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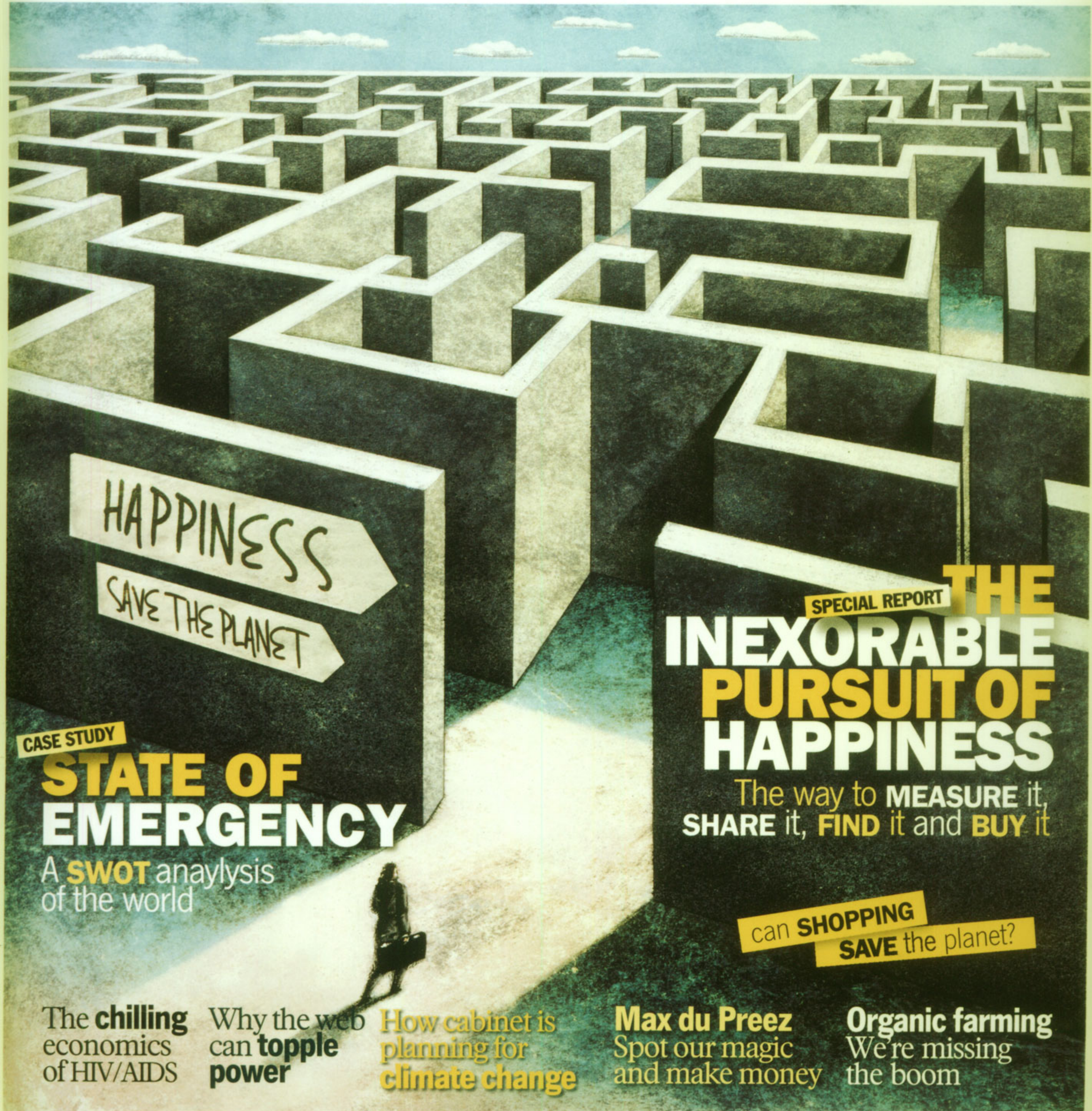
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A MAGAZINE FOR PEOPLE WHO CAN CHANGE THE WORLD



SPECIAL REPORT

THE INEXORABLE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

The way to **MEASURE** it, **SHARE** it, **FIND** it and **BUY** it

can **SHOPPING** **SAVE** the planet?

CASE STUDY

STATE OF EMERGENCY

A **SWOT** analysis of the world

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Why the web can **topple** power

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Max du Preez Spot our magic and make money

Organic farming We're missing the boom



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Estonia has put itself at the forefront of digital democracy by allowing voting to occur online, but the power of the internet can also be used to ensure that elected governments bow to the will of their populaces.

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While some of us may struggle to find Estonia on Google Earth, the eastern European country made history last year when national parliamentary elections were held online as well as at traditional voting stations. As a result Estonia unexpectedly leapfrogged the UK, Ireland and other members of the EU toying with the idea of e-government, landing at the forefront of cutting edge democracy.

The voting system was reliant on citizens carrying an electronic identity card, used as both a traditional national identity document and as a smart card with an electronic chip, which provides for secure authentication and legally binding digital signatures.

Although only 1% (about 30,000) voters voted electronically, it nonethe-

less heralded the dawn of a new age of e-citizenship.

Governments are keen to adopt e-voting for several reasons: votes are cheaper and quicker to cast, collect and count, and in some developed countries the convenience of e-voting may encourage greater participation by an apathetic voting public.

But it is not known whether governments have considered that while an e-literate citizenry may bolster voter turnout, it could also encourage internet activism. Also known as cyber or armchair activism, internet activism uses internet communication technology to actively bring about social or political change.

It arguably originated in 1994 when the Mexican rebel group, the Zapatistas, used e-mail to relay the plight of the indigenous peoples of Chiapas province to the rest of the world. As their



ACTIVIST SITES

ABROAD

- CANE – Coalition Against Nuclear Energy
- Earthlife Africa
- GroundWork
- SAFeAGE
- NiMBLE
- Biowatch
- Pelindaba Working Group
- TAC
- Hello Peter

LOCAL

- While You Were Sleeping
- urban sprout
- Environment South Africa
- Biophile magazine
- Enviropaedia

GETTY//GALLO

conflict with the Mexican government deepened, an elaborate structure of online activism unfolded. Hourly postings of events occurred on websites and bulletin boards around the world and e-mail listservs relayed massive e-mail campaigns to news desks and consulates.

The network is the cornerstone of internet activism and this has enabled citizens (or netizens) to uncover, disclose and broadcast information on an historically unprecedented scale. Overlaying the network are tools that are used collectively to co-ordinate change.

These Weapons of Mass Activism include: e-mail listservs that allow users to post questions and answers simultaneously to all members; searchable portals containing issues and contacts organised by location or topic; custom applications that allow for e-petitions to be sent with minimal clicks; and spoof sites that use satire, parody or humour to challenge targeted corporations or organisations. And the advent of Web 2.0 means blogs, social networks, wikis and podcasts are also being thrown into the mix.

However, internet activism is criticised by those who feel it marginalises the poor or those unskilled in emerging technologies, particularly in developing countries. But a Greenpeace project in India took the internet to the people by establishing an internet café in front of the abandoned Union Carbide factory in Bhopal where a 1984 gas leak killed 16,000 people. Thousands of residents visited the café and sent e-mail messages to Dow Chemicals (merged with Union Carbide in 2000) and the Indian government, demanding compensation.

It's ironic that internet activism is urgently required to save the internet itself. Although South Africans are aware that Telkom's monopoly on internet bandwidth is a handbrake to the economy, not many realise that the entire nature of the internet is under threat.

In the US, major data carriers such as Verizon, AT&T and Time Warner are

contesting the neutral nature of the internet. Their aim is to prioritise the speed at which content is delivered based on its source, ownership or destination. These telecoms companies envisage a tiered internet where a faster service is provided only to the select few companies able to pay excessive rates.

AT&T recently caused a stir when they censored a Pearl Jam performance that failed to meet their standard of 'internet freedom'. During a live webcast the telco giant muted lead singer Eddie Vedder as he launched into anti-Bush lyrics.

Vint Cerf, co-developer of the internet protocol and chief internet evangelist at Google, says: "Allowing broadband carriers to control what people see and do online would fundamentally undermine the principles that have made the internet such a success... A number of justifications have been created to support carrier control over consumer choices online; none stand up to scrutiny."

And the internet community is not idly standing by whilst telcos lobby US congress. The Save the Internet Coalition (savetheinternet.com) has managed to 'mobilise' over one million internet activists to take action. The real power to kick-start change is not driven by individual campaigns but by a mass movement, an organised and co-ordinated coalition, a multiplicity of netizens.

Websites like OneWorld.net give us a glimpse of what lies ahead. Although the London-based OneWorld does not look much different to other civil society news websites, there is a very different beast beneath the hood.

OneWorld has used open source software to link together over 1500 like-minded organisations, automating the process of sharing stories from across five continents and delivers the content in 11 languages.

But that's only touching the surface.

Armchair activism is quite often, and correctly, criticised for the sheer volume of e-mail it produces. Typically, activist websites 'empower' individuals by preparing an e-mail to the relevant authority or politician's office.



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A personalised e-mail is sent by simply clicking the send button on the activist website. But there are two major shortcomings with the way online activism works at the moment.

Firstly, when the targeted office receives ten thousand identical e-mails, it's annoying to say the least. What the activist website has done, in effect, is just drop all the 'ballots' onto the targeted office. The sheer volume is impressive but that is where it ends. The solution: a simple, yet formal report which automatically collates all 'votes'. The recipient of such a report would be able to verify all the e-mail addresses if they felt it necessary.

Secondly, what good is participation without feedback? Everyone needs to know the impact of their efforts, and this information also needs to be collated. The World Wildlife Fund has an activist website which allows its members to login at anytime to see the progress of any and all campaigns they are involved in.

Of course, it would be better if Joe Citizen had only one single website to log into, which gave access to all campaigns worldwide, as well as the ability to participate automatically in chosen classes or categories of campaigns. Activism couldn't be easier. ■