom, and get insights and the words, and you share here with us. You know take it there, don't take everything for granted there, use critical thinking. I totally got inspired by your words said connection, you know when we connected that's power, when I began to know something wrong here in Africa, South Africa, when I say connections, I'll say oh my gosh, and they don't have that kind of segregation over there, why they could go on like that, but I am amazed, you know still, persistent here, then why do you support this, eventually you'll get rid of this is very bad in racial segregation

40:12

AE: yeah more freedom of expression and human rights, so for me that's why I think I started to work on human rights, and I do believe actually (your activities on human rights). Yes, because I think that governments change, they change very quickly (but with pressure). I've come to believe that I have more faith in human rights that I have a democracy, I think democracy can be quite empty and quite false and it doesn't deliver necessarily justice (that's interesting) and equality, I think for me human rights, social justice are more enduring goals than democracy, democracy helps us get to more equal societies where people's individual and collective rights are respected. That's good. But I don't think democracy always does that, which is why it's important

for us to have fundamental rights that are protected and due process, rule of law. I believe in rule of law.

BZ: good good, thank you so much.