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# **UMI**

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**A COMMUNICATIONS ANALYSIS OF THE CHIAPAS UPRISING:  
MARCOS' PUBLICITY CAMPAIGN ON THE INTERNET**

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**A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and  
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Master of Arts**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The important and exemplary role that Internet technology played in enhancing the publicity campaign of the Chiapas insurgents in their struggle for political reform in Mexico, is the focus of this thesis. By examining the Internet as an alternative distribution network for Subcomandante Marcos' communiqués, it can be conjectured that the technology provided him with a space through which his voice could be heard in the international political arena. It was a space both external to Mexican government control, and through which Marcos disseminated a powerful discourse representing the insurgents' political goals and grievances - one contrary to that being transmitted by the state-controlled media. Internet technology, it can be argued, generated the necessary national and international public consciousness, opinion, scrutiny and support for the Chiapas insurgents, that ultimately transformed their conflict with the Mexican government from a violent war of arms, to one of peaceful negotiation and dialogue.

## **ABSTRAIT**

**Le rôle important et exemplaire que la technologie de l'Internet a joué dans rehausser la campagne de publicité des insurgés du Chiapas dans leur lutte pour réforme politique au Mexique, c'est le centre de cette thèse. En examiner l'Internet comme un réseau de la distribution alternatif pour les communiqués de Subcomandante Marcos, il peut être conjecturé que la technologie lui a fourni avec un espace à travers que sa voix peut être entendue dans l'arène internationale politique. Il était un espace externe de la contrôle du gouvernement mexicain, et à travers que Marcos a disséminé un discours puissant, représentant les objectifs et les griefs politiques des insurgés - un discours contraire a celui qui a était transmit pour les médias étatisé. La technologie de l'Internet, il peut être discuté, a généré la conscience, l'opinion, l'examen minutieux et le support national et internationale nécessaire pour les insurgés de Chiapas, qui avait finalement transformé leur conflit avec le gouvernement mexicain d'une violente guerre des armes, à une de dialogue et négociation paisible.**

# CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION:</b>	
Prologue	1
Principal Focus and Thesis Questions	4
Origins of My Personal Interest in Chiapas and the Internet	7
Previous Research on Chiapas	11
Scholarship on Alternative Media and the Indigenous Voice in Politics	12
Theoretical Framework	13
Evidence	21
Outline	22
<b>CHAPTER ONE:</b>	
Introduction	24
Chiapas Identified	25
The Implications of Salinismo: Agrarian Reform and NAFTA	32
The Roots of Zapatista Organizing and Networking	35
The Significance of Social Networking for the EZLN	42
<b>CHAPTER TWO:</b>	
Introduction	47
Launching the Publicity Campaign: Marcos and the Media	48
The Role of the Subcommander	51
The Mexican Mass Media Create Their Own Rhetoric	55
The Internet's Integration into the Zapatista Struggle	60
The Limitations of Access and the State of Internet Availability in Mexico	67
<b>CHAPTER THREE:</b>	
Introduction	78
Methodology	78
Description of Evidence	79
Aim	82
Analysis One: Marcos' Communiqués	83
Analysis Two: The Consulta	97
Conclusions:	
The Implications of Marcos' Publicity Campaign	103
Lessons for the Future	112
Epilogue	115
<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>116</b>

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## **INTRODUCTION...**

*"Zapata is beyond the controversy between liberals and conservatives, Marxists and neocapitalists: Zapata is before - and perhaps, if Mexico is not extinguished, he will be after."*

*- Octavio Paz, 1972*

## PROLOGUE

To study the social and political uses and implications of new communications technologies in the context of the developing world is a crucial, yet profoundly challenging task. The thrust of research in this domain has tended to favor issues related to technological innovation, transfer, integration and adaptability, developmental and educational possibilities, as well as economic advantages, access issues and the unbalanced flow of information between developed and less developed nations. Few studies have been produced that reflect the actual social and political benefits of integrating the new technologies into those isolated regions of the world, that lack the very resources and skills required to apply the technology in the first place.

Initially, it would appear to be somewhat superficial to even question the value of implementing new communication technologies into those areas of the world, where even the most basic requirements of food and shelter are highly inadequate. It is also problematic to infer that contemporary communications technologies will provide the poverty-stricken communities of the developing world with new opportunities - new hopes and new dreams - when their paramount concern lies in a daily struggle for mere survival. Hunger, death and disease will not be eradicated by the new technologies. Exorbitant levels of illiteracy, paralleled with a minimal degree of formal education, will prevent most people from being able to use them. Furthermore, the profoundly authoritarian governments that have tended to reign over the nations of the developing world, will most-likely attempt to prevent the spread of new and "democratizing" communications technologies from

reaching many sectors of the rural population. In their view, the weaker that the system of communication is among the local communities, the less threat they can pose to the power of the ruling class. More likely than not, these governing bodies will continue to employ and adopt the technologies to suit their needs and to promote their interests, thereby increasing and sustaining the already prevalent power gap between the minority elite and the majority poor - a disparity that poignantly characterizes the societies of the developing world.

Perhaps this portrait paints a bleak, albeit vague, picture of the future of the information age in the developing world. But it is an acutely pessimistic image, and we cannot afford to continuously contemplate the world through such cynical and dissenting eyes. For this reason, I have drawn from actual cases that depict the advancement of the information age into the developing world in a more positive light. I have searched for examples that illustrate how the new communications technologies can help unite people in the struggle for eradicating inequality, oppression, cruelty and inhumanity throughout the world, and more importantly, help to establish a system of more democratic communication where it does not yet exist. The Chiapas rebellion of 1994 is one such example, for it explicitly demonstrates the pivotal role that computer-mediated communications and electronic networking has played in the Chiapas Indians' struggle for political reform in Mexico.

Several factors have contributed to make this rebellion unique to all others of its kind in history. First, unlike previous peasant and indigenous uprisings throughout the

world, the Chiapas insurgents did not strictly rely upon the traditional print and broadcast media as a means for disseminating information about their social situation and political objectives. Rather, they embraced various alternative media, such as independent journals and newsletters, videos, local radio, and eventually electronic networking, to expand and enhance what became a powerful publicity campaign against the Mexican government. By taking advantage of more non-partisan communications technologies for transmitting their communiqués to various national and international publics, the Chiapas insurgents were able to counteract the Mexican mass media's portrayal of the conflict, as told through the eyes of the government.

Second, the Chiapas Indians also did not depend primarily on the traditional media as a social institution. The significance of this point is two-fold: 1)it emphasizes their independence from the state media as an agenda-setting institution, thereby enabling the Chiapas Indians to prioritize their political issues and goals through some alternative means; and 2)it illustrates the evolution of an alternative platform through which public opinion could emerge, by allowing people with a common interest in the Chiapas Indians' issues, to discuss and respond to them.

The implications of these factors are far-reaching. The level of both national and international recognition and support for the Chiapas Indians' political plight, that was generated through the appropriation of the various communications media, was far greater than in previous indigenous uprisings where people relied solely on traditional media networks to distribute information about their struggles. It can be argued that the adoption of the

diverse communications technologies for their publicity campaign, empowered the Chiapas Indians by providing them a space through which their voice could be heard all over the world. Similarly, the technologies enabled the rebels to establish widespread public awareness of their ideas and objectives with respect to their political, social and economic situation in Mexico. It also allowed them to generate the necessary local and international public pressure that undoubtedly forced the Mexican government to negotiate with the Chiapas insurgents through dialogue and not arms. Ultimately, these alternative technologies created a space for political dialogue where the road to democracy could be paved through more peaceful means. And perhaps most importantly, the insurgents' appropriation of diverse media technologies provided them with a tool for communicating with the Mexican and foreign public that was more direct, and free from state interference, thereby enhancing the very democratic impulses that were inherent in their struggle.

### **PRINCIPAL FOCUS & THESIS QUESTIONS**

The goal of this thesis is to identify and explore the principal role of the Internet in the Chiapas rebellion. Specifically, it is an attempt to investigate the employment of electronic networking into the indigenous struggle as an alternative medium that could be used to circumvent the government's representation of the conflict through the state-controlled media. I will demonstrate that by providing a platform for transmitting propaganda against the Mexican state, the Internet helped the Chiapas insurgents' principal spokesperson, Subcomandante Marcos, to transmit a political

discourse that was contradictory to that being disseminated by the Mexican government through the national media.

The specific focus of this study can be summarized by the following question: "How has the Internet helped Marcos and the Chiapas Indians to enhance their publicity campaign against the Mexican government?" In exploring this issue, I have chosen to concentrate on how the Internet functioned as an *information distribution network*; that is, how it decreased Marcos' reliance on the state media apparatus as the primary distributor of the insurgents' communiqués, while providing him with an alternative means to present the insurgents' political agenda to the national and international publics.

The chapters that follow will therefore seek answers to five principal questions:

1. How was the Internet campaign waged by Marcos and the Chiapas insurgents?
2. How did Internet technology help them to bypass the Mexican government's coverage of the conflict through the mass media, while reducing their dependence on the state-controlled media for distributing their public communiqués?
3. How did Internet technology enable Marcos and the Chiapas insurgents to transmit their political views and goals to various national and international publics?
4. What impact has the Internet (publicity) campaign had on the conflict between the Chiapas insurgents and the Mexican government?
5. Does the Chiapas example provide a useful resource for other insurgent movements throughout the world?

In exploring these issues, one can gain a better understanding of the significance that integrating

electronic networking into the Chiapas insurgents' struggle had, particularly as a means for providing them with a voice in the international political arena.

This thesis, however, will not attempt to investigate in any detail the Mexican government's counterattack via the mass media during the Chiapas uprising. First, there is simply not enough space within these pages to do an in-depth analysis of both sides of the publicity battle. Second, I believe there is a need to study specifically how isolated indigenous groups are employing computer-mediated communications and electronic networking into their struggles for social and political reform. And third, I have not come across enough information concerning the Mexican government's employment of Internet technology as a medium for strengthening their publicity campaign against the Chiapas insurgents. It would appear, furthermore, that the Mexican state was unprepared for the international publicity campaign which would be waged by Marcos, just as it underestimated the local resistance the Chiapas rebels were able to mount.

What will also not be discussed in this thesis, is the role of the Internet as a *social network* in the Chiapas uprising. The Internet, indeed, has played an integral function in allowing people throughout the world who share a common interest - active and passive - in the insurgents' plight for political reform, to interactively discuss and analyze the issues set out in their communiqués. Learning about how various individuals, activists, and organizations used Internet technology to mobilize international support for the Chiapas rebels was indeed highly interesting. However, as this issue is worthy of a distinct and

comprehensive analysis, it has not found its way into the pages of this text.

And finally, I will not attempt to deconstruct nor analyze the "truth" behind the Chiapas uprising - that is, who, if anyone, was financing the insurgents, who was behind its organization, etc. Numerous theories have been proposed since the uprising first began on January 1<sup>st</sup> 1994, yet this issue is clearly not central to my investigation.<sup>1</sup>

### **ORIGINS OF MY PERSONAL INTEREST IN CHIAPAS AND THE INTERNET**

Over the past several years, I have been greatly intrigued with the field of research that relates the so-called "democratic" potential of new communications technologies to specific regions and populations of the developing world. My specific interest in computer-mediated and electronic-networking technologies, has evolved from many years as a student of mass communications, and in part, as a consequence of all the recent hype and intrigue over the new "interactive" media. Similarly, my fascination with researching regions throughout Latin America stems from a more profound and personal affection for Hispanic culture, language, and tradition, that I cultivated during my undergraduate years at Carleton University, and while studying abroad at the Universidad Autonoma de Madrid, in Spain in 1993.

The initial welding of these two separate interests came about when I set out to write my undergraduate thesis,

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<sup>1</sup> For a very insightful and current analysis of the Chiapas uprising and the nature of the EZLN, refer to Andres Oppenheimer's book *Bordering on Chaos: Guerrillas, Stockbrokers, Politicians, and Mexico's Road to Prosperity* (1996).



entitled *Democratic Communication in the Information Age: A Case Study on Canada and Mexico* (1995). It is here that I began to explore the possibilities of new information technologies in creating a more democratic society, through the potential enhancement of public participation, knowledge and interaction. By comparing and contrasting specific variables, such as the flow of information, access to information and the concentration of ownership between a more developed and less developed society, I was able to conclude that: 1) communications technologies are adopted and appropriated in different ways in distinct societies; 2) communications technologies, despite their participatory and interactive nature, do not necessarily create a more democratic society, particularly where democratic participatory practices are impeded by national governments; and 3) lack of access to information and communications technologies is a major factor inhibiting their emancipatory potential in many areas of the developing world. Consequently, my research tended to explore and identify both the economic and political barriers confronting developing regions, in implementing and employing new communications technologies for constructing a more participatory and democratic society.

With this thesis, however, my aim is to shed some light down a more optimistic path. I have attempted to mold my two primary research interests into an illuminating piece that emphasizes the important *function*, and the fundamental *place* that new communications technologies can have, in helping isolated and oppressed people throughout the developing world fight their political struggles against their often repressive governments. The recent uprising in Chiapas,

Mexico has provided me with the consummate opportunity for doing exactly this.

Another motivation for conducting a study of this nature is simply the lack of depth and scope in current research concerning the bona fide social and political implications of integrating new communications technologies into the developing world. At present, very little is genuinely understood of their potential in invigorating and strengthening the political struggles of peripheral - and especially indigenous - constituencies. And as the events in Chiapas are a relatively recent phenomenon, analysis in this context is particularly limited. Numerous books have already been published that identify, review, and critique the events and implications of the indigenous uprising in Chiapas (e.g., Botz, 1995; Collier, 1994; Ross, 1995 and others). Yet not one of these seem to pursue the appropriation of electronic networking into the Chiapas struggle as a means to enhance the distribution of their messages, nor as a platform for the dissemination of their political views and objectives. The on-going indigenous rebellion in south-east Mexico, therefore, sets the perfect stage for an enlightening research project in the field of communications.

Finally, I wish to stress the importance of this type of research as yet another personal catalyst for selecting this topic. By exploring the Internet's role as a distribution network, I was able to learn a great deal about the people of Chiapas, as well as the diverse issues that both ignited and continue to propel their struggle forward. The Internet itself, as an interactive medium of communication, has proven to be useful in my investigation.

It has allowed me to locate and analyze dozens of their public communiqués, as well as to participate with other individuals interested in this topic, in several discussions concerning the issues they have brought to the public's attention. Similarly, in eradicating the inevitable prejudices and biases we are subject to through literary scholarship, the Internet has allowed me to form my own opinions and ideas - to create a personal understanding and consciousness - about the situation in Chiapas. I have determined, for example, that the Chiapas Indians are not fighting against progress nor impending modernity, as many would claim. Rather, their struggle is for recognition and respect; for their existence, for their autonomy, for their needs and interests, and ultimately, for the right to participate in determining the progressive modernization of their lives. Moreover, I have learnt that the Chiapas uprising is representative of a struggle for the acknowledgment of the indigenous heritage, culture, language, tradition, and land rights, in a part of Mexico which has been highly subjected and rejected by the governing classes for decades.

There is also a lesson to be learned from the adoption of Internet technology into the Chiapas rebellion. It united diverse segments of the Mexican and international public on a single cause, and on a grand scale. It also demonstrated the possibilities of creating a new space for dialogue and discussion; one that could help replace significant bloodshed and violence with a more peaceful means to resolving a conflict between two opposing political constituencies. My study of the indigenous uprising in Chiapas, therefore, attempts to illustrate the value of

implementing a more personal and egalitarian medium of communication for the dissemination of an isolated constituency's political views and goals, to a world-wide audience of potential supporters and sympathizers.

### PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON CHIAPAS

There exists a small but significant and expanding body of literature that is primarily focused upon placing Chiapas in a historical and political context, as well sources which relate the events leading up to and during the 1994 indigenous uprising in Mexico. While these works do not necessarily include analysis of the Internet's role and impact in this context, many of them do mention the important functions assumed by both the Mexican and foreign media during the rebellion, as well as discuss the implications of the publicity campaign waged by Marcos and the Chiapas insurgents, on the Mexican government. All of them, in one way or another, have also provided me with the necessary background reading that was central to a greater understanding of the issues precipitating the Chiapas uprising.

The important works in this area are, George A. Collier's *Basta! Land and the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas* (1994); Dan La Botz's *Democracy in Mexico: Peasant Rebellion and Political Reform* (1995); John Ross' *Rebellion From the Roots: Indian Uprising in Chiapas* (1995); Elaine Katzenberger's book (Ed.) *First World, Ha Ha Ha! The Zapatista Challenge* (1995), including essays therein by Medea Benjamin, Guillermo Gómez Peña and Peter Rosset; *Shadows of Tender Fury: The Letters and Communiqués of Subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatista Army of National*

*Liberation* (1995) by John Ross et al. (Eds.); the Editorial Collective's book *Zapatistas! Documents of the New Mexican Revolution* (1994); Christine M. Kovic's essay "Con Solo un Corazón: The Catholic Church, Indigenous Identity and Human Rights in Chiapas," from June Nash (Ed.) *Explosion of Communities in Chiapas* (1995); *Rebellion in Chiapas: Rural Reforms, Campesino Radicalism and the limits of Salinismo* (1994) by Neil Harvey (Ed.) and an essay there within entitled "The Chiapas Uprising" by Luis Hernández Navarro; a collective work entitled *Waiting for Justice in Chiapas: A Report by Physicians for Human Rights and Human Rights Watch/Americas* (1994); and Andres Oppenheimer's book *Bordering on Chaos: Guerrillas, Stockbrokers, Politicians, and Mexico's Road to Prosperity* (1996).

In addition to the background sources mentioned above, there is also the material which I have downloaded from various Internet sites. All of these sources provided me with relevant information on the role of the Internet in the Chiapas uprising. They include: Harry Cleaver's essays "The Zapatistas and the Electronic Fabric of Struggle," (1995) and "The Chiapas Uprising and the Future of Class Struggle in the New World Order" (1995); Susan O'Donnell and Guillermo P. Delgado's piece called "Using the Internet to Strengthen the Indigenous Nations of the Americas" (1995); and Scott and Kekula Crawford's essay on "Self-Determination in the Information Age" (1995).

#### **SCHOLARSHIP ON ALTERNATIVE MEDIA AND THE INDIGENOUS VOICE IN POLITICS**

I have also applied the work of many scholars who I believe have contributed valuable perspectives on the

diverse topics embodied within this thesis. For example, they provided me with numerous insights into the use of various alternative media for enhancing the indigenous voice in the political arena, for mobilizing local and international support, and for generally increasing minority empowerment in specific situations and historical movements throughout Latin America. They have been particularly useful in helping me to develop a basis upon which to compare alternative systems of information distribution to those of the traditional mass media. Relevant publications in this area include, Gladys D. Ganley's book *The Exploding Political Power of Personal Media* (1992); Lucila Vargas' *Social Uses and Radio Practices: the Use of Participatory Radio by Ethnic Minorities in Mexico* (1995); John Downing's *Radical Media: the political experience of alternative communication* (1984); and Hernando Gonzalez's essay "The Alternative Media and the Overthrow of the Marcos Regime" from F. Korzeny and S. Ting-Toomey (Eds.) *Communicating for Peace: Diplomacy and Negotiation* (1990). Other important publications include Donald R. Browne's *Electronic Media and Indigenous Peoples: A Voice of Our Own?* (1996); Frank Wilmer's book *The Indigneous Voice in World Politics: Since Time Immemorial* (1995); Richard J. Perry's work *From Time Immemorial: Indigenous Peoples and State Systems* (1996); Philip L. Russell's *Mexico Under Salinas* (1994); and Vinson H. Sutlive and Tomoko Hamada's (Eds.) book *Indigenous Perceptions of the Nation-State in Latin America* (1995).

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Locating specific theoretical scholarship to form the backbone of my study proved to be a daunting task, as very

little analysis has been done to date that discusses the role of Internet technology - and particularly its benefits - in the Chiapas conflict. Nevertheless, I have unearthed a diverse range of theoretical work which has proven to be effective in enhancing my understanding of various aspects of my study, on the Internet as an alternative distribution network in the Chiapas uprising.

For example, in his book *Communication Technology: The New Media in Society*, Everett Rogers discusses the concepts of "communication technology" and "interactivity," and maintains that:

Interactivity is a desired quality of communication systems because such communication behavior is expected to be more accurate, more effective, and more satisfying to the participants in a communication process (1986: 5).

The interactive or new media, according to Rogers, are a "de-massified system," which reverses the control over the systems of communication from the "producer" to the "consumer" of messages (1986: 5). He pinpoints various media technologies (e.g., satellites, microcomputers, and VCRs), as being the most valuable means of communication for the developing world, where the mass media are often controlled, centralized, carefully regulated and financed by the state. Consequently, these mass media are able to practice censorship. New communications technologies - especially those which have a transnational reach - can thus function as alternative message distribution networks. By pointing out that those media technologies with interactive capabilities confer access and control over content to its users, Rogers demonstrates the Internet's potential as a valuable communicative tool for the Chiapas Indians for

getting their messages directly out to both national and international publics, without having to depend solely on the Mexican mass media. Through this example, he effectively illustrates the ability of the Internet to help Marcos "construct" specific public audiences that are focused on a particular set of issues - as they are framed by him - thereby allowing Marcos, and not the mass media, to set the agenda for the national political discourse.

Robert E. Park's explanation of the media's role as a social network also has a place in this analysis. In his book *Society: Collective Behavior, News and Opinion, Sociology and Modern Society*, Park defines communication as; "a process by which we 'transmit' an experience from an individual to another but it is also a process by which these same individuals get a common experience" (1955: 222). He applies the term social, "to any group of individuals which is capable of consistent action, that is to say, action consciously or unconsciously, directed to a common end" (1955: 227). Park concludes that the media provide the platform through which public opinion is generated. By propagating discussions, the media help establish the common loyalties and understandings that make concerted and consistent collective action possible (1955: 314). According to the author, it is the role of the press as a social institution, to create a knowledgeable public. Park emphasizes that the media constitute a forum for the generation of public opinion, which arises from the discussion of significant social issues. This, in turn, leads to the development of a set of "common definitions" of these issues. And it is these common understandings that can then become the basis for potential collective action. Park



attempts to demonstrate, therefore, the way in which media can be used as a space for the exchange of information, which may ultimately lead to collective action on issues of common interest to a particular group of people.

While Park's work, which was undertaken in the 1920's, was centered on the role of the press, his analysis can be extended to include other communications media. It helps to explain, for example, the Chiapas Indians' appropriation of the Internet as a platform through which their representative and public mediator, Subcomandante Marcos, could communicate the plight of his people to local and foreign publics (namely, religious and human rights organizations, political and academic activists and the local independent and foreign press). These groups and institutions, in turn, helped Marcos to forge and extend a system of message distribution to a larger national and international audience, from which a common definition about the Chiapas rebellion - as painted through the eyes of Marcos - could subsequently emerge. In sum, it can be argued that through the Internet, Marcos was able to construct and provide these publics with a common definition of the Chiapas Indians' social and political situation; i.e., who they were and what their goals were vis-à-vis the Mexican government.

Paulo Freire's book entitled *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, emphasizes the importance of dialogue in the process of the social liberation of oppressed groups. Undoubtedly, interpersonal networks of interaction between the Chiapas insurgents played a central role in their own social and political organizing. Freire notes, for example, that dialogue is essential for two distinct yet equally important

reasons: First, is that "naming" has an essentially humanizing element:

If it is in speaking their word that men, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which men achieve significance as men. Dialogue is thus an existential necessity (1972: 77).

And second, "naming" is reflexive and therefore has transformative power:

The "dialogical man, is critical and knows that although it is within the power of men to create and transform, in a concrete situation of alienation men may be impaired in the use of that power (1972: 79).

According to Freire, communication is what elevates man to the status of "human-being," and to impede the process of communication, is to reduce man to the status of "thing" (1972: 123). It can be argued that the dialogical process that took place over the Internet during the uprising, therefore, brought Marcos and the Chiapas Indians' political agenda to the national and international consciousness. In doing so, Marcos was able to move his people out of the "object" status into which they had been placed - by being denied access to the Mexican state media and to the political arena - and transformed them into veritable human subjects with a political voice to be heard, and who were now "visible" to the public eye.

The significance of dialogue for initiating a better understanding of the commonalties among diverse peasant cultures is also provided in Everett Rogers' *Modernization Among Peasants: The Impact of Communication*. Here, Rogers argues that in spite of the obvious cultural diversities and national distinctions among peasant lifestyles, "meaningful

generalizations" can be produced about peasants that span national boundaries<sup>2</sup> (1969: 24). Rogers implies, therefore, that through the dialogical process afforded by Internet technology, Marcos was able to create an identity and common understanding of the Chiapas Indians, for a local and international audience.

Joshua Meyrowitz's *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior*, is another valuable resource because it theorizes about how the electronic media have altered our notions of time and space in which social interaction takes place (1986: viii). According to Meyrowitz, the new electronic media undermine the traditional relationships between physical settings and social situations. This is what he claims distinguishes them from all previous modes of communication. As an example, Meyrowitz notes that the introduction of electronic media, while diminishing one's original sense of geographical place, has made possible new forms of social behavior and identity. This point is significant, for it relates to the idea that the electronic media can legitimate social diversities by merging world views and people's behaviors that were once considered to be distinct (1986: 5). In other words, the electronic media have created new spaces for the dissemination and discussion of ideas, and where diverse social identities throughout the world can be constructed, exposed, and embraced. Similarly, social distinctions that were once perpetuated by physical isolation and uncommon experiences, are gradually being eradicated through the introduction of electronic media. Meyrowitz affirms that the

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<sup>2</sup> Rogers attributes both poverty and widespread distrust of government authority - the result of centuries of exploitation and imposed dependency - as the common denominators of all peasant cultures.

electronic media are most effective in forging a "group identity," enabling information to be shared and commonalities to be created among members of diverse groups (1986: 54). Perhaps his theory is most clearly demonstrated in his article "Television: The Shared Arena," in which he introduces the notion that television constructs a shared social arena. By this, Meyrowitz refers to television as a social medium that brings together (e.g., geographically, culturally, ethnically) diverse people in the sharing of a common experience. In discussing the social function of television, he elaborates:

...television is capable of giving each isolated viewer a sense of connection with the outside world and with all the other people who are watching (1992: 219).

It is therefore possible to argue that Internet technology, in helping to distribute their communiqués on an international scale, provided Marcos and the Chiapas Indians with a tool to construct a basis of identification with other local and international groups who have similar political agendas. It also provided them with a means to generate a common understanding of their social and political situation vis-à-vis the Mexican state, and it enabled them to share their experiences with various publics who are interested in peasant and indigenous issues. Meyrowitz's contribution is thus relevant for our analysis, to the extent that he recognizes the potential of the new electronic media in creating a space through which the construction and relation of diverse social identities can take place, and for enhancing communication between groups that were once inhibited by physical boundaries.

In *Technologies of Power: Information Machines and Democratic Prospects*, Majid Tehranian observes that it is the "small media" (the equivalent of alternative or underground media), that represent the technologies of empowerment, particularly as they help intensify and strengthen both participation and struggle in Third World settings<sup>3</sup> (1990: x). Most importantly, however, Tehranian argues that the new information technologies may serve to enhance democracy, but only to the extent that democratic social forces employ them to achieve democratic ends. In other words, it is the democratic impulses behind the use of interactive information technologies that determine how democratic they are to begin with (1990: 98). Marcos' employment of Internet technology into the Chiapas insurgents' struggle for political reform, therefore, helps to illustrate Tehranian's observation that the new media can be applied to serve various community needs, including informing, reacting, mobilizing, organizing, and ultimately, for taking political action. Furthermore, by appropriating the Internet as a means for improving the distribution system of Marcos' communiqués, and for increasing public consciousness of the insurgents' struggle for national democracy, the democratic potential of new communication media was effectively put to practice.

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<sup>3</sup> Although Tehranian articulates the importance of employing participatory or interactive communication media for progressive social change, he is not caught up in the emancipatory hype of the new information technologies. Rather, Tehranian adopts what he refers to as the "dual effects hypothesis," where he notes; "information technologies extend and augment our powers for good and evil, for better or worse, for democracy or tyranny" (1990: xiv). For example, they may provide alternative channels of resistance and ideological mobilization on the one hand, but they can also increase the possibilities of information control and security on the other (1990: xv).

## EVIDENCE

The evidence for this study was derived from both primary and secondary sources of information. They are comprised of:

**1. The Internet.** Four types of information have been extracted from the Internet, including: (1) the archived Internet versions of the EZLN communiqués and *Consulta* originally created by Marcos. These documents provided me with the principal evidence of how electronic networking helped to enhance Marcos' publicity campaign; (2) academic essays and press releases posted on the Internet, which analyzed the Chiapas insurgents' employment of diverse communications technologies throughout the uprising; (3) numerous articles and statistics about the state of the Internet, the mass media, and networking in Mexico; and (4) articles that provided additional background information on the situation in Chiapas.

**2. CD-ROM technology.** A compact disk entitled, "The Revolution Will Be Digitized" that documented the various social and political issues surrounding the Chiapas rebellion. This disk included numerous theoretical notions, and provided me with a historical backdrop to the situation in Chiapas. The CD, produced by Tamara Ford, was a collaborative effort between Mexican and American scholars, and was designed at the research center in the Department of Radio, TV and Film at the University of Austin, Texas.

**3. Magazine articles.** These included several Mexican independent publications such as *Proceso*, *Cómo*, *Huellas*, *Rotativo*, *Mira*, *Cotado 28*, and *Telegrama Político*. I also consulted international publications, such as the *New York Times*, *Macleans* and the *Economist*.

**4. Journal Abstracts.** These included the *Journal of Communication, Media Culture and Society*, and the *Journal of Interamerican Studies & World Affairs*.

**5. Reports.** Specifically, I consulted *NACLA Report on the Americas, Mexico/NAFTA Report, Country Report: Mexico*, and *UNESCO* reports.

### OUTLINE

This thesis will be divided into three distinct chapters. The first chapter will place Chiapas in a historical and political context in relation to Mexico, with an emphasis on the primary political motives behind the uprising. Here, I will also discuss the internal organization of the EZLN, and the existence of anti-NAFTA coalitions prior to the uprising, as two factors that would ultimately contribute to the success of the insurgents' mobilization efforts through Internet technology.

The second chapter will focus on the use of the Internet as an alternative distribution network; i.e., as a medium that could be employed to bypass the Mexican state media apparatus for the distribution of Marcos' communiqués, and as a means to counteract the government's own discourse on the conflict in Chiapas. Here, I will discuss the role of Subcomandante Marcos, and how he used the mass media to launch a powerful publicity campaign against the Mexican government. This will necessarily be followed by a brief discussion on how the state reacted by employing the national print and broadcast media to transmit its own interpretation of the conflict in Chiapas to the Mexican public. From this point, the integration of the Internet into the insurgents' publicity campaign will be analyzed,

including an analysis of the technological advantages of computer-mediated electronic networking, and the state of the Internet in Mexico. It is at this stage that the issue of limited access, and the role of various intermediaries in helping Marcos transmit his communiqués, will be considered.

In the third chapter, I will perform a thematic analysis of the content of fourteen EZLN communiqués (written by Marcos) and the Internet *Consulta*, in order to illustrate how Internet technology, as an alternative distribution network, helped to enhance Marcos' political propaganda campaign against the Mexican government.

This chapter will conclude by summarizing the main implications that the Internet had for the conflict between the Chiapas insurgents and the Mexican government, by strengthening Marcos' publicity campaign. I will then apply the findings of my study to a general context, by drawing several conclusions on how other indigenous groups, insurgents and activists can use Marcos' example to enhance their own struggles for political reform. In doing so, I will attempt to hypothesize upon what the outcome of this particular investigation signifies, not only for the future of political conflict between isolated constituencies and their governments, but also for the future of communications practices and research.



## *Chapter One*

### *CHIAPAS UNCOVERED...*

*"How will this new voice make itself heard in these lands and across the country? How will this hidden wind blow, this wind which now blows only in the mountains and canyons without yet descending to the valleys where money rules and lies govern? This wind will come from the mountains. It is already being born under the trees and it is conspiring for a new world, so new that it is barely an intuition in the collective heart that inspires it."*

*- Subcomandante Marcos, 1992*

The indigenous uprising that erupted in Chiapas at midnight on January 1<sup>st</sup> 1994, resonated with anti-elitist, anti-neoliberal, and pro-democratic sentiment. This date, which marked the eve of Mexico's integration into the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), also accented the numerous problematic social, political, and economic undercurrents within modern Mexico which until then, had remained largely overlooked by the rest of the world. The Chiapas uprising was in fact, not an isolated nor spontaneous event. It was instead, a reaction to centuries of exploitation, neglect, impoverishment, and dehumanization of the country's indigenous people by colonialists, foreign capitalists, avaricious land-owners, and authoritarian governments. As the General Command of the Zapatista National Liberation Army pointed out in their "Declaration of War":

We are the product of 500 years of struggle: first against slavery, then during the War of Independence against Spain led by insurgents, then to avoid being absorbed by North American imperialism, then to promulgate our constitution and expel the French Empire from our soil, and later the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz denied us the just application of the Reform Laws... (*Zapatistas! Documents of the New Mexican Revolution*, 1994: 49).

Their principal demands for work, land, housing, food, health, education, independence, freedom, democracy, justice, and peace, as outlined in the above declaration, articulated not only the Chiapas Indians' lack of basic necessities, but also their demand to be recognized as a separate political constituency within Mexico. This implies that they were claiming the right to participate in the decision-making processes that directly affect their lives, and wished to reap some of the rewards anticipated by the

modernization of their country. Perhaps January 1st 1994 best symbolizes the day that the Chiapas Indians unearthed their political voice; one that had previously been muted by the Mexican government through decades of profound repression.

This chapter attempts to familiarize the reader with the principal causes behind the 1994 indigenous revolt in Chiapas. It begins with an introduction to the current social conditions in the state of Chiapas, by placing it in the context of Mexican society as a whole. It then proceeds to a discussion of the implications of recent Mexican neoliberalist politics - specifically agrarian reform and trade liberalization - for the traditional indigenous lifestyle. From here, I will detail the historical roots that laid the groundwork for the organization of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), and the influence of national and international anti-NAFTA coalitions and human rights organizations, as well as Mexican indigenous organizations, which helped establish the preliminary social networks between the Chiapas Indians and their local and foreign publics.

### **CHIAPAS IDENTIFIED**

Chiapas is a highly complex state to describe. It is made up of five major Mayan ethnic groups, including Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Tojolobale, Zoque and Chole Indians, each of whom have distinct religions, traditions, dialects and cultures. Three percent of Mexico's population (approximately 3.2 million people) reside in Chiapas, which also has the highest concentration of indigenous people (Collier, 1994: 16). The Lacandon rainforest region alone -

where the EZLN is based - has a population of over fifty thousand (Velez, 1994: 1).

Located in the southernmost region of Mexico, Chiapas is also a land of disparate geographical terrain. There are the rugged, mountainous highlands, the central region, the fertile Pacific Lowlands with their numerous bodies of water, and to the east, the dense, tropical rain forests. The overpopulation of the Highlands, which was already apparent as early as the 1950s, has greatly contributed to the present deforestation and erosion of the soil, which makes any subsistence agriculture in that region next to impossible (Velez, 1994: 1). Consequently, thousands of people have migrated to the Lacandon jungle. Though this region has fertile lands and a suitable climate for agriculture, the area is significantly lacking in roads, contributing to the profound isolation of its inhabitants from the rest of the state. Eastern Chiapas, unsurprisingly, is therefore cut off from access to government services, political power and economic opportunity. This mirrors the marginalization of its people from the Mexican society as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

The combination of these socio-economic conditions has made Chiapas into one of Mexico's poorest states, where over half the workforce earns less than US\$3.32 per day (La Botz, 1995: 22). John Ross adds that 40% of the farmers in Chiapas make US\$1.74 per day (1995: 72). According to Ross, this places the average Chiapas Indian at the "extreme poverty"

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<sup>1</sup> It is not altogether uncommon for national governments in many areas of the developing and Third World to take advantage of such "isolationist policies," thereby applying a powerful mechanism of state control. By organizing the movement of their people within a specific space, the ruling classes can then effectively facilitate their dominion over disparate sectors of the population - particularly those that they perceive can pose a significant threat to the status quo (Bossen, Seminar, 1996).

level - a term used by the United Nations to describe those who earn less than the cost of their daily nutritional requirements in a single day (1995: 59). George Collier adds that a mere 11% of adults in Chiapas earn "moderate incomes" of at least \$3,450 USD/year, as opposed to 24% nationally (1994: 16).

Table I, which includes a number of relevant social indicators, provides further evidence of the extreme poverty level of people living in Chiapas.

**TABLE 1**  
**SOCIAL INDICATOR COMPARISON OF**  
**CHIAPAS TO MEXICO**

INDICATORS	CHIAPAS	MEXICO
life expectancy (male)	43	67
infant mortality (under 5 yrs.)	66/1000	33/1000
doctor/patient	0.54/1000	1/885
literacy rate	69%	87%
completion rate of primary school	38%	79%
children (6-14 yrs.) attending school	71.3%	85.8%
households with potable water	58%*	79%*
households with electricity	67%*	88%*
television sets	14%	45%

Sources: George Collier (1994); John Ross (1995); Rossett and Cunningham (1995); Neil Harvey (1994); Christine Kovic (1995); Paul Goodwin (1996); Physicians for Human Rights (1994).

\* These statistics, taken from Rossett and Cunningham's article, differ significantly from those presented in Ross' book. He places the statistics for households in Chiapas with potable water at 10%, and those with electricity at 37% (1995: 72). While Ross' configurations are more potent social indicators for our purposes, he fails to document his sources, and they are

therefore only worthy of a footnote. In addition, Harvey's statistics for the same measurements are similar to Rossett and Cunningham's, placing the percentage of homes without electricity in Chiapas at 33.1%, compared to 12.5% nationally, and those without potable water at 41.6%, in contrast to 20.6% nationally (1994: 19).

Christine M. Kovic, in her article "Con Solo Un Corazón: The Catholic Church, Indigenous Identity and Human Rights in Chiapas," points out that the state has one of the highest levels of malnutrition in Mexico, where 15,000 indigenous people and campesinos died of poverty and illness in 1993 alone (1995: 108). June Nash, in her essay "The New World Dis-Order: A View From Chiapas, Mexico," maintains that a mere three paramedics, social workers or doctors are available for every 25,000 people in Chiapas, and that 105 out of every 1,000 infants die within their first year of life (1995: 180). As a result of such startling social criteria, John Ross concludes that Chiapas has the highest number of deaths per 100,000 people in all of Mexico (1995: 72).

Significant as these comparisons may be in exposing the relative levels of poverty in Chiapas compared to that of Mexico as a whole, it is important to bear in mind that the state has historically supplied the rest of the country with many important natural resources. Among these are approximately 13% of its corn, 5% of its timber, 4% of its beans, 13% of its gas, 4% of its oil, and 54% of its hydroelectric power (Collier, 1994: 16). Not surprisingly, it has received little compensation in return. In fact, Chiapas provides us with a consummate example of a peripheral region exploited for its natural resources by the center, and one that fails to receive the rewards of its

"cheap" labor. This exploitation has been practiced by both the national government itself, as well as by European colonial countries who stripped Eastern Chiapas of its abundant mahogany trees in the early nineteenth century. Today, the region's soil remains dry and infertile, making any form of sustainable agriculture there almost impossible. A more recent example of the Mexican government's exploitation of Chiapas' natural resources, is demonstrated by George Collier when he states that Chiapas supplies Mexico with approximately 54% of its hydroelectric power (1994: 16), while *Table I* reveals that over 30% of households in the state do not even have electricity!

Exploitation interpreted merely as the extraction of a region's raw materials and manual labor for the benefit of others, however, imparts a profoundly one-dimensional representation of this complex concept. Exploitation also includes, on the local level, the extraction of political support from the very people who are being exploited in the first place. It is not difficult for incumbent parties to mislead oppressed indigenous constituencies into re-electing them, particularly when these populations tend to lack both the skills (i.e., through education and literacy), and the means (equal access to the media) to make educated decisions. Nor is it an uncommon practice for political parties to gain the confidence of impoverished peoples by promising them support funds and general improvements in living conditions. Salinas' Programa Nacional de Solidaridad (PRONASOL) is a case in point, as it was designed to provide social welfare programs for the needy. PRONASOL, claimed Salinas, "would lead to justice and democracy" (La Botz, 1995: 106). Dan La Botz elaborates on how the democratic

image behind PRONASOL was used for political purposes to gain support for Mexico's ruling party (the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, or PRI). He writes; "Ostensibly created as a poverty program, PRONASOL's funds did not go to the poorest neighborhoods or rural communities. Money generally went to communities deemed politically crucial to the rebuilding of the PRI" (1995: 108). George Collier adds that in the 1988 Mexican Presidential election, approximately 89.9% of Chiapas voters "allegedly turned out for the PRI" (1994: 17). In fact, he goes as far as to imply that the sixty five year legacy of political power that Mexico's ruling party has enjoyed, is due, in part, to the continued support it has received from Mexico's rural south (1994: 17). And this, despite the lack of visible improvements in the peoples' living conditions throughout this period.<sup>2</sup>

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising to discover that indigenous groups, such as the Chiapas Indians, are also excluded from participation in political decision-making processes. George Collier questions whether:

the indigenous people of Chiapas (are) "Mexicans" only for the purpose of being exploited? Do they have the right to speak out on national politics? Does the nation claim Chiapas's petroleum, its electric power, its raw materials, its labor - in effect all of Chiapas's life blood - except *indigenous Chiapanecans' opinion* regarding the country's future (1994: 15)?

What all of this demonstrates is that the Chiapas struggle is more than a rebellion against the exploitation

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<sup>2</sup> Neil Harvey writes; "Although Chiapas received more funds from Solidaridad than any other Mexican state, several observers noted that the resources were insufficient to ameliorate extensive and increasing poverty" (1994: 17). To this he adds; "Landlessness and unemployment...have not been cushioned by Solidaridad" (1994: 18).



of their land and people, which has gone on for centuries. It is also an outcry to be recognized as a constituency with a political voice, and as equal citizens within Mexican society. This is further evidenced in the Chiapas insurgents' demands for political reform, as outlined in their "Declaration of War." Invoking Article 39 of the Mexican Constitution, the rebels asserted their "inalienable right to alter or modify their form of government" (*Zapatistas! Documents of the New Mexican Revolution*, 1994: 50). In this declaration, they requested the reinstatement of the legitimacy and stability of the nation by overthrowing "the supreme and illegitimate federal executive," Carlos Salinas de Gortari, as well as emphasized the right of the civilian population to "freely and democratically elect their own administrative authorities" (*ibid.*, 1994: 50). In several communiqués that followed the initial armed uprising, the Chiapas insurgents would also demand the resignation of President Salinas, the creation of a transitional government, and the reform of the Mexican Constitution. This fact clearly illustrates that the Chiapas Indians were practicing their right to participate in the political discussions which directly affect their lives. They were also demanding to be respected as an autonomous indigenous group, with the right to determine the direction of its own destiny.

The next section will examine two particularly destructive neoliberalist and modernization policies implemented during the Salinas presidency (1988-1994), which clearly illustrate the exploitation of the Chiapas Indians by the Mexican government.

### **THE IMPLICATIONS OF SALINISMO: AGRARIAN REFORM AND NAFTA**

In early 1992, Salinas amended Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution,<sup>3</sup> which put an end to agrarian reform and enabled the privatization of ejidal lands.<sup>4</sup> This policy would have a tremendous impact on Mexico's agricultural system, as it opened the doors for private investors - such as large Mexican and foreign agricultural interests - to purchase land. It also established the creation of a modern agricultural process based upon the use of chemical fertilizers, advanced irrigation techniques and equipment. Not only could the average indigenous peasant not afford to purchase such property and equipment, but the use of their labor was drastically reduced. The amendment to agrarian reform also eliminated essential government services to peasant farmers, including credit, technical assistance, insurance, marketing, and agricultural advising, at the very moment that they were being forced to modernize and to increase their overall production capacity (Collier, 1994: 151).

These revisions to Article 27, however, were approved without the consent or the participation of the indigenous people, as the changes would inevitably undermine subsistence agriculture upon which their traditional livelihood is based. Neil Harvey eloquently reminds us that the end of land reform in Mexico signified something far

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<sup>3</sup> Article 27 was the constitutional Act passed by President Lazaro Cardenas (1934-1940), which enabled the distribution of 20 million hectares of land to over 776,000 peasants. Dan La Botz also notes that; "Cardenas' distribution of land to the ejido laid the basis for a revival of agricultural and a renaissance of the Mexican peasant villages" (1995: 24).

<sup>4</sup> "Ejidos" being collectively held land used mostly for farming, was provided for in Article 27 of the Mexican constitution. Neil Harvey calculates that by 1991, there were 29,951 ejidos in Mexico, representing half of its

beyond destroying the indigenous peoples' hope for a piece of land:

In this respect, we should distinguish between effects which are directly measurable in terms of land purchases, etc. and those which operate more at the level of expectations, hopes and fears. It seems clear that the end of land reform constituted a symbolic break with the past, but one which offered no guarantees of improvement for the future (1994: 26).

The transition to a commercially-based agricultural economy in Mexico was further supported by Salinas' NAFTA negotiations. In its essence, NAFTA represented the implementation of a neoliberalist policy that was completely ignorant of the Mexican reality. For example, Neil Harvey considers NAFTA's immediate impact on Mexican corn producers<sup>5</sup> (constituting approximately 2.5 million people):

The rationale for NAFTA is that each country and region should produce goods and services in which they have comparative advantages. This argument implied that over two million small producers in Mexico could not continue to survive as maize producers. Average yields in Mexico are 1.7 tons per hectare, compared to 6.9 tons in the United States. Disparities in terms of technological development, subsidies, infrastructure and climatological factors also place Mexican producers at a great disadvantage (1994: 14).

David Barkin, in his Internet article "The Specter of Rural Development," also summarizes the implications of trade liberalization on Mexico's indigenous poor:

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total land surface and approximately 20 million people, or one quarter of the country's population (1994: 21).

<sup>5</sup> David Barkin notes that in 1990, Mexican corn producers accounted for more than half (55%) of the total domestic maize production (1994: 2). George Collier also reveals that as early as 1980, Mexico had already begun to import 25% of its corn from the U.S. (1994: 93).

The accelerating process of international economic integration is weaving urban and rural differences into a single battleground of conflicting interests, thrusting modern systems into traditional backwaters, and leaving important parts of Mexican society unprepared to compete in an economic and social environment that offers fewer, though more attractive rewards to a small elite...They are now engaged in an increasingly difficult struggle to survive, as the neoliberal policies of modernization through international economic integration threaten their very existence (1994: 1-2).

NAFTA, therefore, was the archetype of Salinas' political ideology, based upon conservative, elitist, and capitalist values. It was also, perhaps, the climax of his structural adjustment program; the key to the integration of his country into the global market economy. Rather than improving the lives of the majority of his people, however, Salinas succeeded in greatly exacerbating the already striking divisions between his nation's rich and poor.<sup>6</sup>

It does not come as a surprise then, that the beginning of the Chiapas uprising coincided with the eve of the Mexico's integration into NAFTA. Remarked Subcomandante Marcos in response to a journalist on why this date was chosen to begin the uprising; "This is our response to the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement, because this represents a death sentence for all of the Indigenous ethnicities in Mexico, which are disposable for the government of Carlos Salinas de Gortari..."(*Zapatistas! Documents of the New Mexican Revolution*, 1994 :12). In yet another interview with a correspondent from Mexico's primary independent newspaper *La Jornada*, Marcos is quoted as commenting; "It is a problem for us, because there is no

section on indigenous peoples...we don't know how to read and write. What possibility do we have of competing in the world market? Doing what?"(ibid.,1994: 220).

For the Chiapas Indians, NAFTA therefore signified the epitome of both Western capitalist politics, as well as a complete disregard for the social composition and the economic reality of Mexican society. It was the embodiment of an elitist political ideology that for centuries has excluded the indigenous people. Furthermore, it can be argued that the uprising is symbolic of the Chiapas Indians' attack on the single party Mexican state, which has excluded them from its political discourse, and which was now threatening the very foundations of their commercial existence. Guatemalan writer and Nobel Prize recipient, Rigoberta Menchu, summarizes the case eloquently:

If the Indians lost their land and the ability to farm, they would no longer exist as a culture and a people. NAFTA and the changes to Article 27 did not represent a new economic order for the Indians but rather threatened to destroy a two thousand year old civilization (La Botz on Menchu, 1995: 25).

#### **THE ROOTS OF ZAPATISTA ORGANIZING AND NETWORKING**

The Chiapas uprising is neither a spontaneous indigenous revolt nor the military action of agitated outsiders, but rather the combined product of the work of a political-military organization and of the socioeconomic problems of the region's inhabitants (Navarro, 1994: 44).

After examining some of the socio-economic factors which ignited the Chiapas Indians' cry for democratic

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<sup>6</sup> In one Internet article entitled "Development Gap on Mexico Crisis," the authors note; "During the Salinas administration, the number of billionaires in Mexico rose from 2 to 24. The assets of the richest individual

reform, it is now necessary to trace how the rebellion was organized, and who played a role in helping the insurgents mobilize support for their political goals. Such an investigation will help us to understand: (1) how the local infrastructure for the EZLN was created and how it eventually appropriated the Internet technology into its struggle, and (2) how the interpersonal networks that were created outside of Chiapas eventually helped the insurgents to form their social networks over the Internet.

Many activities and events ultimately led to the formation of the EZLN.<sup>7</sup> For this discussion, two are particularly important: those of the Catholic and Protestant Churches, and the 1974 Indigenous Congress. The first provided the Chiapas Indians with a platform to assert their rights, while the second offered them a means for establishing contacts with the outside world.

Throughout the 1960's, the Catholic Church - namely the Diocese of San Cristobal de Las Casas (located in Chiapas) - began to promote the rights of indigenous peoples. Bound by the doctrine of Liberation Theology, pastoral activities became increasingly focused on improving the hardships faced by its followers, and thereby established organizational spaces for the reflection of Christianity (Navarro, 1994: 47). From these gatherings, organizations emerged whose principal goal it was to defend the interests of the indigenous people. This was particularly evident in the Protestant Church, where the use of lay preachers and the

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total more than the combined annual income of the poorest 17 million people" (1995: 2).

<sup>7</sup> George Collier traces the EZLN's inception to November 16<sup>th</sup> 1983, "when six idealists from Mexico's north arrived to join forces with dissident peasants and Indians in a movement that immediately went underground to begin military and political organizing" (1994: 81).

establishment of "more participatory and democratic congregations" actively involved native people in organizing for social change (Collier, 1994: 55). George Collier also emphasizes the Protestant Church's contribution in helping to legitimize literacy, noting that the literacy rate among Protestant native-language speaking communities in Chiapas are considerably higher than those in other dioceses, according to a 1990 census (1994: 58). Consequently, he adds, a space was created through which "people could challenge the boundaries not just of gender and literacy, but of access, through literacy, to formerly impenetrable domains of law and politics" (1994: 59). This observation is significant, because it brings us back to Paulo Friere's notion of "naming"; that is, it is through dialogue that the steps towards conscientization<sup>8</sup> and self-enlightenment are reached. Accordingly, it is through literacy that this process is unleashed and made possible. If the Protestant Church valued literacy among its followers, then it is possible to conclude that it played an important role in bringing them a step closer to political participation and discourse. Moreover, co-operation in Church-related activities (be they Catholic or Protestant), raised awareness of human rights, and initiated a process through which people could begin to demand respect as an indigenous group and more importantly, as human beings.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Friere's concept proposes that through the process of learning, one can begin to perceive social and political contradictions which can then lead to taking action against the oppressive elements of one's reality (1972: 19).

<sup>9</sup> Subcomandante Marcos himself demonstrates a profound understanding of Friere's concept. In one interview with *La Jornada*, he claimed; "Our death doesn't exist. Ours...I speak for the *compañeros*. The neopositivists are right when they say that things exist only when they are named. Until someone names it, Chiapaneco death doesn't exist. But now it exists" (*Zapatistas! Documents of the New Mexican Revolution*, 1994: 150).

While recognizing that non-traditional religions may be more democratic in their practices than Catholicism, George Collier nevertheless pinpoints the positive effects that various church initiatives had in Chiapas, and how they contributed to the unification of ethnically diverse peoples across religious boundaries:

Because these new forms of worship were so well received, the Catholic Church in eastern Chiapas began to embrace some of the more democratic features of the Protestant churches. The competition between diverse Protestant, Evangelical, and Catholic churches created an environment in which only a secular movement, like that of the Zapatistas, could hope to unite peasants across religious lines and attract both women and men, young and old (1994: 56).

Christine Kovic expands on the unifying tendencies of the Catholic Church, and their involvement in activities for social change across ethnic divides, by observing:

...indigenous communities can no longer be seen as homogenous, isolated and egalitarian. These ties with communities of origin and among isolated indigenous communities, rather than threatening the existence of intact indigenous community in fact strengthen their identity as an indigenous group (1995: 103).

According to the author, church activists made people aware of the commonalties of their needs and the importance of unification in order to achieve their social and political goals. It can be argued, therefore, that the Catholic and Protestant churches in Chiapas provided the model for learning how to dialogue on political issues, as well as for bringing together people with common concerns. In sum, they created the basis for peasant political organizing. Today, the Catholic Church - under the Diocese of San Cristobal de Las Casas - continues to play a prominent role in providing



legitimacy for the Chiapas Indians' demands for land, and for the protection of their human rights, by acting as the principal mediator between them and the Mexican government (Navarro, 1994: 47).

A second formative experience came out of the assembly of the first Indigenous Congress, which took place in San Cristobal de Las Casas in October of 1974. The four day affair (from October 12th to 15th), organized by Bishop Samuel Ruiz upon the request of the state governor, brought together the four ethnic groups of Chiapas to discuss issues concerning land, commerce, education, and health. According to George Collier, the Congress was unprecedented in the history of Chiapas, as it represented the first official assembly of Indians "not convened by the government to tell them what to do" (1994: 62). Luis Hernández Navarro adds; "This exchange defined the issues and gave birth to a process of organizing that continues to this day" (1994: 45). Christine Kovic also notes; "The importance of this Congress cannot be under-emphasized: it was the first opportunity in 500 years for the four ethnic groups to unite and reflect on their situation in public spaces that had been dominated by ladinos" (1995: 105). The Indigenous Congress, therefore, represented a public forum where the Chiapas Indians could discuss their mutual concerns.<sup>10</sup> And out of this Congress, according to George Collier, grew the independent campesino organizations:

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<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the strongest evidence I have come across in my research to illustrate the impact that the Indigenous Congress would later have on the organization and political mind-set of the EZLN, is George Collier's comparison of the provisions set forth in both of their agendas. Here, he notes that the Chiapas Indians' demands have remained relatively constant for the past two decades, on issues concerning land, health, services, food, education, work, and commerce. See Collier (1994: 63-64) for more on this subject.

The Indigenous Congress of 1974...was a grass roots convention for Indians and by Indians and offered a chance for indigenous people to voice their own solutions to the problems that confronted them. Unlike the government-sponsored peasant and indigenous organizations, which are organized from the top-down, the congress provided a model of bottom-up organizing upon which independent peasant organizations subsequently drew (1994: 63).

This model of "bottom-up" organizing is clearly evident in Subcomandante Marcos' description of the democratic formation of the EZLN. In one interview, Marcos emphasizes the collectivity involved in the decision-making processes of the indigenous communities:

...the isolation of the Indigenous communities provoked the development of another type of "state," a state to deal with the survival of a collective, of a democratic collective with these two characteristics: The leadership is collective and removable (*Zapatistas! Documents of the New Mexican Revolution*, 1994: 292).

In referring specifically to the organization of the EZLN, he adds:

It was necessary to organize, to establish this collective authority alongside the absurdity of a vertical, authoritarian structure. Then it was possible to divide the process of making decisions. I mean by this that strategic decisions, important decisions, have to be made democratically, from below, not from above (*Zapatistas! Documents of the New Mexican Revolution*, 1994: 293).

Marcos' commentaries are at once a critique of the undemocratic nature of the Salinas government's agrarian policies, as well as an insight into the collective structure of the EZLN, where, he notes; "a decision cannot be made until everyone is consulted..." (ibid., 1994: 293). Similarly, when asked about the role of women in the EZLN, he claims; "There isn't a politics of gender, there are only

combatants. There are woman soldiers and there are men soldiers, but in the end they are soldiers" (1994: 303).

The underlying democratic currents within the structure of the EZLN are particularly significant when considering the eventual integration of the Internet as an alternative distribution network into their struggle.<sup>11</sup> Here, it can be argued that the technology enhanced the democratic goals of the EZLN, by allowing them to relay their messages more "directly" to a broader international public. It therefore provided a means by which more open and unrestricted communication (i.e., without government interference), could take place. Not only did the Internet contribute to the growing organization of the Chiapas cause, but it elevated their local political concerns to the national and international level. The Internet, as an unregulated distribution technology, was thus proven to be compatible to the structure and needs of the EZLN. Harry Cleaver, in his paper "Zapatistas and the Electronic Fabric of Struggle," appropriately concludes:

...as part of their struggles to resist exploitation and oppression and to develop their own ways of life and community structures, they have developed their own forms of self-organization which turned out to be complementary to the computer systems with which they would link up (1995: 2).

The following section will describe the principal local and foreign advisors involved in the Zapatista struggle. These included both national and international anti-NAFTA

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<sup>11</sup> I have applied the terms "integration", "appropriation" and "employment" of Internet technology throughout this study to avoid the implication that the Zapatistas were personally using the Internet to communicate directly with their publics.

coalitions and human rights organizations, and various indigenous organizations throughout Mexico.

### **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING FOR THE EZLN**

The impact of the anti-NAFTA coalitions that were already in place prior to the Chiapas uprising is analyzed in some detail in *Zapatistas! Documents of the New Mexican Revolution*. Here, Harry Cleaver discusses in the introduction the numerous coalitions and grassroots groups throughout Canada, the United States and Mexico, that took up the fight against free trade. He writes:

In each country, a broad coalition...was constituted by knitting together several hundred groups opposed to the trade pact. That knitting was accomplished partly through joint discussions and actions and partly through the sharing of information and analysis about the meaning and implications of the agreement (1994: 21).

Included within this network are groups who perceived the threats posed by economic restructuring and trade liberalization - i.e., ecological activists, human rights organizations, women's groups, indigenous groups, workers in the United States threatened with losing their jobs through the relocation of plants to Mexico, and Mexicans concerned with the influx of US capital (*Zapatistas! Documents of the New Mexican Revolution*, 1994: 21). In sum, the anti-NAFTA movement's goal was to monitor the impact of the agreement, to facilitate the struggle against it, and ultimately, to prevent its realization (1994: 21). While their political goal of stopping NAFTA was not realized, their strategic role in shaping the Chiapas Indians' demands must not be underestimated. I refer here to the significance behind the

pre-existence of an international electronic network, which was already firmly in place when the Chiapas Indians took up their cause against trade liberalization in Mexico. Specifically, the presence of anti-NAFTA networks, such as PeaceNet and ACTIV-L, provided a space for sharing information between groups concerned with the implications of NAFTA. According to Cleaver:

The same process of communication linked the coalitions in each country in a manner never before seen in the Western Hemisphere. The result, both locally and internationally, was a new organizational form - a multiplicity of rhizomatically linked autonomous groups - connecting all kinds of struggles throughout North America that had previously been disconnected and separate (1994: 21).

One can begin to understand, therefore, the significance of the Internet as an organizational tool amongst a disparate and geographically isolated group of peoples, and as a means for sharing information and ideas on issues of common interest. Similarly, this tool was appropriated into the Chiapas insurgents' struggle, to strengthen their case against the Salinas government. In Professor Harry Cleaver's words; "...the cyberspace world of computer communication networks was itself already the terrain of manifold struggles and thus open to appropriation by those whose own forms of organization were pre-disposed to building strength through linkages with others" (1995: 2).

Within the international public, human rights organizations also played a particularly important role in the Chiapas conflict, because they were already linked to international monitoring groups, and to the mass media (Navarro, 1994: 54). As the principal observers and reporters of the human rights abuses on indigenous people by

the Mexican army, human rights activists assumed a pivotal role in transmitting this information to the national and international public. As "objective international watchdogs," the reports of these human rights groups ultimately helped to influence the Mexican government to declare a cease-fire soon after the armed uprising began, and to opt for a more peaceful settlement of the conflict through negotiation with Subcomandante Marcos and the Chiapas rebels.

According to Dan La Botz, three other Mexican-based organizations - which emerged after 1974 - helped the Zapatistas to clarify the goals of their struggle. They included: the Independent Confederation of Agricultural Workers and Peasants, founded in 1975, the Emiliano Zapata Peasant Organization, formed in 1982, and the Maoist Popular Politics organizers, all of which had developed agendas on labor organization, land reform and credit. By the mid-1980s, all three of these movements were well established within Chiapas and the Lacandon rainforest region (1995: 37). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, these organizations fighting for social change were united first on the Mexican and then on the continental Latin American level. By the early eighties, the "Plan de Ayala" National Coordinating Committee forged an alliance of peasant groups and laborers from 21 different organizations and diverse states throughout Mexico, to demand agrarian reform under the banner of Emiliano Zapata (Collier, 1994: 70). Later in 1990, delegates from over 200 Indigenous groups met in Quito, Ecuador to launch a movement of continental unity. Following this encounter, the Continental Coordinating Commission of Indigenous Nations and Organizations was

created in Panama in 1991 (*Zapatistas! Documents of the New Mexican Revolution*, 1994: 22). Another event was organized in Mexico in 1993, hosted by the Frente Independiente de Pueblos Indios (FIPI). Here, the FIPI requested that other Indians within the network come to Chiapas, specifically to observe the emanating state violence and human rights abuses by the government's troops on the civilian and indigenous population.

More recently, the utilization of the Internet for the exchange of ideas and experiences between indigenous groups has also formed an important part of their organizing and networking processes. NATIVENET is a good example of a website where aboriginal and indigenous peoples can share information related to their similar struggles. Keeping in mind that most indigenous people do not have access to the technology, many organizations with Internet linkages have played a key role in raising public consciousness of the needs and motives of Indian groups throughout the world. The Mexican Academy for Human Rights (Academia Mexicana de Derechos Humanos, or AMDH), for example, has a website where human rights organizations can exchange information on the situation in Chiapas.

One begins to sense, therefore, the influential role which diverse international human rights and national indigenous organizations have played in the Chiapas rebellion. Not only did their presence help to clarify the Chiapas Indians' social and political agendas, but they also contributed to the formation of a continent-wide Indian movement which had not existed before. Through face-to-face meetings and the establishment of various information networks, computerized communications could later be

incorporated into their struggle as an effective tool for the distribution of Marcos' communiqués, and for the mobilization of national and international support and public opinion. In sum, these events and organizations helped the Chiapas Indians to establish their preliminary social networks over the Internet, ultimately transforming their struggle into a larger movement for the general improvement of the Mexican society, and for the betterment of the lives of the indigenous people throughout the world.

Having related the principal causes and historical roots of the Chiapas rebellion, I shall now focus on the function of the Internet as an alternative distribution network for the Chiapas insurgents' communiqués, and how these figured as a strategy in circumventing the Mexican government's one-sided representation of the conflict through the national mass media.



## *Chapter Two*

### *MARCOS' INTERNET CAMPAIGN...*

*"Shadows of Tender Fury, we will  
once again rise up our voice so that it is  
heard and the lies are silenced."*

*- Subcomandante Marcos, 1994*

This chapter will analyze the Internet's role as an alternative distribution network for Marcos' communiqués during the Chiapas uprising. By calling the Internet a "distribution network," I am drawing attention to the dual communicational aspects of all media: their capacity to both distribute information, as well as to set the agendas in terms of which this information will be meaningfully interpreted. The study will therefore begin with a brief discussion of the role of the Mexican print and broadcast media in the uprising; that is, how they were employed by Marcos to launch his publicity campaign against the Mexican government. This analysis will consider the central role of Subcomandante Marcos in the design of the Zapatistas' publicity campaign. As the principal spokesperson and representative for EZLN, Marcos effectively employed various media through which he could begin to design and relay a critical political discourse, one where his views of the federal government and his political goals could be expressed and distributed to the Mexican public. The second part of this analysis will therefore consider the relationship between the Mexican government and its media. From this perspective, it will be possible to analyze how the state used the mass media to create its own interpretation of the Chiapas uprising for Mexican citizens.

I will then focus on the role of the Internet as an alternative network for message distribution. The goal here is to identify its ability to provide Marcos with a means through which he could both counteract the state's portrayal of the conflict, while reducing his reliance on the traditional print and broadcast media as his sole means of communicating the Zapatistas' messages to the national and

international publics. This section will therefore include an analysis of the technological advantages of the Internet. Specifically, I will consider some of the principal features that distinguish it from older mass communications technologies - with their top-down information dissemination approach - and how the Internet has been recently applied to other insurgent conflicts and situations, to both enhance and democratize the communicative process between groups seeking political reform and their publics. These examples can serve to highlight the benefits that Internet technology had for Marcos and the Zapatistas in their own publicity war with the Mexican government. Finally, I will also consider how the Internet was employed by Marcos; i.e., how it was incorporated into their struggle, and the way in which it was used as a distribution technology. The main focus here will be the role that various intermediaries played in helping Marcos distribute his messages.

#### **LAUNCHING THE PUBLICITY CAMPAIGN: MARCOS AND THE MEDIA**

...we are interested in getting information about our struggle published at a national and international level. We want the whole world to understand what we are (Interview with Major Anna Maria of the EZLN, *Zapatistas !Documents of the New Mexican Revolution*, 1994: 227).

The predominant role that was played by the Mexican and foreign mass media at the onset of the indigenous uprising in Chiapas has an important place in this discussion. From the very first day of the rebellion, Subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatistas launched what was to become an extensive propaganda campaign against the Mexican government, by employing a diversity of mass media. In this manner, they were able to begin to raise national and international

public consciousness for their political grievances and objectives. Television and newspaper journalists from around the world played a particularly crucial role in conveying information about the situation in Chiapas to their respective audiences, as well as in arousing the initial sympathy and support for the insurgents' plight.<sup>1</sup> Along with the human rights activists who went to Chiapas to witness the events first hand, their reports vividly described the abuses and discriminations suffered by both the Chiapas Indians and the civilian population, at the hands of the Mexican federal army and police.

A clear example can be provided through a very basic thematic analysis of the headings and content of several articles located in one edition of *Proceso* magazine, from February 28th, 1994. This edition alone contains at least three different articles related to human rights abuses in Chiapas. The first article, written by a Parisian journalist, entitled "Organismos internacionales confirman detenciones masivas, torturas, desapariciones, ejecuciones sumarias y crueldad con enfermos y heridos" [Translation: International organizations confirm mass detentions, tortures, disappearances, summary executions and cruelty towards the sick and wounded], describes the grave human rights violations committed by the federal army in Chiapas (1994: 24). The second article, written by a journalist from Madrid, called "Medicos del Mundo: El Ejercito cerro hospitales" [Translation: Doctors of the World: The Army has closed hospitals], relates how the Mexican army took over

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<sup>1</sup> Hernando Gonzalez, in his essay "The Alternative Media and the Overthrow of the Marcos Regime," discusses the significant contribution that foreign media coverage made to the 1986 Philippine uprising. He observes that the foreign media functioned as alternative sources of information during the conflict, reporting on government corruption and human rights violations (1990: 212).

various hospitals and barred access to medical services during and after the armed conflict in Chiapas (1994: 28). The third article, written by a Los Angeles reporter, entitled "Gobierno y CNDH encubridores: Human Rights Watch" [Translation: Government and CNDH concealers: Human Rights Watch], discusses the release of a then forthcoming document, the "Rebellion of the New Year: human rights violations during the armed uprising in Chiapas"(translated). This document, reveals the reporter, confirms the suspicions regarding the massive injustices among the civilian population by the federal army throughout various cities and towns in Chiapas (1994: 31).

George Collier emphasizes the significance of such reports when he writes:

The Zapatistas have been portrayed as a group of peasants pushed to the breaking point by poverty and exploitation who finally struck out against their oppressors-the government that abandoned them, the army that repressed them, the wealthy ranchers and caciques (political bosses) who kept them in subjugation, the ladinos who taunted them. The popular media have recounted stories about the hardships of life in eastern Chiapas...as one reads these chronicles of misery, one can understand why the peasants finally boiled over with anger (1994: 54).

Lucila Vargas, in her book *Social Uses and Radio Practices: the use of participatory radio by ethnic minorities in Mexico*, also acknowledges the significance of these international reports in creating consciousness of the situation in Chiapas:

Fortunately, the national print press, the international press, and the human rights organizations were on hand to publicize the killing, torture, and intimidation being carried out by the government troops. For once, it seems, the historical struggle of Mexico's indigenous peoples

against racism, oppression, and poverty has been given its share of international press coverage (1995: xiv).

### THE ROLE OF THE SUBCOMMANDER

Subcomandante Marcos, commonly described as the military strategist, principal spokesperson and representative for the EZLN, proved himself to be highly skilled at using a number of communicative tactics from the outset of the Chiapas uprising. He sent daily communiqués to several of Mexico's left-wing, independent newspapers and magazines such as *La Jornada*,<sup>2</sup> *El Tiempo*, *El Financiero*, and *Proceso*.<sup>3</sup> He also gave extensive interviews to both national and international reporters and journalists, held press-conferences, wrote political essays and short stories, composed poems for the Mexican public, wrote letters to school children, and even established a paper for the EZLN called *El Despertador* (*The Alarm Clock*), which rapidly spread throughout the country.

While his competence and success as a communications specialist were internationally recognized, his true identity and personality remained a well-kept secret throughout much of the uprising. In a personal interview with the Subcomandante, reporter Medea Benjamin pinpoints Marcos' own acknowledgment of the mystery behind his being; "No one knows who Marcos is...This Marcos does not even have a face. Even the people I've been living with here for years don't know my background. They only know my face and they know that I'm called Marcos" (Benjamin on Marcos, 1995:

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<sup>2</sup> John Ross refers to *La Jornada* as Mexico's "pluralistic" national daily (1995: 33).

<sup>3</sup> Ross also points out that *Proceso* magazine is an independent weekly publication which does not use government advertising. It has a readership of approximately 100,000 people in every capital and provincial city in Mexico (1995: 32).

69).<sup>4</sup> When asked directly by reporters about who he is, Marcos often responded with vivid and poetic generalizations. The mark of a true propagandist, he was careful never to give away his true identity, diverging attention away from himself by focusing, rather, on the plight of the Mexican indigenous. In one communiqué, for example, Marcos described himself as:

every untolerated, oppressed, exploited minority that is resisting and saying, "Enough!" He is every minority who is now beginning to speak and every majority that must shut up and listen. He is every untolerated group searching for a way to speak (*Zapatistas! Documents of the New Mexican Revolution*, 1994: 313).

Marcos' persona is a profoundly difficult one to uncover, as very little is known or at least, has been revealed, about this "myth-drenched masked man" (Ross, 1995: 295). As Joel Simon concluded in his article "The Marcos Mystery: A Chat With the Subcommander of Spin"; "No journalist has figured out who Marcos is, really, and until someone does, he will continue to invent and re-invent the image of himself that he disseminates to visiting journalists" (1994: 9). Interviews with the Subcomandante himself revealed that he is well-educated (he attended the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico), a lover of literature, a soldier, a poet (Ross, 1995: 298-299), and that he has a "vast knowledge of contemporary world politics and urban culture" (Peña, 1995: 93). Interviews with other members of the EZLN divulged that Marcos was chosen as the spokesperson for the EZLN, due to his ability to speak

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<sup>4</sup> The reader should refer to Medea Benjamin's article, provided in Elaine Katzenberger's book *First World. Ha Ha Ha! The Zapatista Challenge*, for an insightful and intelligent interview with Marcos. The author

Spanish - the national language - and English - the language of the international press (Ross, 1995: 301).

The significance of Marcos' presence in the Chiapas uprising, however, goes far beyond the role that he played in merely distributing the Chiapas Indians' grievances to national and international publics. It extends into the crucial position he assumed as a political propagandist and as a public relations specialist. As the primary "interpreter" of the conflict in Chiapas, and of the political goals of the insurgents, Marcos' principal role has lain in constructing and conveying a particular image of the Chiapas Indians to their national and international audiences. In other words, in creating an effective publicity campaign in order to win widespread public support.

Marcos' strongest weapon throughout his publicity campaign is identified in the words of a famous Mexican poet and author, Octavio Paz, who wrote; "Marcos stands out as well through an art forgotten by our politicians and ideologues: rhetoric" (1994: 60). Guillermo Gómez Peña, among others, analyzed in detail the efficacy of Marcos' rhetoric and disposition for entering into the "political wrestling arena of contemporary Mexico" (1995: 90). Noted Peña:

...his utopian political visions - presented in simple, nonideological, and poetic language - went straight to the jaded hearts and minds of students, activists, intellectuals, artists, nihilistic teens, and even apolitical middle-class professionals...His combination of political clarity, bravado, and humility appealed to

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poses such questions as; "Given your role as spokesperson and how incisive you are, aren't you worried that the EZLN has become too closely associated with one person?" (1995: 69).



progressive politicians and activists throughout the world (1995: 90).

Dan La Botz also pointed to Marcos' "combination of wit, irony, humor, and sophistication" as the means through which he "delighted Mexicans of all classes" (1995: 9).

In my personal analysis of many of his communiqués, I identified a wide variety of tones and styles that Marcos used, which helps to illustrate his aptitude as a public relations specialist. They were often humorous, sarcastic, accusatory, and critical in tone, while simultaneously attempting to appeal to the reader for sympathy. Marcos also adopted various styles of writing, including: narrative, where he appeared to be telling a story; formal, where he wrote letters addressed to specific individuals or organizations; informal, where he wrote his points down in numerical form; and lyrical and poetic, where he composed verses or quoted those of famous poets or musicians.

Yet Andres Oppenheimer observed that part of Marcos' success lay not in how he addressed himself, but rather in the focus and emphasis of his argument - being the struggle of the indigenous people (1996: 46). Oppenheimer argues that Marcos changed his political message once the rebellion had begun, by accenting indigenous needs and issues, rather than portraying the uprising as a proletarian struggle. Oppenheimer also notes that Marcos would "fine-tune his discourse to portray the Zapatista uprising as an ideologically vague rebellion with no other guiding light than the desperation of Chiapas poverty-stricken Mayans" (1996: 47).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For an enticing portrayal of Marcos, refer to Andres Oppenheimer's fourth chapter (1996: 61-82), in his book *Bordering on Chaos: Guerrillas, Stockbrokers, Politicians, and Mexico's Road to Prosperity*.

What all of this points to, however, is that Marcos' was central in creating one side of the discourse in the conflict between the Chiapas Indians and the Mexican government.<sup>6</sup> His apparent ease with the written and spoken word characterized him as a master propagandist and public relations specialist, and ultimately helped him to win the empathy of many people throughout the world.

#### **THE MEXICAN MASS MEDIA CREATE THEIR OWN RHETORIC**

"Televisa doesn't have to be there because they invent the news anyway" (Ross on Marcos, 1995: 183).

In considering the role of the Mexican mass media in transmitting the initial portrayal of the situation in Chiapas, however, one must proceed with caution. While it can be argued that the mass media indeed helped Marcos to begin disseminating a particular image of the Chiapas Indians to the Mexican public, it must not be forgotten that the national media also had their own agenda.

As in much of Latin America, the mass media in Mexico are both privatized yet largely supported by government funding. As a result, strong links have been established between media owners, journalists, and political parties, whereby money is often exchanged for media space and favorable coverage. As Philip Russell in his book *Mexico Under Salinas* acknowledges:

Even though the media is privately owned, it is far from impartial. The PRI has ample funds to buy media space that other parties cannot afford. Reporters generally receive salaries ranging between \$100 and \$500 a month. To supplement such meager incomes, they regularly take payments

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<sup>6</sup> It is a discourse, however, whose validity is as difficult to establish as that of the Mexican government's.

from candidates and incumbents in exchange for favorable coverage (1994: 131).<sup>7</sup>

Various consequences have been attributed to this "indirect" form of government control over the national media. Among them is the limitation and distortion of any information that is in conflict with state interests, the lack of importance ascribed to indigenous issues in the national press,<sup>8</sup> and the practice of "ultimate censorship." Under this practice, journalists who report on the corruption of officials or on the violation of human rights, risk being threatened or murdered by the state<sup>9</sup> (Russell, 1994: 132).

Numerous examples can be provided to demonstrate the Mexican state's power over the print and broadcast media, in the context of the Chiapas uprising. Consider first, John Ross' observation that the Mexican government was aware of impending guerrilla activity in Chiapas as early as the summer of 1993 - several months prior to the armed uprising. He emphasizes that several independent Mexican publications (e.g., *Proceso*, *La Jornada*, *El Financiero*), carried ample coverage of the events in the jungle of Chiapas during this period. Similarly, several American publications (e.g., *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *LA Times*, *Wall Street Journal*), were also covering numerous issues concerning the implications of NAFTA on both sides of the border. Yet he notes; "...despite the heavy news flow out of Mexico during

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<sup>7</sup> Macleans reporter Scott Morrison points out that "Mexican journalists can rake in nearly \$6,000 a month in bribes while covering PRI candidate Zedillo's campaign. About 80 per cent to 90 per cent accept the envelopes...It causes them to have a distorted view of the facts" (15 Aug., 1994: 22).

<sup>8</sup> Russell comments; "In Pijijiapan, Chiapas, landowners' hired gunmen murdered 12 peasants. Almost as striking as the occurrence of such an event was it not being treated as a major news story. One paper in Mexico City reported the killings on page six, another on page 11" (1994: 154).

the prelude to the vote, reports of a growing guerrilla threat in southern Mexico did not make the wire services" (1995: 48). It would be possible to assume that ignorance on the part of American journalists and CIA officials, who failed to adequately investigate the social status of Mexico at the time, played a role in diminishing the significance of the guerrilla activities south of the border. Andres Oppenheimer confirms this opinion when he concludes; "As was often the case, the CIA had done a decent reporting job, but a terrible one of analysis" (1996: 32). Their principal fault, according to Oppenheimer, was in assuming that grassroots groups, such as the Chiapas insurgents, could not pose a veritable threat to the ruling party, which was perhaps true of isolated uprisings in the past. Consequently, he concludes, the U.S. government did not take the reports seriously (1996: 31-32). On the other hand, the Mexican government had its own reasons for trying to keep its knowledge of the guerrilla activities a secret, and responded to any allegations by flatly denying their existence. Oppenheimer points out that the Mexican government "was fighting every single vote in the U.S. Congress to get the approval of NAFTA and it didn't want any bad news to spoil the enterprise" (1996: 32-33). The Mexican government's ability to disguise the EZLN's existence in the face of international scrutiny, therefore, clearly illustrates its ability to manipulate and limit the flow of information outside of its borders, which ultimately helped the state to secure Mexico's integration into NAFTA.

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<sup>9</sup> Russell adds that between December 1988 and July 1991, 26 journalists were murdered in Mexico under this practice (1994: 132).

Another example to illustrate the power of the Mexican government to manipulate the images of the uprising are documented by *Televisa's* coverage of the events in Chiapas. *Televisa* is at once Mexico's main television network, and Latin America's largest broadcasting empire.<sup>10</sup> Although it is a privately owned company, *Televisa* is supported by the state through government advertisements, legal provisions, and by the privileged use of the state-owned Morelos communication satellite system (Russell, 1994: 133). On one occasion, notes author John Ross, *Televisa* was posing as channel 11 (operated by the National Polytechnic Institute), at one of the demonstrations at San Cristobal de las Casas, in Chiapas. Notes Ross, however, that *Televisa* was actually renting the channel, and cutting off the sound whenever a Zapatista supporter expressed any anti-government sentiments on the air (1995: 183). Yet another example of the state's attempt to manipulate the images of the uprising can be drawn from a news bulletin circulated over the Internet. It reads:

I would like to report that a newsman we know has a video showing that *Televisa* trucks brought civilians to Chiapas, had them put on EZ ski masks, and put them next to the bodies of murdered peasants, filming the 'scene' as if the Zapatistas were responsible for the murders ("Televisa Creates the News!" 20 February, 1995: 1).<sup>11</sup>

Reporter Rafael Ramos in his article "Para Proteger sus Intereses Millonarios Consentidos Deforman las Realidades,"

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<sup>10</sup> Clark and Riddell, in *The Sky Barons: The Men Who Control the Global Media*, note that *Televisa's* four channels have a monopoly of television viewers in Mexico, regularly achieving a 90% share of the entire viewing audience (1992: 80).

<sup>11</sup> While this bulletin is both plausible and effective in demonstrating the potential of the Mexican state to manipulate the mass media, I am fully aware of the complicated issues underlying the question of authorship of Internet news bulletins. It just so happens that the author of this message is anonymous.

[translation: "To Protect their Interests Spoilt Millionaires Deform Realities"] also claims that Televisa's president, Emilio Azcárraga, tried to minimize the conflict in Chiapas, "as if this entity was not a part of all that is Mexico" (February 1994: 12).

The so-called "limited" and "one-sided" coverage of the events as presented by the national media, however, must be viewed as the Mexican government's own publicity stunt; that is, the construction of the other half of the discourse on the Chiapas uprising. Through the print and broadcast media, the state disseminated their own interpretation of the conflict and their political goals vis-à-vis the Chiapas Indians, to the Mexican public. Clearly, the mass media was their most powerful publicity tool.

It is important to understand and emphasize the role of the mass media during the uprising, in the creation and transmission of two distinct, yet parallel political discourses by Marcos, on the one hand, and the Mexican government on the other. In this way, one avoids the assumption that Marcos' personal interpretation of the conflict in Chiapas has greater truth than that of the state, or vice versa. Furthermore, it can be argued that it was the ease and efficacy with which the state was able to create and transmit their own images of the Chiapas uprising through the national media, that encouraged Marcos and the Zapatistas to employ an alternative system of communication; one that could get their own messages directly out to both national and international publics, and independently of the Mexican government's interference.

### THE INTERNET'S INTEGRATION INTO THE ZAPATISTA STRUGGLE

Do not let the mouths of the powerful speak. Only venom and rot leave their lips. Silence their lies and deceitfulness (Marcos communiqué in *Zapatistas! Documents of the New Mexican Revolution*, 1994: 257).

Marcos was well aware of the obstacles his people faced in counteracting the state's political rhetoric, and in achieving freedom of expression through the Mexican national media. In one letter of solidarity to various national press organizations, he emphasized the inequality of opportunity between those with and without access to the powerful communication media:

...the dialogue will not be in the jungle...because there those who can communicate through satellite would have the advantage, since telephone or fax, forget it. And, if time is on the side of the small ones, we prefer democracy and the equality of opportunity for the communications media, and that the news should not only be for the powerful (*Zapatistas! Documents of the New Mexican Revolution*, 1994: 169-170).

This remark demonstrates that Marcos recognized that the Zapatistas could not depend on the national media as an outlet for transmitting their own political objectives and for criticizing the Mexican government, and that they needed to find an alternative means of self-expression. It was to be through computer-based electronic networking that this means was eventually realized.

The concept of employing alternative forms of communication technology by an insurgent group, as a means to both bypass its national mass media, and as a tool for enhancing grassroots and political struggles, is not

altogether new.<sup>12</sup> Gladys D. Ganley, in her book *The Exploding Political Power of Personal Media*, reveals that the possibilities for using "personal media" exploded after World War II, during which various new communications technologies evolved. On their positive contribution to facilitating the communication process between people, she writes:

Some of the greatest inventiveness has been among those who had been previously powerless and have now attained the means to do things that are forbidden...More importantly, these new media allow geographically distant groups with like interests to merge for common activities, and people around the globe to exert power against their governments, their societies, their institutions, their employers (1992: 10).

One of the most prominent examples of the successful appropriation of personal media by an insurgent group, stems from the 1989 Tienamen Square student uprising in China. Here, various alternative media played a central role in counteracting the Chinese national media's one-sided coverage, which usually implicated the students. It also enabled the student insurgents to bypass the Chinese government's restrictions that they placed on the foreign media, the disruption of Western satellite television transmission, the confiscation of foreign mail and newspapers at the border, and the guarding or removal of

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<sup>12</sup> Majid Tehranian sites several examples of social and political upheavals in which the "small media" combined with traditional, social and religious networks, to produce powerful social movements. For more information on this issue, consult his book *Technologies of Power: Information Machines and Democratic Prospects* (1990: 12). Hernando Gonzalez also discusses in detail the impact of the alternative media during the 1986 Philippine uprising, and how it was successfully employed to challenge the legitimacy of the Marcos regime. For more information on this work, consult his essay "The Alternative Media and the Overthrow of the Marcos Regime," in *Communicating for Peace: Diplomacy and Negotiation* (1990).



various communications equipment (Ganley, 1992: 149).<sup>13</sup> What is pertinent to our focus, however, is Ganley's analysis of the effectiveness with which computer networking and bulletin board services were incorporated into the uprising. In recognizing that many "PC capabilities...have been adapted to and adapted for a wide range of political expression," Ganley emphasizes that computer technology has put "an enormous amount of power, including political power, in the hands of multitudes of individuals" (1992: 60). During the Tienanmen uprising, for example, several computer networks were established by foreign companies in China, through which messages were circulated containing graphic details of both civilian and military activities at the height of the crisis (1992: 157). In the United States, Chinese students with access to BITNET used the network to coordinate their activities, and to gather, exchange and disseminate information throughout the uprising. Ganley adds:

BITNET bulletin boards were employed to set up phone, fax, and letter-writing brigades, to supply and coordinate news and pass on messages, to exchange fax numbers, to compile lists of the dead and injured in China, to lobby in Washington and to mobilize US public opinion (1992: 158).

These observations summarize many of the uses of Internet technology between individuals and organizations who have been supporting the Chiapas Indians in their plight against the Mexican state.

A discussion on the appropriation of Internet technology into the Zapatista struggle necessitates an analysis of how this medium and its operations differ from those of the traditional media. Perhaps the most important

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<sup>13</sup> Refer to Lucila Vargas (1995: xvi) for her views on the utility of community-oriented radio stations during

single feature that distinguishes the Internet from other media, is that it is a "democratizing" technology. This notion is primarily due to the inherent design of the technology. What we now know as the Internet originally began as a network called ARPANET, which was designed in 1969 by a branch of the Advanced Research Projects Agency of the United States Department of Defense. ARPANET was created with the intention of linking academic, military and defense institutions, in order to facilitate the exchange of information between them (Gilster, 1993: 14). Not coincidentally, the network also grew out of a Cold War research project investigating how Western military communications could be upheld in the event of a nuclear war. Observes Harry Cleaver in his synopsis of the advent of Internet technology:

The design that was developed within this context of military conflict was a highly flexible, geographically dispersed web of multiple linkages. The organization of that web allowed specially formatted information to move from any point to any other point through many, many possible routes. Thus, even if many of those possible routes were destroyed, many others would still be functioning and the information would get through (1995: 3).

What primarily distinguishes Internet technology from other communication media, such as the telephone, is that it operates on a packet-switched network; i.e., data are routed to their destination by first being sorted into clearly addressed packets, which then move from machine to machine until they are delivered (Gilster, 1993: 23). This system is particularly useful for complex applications requiring contact with more than two computers, and thereby supports

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the initial stages of the Chiapas uprising.

the process of one-to-many communication. Another advantage of this technology is that the computers routing the data can choose alternative paths when a given link fails (Gilster, 1993: 15), thereby improving the transmission of data, and thus increasing the overall efficacy of the communicative network.

Several other advantages have been linked to the Internet, which have subsequently contributed to its being heralded as a more democratic technology. Everett Rogers, for example, discusses the increasing interactivity provided by the new communications technologies since the 1980s, emphasizing in particular how the new computer-based systems have helped transform communication from a predominantly uni-directional to a "many-to-many" process (1986: 2). According to Rogers, therefore, computer-based communications technologies have altered the standard one-way 'sender-receiver' model of communication, into a two-way interactive system of information exchange. This technical aspect was particularly helpful to Marcos, as it expanded the overall reach of his communiqués to all those who had access to the technology. This feature of the Internet also enabled Marcos to encourage and tabulate international public opinion of the EZLN's political goals, as we will see through the Internet *Consulta* example in chapter three.

Another advantageous trait often associated with Internet technology, is its lack of bias towards either space (geographical boundaries), or time (distance and speed). As E.B. Kerr and S.R. Hiltz observe in their book *Computer-Mediated Communication Systems*; "The medium is asynchronous, meaning that time and space are minimized as barriers to interaction, and that people can participate at

the time and pace most convenient to them" (1982: 3). The Internet, therefore permitted the Chiapas insurgents to overcome their geographic isolation from the rest of the world. It also increased the speed with which his messages could be communicated to the rest of the world. As a result, Marcos' dependence on traditional time and/or space biased communication media - such as television and the press - as tools for the distribution of his propaganda against the Mexican government, was greatly reduced.

Yet another characteristic attributed to Internet technology is that by the very nature of its design, it is a "decentralizing" medium; it is (at present) both unregulated and uncontrolled by a centralized body. Rather than supporting a hierarchical power structure of information control (as is the case with the traditional electronic media), Internet technology favors a more egalitarian exchange of information. Joshua Meyrowitz recognizes this notion when he claims that authority often rests on information control; i.e., access to and control over the dominant communication channels at a particular time (1986: 160). He observes, however, that the new communications media have threatened these pyramids of status by allowing individuals to bypass traditional channels and gatekeepers, and by opening up those in power to public scrutiny (1986: 163). This point is particularly important to our analysis, as we consider how the Internet was helpful in conveying Marcos' messages about the deceitful and abusive nature of the Mexican government and its army, to the relevant local and foreign publics.

Once used strictly for military and research purposes, the Internet has gradually evolved into a medium with a

diverse range of functions, including a number of personal, commercial, and more importantly, political uses. Gladys Ganley provides a valuable example of the potential empowerment afforded to people through computer networking during the 1988 Chilean plebiscite. Here, she describes how anti-Pinochet parties established an elaborate computer network throughout Santiago, consisting of two computer systems to prevent possible government interference, prior to the elections. Their goal was to ensure that an effective system of checks was in place when the official votes were being registered and counted. The voting results were immediately sent from the 22,000 individual voting stations around the country to a central "NO" (i.e., anti-Pinochet) computer in Santiago, where they were then compiled and counted. The outcome of the plebiscite - which turned out to be a resounding "NO" against the restoration of Pinochet - was thus guaranteed by the appropriation of electronic computer networks, which acted as "watchdog communication channels." According to Ganley, this example effectively demonstrates how the electronic computer system helped to restore democratic elections in Chile after years of dictatorship and election fraud (1992: 88). For our purposes, this case helps to illustrate how computer networking could be appropriated into the Zapatista struggle, in order to ensure the effective transmission of Marcos' communiqués, without government interference. In this sense, the Internet helped to democratize the Mexican information system by offering the Zapatista movement its own voice on the political stage.

## **THE LIMITATIONS OF ACCESS AND THE STATE OF INTERNET AVAILABILITY IN MEXICO**

"Access", unfortunately, is not "given" to most people in the world. Indeed, most people are excluded from direct participation in cyberspace because of lack of access to The Net. This problem is particularly acute in rural areas and among the world's indigenous peoples who often lack even electricity or phone lines, much less computers or the skills to operate them (Cleaver, 1995: 4).

It is highly problematic to pursue an analysis of the role of the Internet in enhancing the political goals of an indigenous community, without touching upon the issue of access. For like most other isolated communities of the developing world, access to computer technology and networks is profoundly restricted in Chiapas. As Harry Cleaver describes:

The problem of access is great in Chiapas and for the Zapatistas. Despite all the media hype which came with the discovery of the role of cyberspace in circulating Zapatista words and ideas, Subcomandante Marcos is not sitting in some jungle camp uploading EZLN communiqués via mobile telephone modem directly to the Internet (1995: 4-5).

The Chiapas Indians, as many other rural indigenous communities, lack many of the basic elements that would provide them with direct Internet access. Among the absent components are: infrastructure (such as electricity and telephone lines); financial resources (to cover the cost of the hardware and the connection); technical skills (exacerbated by a low literacy level); and language barriers (the Chiapas Indians speak dialects other than Spanish, which are not yet recognized by Internet technology). These are but a few of the reasons why access is problematic and minimal in Chiapas. Mexico itself is not much better off.

Here too, Internet access is available only to those people who are affiliated with either the government, large corporations, academic institutions, or to those who own a personal computer, modem, telephone and who have the financial resources to pay for the connection (O'Donnell and Delgado, 1995: 4).<sup>14</sup> Several authors have also noted that a number of recent studies on the general population of Internet users, predict that access will be increasingly restricted to the wealthier, educated, articulate, and male members of a given society (O'Donnell and Delgado, 1995: 5; Scott and Kekula Crawford, 1995: 8), which already appears to be the norm in Mexico.

To demonstrate the scarcity of Internet access in Mexico, I have included a chart summarizing the results of the "First Demographic Investigation of the Internet in Mexico." The original study was conducted by the Mexican branch of the National Information Center (NIC), between August 1st and September 30th, 1996. The survey sample size consisted of 420 people, and included 47 organizations (i.e., Internet Service Providers) throughout Mexico.

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<sup>14</sup> Teresa Carson, in her article "Internet's Popularity leaping in Latin America," includes a 1996 estimate taken from Reuters Ltd., that places the total number of Internet users in Mexico at approximately 100,000 (1996: 1).

**TABLE 2****A DEMOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF THE INTERNET IN MEXICO**

<b>Age of Respondents</b>		<b>Occupation of Respondents</b>	
<b>AGE</b>	<b>PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL</b>	<b>OCCUPATION</b>	<b>PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL</b>
35+	18%	Professional/ Consultant	36%
20-34	67%	Student/ Professor	32%
20-	15%	Administrator/ Director	14%
		Other	15%

<b>Sex of Respondents</b>	
<b>SEX</b>	<b>PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL</b>
M	87%
F	13%

<b>Income of Respondents (pesos/mth.)</b>	
<b>INCOME</b>	<b>PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL</b>
2-4,000	28%
5-9,000	26%
2,000-	21%
10-19,000	18%
20,000+	7%

<b>Education Level of Respondents</b>	
<b>LEVEL</b>	<b>PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL</b>
Career	67%
Masters	16%
Preparatory	11%
Doctoral	3%
Technical	2%
Other	1%

<b>Who Pays for the Connection</b>	
<b>WHO PAYS</b>	<b>PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL</b>
University	36%
Respondent	29%
Company	28%
Other	7%

\*The above study can be located  
at the following website:  
<http://estudio.nic.mx>

Although this study used a minute sample of the Mexican population, several inferences can be drawn from the



findings in Table 2 which appear to be consistent with the previous description of the restricted segments of the population to which the Internet is accessible in Mexico. The study reveals, for example, a predominantly male-oriented user group (87%), between the ages of 20 to 34 (67%). These results potentially signify that the Internet in Mexico is mostly used and accessed by a specific age group, and that a large discrepancy exists between the number of men and women who have access (i.e., the skills and financial resources), to the Internet. The study also documents a high level of Internet use among both professionals (36%) and academics (32%), which explains why most of the respondents have careers (67%), and/or have a relatively high level of education (19% have a masters degree or higher). Table 2 further illustrates that the majority of the respondents do not pay for Internet access, but that the cost is covered by either an academic institution (36%), or a company (28%). This factor becomes particularly relevant when one considers that the average income levels among the respondents is relatively low, (with the majority earning between 2-9,000 pesos per month). This highlights the degree to which Internet access among the average Mexican population depends largely on their affiliation with certain institutions or with their place of work.

Yet another set of statistics from the NIC, taken between March and April of 1997, is particularly useful in disclosing the predominant sources of information available on the Internet about Mexico:

**TABLE 3****TOP LEVEL DOMAIN  
NAME ".mx"**

<b>DOMAIN</b>	<b>AMOUNT</b>
<b>gob.mx</b>	<b>3,273</b>
<b>edu.mx</b>	<b>250</b>
<b>net.mx</b>	<b>223</b>
<b>com.mx</b>	<b>184</b>
<b>org.mx</b>	<b>107</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>4,037</b>

\*This table can be located at:  
[http://www.nic.mx/cgi/cuantos\\_dominios](http://www.nic.mx/cgi/cuantos_dominios).

Table 3 demonstrates that from a total of 4,037 Domain Name Servers in Mexico (Internet Protocol or IP Addresses with the code ".mx"), the greatest percentage are affiliated with the government (approximately 81%). In second place are those servers associated with academia/research (approximately 6%). A possible interpretation of these figures is that most of the information on the Internet about (or from) Mexico, is unsurprisingly, government-related. While the results cannot be used to characterize the principal uses of the Internet in Mexico - which is most-likely for electronic mailing and inter-governmental communications (also highly characteristic of North American Internet utilization) - they indicate that the main sources of information on the Internet concerning Mexico are associated with either government or educational issues. Consequently, one might assume that a large portion of Internet use is related to one or more of these institutions. It can be concluded, therefore, that access to

the Internet is highly restricted in Mexico to those people who fulfill certain social criteria. And as the indigenous people of Chiapas lack the basic infrastructure, skills, and financial resources to be part of these groups, it can be deduced that access to the Internet for Marcos and the Zapatistas was achieved through other means.

In discussing Marcos' "use" of Internet technology, it is important to clarify the purpose it served and how it was integrated as a communicative tool into the Zapatistas' struggle against the Mexican state. First, the value of computer networking for Marcos was to provide him with a means of *uni-directional* communication between himself and his Mexican and foreign publics. In other words, its primary function must be perceived as a medium that was used for the distribution of his communiqués, and not as a medium for *exchanging* information between the insurgents, with other indigenous groups, or with their supporters. This fact is essential for a realistic understanding of the Internet's role in the Zapatista struggle. As Scott and Kekula Crawford note in their article entitled "Self-Determination in the Information Age"; "While it is tempting to expound on the potential benefits of electronic communications for a freer and more self-determined world, we must also temper the enthusiasm for those technologies with a realistic view as to the limitations, particularly regarding access in less developed regions of the world" (1995: 7).

Having examined the utility that the Internet served for the Chiapas insurgents, it is also important to understand the process through which it was appropriated into their struggle. Since Marcos and the Zapatistas lacked direct access to the technology, they were compelled to make

use of various intermediaries within the national public to post their messages for them. Among these intermediaries were religious organizations and human rights activists who had access to the necessary technology, and who would play an integral role in the initial distribution of the insurgents' communiqués over the Internet. Eventually, individuals and organizations throughout the international public who were interested in the Zapatista struggle, would also assume a key role as intermediaries in the distribution of Marcos' communiqués over the electronic networks. O'Donnell and Delgado recognize the relevance of using these intermediaries for the Zapatistas when they write:

Opportunities exist for people with access to the Internet to post messages on behalf of those without. Preliminary observation suggests that indirect access is an important feature of the Internet participation of Indigenous peoples (1995: 4).

Similarly, Frank Wilmer acknowledges the social networks that indigenous people are increasingly forging, in order to reach larger audiences with their political issues:

Indigenous people have formed alliances in order to enhance their ability to assert influence in both national and international arenas. Alliances are important vehicles through which issues of international concern are raised within the community of nation-states (1995: 137).

Andres Oppenheimer confirms this point when he writes that the Chiapas rebels had their own revolutionaries - links to particular individuals in Mexico City - who helped them in their "underground propaganda network." One woman in particular, notes Oppenheimer, was responsible for faxing

their communiqués around the city, and for making sure that they reached the right newspapers (1996: 26).

Although various accounts have been written which describe the process through which Marcos' communiqués reached the Internet,<sup>15</sup> the most probable route is that the original communiqués were first hand-written by Marcos, then typed onto paper that was previously signed by him (*Zapatistas! Documents of the New Mexican Revolution*, 1994: 201.) From here, John Ross points out, a resourceful chain of couriers moved the messages first to the diocese from which they are distributed to the national pluralistic daily *La Jornada*, to *El Financiero*, and to *El Tiempo* (1995: 13). According to Harry Cleaver, this process was further strengthened by other people throughout Mexico who read the communiqués, and who rallied to the cause:

...they typed or scanned the communiqués and letters into e-text form and sent them out over The Net to potentially receptive audiences around the world...Again and again, friendly and receptive readers spontaneously re-posted the messages in new places, while sometimes translating the Spanish documents into English and other languages. In this way, the words of the Zapatistas and messages of their communities have been diffused from a few gateways throughout much of cyberspace (1995: 5-6).

With time, the process of message distribution of Marcos' communiqués was to achieve greater organization and efficiency. Cleaver pinpoints two main reasons behind this evolution: First, the number of people involved in gathering, translating and posting the

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<sup>15</sup> In one press release archived on the Internet entitled "Rebels Use Internet to Argue Cause", originally written by Leonard Doyle for *The Independent*, the reporter writes; "Marcos, the Mexican rebel leader, carries a laptop computer in a backpack and plugs the machine into the cigarette lighter socket of a pick-up truck before tapping out his now famous communiqués. Copied onto floppy disks the statements are taken by courier to supporters who transmit them by telephone to computer bulletin boards" (1995: 1).

communiqués gradually increased. And second, many individuals and organizations (e.g., religious, human rights, academic, independent press etc.), took up the responsibility for posting relevant information on the conflict to specific sites throughout cyberspace (1995: 6). Frank Wilmer recognizes the important role of these sympathetic Mexican and foreign individuals and organizations in setting up Internet sites and posting information related to the conflict in Chiapas, when he writes; "Advocacy groups have also been formed on behalf of indigenous peoples. These organizations have worked avidly toward the goal of promoting national and international recognition of the special rights and needs of indigenous peoples" (1995: 140). Economics Professor and political activist Harry Cleaver of the University of Austin, Texas, has been a "key link in the rebels' information chain" (Doyle, 1995: 1), and a perfect example of an individual who has demonstrated an interest in promoting the plight of the Chiapas Indians over the Internet. He has been responsible for maintaining an extensive mailing list service on the Chiapas uprising called *Chiapas95*. The Institute of Latin American Studies at the University of Texas has also set up its own Latin American Network Information Center (LANIC) gopher site, which posts and archives any information related to Chiapas.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> For a more comprehensive list of the sources of information on Chiapas and the uprising on the Internet, consult Cleaver's guide "The Zapatistas in Cyberspace," located at the following website: <http://web.maxwell.syr.edu/nativeweb/geography/latinam/mexico/zapatistas.html>.

I believe that the significance of the role played by Cleaver and other individuals and academic organizations in the Chiapas insurgents' publicity campaign, has lain in their acting as both gatekeepers, as well as creators of a third level of political discourse about the Zapatista movement. These sites became the spaces through which primarily North American and European publics - with Internet access and a shared interest in the struggle - could then exchange their ideas on the numerous issues related to the conflict in Chiapas. Consequently, along with those discourses being created by Marcos and the Mexican government, a third discourse - that of foreign individuals and institutions - must be acknowledged, if we are to provide a more accurate understanding of the powerful propaganda campaign waged by the Zapatistas and their sympathizers. Nevertheless, it must also be noted that the inclusion of such intermediaries in distributing the Zapatistas' messages raises a number of issues concerning the very legitimacy of these agents, and the messages they circulate over the Internet (e.g., how does one ensure that Marcos' communiqués were being relayed in their original form?) It also evokes issues concerning the legitimacy of both personal and institutional voices which speak on behalf of an entire constituency.<sup>17</sup> One must acknowledge, however, the current reality of the Chiapas insurgents. Due to their geographic isolation from the rest of the world, and to their lack of access to electronic networking technologies, their dependence upon intermediaries for distributing their messages, and ultimately for relaying their voice to the

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<sup>17</sup> Naturally, the same concerns could be raised about Marcos' role as spokesperson on behalf of all the Chiapas Indians.

national and international political arena, constituted a novel means for launching a publicity campaign. It can be concluded, therefore, that the Zapatistas' limited access to Internet technology was the underlying factor in determining both how it was used as a uni-directional communications tool, and the process through which their messages were relayed to the national and international publics.

Having discussed in detail the primary role of Internet technology in the Chiapas uprising, I shall now turn the focus of this thesis to a thematic analysis of the content of Marcos' communiqués and the Internet *Consulta*. These documents have been chosen to demonstrate how Marcos used his communiqués as tools of propaganda against the Mexican government, and how the Internet enhanced his publicity campaign by extending the reach of their distribution.



## *Chapter Three*

# **THE POLITICAL USES OF THE INTERNET BY MARCOS...**

*"...it is not only by shooting bullets in the battlefields that tyranny is overthrown, but also by hurtling ideas of redemption, words of freedom and terrible anathemas against the hangmen that people bring down dictators and empires..."*

*- Emiliano Zapata*

Individual leaders have marshaled widespread global support and provided symbolic unity among thousands of groups otherwise separated by geographic distance, remoteness, and localized cultures and languages. The most influential individuals have also been highly skilled in the art of persuasion, in organization, and in networking the many complex groups and associations that make up the indigenous movement (Wilmer, 1995: 135).

An investigation of the principal role of the Internet in the Chiapas uprising would not be complete without an illustration of how the technology was used for enhancing Marcos' publicity campaign against the Mexican government. Consequently, I have chosen to conduct what I will refer to as a "thematic analysis" of the content of a sample of communiqués that were originally written by Marcos, and then posted onto the Internet by intermediaries for the viewing of specific national and international publics, with access to the technology.

#### **METHODOLOGY**

In attempting this study, I found the classical Lasswellian model of communications flow to be helpful as a methodological approach. This model has enabled me to distinguish between the network and communicative dimensions of the Internet by answering four specific questions: (1) *Who* was being addressed by Marcos in his communiqués?; (2) *What* message was being communicated by Marcos? (i.e., What themes did he emphasize?); (3) *How* has the Internet, as a system of message distribution, helped Marcos to enhance his publicity campaign? (e.g., How did it expand the reach of his ideas and provide a space for the emergence of public opinion?); and (4) *What* effect has Marcos' information campaign had on the conflict between the Chiapas insurgents and the Mexican

government? This inter-relational approach has subsequently allowed me to develop an understanding of the Internet's ability to provide a space - a political platform - through which the "voices" of once isolated and politically disenfranchized constituencies can now be heard.

### DESCRIPTION OF EVIDENCE

Finding the data to answer the four questions has been challenging because of the sheer amount of documents available on the Internet dealing with the conflict in Chiapas. A lot of time was consequently spent merely browsing, searching, and identifying which documents were most exemplary in illustrating my points. I have located two principal sites where these communiqués are archived: the *EZLN homepage*,<sup>1</sup> and the *Chiapas95* mailing list.<sup>2</sup> The first site is on the World Wide Web, and contains four folders, each of which are labeled by year, beginning with the first year of the uprising in 1994. The documents found under this site cover various subject-matters, including: Marcos' views on neoliberalism, national and international appeals to mobilize support for the EZLN, updates on the dialogical process with the federal government, and letters to various individuals (often intellectuals and political activists) within the Mexican and foreign publics. Preliminary analysis revealed that there are a total of 149 EZLN communiqués archived at the *EZLN homepage*, all of them dating between January 1<sup>st</sup> 1994 and April 25<sup>th</sup> 1997. Out of this total, about half (65) of all the communiqués cover the year 1995, and eight of these are from the month of February. In order

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<sup>1</sup> The *EZLN homepage* can be located at <http://www.ezln.org>.

to reduce the amount of information to be analyzed, I decided to focus only on those accounts written during the month of February 1995, when Marcos appeared to have campaigned extensively.

The second site, *Chiapas95*, is a gopher mailing list that was specifically created for the distribution of news, information, and debate concerning the situation in Chiapas by Professor Harry Cleaver at the University of Austin, Texas. A preliminary analysis of the *Chiapas95* mailing list reveals that there are 477 documents archived for February 1995. They explore a variety of issues, such as: information on the grass roots struggles in Chiapas and Mexico; news stories and reports on solidarity actions around the world; reports by humanitarian groups of human rights violations by the Mexican federal army on the people of Chiapas; information on the policies and actions of the Mexican state, the U.S. government, and international state institutions; reports on the Mexican economy and analysis of neoliberal politics; and discussions about the diverse aspects of the indigenous struggle (Cleaver, "Chiapas95", 1996: 1).

While many of Marcos' communiqués at this site can also be located at the *EZLN homepage* on the World Wide Web, those found under *Chiapas95* are more extensive and many have English translations. They also cover a wider range of issues including interviews with Marcos and other members of the EZLN, prisoners' testimonies, letters to the President and other individuals, and detailed accounts of army abuses. The EZLN communiqués at this site have been posted on behalf

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<sup>2</sup> The *Chiapas95* mailing list can be found at <http://www.eco.utexas.edu:80/Homepages/Faculty/Cleaver/chiapas95.html>.

of the Zapatistas by two solidarity groups based at the university, the Austin Comité de Solidaridad con Chiapas y Mexico, and Acción Zapatista de Austin. Many of them are also translated by volunteers at the National Commission for Democracy in Mexico.

During the period of February 1995, I have located 17 documents which appear to be communiqués composed by Marcos and signed by him and/or the Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee - General Command of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (the CCRI-CG is the EZLN's primary decision-making body). From these communiqués, I have read and analyzed 14, dated from February 9 1995 to February 27 1995. Although this is only a small sample of the total number of EZLN communiqués that are currently archived on the Internet (between January 1994 and April 1997), they are nevertheless representative of the way Marcos used the communiqués as tools of propaganda, as they appear to be written by him. In this sense, I am able to propose that the sample I have chosen for this analysis adequately represents the majority of the EZLN communiqués posted on the Internet.

Another piece of evidence that I have found useful for helping to answer the questions is Marcos' national and international plebiscite, known as the *Consulta*. The *Consulta* was designed by Marcos and the CCRI-CG with the dual intention of: 1) presenting the national and international publics with a clear outline of the EZLN's political agenda; and 2) to open up a space for "dialogue" with these publics by requesting their opinion (yes or no), on the future political goals of the EZLN, as defined by them, and posed in the form of six questions. The *Consulta*

was also posted onto the Internet,<sup>3</sup> where people throughout the world who had access and an active interest in the Zapatista struggle, could participate in Marcos' public opinion survey in cyberspace.<sup>4</sup>

### AIM

For my study on the political uses of the Internet by Marcos, I have first employed a thematic analysis of 14 of Marcos' communiqués found under the *Chiapas95* mailing list. The principal idea was to identify how Marcos used his communiqués as tools of propaganda. Conducting a thematic analysis of these documents has also allowed me to relate to the first two questions I set out to answer through the Lasswellian model; i.e., who was being addressed, and what are the main themes outlined in Marcos' communiqués. From this analysis, inferences could then be made about how the Internet, as an alternative medium for the distribution of his communiqués, helped to strengthen Marcos' publicity campaign against the Mexican government.

A thematic analysis of the *Consulta* will also be conducted, and used towards two principal ends: (1) to confirm the findings of the other analysis, as it relates to the first two questions set out in the Lasswellian model. In doing so, the *Consulta* helps to illustrate who Marcos was addressing, and what were the major themes he incorporated

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<sup>3</sup> The *Consulta* can be located at <http://www.actlab.utexas.edu/~zapatistas/coninfo.html>.

<sup>4</sup> There remains some confusion about how exactly the national and international plebiscites were conducted, for I have not come across the answer in my research. One article in the *Mexico and NAFTA Report* did however, point out that the Zapatistas used a group of Non-Governmental organizations to conduct the national plebiscite. It also states that the plebiscite was "transmitted via the Internet," and "backed by full page adverts in newspapers." (24 Aug. 1995:3). I am also uncertain about whether the international *Consulta* was carried out strictly on the Internet, or if it was first disseminated through various print media. The fact that there were separate calculations tabulated for the international *Consulta* and the electronic *Consulta*, however, leads me to believe the latter.

into his propaganda campaign; (2) In particular, however, the *Consulta* is useful for answering the third question set out in Lasswell's model; that is, how the Internet helped to enhance Marcos' publicity campaign. Through the Internet *Consulta*, it can be demonstrated that an alternative space was provided through which Marcos could encourage public opinion to form around the Zapatistas' political goals. We will also see how the Internet *Consulta* equipped Marcos with a means through which he could tabulate the public's response to the issues set forth in the plebiscite, and therefore estimate the level of public support there was for the Chiapas insurgents in their struggle for political reform in Mexico.

Having conducted these two analyses, I can then draw several conclusions based upon their findings, in order to answer the fourth question set out in the Lasswellian model; i.e., what overall effect Marcos' publicity campaign had on the conflict between the Zapatistas and the Mexican government. These conclusions can then be adopted as examples for how Marcos' powerful propaganda campaign over the Internet, can be applied to the political struggles of other indigenous groups and activists, as well its implications for future communications research.

### **ANALYSIS ONE: MARCOS' COMMUNIQUEES**

#### **1. ADDRESS**

In considering the first question of the Lasswellian model, I was able to determine through a thematic analysis *who* Marcos was addressing in his communiqués. Of the fourteen documents analyzed in this study, eight of them were addressed to a general public in the following manner: "To

the people of Mexico;" "To the people and governments of the world;" and "To the national and international press." Three of the communiqués were specifically addressed to the national independent press as follows: "To the national weekly *Proceso*;" "To the national newspaper *El Financiero*;" "To the national newspaper *La Jornada*;" "To the local paper of San Cristobal de las Casas *Tiempo*." Two of the communiqués were directed specifically "To the National Commission of Mediation (CONAI)," and one communiqué was a letter addressed, "To Mr. Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de Leon," the current Mexican President.

Although the majority of the communiqués appear to be addressed to a general (national and international) public, it is possible to assume that they were intended to reach specific target groups within those publics, and that their content was most-likely interpreted and understood by these diverse groups in very different ways. It is also possible to argue that Marcos had a particular goal in mind while composing his messages - i.e., creating widespread consciousness of the existence and political plight of the Chiapas insurgents. According to Richard Perry, the very success of Marcos' communiqués lay in his attempt at "coalition building;" i.e., to broaden the base of identification and consciousness of shared issues and concerns, among otherwise unconnected communities, or beyond the local and into the international sphere (1996: 82-83). Elaine Katzenberger agrees that the "ability to provoke an understanding of common struggle among diverse people was the most striking aspect of the Zapatista insurrection" (1995: ii).



Who then can we infer were the primary target groups of Marcos' communiqués? Judging from my extensive research on the Chiapas uprising, I can identify at least seven national groups that Marcos was trying to reach with his publicity campaign. These include:

- (1) **Leaders and members of the political opposition to the PRI.** The authors of *Waiting for Justice in Chiapas: A Report by Physicians for Human Rights and Human Rights Watch/Americas*, confirm that Marcos enlisted the support of leaders of six distinct opposition parties to push for broad political reform during the peace talks which began on February 21, 1994.(1994:23) In particular, I would argue that Marcos was trying to target those parties with less conservative - and therefore less neoliberal - values, such as Mexico's main political party of the left, the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). Andres Oppenheimer, in describing Marcos as a "leftist revolutionary," agrees that he was attempting to mobilize support from the PRD (1996: 16). Carlos Gil, in his book *Hope and Frustration: Interviews with Leaders of Mexico's Political Opposition*, also demonstrates the possible support Marcos would receive from members of the opposition, as a consequence of their general expressions of concern over neoliberal, capitalist politics. Gil argues that one of the principal issues identified as problematic by these parties is, "the possible repercussions from Mexico's decision to throw open the nation's economy to international capital via its 1986 entry into the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and its willingness to begin negotiating for free

trade with the United States and Canada in 1991" (1992: 5).

- (2) **Independent national press organizations.** I am referring here to those magazines and newspapers not affiliated with the Mexican state, and as named in several of Marcos' communiqués. These include: *Proceso*, *El Financiero*, *La Jornada*, and *El Tiempo*, all of which Marcos entrusted to report truthfully and objectively on the conflict in Chiapas.<sup>5</sup>
- (3) **Human rights groups and organizations.** Specifically, those which are located in Mexico, yet which are not government-owned or affiliated.<sup>6</sup> Some of the organizations that have played a significant role in reporting on the human rights violations in Chiapas are: the Centro de Derechos Humanos "Fray Bartolome de las Casas," the Coordinación de Organismos No-Gubernamentales de Chiapas por la Paz, and the Comisión Mexicana de Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos, A.C.
- (4) **Intellectuals within Mexican society.** Andres Oppenheimer confirms the fact that Marcos was targeting intellectuals in his personal interview with the Subcomandante, where he admitted seeking out the support of Mexican intellectuals such as Carlos Fuentes, Carlos Monsivais and others, by writing them personal letters because, "they are public opinion leaders" (Oppenheimer on Marcos, 1996: 71).
- (5) **Church groups and religious organizations.** As many of these organizations have demonstrated an interest in

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<sup>5</sup> Marcos clearly outlines his reasons for choosing these particular press organizations in one of his letters documented in *Zapatistas! Documents of the New Mexican Revolution*, (1994: 176-182).

<sup>6</sup> The Centro Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH) is a perfect example of a government-owned human rights organization in Mexico which has received tremendous criticism from various international human rights groups for failing to provide accurate accounts of the situation in Chiapas.

indigenous issues and concerns in the past, they would be likely to be sympathetic to the various grievances of the Chiapas Indians.

(6) **Small to medium business enterprises and small Mexican farmers.** In other words, all those people who had something to lose through the signing of NAFTA. Carlos Gil emphasizes this point when he points out that owners of small businesses and farms - due to foreign competition and decapitalization (as a result of price controls, salary controls, controls over interest rates, and exchange rates) - were suddenly unable to compete under the conditions of the global market (1992: 89).

(7) **The general Mexican public.** That is, any individual or groups (e.g., anti-NAFTA coalitions, activists, revolutionaries) within civil society who were also seeking political reform, and who believed in the potential of working towards democracy in Mexico. Undoubtedly, the more support Marcos could gather from different Mexican publics, the more pressure he could put on the state to negotiate with the Zapatistas. Hence, his attempt to transform the Chiapas Indians' struggle into a broader national movement for democratic reform.

It is also possible to identify at least seven international groups that Marcos was attempting to target with his communiqués. They comprise:

(1) **The international/foreign press.** The principal idea behind targeting these organizations would be twofold: to extend coverage of the Zapatistas political plight against the Mexican government beyond the national sphere, and to provide the international public with a more critical view

of the situation in Chiapas, as told through the words of foreign reporters. Guillermo Gómez Peña recognizes Marcos' "carefully planned relationship" with the international media. In particular, he cites the *New York Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *NACLA Report on the Americas*, *Le Figaro*, and *Der Spiegel*, as among the main foreign press organizations that extensively covered the situation in Chiapas (1995: 91).

- (2) **Human rights groups and organizations.** Marcos would undoubtedly target these groups in his political campaign, as they proved to be sympathetic to the plight of the Zapatistas from the very beginning of their uprising. By going to Chiapas to witness the armed conflict first-hand, and then reporting on the abuses and human rights violations inflicted on the indigenous and civilian population by the federal army and police, they would play a significant role in putting pressure on the Mexican government to negotiate peacefully with the Zapatistas.
- (3) **Academics and activists.** Marcos' goal here would be to seek the support of foreign intellectuals who, aside from the press, could also provide the international public with detailed analyses of peasant reform goals in Mexico. They would furthermore draw attention to the effects of neoliberal and conservative political ideologies on the contemporary Mexican society. Professor Harry Cleaver, as it has previously been noted, is one such intellectual. As both an academic and activist, not only has he written several academic accounts on the Chiapas uprising, but his Internet mailing list also contains ample evidence of the debate and analysis that was being conducted on the Zapatista movement.

- (4) **Anti-NAFTA coalitions.** In other words, those groups who even prior to the Chiapas uprising, demonstrated strong sentiments against the signing of the free trade agreement. These groups would include among others, environmental activists, students, and many small to medium businesses and farms throughout Canada and the United States - who like their Mexican counterparts, also found themselves unable to compete under the conditions of the new global market economy.
- (5) **Indigenous organizations.** Naturally, Marcos' goal here would be to reach indigenous groups throughout the world who would undoubtedly identify with the Chiapas Indians' movement.
- (6) **Members and leaders of various political parties.** Namely, those political parties who expressed concern over the signing of the free trade deal, and those who have a less right-wing conservative, and a more leftist ideological slant.
- (7) **Feminist groups.** These would constitute those activists who are also struggling for reforms that recognize the status and rights of women within the social, economic and political spheres of society. These groups would be particularly sympathetic to the plight of the indigenous women in Chiapas, who have used the Zapatista movement as a backdrop for attempting to improve their own under-privileged status as indigenous women within Mexico. Feminist activists would also undoubtedly support the Zapatistas in their condemnation of the federal army and police, for their inhumane actions against the women of Chiapas.

## 2. THEMES

The second half of this analysis relates specifically to the second question in the Lasswellian model, by identifying what principal messages were being communicated by Marcos to his target audiences. A thematic analysis of the content of his communiqués, under the principal themes I have identified therein, will therefore be conducted.

In my analysis of the 14 EZLN communiqués, I have distinguished 15 recurring themes, as well as the number of communiqués in which each theme appears. They are as follows:

THEME	COMMUNIQUE
criticism of the Mexican government	14
the "good" EZLN versus the "bad" government	10
abuses by the federal army	9
neoliberalism	8
updates of the federal army's movement into Zapatista territory	8
EZLN's willingness to dialogue	7
nature of the EZLN	5
exploitation	4
notion of Mexico having "two faces"	3
nature of the Mexican mass media	3
notion of the core versus the peripheral society	3
nature of Marcos	3
nature of the Zapatistas' struggle/ EZLN's motives	3
conditions for the dialogue	3
modern versus traditional society	2

From this list, I have narrowed down the diverse themes into five principal issues that Marcos tends to reiterate throughout his communiqués. For each of these categories, I have supplied quotations from Marcos, which I believe are effective examples of the propaganda technique he applied to try and sway his target audiences to the side of the Zapatistas.

1. **The neoliberalist critique.** Marcos emphasized throughout his communiqués - without necessarily using the term "neoliberalism" - the negative implications of Salinismo and contemporary Mexican political ideology for the indigenous and peasant populations. The other themes that arise under this subject which Marcos appropriated in many of his communiqués include: the exploitation of the indigenous people for the benefit of the powerful, the notion of the "modern" versus the "traditional" society, the notion of the "core" versus the "peripheral" society within Mexico, and the idea that Mexico has "two faces"; i.e., as a stable, prosperous, and modern nation - which is portrayed by the government to the rest of the world - and the oppressive, marginalized and poverty-stricken regions occupied by the nation's indigenous peoples, which is carefully obscured by the state.

### **Examples**

*Communiqué 9/2/95:*

"The supreme government threaten us...The Zapatistas and not those who appraised the Indigenous blood, in the stock exchange of Chiapas to be worth less than the price of a chicken...The Zapatistas and not those responsible of a crime and now retain the power over the energy wealth of Mexico...The Zapatistas and not

those who were active or passive accomplices of the greatest crime since Porfirio Diaz: Salinismo." (p.1-2)

*Communiqué 9/2/95:*

"It is evident that the supreme government is ignoring the conditions of isolation in which that same government has always kept the indigenous communities, and which make communication difficult." (p.4)

*Communiqué 20/2/95:*

"Mexico is something more than a six letters and a underpriced product on the international market." (p.5)

*Letter to Zedillo 10/2/95:*

"We have been always the dead ones alive. We don't have anything but misery, exploitation, and lack of liberty and justice and democracy in our country. We tell the truth, which is what you powerful ones want to hide from the people of Mexico." (p.4)

**2. Criticism of the Mexican government.** Every single communiqué in this analysis contained at least one direct criticism of the state. Remarks such as "the bad/evil government," "the government is acting with lies," or "the two-facedness of the government," were applied numerous times by Marcos. Other themes that fall under this category which he exploited were the direct attacks against the current President, as well as critiques of the federal army and police, and of the national mass media.

**Examples**

*Communiqué 2/9/95:*

"He seems not to have ever talked to people with dignity. He is inexperienced in relating to human beings. He knows how to deal with figures, macroeconomic plans, a lying media, and submissive opponents, but not with human beings. We will see if he learns before he breaks up everything." (p.1)



*Letter to Zedillo 20/2/95:*

"Mr. Zedillo, we accuse you as traitor to the homeland. Because all the money you have received from the United States you spent to kill Mexicans. You, Mr. Zedillo, are selling piece by piece our homeland." (p.2)

*Communiqué 12/2/95:*

"The Revolutionary Indigenous Clandestine Committee (CCRI) with human sorrow announces the barbarism and the dirty and genocidal war which the federal government headed by Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de Leon has carried out against the Zapatista National Liberation Army." (p.2)

*Communiqué 20/2/95:*

"A year ago, in February, we were in the Cathedral in San Cristobal de las Casas talking of peace. Today we are in the jungle talking of war. Why? Has someone asked this man why? Why did he trick us? Why did he feign a commitment to coming to a just a political agreement and then launch a terror that has now escaped from his hands?" (p.2-3)

*Communiqué 27/2/95:*

"With its lies of supposed Zapatista desertions, the supreme government tries to trick the people of Mexico and the peoples and governments of the world, and to hide the truth: the desertions of dozens of federal soldiers in the front lines of the governmental offensive..." (p.2)

**3. Abuses by the federal army.** Marcos incorporated numerous accounts of the abuses and human rights violations by the federal army and police on the people of Chiapas into his communiqués. He also provided his readers with several updates on their movement and actions into Zapatista territory.

## **Examples**

### *Communiqué 11/2/95:*

"The federal government is acting with lies, it is carrying out a dirty war in our villages. Yesterday, around noon, 14 helicopters bombed the area around Morelia and Gamucha, as well as shot artillery fire in the area under Zapatista control...They are surrounding us with death and ugliness...Brothers and sisters, the government of Ernesto Zedillo is killing us, it is killing children, it is attacking women and raping them." (p.1-2)

### *Communiqué 12/2/95:*

"The 9<sup>th</sup> of February...The federal troops penetrated Guadalupe Tepeyac with excess of violence dislocating and driving out all the civilian inhabitants and the International Red Cross...The 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> of February, the low level flights of the 30 helicopters increased in frequency by day and night...The federal soldiers, together with the police are detaining and torturing civilians." (p.1)

### *Communiqué 17/2/95:*

"In the communities the Federal Army has been dedicated to destruction, robbing, plundering and pillaging. The civilians who have the unfortunate luck to fall into their hands are victims of torture and interrogations. In addition they are detained illegally, disappeared and some are assassinated." (p.1)

### *Communiqué 23/2/95:*

"The supposed will for dialogue of Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de Leon is false. While he talks of a political and legal solution, his armies continue advancing in the Lacandon jungle, spreading terror among the civilians..." (p.1)

### *Communiqué 25/2/95:*

"Today a unit of the federal army, made up of thousands of soldiers...left...after destroying all the belongings in the homes of the indigenous people. They burned three homes. They killed all of their food...Furthermore, the government troops left some plastic balls attached to wires in all the homes making them appear as explosives." (p.2)

4. **The will to dialogue.** Marcos made numerous references to the EZLN's commitment to seek a peaceful and political solution to the conflict through dialogue and not arms.

Consequently, he often discussed the conditions upon which the EZLN was willing to resume the dialogical process with the Mexican government.

### **Examples**

#### *Communiqué 17/2/95:*

"...the Clandestine Indigenous Revolutionary Committee, General Command of the Zapatista National Liberation Army, has ordered its troops to retreat to their positions in the mountains and to avoid as much as possible armed conflict with the punitive expedition of the supreme government. In this manner the Zapatista National Liberation Army ratified its will to dialogue, and directed itself to the civic society, both national and international, so that they could evaluate this real and trueful demonstration of the political will of the Zapatistas." (p.2)

#### *Communiqué 20/2/95:*

"...the CCRI-GC of the EZLN exhort Ernesto Zedillo to decide once and for all to resolve the conflict through dialogue, and to offer clear and concrete signs of this feeling. Or he should confront the nation, and make all Mexicans and the international community understand that he opted for the murder of civilians and the military annihilation of the EZLN." (p.1-2)

#### *Communiqué 24/2/95:*

"We reiterate our disposition to a just and dignified political solution to the conflict and the prompt resumption of the dialogue..." (p.2)

5. **The "good" EZLN versus the "bad" government.** In many of his communiqués, Marcos drew stark contrasts between the nature and objectives of the EZLN, versus those of the Mexican government. Often, he painted a portrait of the poor and helpless indigenous people on the one side, and the powerful federal army on the other, or emphasized the honest intentions of the Zapatistas versus the dishonesty of the government. Clearly, he was attempting to mobilize

national and international public sympathy through the use of these contrasts.

### **Examples**

*Communiqué 9/2/95:*

"At all times the EZLN has given demonstrations of its commitment to a just and dignifies political solution to the conflict. The supreme government, through the mouth of its representative...did nothing but lie to the people of Mexico and lie to us." (p.3)

*Communiqué 20/2/95:*

"It was not the EZLN who broke off the dialogue and reinitiated the war. It was the government. It was not the EZLN who feigned political willingness while preparing a military attack and betrayal. It was the government. It was not the EZLN who detained and tortured civilians. It was the government. It was not the EZLN who murdered. It was the government. It was not the EZLN who bombed and strafed communities. It was the government. It was not the EZLN who raped indigenous women. It was the government..." (p.2-3)

*Communiqué 20/2/95:*

"There are two fundamental things that should be taken into account, the first of which is that it was the government, not the EZLN, who broke the dialogue and launched a military offensive and the persecution of our leaders." (p.1)

*Communiqué 25/2/95:*

"The federal army repeats the lessons learned from their U.S. and Guatemalan teachers. There are already several communities destroyed in a similar manner. Thousands of Indigenous People are being left in the most absolute misery." (p.2)

This collective evidence indicates that these communiqués, were indeed effective propaganda tools against the Mexican government. First, Marcos used them to address specific audiences, people that he believed would be more-likely to sympathize with and support the political goals of the Zapatistas. Second, he also used the communiqués to

stress specific themes that clearly presented his views on various issues related to the conflict.

It is therefore possible to conclude that the Internet, as an alternative medium for the distribution of Marcos' communiqués, could only have helped to further enhance his campaign by allowing him to reach a public beyond the Mexican border. In other words, it provided Marcos with an alternative platform upon which his interpretation of the conflict and criticisms of the Mexican government, could reach the international public. We have already seen how the Mexican state is able to manipulate and control the flow of information that is contrary to its interests, outside of the nation's borders. Consequently, with the help of intermediaries who posted his communiqués on the Internet, Marcos' publicity campaign against the state could only have been that much more powerful and effective.

## **ANALYSIS TWO: THE CONSULTA**

### **1. ADDRESS**

Although the *Consulta* generally addresses itself to the national and international public, there is ample evidence to suggest that Marcos was using the plebiscite to appeal to anyone who could identify, in one way or another, with the Chiapas Indians' struggle. For example, in the *Consulta* he declares; "...the EZLN again offers a bridge of hope to the people of Mexico and to the peoples of the world that recognize in our struggle their own..."(p.1) At yet another point, it states; "The sixteen demands referred to in the first of the six questions are the same demands shared by indigenous and non indigenous peoples of the world."(p.3) This propagandistic strategy is effective, for it expands

Marcos' potential audience to all those people to whom the Zapatistas' political goals strike a chord. At one point, the *Consulta* does specifically address itself to other indigenous communities and organizations throughout the world, when it reads; "We are sure that you as an organization and as indigenous peoples will understand this call, and feel it in your heart because you are also living the persecution and attempts to exterminate your nations." (p.3-4) Here, Marcos was clearly attempting to appeal to all indigenous constituencies who could identify with the Chiapas Indians struggle for political reform, and to be recognized as people with a voice in the political arena.

## 2. THEMES

I have identified four principal themes that Marcos emphasizes in the *Consulta*. The most important of these being his outline of the political goals of the EZLN. Marcos also reaffirms some of the topics he addressed in his communiqués, such as the EZLN's will to dialogue with the government, emphasis on the "good" (Chiapas Indians/EZLN) versus the "bad" government, and appeals for public support and solidarity for the Zapatista struggle.

**1. The Political goals of the EZLN.** Marcos clearly outlines in the *Consulta* the Zapatistas' political objectives in the form of six questions, on which he asks for the national and international publics' opinion. They are presented as follows:

1. Do you agree that the principal demands of the Mexican people are land, housing, jobs, food, health, education, culture,

information, independence, democracy, liberty, justice, peace, security, combat of corruption, and defense of the environment?

2. Should the different democratizing forces in Mexico unite in a citizens broad-based political and social opposition front and struggle for the 16 principal demands listed in question number 1?

3. Should Mexicans carry out a profound political reform which would guarantee democracy? (Respect for the vote, reliable voter registration, impartial and autonomous electoral organizations, guarantee the participation of citizens, including those not members of political parties, as well as non-governmental organizations, recognition of all the political forces, be they national, regional or local?

4. Should the EZLN convert itself in a new and independent political force, without joining other political organizations?

5. Should the EZLN join with other organizations and together form a new political organization?

6. Should the presence and equal participation of women be guaranteed in all positions of representation and responsibility in civil organizations and in the government?

**2. The EZLN's will to dialogue.** Marcos also reaffirmed in the *Consulta* the Zapatistas' commitment to dialogue - with their supporters, as well as with the Mexican government - in reaching a peaceful solution to their conflict. Consider the following examples:

"The EZLN has taken the initiative of the national plebiscite, as another demonstration of its will to solve the conflict by political means. Far from recurring to the argument of weapons, the EZLN has insisted on recurring to dialogue to seek a transition to democracy in Mexico...The national plebiscite is the ratification of the EZLN's commitment to a peace with justice and dignity." (p.1)

"An important part of this effort for democratic change is dialogue among the distinct social and political forces. The national plebiscite is part of this effort and part of the national dialogue." (p.1)

"We have directed ourselves to an entire country to ask Mexicans their thoughts about the principal problems of the country, about

the ways to overcome them, about the future of the EZLN and about the recognition that Mexican women deserve." (p.2)

**3. The "good" versus the "bad".** Here, as in his communiqués, Marcos created stark contrasts between the Chiapas Indians and the Mexican government, as a means to generate greater sympathy for his people from the national and international public. This is particularly evident at three occasions in the *Consulta*:

"The national plebiscite is the reiteration of the obvious: the commitment to peace is on the side of the EZLN, the interest in war is on the side of the government." (p.2)

"The Mexican government has left them no option than that of taking up weapons to defend themselves. For centuries they have struggled for their rights, but they have not been heard. Instead they have been continually persecuted, assassinated, exploited, and humiliated." (p.3)

"The EZLN's call for a plebiscite is unprecedented. It is the call of the Indians that for centuries have been persecuted and forgotten. The self-named, faceless ones..." (p.3)

**4. The appeal for support and solidarity.** Clearly evident throughout the *Consulta*, are Marcos' attempt to appeal to the national and international publics for their participation in the plebiscite, and for support of their struggle. Several examples can be supplied to illustrate this point:

"With respect we direct ourselves to all the social sectors which make up the Mexican nation to ask them to participate in this effort for peace and democracy, to ask them to express their opinion about the six questions, to ask them to construct the peace with justice and dignity that we Mexicans deserve, to ask them to struggle for democracy, liberty and justice." (p.2)

"The peoples that want to be free should join in solidarity and action to struggle against this new world order which is being imposed on us as neoliberalism." (p.3)

"We call on you to join with us in this International Plebiscite called for by the EZLN. We call on you not to leave us alone, to struggle with us for justice, liberty, and democracy, not only



for the Indians of Mexico, but for all the indigenous peoples of the world." (p.4)

The thematic analysis of the *Consulta*, therefore, confirms the findings of the first study, by illustrating how Marcos constructed his target audiences, as well as the main themes he employed to try and sway public opinion and support to his side.

The *Consulta* example can also be used to illustrate specifically how the Internet enhanced Marcos' publicity campaign. First, it can be argued that by posting the plebiscite on the Internet, Marcos significantly expanded the reach of this particular propaganda tool beyond national borders. Consider, for example, the results of the national and international plebiscite as they are available on the Internet. These calculations are particularly helpful in disclosing the number of individuals that Marcos was able to reach with his *Consulta*. The results reveal that a total of 1,088,094 votes for the National *Consulta* were tabulated,<sup>7</sup> from which the overwhelming majority agreed with the points outlined in the questionnaire. My calculations<sup>8</sup> reveal that approximately 80% of the national population voted "YES," 15% voted "NO," and 5% responded that they were uncertain with regard to the EZLN's future political goals. Similarly, a total of 81,775 votes were tabulated for the International *Consulta* (represented by 45 countries), in which the large majority also conceded to the issues proposed by the EZLN. In this case, my calculations reveal that approximately 81%

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<sup>7</sup> According to an article in *NACLA Report on the Americas*, the voters of Marcos' national plebiscite represented a mere 3% of Mexico's 55 million people, and were concentrated in the capital and the southern states of the country (Nov./Dec.1995: 44).

<sup>8</sup> My calculations for this analysis were based upon an average taken from the total percentages of the responses provided by the "YES," "NO," and "DON'T KNOW" votes.

voted "YES," compared to about 11% who voted "NO," and 8% who remained unsure about the political goals of the EZLN. While I am unclear as to how the international *Consulta* was conducted, I did come across the results of an "Electronic Zapatista Consulta" on the Internet. I am assuming that the totals have been generated from among those individuals responding to the Internet plebiscite, and include its results to demonstrate once again, how the medium was applied to expand the overall reach of the *Consulta*, beyond Mexican borders. My calculations here disclose that out of a total of 2632 respondents, approximately 76% voted "YES," 12% voted "NO," and another 12% voted "DON'T KNOW" to the Zapatistas' questions, via the Internet. Unfortunately, however, there is no means for determining the accuracy of the calculations provided on the Internet, nor the origins of the individuals who responded to the Internet plebiscite. Consequently, their specific interest in the Chiapas Indians' struggle for political reform cannot be known.

Another way, it can be argued, that the Internet *Consulta* enhanced Marcos' publicity campaign, is that it provided him with an alternative space for encouraging the formation of international public opinion around the Zapatistas' political goals - a kind of social activism in cyberspace, if you will. In this sense, the Internet created a platform upon which Marcos' political voice could be "heard" outside the realm of government interference and manipulation, and in the international political arena.

Lawrence Grossman, in his book *The Electronic Republic: Reshaping Democracy in the Information Age*, pinpoints yet another important way the Internet helped Marcos in his campaign:

Using computerized lists and on-line networks for different interest groups, individual citizens will also be able to send their own promotional material, propaganda, and publicity of all kinds in all formats to individuals, groups, and political representatives of their own choosing. And day by day, numerous polls and surveys, both official and unofficial, reliable and meretriculous, impartial and self-serving, will take the pulse of the public, and continuously tabulate political opinion (1995: 149).

While Grossman writes that the use of electronic networks for these purposes "will be" possible in the future, Marcos has already demonstrated how Internet technology could be employed for encouraging and tabulating public opinion on an international scale. The results of the *Consulta* exemplified that the majority of the respondents did in fact agree with the issues as Marcos presented them. It is safe to conclude, therefore, that he was well ahead of the game when it came to appropriating a new communication technology for fighting a publicity battle against a powerful government.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

#### **The Implications of Marcos' Information Campaign**

The analyses I have conducted on Marcos' *communiqués* and *Consulta* served to illustrate how they were effective instruments of propaganda against the Mexican government. It is now possible to conclude this study by providing an overview of how the Internet, as an alternative network for the distribution of Marcos' propaganda, ultimately helped to enhance his publicity campaign, and what effect this campaign had on the conflict between the Chiapas Indians and the Mexican government.

My analysis of Marcos' publicity campaign over the Internet provides the following evidence: First, it enabled him to overcome the Zapatistas' geographic isolation, by expanding the reach of his messages beyond the national level to the international public sphere. An obvious implication of this is that the technology also helped Marcos increase the degree of public consciousness about the Chiapas Indians' struggle for political reform in Mexico. Second, the Internet enabled Marcos to overcome the Zapatistas' political isolation. The political voice of the indigenous people of Chiapas (and the rest of Mexico for that matter), are neither democratically represented by the state, nor do they have access to the national media. The Internet therefore provided them with the alternative means through which their spokesperson, Subcomandante Marcos, could present their political goals and views vis-à-vis the Mexican government. Harry Cleaver concurs when he points out that, "...through their ability to extend their political voice via modern computer networks the Zapatistas have woven a new fabric of electronic struggle to carry their revolution throughout Mexico and around the world" (1995: 1). Crawford and Crawford also comment on the importance of establishing a presence on global information networks by groups engaged in various self-determination struggles. In particular, they note that these networks help to expand the voice of peoples, and to create international awareness and support for their movements (1995: 5). Third, the Internet decreased Marcos' reliance on the traditional print and broadcast media as the exclusive network of distribution for his communiqués. The implications of this are two-fold: 1) by posting the communiqués on the Internet, Marcos was able to

counteract the Mexican government's power as the primary interpreter of the goals of the Zapatista struggle, to the national and international public. Circulating his communiqués over the Internet, therefore, allowed him to spread awareness of the Zapatistas' goals as he defined them; (2) the speed and efficiency with which Marcos' communiqués could be distributed to his target audiences within the national and international publics was increased, as he no longer relied solely on traditional forms of message distribution. Fourth, Internet technology provided Marcos with a system of "checks," particularly on the actions of the Mexican government and its army. By enabling his communiqués to be distributed more widely, the Internet magnified the world lens on the situation in Chiapas (e.g., by circulating his reports on the abuses by the federal army on the indigenous and civilian population of Chiapas). It was in effect, a valuable medium for helping Marcos gain sympathy for the plight of the Chiapas insurgents. Dan La Botz illustrates this point effectively:

As the EZLN marched, Marcos distributed a series of remarkable communiqués and letters explaining the rebels objective, political program, and social ideals. These documents, printed in Mexican newspapers and circulated worldwide on the electronic computer networks would, over the next several months, prove to be the Zapatistas' most powerful weapon, winning them sympathy and support throughout Mexico and soon from around the world (1995: 2).

Harry Cleaver also notes the effect that the Internet had in keeping an eye on the government from the early stages of the uprising:

From the very first day, when news of the uprising went out through the media and details began to circulate through

computer networks, people listened to the words of the EZLN Declaration of War, sympathized with them, and began to mobilize to block the government's repressive moves (*Zapatistas! Documents of the New Mexican Revolution*, 1994: 21).

Finally, and as the Internet Consulta indicates, the technology provided Marcos with a platform through which favorable national and international public opinion of his political agenda could be generated. Not only was a space created where a form of dialogue "between" Marcos and his supporters could take place, but the technology also supplied him with a means to estimate the degrees of agreement which other indigenous groups and activists had with the Zapatistas' political goals. Overall, however, I would propose that the principal way in which the Internet enhanced Marcos publicity campaign, was by providing him with an alternative communication network through which he could distribute his propaganda against the Mexican government. Ultimately, this meant that Marcos' at once increased his links to the outer-world, while breaking through the isolation which the Mexican government and its mass media tried to impose on the communicative abilities of the Zapatistas.

Several conclusions can also be drawn on the overall effect that Marcos' publicity campaign had on the conflict between the Chiapas insurgents and the Mexican government. One of the most important implications of Marcos' information campaign is that his continuous flow of propaganda to various national and international publics, transformed the armed uprising into a dialogical war. Crawford and Crawford provide a particularly useful observation on the increasingly important role that

information plays as a strategic "weapon" for fighting political wars; "...by providing empowerment through information, the range of options that are available to make progress without violence is expanded. From the states' point of view, military or police action seems much less attractive when the world is watching, and information networks allow the world to watch in new and often relatively uncontrollable ways"(1995: 6).<sup>9</sup>

What then, did Marcos' "weapon" accomplish? First, by exposing the federal army's brutal treatment of the people in Chiapas, the Salinas government was forced to declare a unilateral cease-fire, and to transfer the military conflict to the negotiation table - in Zapatista territory.<sup>10</sup> Many authors have commented on the effect that the outpouring of such negative publicity had on the government's decision. Andres Oppenheimer, for example, noted in his analysis of the initial stages of the Chiapas rebellion that; "All the front pages, all the television networks around the world are stressing what has happened in Chiapas and are condemning the Mexican government" (1996: 41). To this he adds; "It was critical for the government to turn the tables and to be seen as a force of moderation, peace and national reconciliation" (1996: 42). Harry Cleaver also believes that the Mexican government's decision to change its way of dealing with the situation was based primarily on its fears of "the extremely rapid spread of popular support for the EZLN and for the communities they represent" (*Zapatistas!*

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<sup>9</sup> For a very interesting proposal on the way that new information technologies may effect the nature of war, refer to John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt's essay "CyberWar is Coming!" This can be located on the Internet at <http://www.usc.edu/rengen/PROCESS/Public/Text/Conspiracies/Cyberwar.abstr>.

<sup>10</sup> The contributors to *Waiting for Justice in Chiapas*, declare that the Mexican government's "decision to debate reforms of national importance with the leaders of a hitherto - unknown military force is unprecedented in recent Latin American history" (1994: 16).

*Documents of the New Mexican Revolution*, 1994: 20). Inevitably, this was the result of all the negative publicity that Marcos and his supporters were transmitting to the national and international publics.

The second effect that Marcos' "weapon" accomplished was to substantially reduce the human rights violations that were perpetrated on the Chiapas Indians. The human rights groups who contributed to *Waiting for Justice in Chiapas*, acknowledge the implications that widespread public scrutiny had on the armed conflict between the Chiapas rebels and the federal army when they write:

Under mounting public pressure...President Salinas suddenly and dramatically abandoned this strategy. Appearing on television that day, he announced a unilateral cease-fire, and began to open channels for direct negotiations with EZLN leaders. Had it not been for that timely decision, violations of human rights would surely have occurred on a far greater scale (1994: 16).

These human rights groups are describing how Marcos' publicity campaign against the Mexican government contributed to reducing the potential violence and bloodshed that have traditionally characterized indigenous uprisings.<sup>11</sup> The communiqués and the *Consulta* examples have already demonstrated how Marcos placed tremendous emphasis on dialogue. This was accomplished both indirectly, through using his communiqués as tools of propaganda, or directly, by asking for the national and international publics' opinion, and by accentuating the Zapatistas' commitment to dialogue and to finding a peaceful solution to their problems with the Mexican state. Consequently, it can be

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<sup>11</sup> The authors of *Waiting for Justice in Chiapas*, indicate that official statistics reveal about 145 people are known to have perished during the twelve day armed conflict in Chiapas, between January 1<sup>st</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>, 1994.



argued that Marcos was demonstrating his belief in the power of words, and not arms, in resolving the Chiapas Indians' political conflict with the Mexican government. It was a voice in the political arena he was searching for, not combat with a powerful army that he knew the Zapatistas could never defeat.

It can also be argued that Marcos' "weapon" rearranged the Mexican political agenda, by temporarily placing the Chiapas Indians' plight at the forefront of the national political discourse. Peter Rosset and Shea Cunningham, in their article "Understanding Chiapas," effectively summarize this point:

...the Zapatista message...thrust the very nature of the neoliberal economic model of the Salinas administration onto the national agenda for discussion, as urban elites woke up to the reality that there are now two Mexicos: the yuppie Mexico in the capital northern cities that has fed upon market liberalization and NAFTA-related investment, and the ever larger and ever more marginalized poor Mexico (1995: 165).

Not only does Rosset illustrate the success with which Marcos' communiqués had in exposing the "two faces of Mexico," but also in drawing the Mexican publics' attention to the neoliberalist policies of the state, and arousing national discussion about their implications for the indigenous peoples of Mexico. Similarly, it can be deduced that Marcos and the Zapatistas have provided, through these communiqués, an example of the way in which indigenous peoples are beginning to find a way into the national political discourse. Andres Oppenheimer emphasizes this very idea with respect to the insurgent uprising in Chiapas; "The Zapatistas had changed the course of Mexico January 1 by

drawing national and world attention to the plight of Mexico's poor, and had set a new agenda for the country's politicians" (1996: 76).

Finally, Marcos' "weapon" was to help transform the Zapatista rebellion - and what began as a relatively small and isolated peasant uprising - into a national democratic movement. Dan La Botz observed the rapid effect with which Marcos' publicity campaign had in creating a broader-based movement throughout Mexico:

The Zapatista uprising and photos of Subcomandante Marcos in his ski mask dominated the newspaper headlines. National television carried reports of the Chiapas Rebellion throughout Mexico. In those first few days of January many ordinary people identified with and sympathized with the Chiapas rebels. Though many were critical of the Zapatistas' use of violence, ordinary Mexicans empathized with the plight of the indigenous peasants (1995: 5).

Elaine Katzenberger supplies evidence of widespread national support for the Zapatistas' cause, in the very early stages of the rebellion. She notes that on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 1994 a large demonstration transpired in Mexico City where over 100,000 people walked the streets shouting "First World, Ha Ha Ha!" in defiance of the ruling classes economic policies and their allies in the developed nations to the North (1995: ii). To this Katzenberger concludes:

It was an expression of solidarity with the Zapatistas who had repudiated the official facade of political stability and economic well-being in Mexico. And it was the catharsis of exposing and acknowledging the actual conditions of worsening poverty and repression, and publicly naming the cause for them (1995: ii).

John Ross also acknowledges the overwhelming support of the Zapatistas throughout Mexico, when he notes that every

demonstration in the capital (such as students protesting tuition fees, striking police offices etc.), carried an emblem of the EZLN (1995: 178). As one reporter for the *Economist* revealed; "The opinion polls indicated that the voters did not rally around the president as he had hoped...Some 60,000 supporters turned up in Mexico City's central square chanting, 'We are all Marcos!'" (18 February, 1995: 40).

What all of these authors have essentially observed, is that somehow, Marcos prompted people within the Mexican civil society to identify, in one way or another, with the plight of the Chiapas Indians. Undoubtedly, this can be attributed in part, to the ingenuity of his publicity campaign. It has already been demonstrated how Marcos used his communiqués to attempt to broaden the sphere of identification between the diverse groups targeted within them, and the Chiapas Indians. He also highlighted the underlying problems of neoliberalist economic politics for the majority of the people living and working in Mexico, and criticized the policies and actions of the Mexican government. By applying these techniques, Marcos succeeded in appealing to the emotions of the broader Mexican society - i.e., anyone who saw in the Zapatistas' plight an outlet for their own grievances with the government.<sup>12</sup> And from here, he managed to ignite what appeared to be a larger national movement for democratic reform throughout Mexico.

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<sup>12</sup> Some authors have even gone as far as to suggest that Marcos and the Zapatistas actually threatened the stability of the state. It is plausible to argue that unlike previous indigenous rebellions throughout Mexico, Marcos did succeed in spreading a local movement to the national level. I would hesitate to conclude, however, that he could overpower the long-term stability of the PRI. Rather, he can be attributed with revitalizing national attention to the ruling party's political and economic ideologies of governance.

### **Lessons for the Future**

Does the Chiapas example provide us with a useful resource for other insurgent movements throughout the world? In other words, what are some of the primary examples that can be taken from Marcos' successful publicity campaign over the Internet, by other indigenous and insurgent groups fighting for political reform? I would first suggest that having identified the potential role of Internet technology as an alternative medium for the distribution of Marcos' communiqués, has enabled me to visualize its application in diverse contexts, particularly by those groups or activists who are also struggling to gain widespread awareness and support for their own political goals. The Internet can help these constituencies overcome geographical barriers, increase the speed and efficiency of the dissemination of their public messages, decrease their reliance on more traditional forms of communication, while providing them with an alternative space through which to present their political grievances, ideas, and goals. The Internet can also help these groups to both encourage and measure public opinion of their political agendas, as well as to help generate and mobilize a broader base of support. The Internet, through its role as a distribution network, can provide many individuals and groups with an uncontrolled communicative space that they may not otherwise have access to - be it through the mass media, or their government. In other words, when the infrastructure is available, it can give them a voice in the political arena.

An important differentiation must be made, however, between the possibilities for applying Internet technology for political uses for indigenous groups and other activists

and organizations. As we have seen, direct access to such communications technologies is denied to most indigenous peoples throughout the world. We have also mentioned how the use of intermediaries for furnishing indigenous groups with a link to the outside world carries with it potential problems and concerns. However, the Internet's role in the Chiapas uprising can provide us with a good example of how effective this mediated communication process can be, given an adequate basis of support and interest in the insurgents' cause. How to provide indigenous communities with more direct access to such networking technologies, however, must not cease to be a focal point of concern and analysis for future communications studies.

For those political activists and groups who are lucky enough to have direct access to the technology, the Internet opens up even greater opportunities for creating social networks through which information can be exchanged, ideas and experiences shared, and events strategically planned and organized. This signifies a potential application of the new computer-mediated communications technologies that goes beyond its distribution capacity, to include its potential as a socializing medium. This characteristic is certainly worthy of greater attention and focus in future analyses of the political uses of the Internet.

Also worthy of consideration, but which has not been discussed in this study, is how the Internet can be used by national governments to launch a publicity counterattack against those groups seeking political reform, or to try and manipulate the flow of information that runs through its

channels.<sup>13</sup> Without this knowledge, one could hardly assume that the Internet is as free from regulation and control, and as democratic in design, as it is often assumed to be.

I would conclude this study, therefore, by restating my belief that the Internet has proven to be a vital weapon for Marcos and the Chiapas insurgents in their publicity battle with the Mexican government. Through its appropriation as an alternative network of distribution for Marcos' communiqués, the Internet can be used as an effective example to illustrate the potential of an uncontrolled communication technology for providing a platform upon which more egalitarian publicity campaigns can be waged and political wars fought. More importantly, perhaps, Marcos has demonstrated that skill in rhetoric, and not in arms, can ascertain the true victor of a conflict between two opposing, yet unequally powerful constituencies.

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<sup>13</sup> Harry Cleaver goes into some detail about the possibility of capitalist counterattacks against the appropriation of cyberspace. He believes that there has been "increased monitoring, reporting and analysis of our use of cyberspace in ways designed to delegitimize and inform counter-strategies" (1995: 8). He also notes that there have been "assertions of Mexican government tampering with computer communications" including that of a major network going down at critical moments during the 1994 federal elections when upheaval was feared (1995: 10). Similarly, Gladys Ganley discusses the use of computer networking during the 1988 Mexican federal election. In the past, she notes, Mexican elections had long delays before the results were released. That year, the opposition party was assured that there would be no delays, as the votes would be tracked by the government's central computer. However, when the polls closed the PRI pleaded a central computer breakdown and stopped reporting the figures. Salinas was thereafter elected President (1992: 90). Harry Cleaver also states that there is concrete evidence of government efforts to create a counter-presence on the Internet, and asserts that the Mexican government has been expanding its overt presence in cyberspace, both in Mexico and around the world, as a way to promote its services, and to "offset and counter the massive flow of negative information about the Mexican government's actions and policies" (1995: 11).

## EPILOGUE

The indigenous struggle that began over three years ago in Chiapas, Mexico is far from over. The social and political situation of Mexico's poor has not changed. The words and the images of Marcos and the Zapatistas are no longer on the front pages of the news, nor all over our television screens. They have ceased to be at the forefront of the Mexican political discourse, and a major topic of discussion among intellectuals, academics, and activists throughout the world. Marcos and the Zapatistas can hardly be credited with accomplishing the principal goal of their conflict - achieving democracy throughout Mexico. Nor can they be attributed with having made a significant impact on the political ideology of Mexico's ruling class. This is unlikely to change in the near future. What Marcos and the Zapatistas can be recognized for, however, is that they reminded the Mexican government and the people of the world, that indigenous people indeed have an important political voice to be heard. And more importantly perhaps, that there is a way for oppressed and isolated peoples to be heard in the international political arena, from which they have been restricted for over five centuries.

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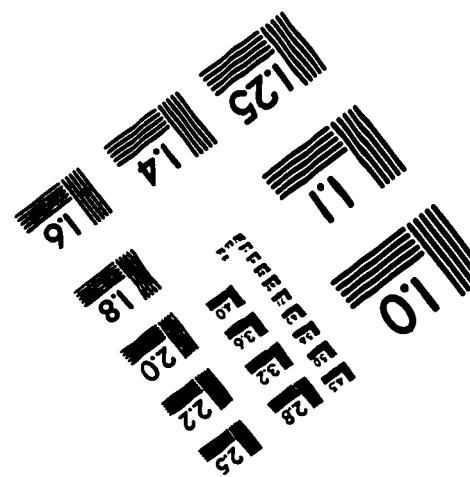
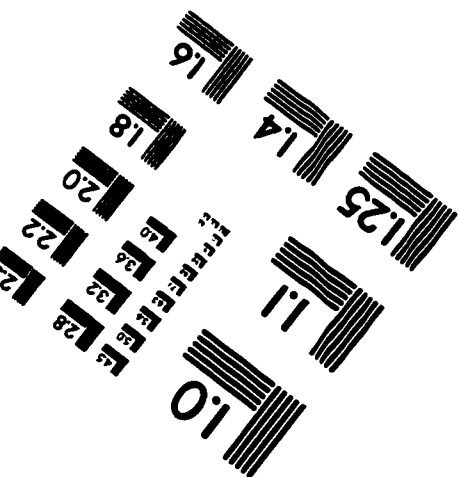
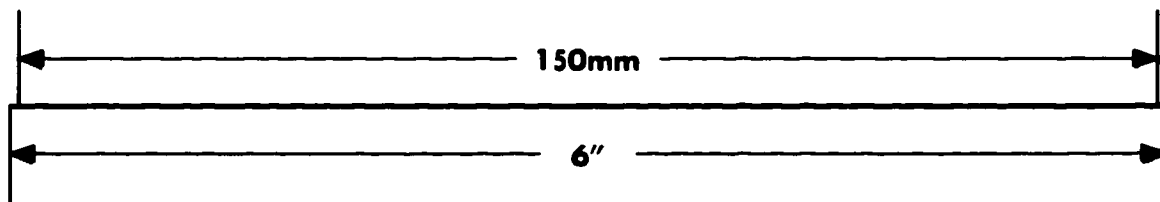
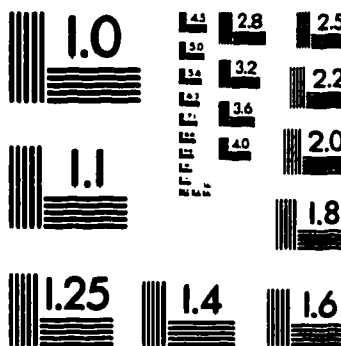
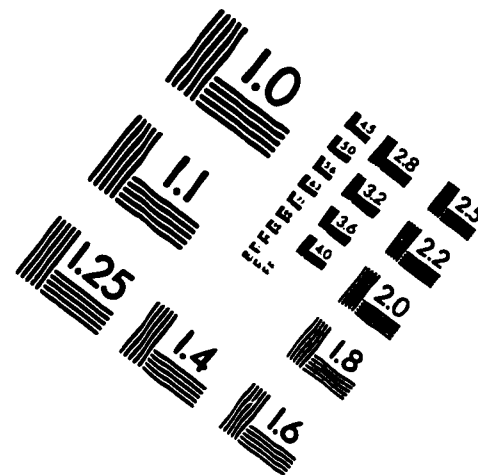
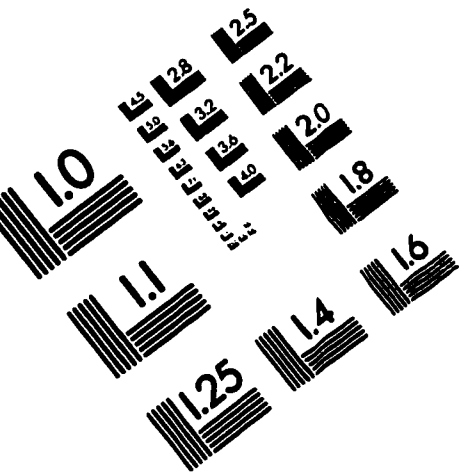
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