

THE ZAPATISTAS ONLINE

Shifting the Discourse of Globalization

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Abstract / This study examines the complex and contradictory dynamic of localization and globalization as they are manifest in online postings created by Zapatista supporters in Mexico. The aim is to develop an understanding of the dimensions of the Internet that contribute to its efficacy as a tool in grassroots globalization. Online newsgroup postings and websites created by Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) supporters are examined here in terms of the technological dimensions particular to computer-mediated communication. These dimensions include a relative lack of centralized control, the decentered author, interactivity and an alliance-building capacity. Combined, these technological dimensions facilitate a particular type of communication and contribute to a broadening of the discourse regarding the Mexican government as well as dominant conceptions of the Mexican nation.

Keywords / Chiapas / computer-mediated communication / globalization / Internet / localization / Mexico / Zapatistas

The Revolt

On 1 January 1994, the day the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into effect, about 3000 members of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) took control of the main municipalities in Chiapas, Mexico. When Mexican military authorities dispatched reinforcements, the guerrillas withdrew to the rainforest.

Televisa, the national television network aligned with the Mexican ruling party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), and most of Mexico's major news media limited their coverage of the rebellion, downplaying its significance and denouncing the Zapatista leadership as foreign intellectuals or communists or both. Since the first day of the rebellion, however, the Zapatistas have fought to gain media exposure that respects their demands. And the movement has elicited widespread sympathy within Mexico and around the world. Led by their media-savvy spokesman, Subcommander Marcos, the Zapatistas orchestrated a New Year's Day media event to diffuse their message. Indeed, despite their ongoing clashes with the Mexican army, military victory has never been the Zapatistas' primary aim. The Zapatistas use arms to draw attention to their demands, gambling that international accounts of their struggle and their deaths will force the Mexican authorities to negotiate. Simply stated, the Zapatistas are fighting for democratic reforms that will end the corrupt politics

and unjust economic practices prevailing in Mexico. More generally, they oppose the new global order, which they see as another instance of the colonization that began over 500 years ago. They are fighting against the exclusionary consequences of economic modernization, but they also challenge the inevitability of a new geopolitical order under which capitalism would become universally accepted (Castells, 1997).

The Zapatistas are confident that the legitimacy of their demands, once freely articulated, will be clear – a sentiment that opinion polls, at least, seem to support. According to a poll conducted on 8 and 9 December 1994, and published in *Reforma*, a Mexican daily, 59 percent of Mexico City residents had a ‘good opinion’ of the Zapatistas, and 78 percent thought that their demands were justified (Castells, 1997: 79). Their focus on the media may also save many of the rebels’ lives: on 12 January – only 11 days after the uprising began – Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari announced a unilateral ceasefire and appointed a peace representative to begin negotiations. The Zapatistas seemed to have won their first battle, not with guns but with words.

To some, the Zapatistas’ reliance on words and ideas over weapons signals a new type of warfare. Journalists working for the mainstream international media produce tales of Marcos using a mobile telephone to upload EZLN communiqués directly onto the Internet. This version of events is in fact so common that those outside Mexico who rely on mainstream media for their news of the movement are more likely to associate the Zapatistas with cyberspace than with Chiapas. Such direct links between the remote corners of Mexico and the rest of the world, however, are apocryphal. Indeed, these renditions reveal more about the developed world’s celebration of technology than they do about the Zapatista movement itself. Although the rapid and powerful support for the movement in Mexico and around the world cannot be ascribed to the EZLN’s use of the Internet, the role played by computer-mediated communication (CMC) is by no means insignificant. In the broadest sense, it provides an environment in which national and international actors sympathetic to the Zapatistas can be drawn into the conflict, a phenomenon which exerts pressure on the Mexican authorities far beyond that which the EZLN alone could hope to deliver.

CMC’s Role in the Movement

During the initial uprising, the commercial media overwhelmingly refused to reproduce Zapatista material and this refusal by the media seriously constrained the ability of the Zapatistas to get their message out (Clever, 1998). In an attempt to remedy the situation, Zapatista supporters with access to communiqués began to send them out over computer networks and in so doing catapulted news of the movement onto headlines around the world. The Zapatista ‘dispatches’ went out to Usenet groups, Peacenet conferences and Internet lists whose members were already concerned with Mexico. Zapatista communiqués circulated through a variety of networks, including human rights groups, indigenous rights groups and feminist organizations, to name just a few. Receptive readers reposted the messages, and Zapatista-related reports and information were soon spread across cyberspace.

To Subcommander Marcos, the support was both unexpected and welcomed:

There are people that have put us on the Internet, and the zapatismo [the ideology of the Zapatistas] has occupied a space of which nobody had thought. The Mexican political system has gained international prestige in the media thanks to its informational control, its control over the production of news, control over news anchors, and also thanks to its control over journalists through corruption, threats and assassination. This is a country where journalists are assassinated with a certain frequency. The fact that this type of news has sneaked out through a channel that is uncontrollable, efficient and fast is a very tough blow [to the Mexican state]. (Le Bot, 1997: 114)

CMC does not simply transmit information but helps to create what Cleaver calls the 'fabric of the struggle'. By connecting various sympathetic organizations located around the world, CMC extends the reach of the movement. According to Appadurai, transnational media such as CMC contribute to grassroots globalization, or the social networks developed to resist a globalization defined by and in the interest of corporations and nation-states. He writes,

... a series of social forms has emerged to contest, interrogate and reverse these developments and to create forms of knowledge transfer and social mobilizing that proceed independently of the actions of corporate capital and the nation-state system (and its international affiliates and guarantors). (Appadurai, 2000: 3)

In other words, these social forms developed in part through the use of CMC help to offset the traditional power structure, so globalization is not strictly a matter of transnational domination and uniformity but also a potential source of liberation of local cultures from conventional state and national controls. To members of the EZLN, its supporters and sympathizers, for example, the movement is an attempt to shift control away from the wealthy few, who enjoy the fruits of the global economy and the privileges of the ruling class, and toward the neglected segments of the Mexican population, including the indigenous, the urban poor and the peasants. For the Zapatistas, globalization must include a shifting of 'peripheral visions' to center stage through new communication networks (Curran and Park, 2000: 7).

The Global and the Local

Globalization cannot be defined without considering its converse, localization; the dialectical processes are simultaneous and have a profound impact on each other. In the broadest sense, globalization is the intensification of worldwide relations that connect distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by far off events and vice versa (Giddens, 2000). Globalization is characterized by a sense of shrinking distance brought about by the dramatic reduction in the time it takes to travel places, either physically or representationally through electronically mediated images and text (Harvey, 1989; Tomlinson, 1999). For Giddens (1990), spatial proximity is the process of stretching social relations across distance. But the importance of connectivity brought about through globalization goes beyond the technological accomplishments of

communication and transport. Connectivity does not merely take some people beyond the places where they live, it alters the nature of those places (Tomlinson, 1999: 9). In order to influence the processes by which localities are transformed, grassroots globalization aims to add democratic and autonomous dimensions to the new reality brought about by the dominant forces of globalization (Appadurai, 2000: 3). In the case of the EZLN rebellion, an apparently local struggle links with global networks of support in order to challenge the power and legitimacy of the modern nation and the global economic forces that every day press in on Chiapas. Through their 'war of words', the Zapatista movement strives to expand the discourse of both the Mexican nation and globalization to include the interests of neglected segments of the population in Mexico. They are advocating for the rights of those who are not transported out of Chiapas; those left to face the local reality of economic injustice, exacerbated by globalization. And while peasants in Chiapas have not reaped the benefits of the expanding economic network of the new global environment, they have gained support through global social and political networks.

Examining the Zapatistas Online

In its broadest sense, this study examines the complex and contradictory dynamic of localization and globalization as it is manifest in the case of the Zapatista movement. The Zapatistas are using guerrilla tactics that invoke the global in what is seemingly a local struggle. Yet it is the political economy of global capitalism that has deeply transformed the everyday lives of millions throughout Mexico. The situation in Chiapas is unique precisely because the EZLN movement derives its strength from the same forces that contribute to the injustice and suffering against which they are fighting – namely CMC and other transnational media outlets. After a brief background of the movement, the characteristics of online newsgroup postings created by EZLN supporters are examined in terms of the technological dimensions particular to CMC. These dimensions include a relative lack of centralized control, the reconfiguration of notions of proximity, the decentered author interactivity and an alliance-building capacity. Combined, these technological dimensions facilitate a particular type of communication and contribute to a broadening of the discourse regarding the Mexican government as well as dominant conceptions of the Mexican nation.

Specifically, this study examines texts from six days of newsgroup activity in February 1995 on Chiapas95, a 'list' which distributes news and debates about Chiapas culled from other sites in cyberspace. Material posted during this time period is the focus of this study because on 9 February Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo ordered the army to break the ceasefire with the Zapatista rebels and to capture Marcos and other Zapatista leaders. The supposed impact of the ensuing flurry of online activity has been heralded by many as proof of the power of the Internet to affect real world politics (Castells, 1997; Cleaver, 1998; Robberson, 1995). Within hours of the president's declaration, his words, along with a call for 'urgent action', had been distributed all over the world on the Internet. Zedillo promptly ordered his troops to retreat. The large number of

texts generated during these six days and the supposed impact they had on Zedillo make this a particularly useful collection of texts with which to explore the potential of CMC.

The Internet activity prompted by Zedillo's declaration did not go unnoticed by the mainstream press. In February 1995 several US news stories described the Internet as a new weapon in the political revolutionary's arsenal. *Washington Post* reporter Tod Robberson wrote 'With help from peace activists and rebel support groups here in the southern Chiapas state, the Zapatista message is spreading around the world, literally at lightning speed, thanks to telephone links to the Internet computer network' (Robberson, 1995: A1). He goes on to report that Zedillo was confronted head on with the power of the Internet when, in February 1995, he launched a military offensive aimed at capturing Subcommander Marcos and other Zapatista leaders. Within hours, the president's words, along with the call for 'urgent action' to force Zedillo into reversing his course had been distributed all over the world. The same week CNN also ran a story pointing to the Internet's role in forcing Zedillo's order to retreat.

Most claims by reporters and scholars regarding the power of the Internet are based on perceived connections between Internet activity and 'real world' events. As is the case with other mass media, however, direct effects are difficult to demonstrate. The aim here is not to prove the effectiveness of the Internet but to examine its role in the Zapatista movement in particular and in terms of power and culture more generally. With this in mind, several overlapping issues need to be addressed, beginning with the specifics of the struggle.

Background of the Struggle

It is not a matter of coincidence that the EZLN chose the first day of NAFTA to declare war on the Mexican government. The timing of the EZLN declaration was part of a calculated strategy to garner international support – and the strategy succeeded. The Zapatistas and many others expected NAFTA to drive large numbers of workers off the land, contributing to rural misery and a surplus of labor (Chomsky, 1995). The Zapatista army called NAFTA a 'death sentence' for Indians. They claimed that it was essentially an endowment to the rich that would increase the rift between narrowly concentrated wealth and mass poverty and destroy what remains of the Indian ways of life. In the decade of economic reform leading up to NAFTA, the number of people living in extreme poverty in rural areas of Mexico increased by almost a third. Half of the country's total population lacks the resources to meet basic needs, a dramatic increase since 1980. Following World Bank/International Monetary Fund prescriptions, agricultural production was shifted to export – a policy that benefited agribusiness, foreign consumers and affluent sectors in Mexico at the expense of the general population. Malnutrition became a major health problem, agricultural employment declined, productive lands were abandoned and Mexico began to import massive amounts of food. Wages in manufacturing fell sharply and labor's share in the gross domestic product, which had risen until the mid-1970s, has since declined to well over a third. The fall of wages

was hailed by the Mexican Secretary of Commerce as an incentive to foreign investors; an incentive which comes alongside Mexico's repression of labor, lax enforcement of environmental regulations and a general orientation of social policy to the desires of the privileged minority (Chomsky, 1995; Oppenheimer, 1996).

The problems run far deeper than NAFTA, however. As EZLN's Declaration of War states: 'We are a product of 500 years of struggle.' Due to colonialism and centuries of governmental corruption and neglect, peasants in Chiapas have been denied education, land, work opportunities, food and health care (Collier, 1994). Many scholars and commentators on Mexico agree that the rural populations have indeed been victims of exploitation, neglect and graft for centuries. Carlos Fuentes, for instance, wrote: 'There could hardly be a more predictable recipe for rebellion.' He points a finger at local governments. 'A state that could be prosperous, with fertile land aplenty for most of its men and women, is not – because the local authorities . . . are in league with overlords of economic exploitation. . . . When someone protests, the government acts on behalf of the oligarchy – it represses, jails, kills and rapes – so things will stay the same' (Fuentes, 1997: 87).

Groups that were already organized in opposition to NAFTA rallied around the Zapatistas. The EZLN were likewise able to tap into the support of international non-governmental organizations concerned with issues such as Native American rights, environmental protection, human rights and the threat of 'neoliberal' capitalism. The Zapatista cause has also been taken up by celebrities such as film-maker Oliver Stone and former French First-Lady Danielle Mitterrand, both of whom attended a 1996 conference in Chiapas organized by the Zapatistas (Robberson, 1995; Cleaver, 1998; Castells, 1997), giving the movement added exposure and lending it a sort of leftist brand-name appeal. These groups and individuals, unified by the desire to resist the negative impact of transnational corporations on more local conditions – in this case the Mexican nation – are part of a larger movement of grassroots globalization.

Analysis of Usenet Group Postings

Between 9 and 16 February, more than 150 postings appeared on the Internet newsgroup Chiapas95, a 'list' that distributes news and debate about Chiapas culled from other newsgroups, from conferences on Peacenet and from other sites in cyberspace. Chiapas95, a website and Usenet group, was created in autumn 1994 by Harry Cleaver, in response to a rising demand for information about the Zapatistas. It grew out of a 'cc' list – a list of email addresses – to which he forwarded material he found on the Internet during his own research on the Zapatistas. In an introduction to the site, he writes: 'As the word spread from person to person that there was an easy way to stay on top of the flow of news and analysis, a way to get only what was important and skip all the trivia and chit-chat of several lists, more and more people wanted their addresses added to the list.' When the list reached around 50, he created a listserv which automates subscribing and unsubscribing and archiving the postings. Since

then three more narrowly defined lists have been created to reduce the flow of postings – Chiapas95-lite, Chiapas95-english, and Chiapas95-espanol. The postings analyzed here are from the original Chiapas95 that includes all postings. According to Cleaver, the number of subscribers fluctuates but always remains in the hundreds. Some of the subscriber addresses are way stations through which the flow of information is routed to other sublists of people, making it more difficult to gauge the number of people actually receiving postings.

Information exchange on the Internet is not regulated by any one central organization or set of ideas, unlike more traditional media outlets, where content is regulated by an elaborate combination of industry forces and professional norms and procedures. The postings analyzed here vary in terms of language, length, content and narrative form. They range from announcements of protests to rumors to official press releases. By comparison with those that govern the mainstream news industry, the norms and codes that shape Chiapas95 are less formal and procedural: postings express similar points of view more often than they exhibit similar approaches to writing and reporting. In addition to relative lack of centralized control, the Internet, like globalization, induces a sense of shrinking distances, a phenomenon rooted in the reduced amounts of time and money it takes to communicate across vast physical space. It seems that all locations become effectively equidistant; the time it takes a message to travel from one site to another is not related to distance.

This reconfiguration of notions of proximity combined with a relative lack of centralized control influences the nature of the online discourse in three specific ways. First, because there are no overarching norms of content or requirements for authoring the texts, the identities of authors are often obscured or entirely omitted, thereby shifting the responsibility or prerogative from the author to the reader to interpret the content of each posting. Second, the discourse facilitates discussion through interactivity. Since all readers are potentially authors online, readers are not limited to interpreting the discourse but also play a key role in creating it. Third, and perhaps most importantly, CMC in general has revolutionized the ability of individuals and organizations to build coalitions and networks. People from various nations have taken advantage of Chiapas95, for example, to develop coalitions of understanding, to educate a global audience about the political situation in Mexico and to organize action against the oppressive forces of the Mexican state.

The Decentered Author

Authors no longer need to use mass production or distribution systems to bring their texts into the public domain. According to Mitra and Cohen, ‘This produces a Babel of texts whose authenticity and reliability are constantly called into question because they do not represent the traditional “authentic”, but centralized sources of information’ (Mitra and Cohen, 1999: 196). The fact that no author is truly authoritative on the Internet means that readers themselves are required to take on the gatekeeping function traditionally reserved for editors. Lacking the assurances of an authorial identity to guide their reading,

Internet readers must measure the truth-value of particular texts and sites. The validity of a particular posting is gauged by its point of view in contrast to conventional journalism, which is deemed credible based on the author's status as a 'professional' and the extent to which he or she avoids or obscures the point of view. If the content of a posting on Chiapas95 reflects support for the Zapatistas or resistance to the policies and practices against which they are fighting, for example, it is likely to be seen as valid because the majority of the members of the listserv share various degrees of support for the Zapatista movement.

The shift in the role of the author is also prompted by the breakdown of opposition between author and reader on the Internet, and the responsibilities traditionally restricted to authors are shifted to or at least shared by the readers. According to Mitra and Cohen:

The author is expected to give the reader the potential to transcend the role of a passive reader to [become] an active reauthor of the text as he or she follows and explores the links offered by the primary author . . . the author is no longer bound to producing a preferred meaning but only offers a large set of potential meanings. (Mitra and Cohen, 1999: 187)

The collection of postings analyzed here demonstrates this lack of focus on the author; in fact, it is often impossible to discern the identity of the author.

This shift away from identity as a means of assessing credibility does not mean that online authors have abandoned assertions of truth. Indeed, many believe the Internet to be the most effective way to disseminate competing versions of the truth espoused by conventional news media. In 1994, when few would publish the EZLN's Declaration of War and explanations of their actions, Internet activists who posted official communiqués, letters and other documents online wanted not only to convey information about events as they unfolded and call for support, but also to correct inaccurate information circulating in mainstream press coverage. The *Washington Post* quoted web activist Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia of San Cristóbal, who said,

Our mission is strictly informative. We use the Internet to inform people abroad of what is happening here, but mainly to counter the government's disinformation. . . . the government circulated a rumor through Notimex [the official news agency] that I had been arrested. Without the Internet I would have had to spend days on the phone . . . to tell everyone that it wasn't true. Now, I just send a message to the bulletin board and the word goes out instantly. (Robberson, 1995)

Ruiz is head of both a local human rights center in Chiapas and the National Commission for Intermediation (CONAI), and during negotiations between the government and the EZLN, he acted as mediator. On 9 and 10 February he sent out several messages detailing military activities, including reports of who had been detained, where troops were located in San Cristóbal and throughout Mexico, as well as which city representatives and local groups had come out in support of the government's actions. A message sent by CONAI declared that Zedillo's actions against the Zapatistas posed a serious threat to the peace process and called on both parties to resume peaceful negotiations:

‘Listen to the voice of civil society, which is committed to the task of seeing our country walk down a path toward increased justice, democracy, and participation.’ The next day, the National Commission for Democracy in Mexico (NCMD) sent out a posting with the heading ‘Testimonies of Torture’, which contained transcripts of statements made by people describing the beatings, sexual assault, forced confessions and other abuses they allegedly endured at the hands of Mexican government officials.

A few postings sought to confirm information conveyed by friends in Mexico. On 11 February, a professor at the Department of Sociology at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, requested corroborative information:

I received a call from a friend early this morning that had received a call from Chiapas saying that serious fighting was occurring in Chiapas this morning. According to this secondhand information the military had begun an offensive and already local hospitals were full. I don't want to be a rumor monger. Can anyone confirm these allegations?

Several postings included communiqués from the members of the EZLN, including a letter from Marcos to the Secretary of State in which he insists that no amount of military action will force the EZLN to surrender. A letter from the Indigenous Clandestine Revolutionary Committee – the leaders of the EZLN – accuses the Mexican government of carrying out a ‘dirty war’ and spells out the details of military attacks in Chiapas: ‘Brothers and sisters, the government of Ernesto Zedillo is killing us. . . . We ask that the people of Mexico and the people of the World do something to stop the war.’

Stories first published in newspapers and transcripts of radio broadcasts appear frequently on Chiapas95. Occasionally stories are infused with commentary pointing out alleged inaccuracies. These postings serve as much to inform listserv members about the situation in Chiapas as they do to alert them to versions of events being reported by the mainstream media. Stories are often posted days after their original publication, which transforms them, in effect, from ‘news’ into cultural artifacts. They help list members to assess the challenge they face in influencing the mainstream discourse about the movement and serve to renew their commitment to this challenge.

While most of the postings during the six-day period under review were directly related to contemporary events in Chiapas, some referred to related news unfolding in the USA. One posting inquired about a rumored Chase Manhattan Bank memo that urged the Mexican government to liquidate the Zapatistas in order to restore investor confidence. Another responded by pointing out links to Internet sites with information about the Chase memo. Users circulated related stories and copies of the memo itself, eventually capturing the attention of the mainstream press. A statement from the bank followed, publicly disassociating the bank from the document and its author, Riodan Reolt – a Chase employee who was eventually fired.

Another posting announced an anti-terrorism act that many perceived as a threat to political mobilization on the Internet:

Two actions have been taken to legalize State repression of the kind of work we are doing, i.e., using cyberspace to mobilize support for the resistance to the Mexican government

repression of those struggling for democracy. The rubric under which these actions are being taken is 'counter terrorism' – a ploy which has been in use for almost 20 years now. Please note that Clinton's executive order (2nd document below) was signed on Feb. 9, 1995, the same day Zedillo ordered the military against the Zapatistas. Believe it or not, absolutely peaceful forms of resistance can be repressed using these means. ('Pending Law . . .', 1995)

The posting included a copy of the Omnibus Counter Terrorism Act, many aspects of which have in fact been instituted piecemeal via other laws and executive orders. Among other things, the Act would grant the president of the US the power to freeze the assets of and bar contributions to unpopular organizations he alone assessed to be 'detrimental to the interests of the United States'. The bill could also be used to prevent judicial review and allow citizens to be arrested and non-citizens deported for actions such as purchasing a fax machine for the Zapatistas. It would also approve warrantless searches of machine-readable information online. Yet the posting accurately asserted that before 10 February, the day of the posting, none of the major newspapers or broadcast networks had covered the pending act.

These few examples demonstrate that the Internet offers information ignored by the mainstream press and, more than mere information, it offers perspectives and contexts, the inclusion of which would be considered 'unprofessional' and beyond what is feasible considering the time and budgetary constraints of conventional journalism. The redefined role of the author and the attenuated distinction online between author and reader result in eclectic content and encourage readers to more fully engage with the material, assessing information by gauging its point of view, seeking independent verification and posting responses, for example. In contrast to professional news organizations, Chiapas95 nowhere asserts the credibility or authority of participants. Members of the group seem already to subscribe to a particular version of truth: Chiapas95 is directed at and compiled by Zapatista supporters, and although dissenting opinions occasionally surface, they are few and far between. Although the postings point to multiple realities concerning events in Chiapas, they all contribute to the view that the Zapatistas are justified in their rebellion against the practices and policies of the Mexican government. Thus, even exaggerated or paranoid accounts have a place in the discourse because they are expressions of the enthusiasm, fear, or frustration tied to the movement, all sentiments, feelings, thoughts that are indeed 'real'. And it is precisely the 'reality' of different perspectives (if not ideologies) on Chiapas95 that makes it so drastically different from 'news'. This point is further demonstrated in the postings of Zapatista-related debates and analyses.

Interactivity

Interactivity is often touted as one of the Internet's most valuable characteristics. Yet because Chiapas95 is a newsgroup created by and for Zapatista supporters, for example, dissenting opinion is rare, often inveighed against, or used as a sort of literary anvil against which to shape more forceful pro-Zapatista rhetoric. Chiapas95 is not an example, if indeed one exists, of the all-inclusive discourse touted by proponents of the democratic potential of the

Internet – although the list does occasionally post lively discussions and interesting arguments both for and against Zedillo and his actions.

A rare, lengthy and articulate defense of Zedillo appeared on 10 February and was reposted several times each day over the next week in various forms along with various rebuttals. Sometimes it is difficult to precisely follow the exchanges, to discern who said what, and at what point in the discussion. For example, one posting opened with the following statement: ‘EZLN chose to become a terrorist organization rather than a political party.’ Without any indication of a change of speaker except the difference in opinion, the next line reads, ‘Why . . . are you against democracy?’ After a page-long defense of the EZLN, we discover the name of the author. But the author offers little more than his own version of events. He does not point to any other sources or documents nor does he provide any explanation of his background or expertise. It is the force of his argument and the vigor with which he defends the EZLN and their supporters that keep readers from simply discounting his argument.

The anti-EZLN posting drew another response the following day. On 12 February, Cleaver posted a lengthy rebuttal, dissecting the arguments and asking for additional information. Cleaver focuses on the following sentence from the original posting: ‘I am not in agreement with everything the Mexican Government is doing, but in this case I understand why it took the decision.’ Cleaver responds, ‘You’re not in agreement? Then why do you repeat and give credence to the lies and deceptive proposals of the PRI [Institutional Revolutionary Party]? By the way . . . what kind of consulting do you do? The term usually refers to consulting to business.’ In another message, Cleaver explains that he posted an extensive exchange between himself and the anti-EZLN poster so that supporters can familiarize themselves with arguments against Zedillo, his policies and actions, and capitalism in general. Cleaver does, in fact, provide persuasive arguments in support of the Zapatistas, but he also reveals his own intolerance for certain perspectives and his commitment to a particular version of truth.

Alliance Building

Most of the postings in this collection aim to mobilize support – postings of counter-information reports as well as ‘discussions’ that demonstrate rhetorical strategy. Postings that specifically call for action demonstrate the ways the Internet strengthens the ability of individuals and organizations to build coalitions and networks. Zapatista supporters are using computer networks as a political tool, organizing with less regard for geography than has been possible for traditional national political movements. It is just as feasible for the EZLN to gain support from people in Australia as from people in near-by countries such as Guatemala. In fact, it may be easier to gain support in Australia since more people there have access to the Internet (CommerceNet Research Center, 2000). Postings on Chiapas95 predominantly originate from Mexico and the USA; some, however, are from as far away as Brazil, Italy, the Netherlands and Australia. While many organizations allied with the Zapatistas focus on local aspects of the struggle, such as indigenous land rights, farm labor laws, health

care and education in the Chiapas jungle, most view the struggle more universally, framing it in terms of human rights, anti 'free trade', pro-democracy, anti-capitalism and so on.

Calls to action can include announcement of a rally in Madrid, a plea to complete an anti-Zedillo form letter, urgings to join protests at Mexican embassies, or requests enlisting general support. Shortly after Zedillo announced the end of the ceasefire, the Austin Committee of Solidarity with Chiapas and Mexico, the group that runs Chiapas95 and is active in a variety of related projects on the Internet, distributed information about Zedillo's move against the rebels and called for a 'massive mobilization against the government's actions'. The organization announced a local meeting and encouraged 'Those who receive these messages outside of Austin [to] take what steps they can to attempt to duplicate the effective actions of last January.'¹

A protest march in San Francisco sponsored by the National Commission for Democracy in Mexico and Food First was announced on both news groups several times on 9 and 10 February. NCMD is a network of local groups recognized by the EZLN for coordinating support for their cause in Mexico. Food First, on the other hand, is a group dedicated to eliminating the injustices that cause hunger. Under the subject heading 'Chiapas Internet Press Kit', one posting lists the Internet address to send messages 'in order to achieve maximum diffusion of news/announcements about the current situation in Chiapas'. It also lists an Internet site where one can obtain the email addresses of many US newspapers and the members of the US House of Representatives.

Such mobilization efforts demonstrate that the Mexican government faces much more than peasant guerrillas in Chiapas. Just days after Zedillo broke the ceasefire, for example, members of human rights groups and others from around the world descended upon San Cristóbal to witness the actions of the military. The swift action on the part of these witnesses mostly came in response to postings such as those analyzed here, circulated via the Internet (Castells, 1997; Cleaver, 1998).

Discussion

By strengthening the resources of democratic culture, transnational links made possible through CMC are creating grassroots globalization; more opportunity exists to collectively solve problems common to societies everywhere – problems manifested locally, such as those related to human rights, environmental issues and peace (Appadurai, 1996; Downing, 1989). To Fredrick, the promise of computer networks is that their content is neither controlled by institutional agents like owners and editors, nor regulated by the norms of professional journalism. He sees CMC as essential in resisting big money and powerful political interests which have pushed civil society to the edge, leaving many citizens with no communications media of their own (Fredrick, 1992).

This study demonstrates that CMC's relative lack of institutional control is just one of many factors that contribute to grassroots globalization. The reconfiguration of notions of proximity amounts to an absence of geographical

constraint and facilitates international participation and alliance building among supporters of the movement. The decentered author and interactivity encourage online users to engage with material more critically and to add their voices to the discourse by posting material. Groups and individuals have access to one another online and are empowered by the opportunity to establish alliances, to reinforce their beliefs and to share knowledge and information. This is not to say the Internet necessarily generates support for the movement or that all elements of the movement and its networks of support are within reach of the Internet. But CMC has certainly strengthened the movement by facilitating communication first among members of the movement and its supporters; second, among members of the network of EZLN supporters worldwide; and third, among the Zapatista network and those who support sympathetic but officially unrelated causes.

Curran and Park (2000) refer to the Zapatistas and their supporters' use of cyberspace to 'win international sympathy for their cause' as an example of how 'peripheral visions' can reach the center through new lines of global communication. They suggest that new supranational media are opening up innovative lines of communication among groups, granting people access to information and ideas that those in authority have tried to suppress. We can see from this analysis that it is not simply new lines of communication but also the nature of the communication taking place – demanding, confrontational, interactive – that contributes to the Zapatistas' success in building an international support network.

The Zapatistas challenge activists and intellectuals within Mexico and around the world to imagine the Zapatista cause in relation to their own lives and struggles, hoping to inspire people to unite to bring about a new reality. And CMC allows the world to respond to the challenge with various degrees of dedication and forms of involvement. Castells writes, 'The Zapatistas' ability to communicate with the world, and with Mexican society, and to capture the imagination of people and of intellectuals propelled a local, weak insurgent group to the forefront of world politics' (Castells, 1997: 79).

The Zapatistas' efforts to engender international support, combined with CMC's ability to facilitate alliances through dialog, simultaneously unified many groups and individuals concerned about the negative impact of globalization while fragmenting the few in power – namely Zedillo and other members of the Mexican political and business elite. Alejandra Moreno Toscano believes that the novelty of the EZLN movement lies in the way various outlets of information emerged to offer a range of interpretations of events. She writes:

The flow of public information reaching society, through the media, and through new technological means, was much greater than what conventional communication strategies could control. Marcos gave his opinion, the Church gave its opinion, and independent journalists, NGOs, and intellectuals, from the forest, from Ciudad de Mexico, from the world's financial and political capitals, all gave their own opinion. These alternative opinions, made possible by open media, or by closed media that felt the pinch from open media, called into question forms of construction of 'the truth', and induced, within the political regime as well, a variety of opinions. The view from power became fragmented. (Moreno Toscano, 1996: 73)

Indeed, some of the most promising and innovative uses of CMC are exhibited in the Zapatista movement. The alternative opinions it gives voice to open media to various perspectives and, as Moreno Toscano points out, call into question the truth generated through the traditional news media and fragment the power of the Mexican government to enjoy exclusive control over the ability to define the Mexican nation.

Note

1. The 'effective action' referred to is the support for the Zapatistas exhibited by individuals and organizations from all over the world just after the initial uprising. Many believe letters and faxes sent to Zedillo and visits to Chiapas by members of non-governmental organizations and other such tactics swayed Zedillo away from military action and toward negotiation.

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