Now is the time for hope to organize itself and to walk forward in the valleys and the cities. And on the computer networks. CONNECT.


by Michael Hoechsmann

Changing technologies bring with them a succession of new cultural practices and social relationships. The Internet, originally developed by the U.S. Army as an affordable satellite communications technology, has now been adopted by social activists as a rapid and effective means of organizing international solidarity. The horizontal power relationships of the Internet, which allow both sending and receiving the same opportunity to transmit and receive messages, have created the conditions for the emergence of a global network of information distribution. The implications of this new technology for people struggling for social justice and democracy worldwide are enormous.

In the current context of a globalizing economy, it is becoming clear that the power of the sovereign nation state has diminished and that global money markets and multinational corporations have unprecedented power to affect social policy across most of the world's borders. Given these global conditions where the push and pull of regional political and economic developments can be felt worldwide, it is increasingly important that social activists begin to think in terms of horizontal international solidarity, even in the post-imperial global North, where for the balance of the century the Keynesian social contract has helped to localize much of the struggle for social change within the parameters of the nation state.

While the development of any new medium of communication always brings with it both utopian aspirations and dystopian nightmares, in the early going at least, the Internet appears to be fulfilling its utopian promise. If the fax machine, another recent addition to the communications toolkit, can cut its teeth in Tiananmen Square, the activist implications of the Internet have been most forcefully released in Chiapas, Mexico through the Zapatista National Liberation Army. After a brief armed uprising during January 1994 in opposition to the consolidation of NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), the local political actions of the Zapatistas in Chiapas have been largely limited to crisis management with the many peasant communities that were occupied by the army and some limited negotiations with the Mexican government. On a broader level, the Zapatistas have succeeded in forcing their political agenda indigenous rights and social justice in general onto the national stage, to great extent thanks to the international exposure their claims have had on the Internet.

Despite the efforts of the Mexican government to localize the conflict, some of the widespread discontent of the Mexican populace in the wake of the disasters effects of NAFTA has coalesced around Zapatismo.
The Zapatistas have turned a new page in guerrilla warfare, demonstrating the effectiveness of minimal low-intensity armed conflict combined with high intensity media activism. Dressed in their trademark ski masks, the Zapatistas made sure that what little time that they had during their armed uprising would make good media copy. The uprising took place on January 1, 1994 just as the Mexican ruling class was sleeping off the effects of celebrating the new dawn of NAFTA. Some of the graffiti put up by the Zapatistas was in English for the benefit of international press corps. Most significant, however, was the rapid deployment by the Zapatistas of press releases on the Internet. The first posting, made on Jan. 1, was translated the same day and posted on bulletin boards worldwide. Like many subsequent postings, it was published in the Mexican daily La Jornada and made available to international newspapers. After the one-sided, carefully choreographed and televised Gulf War, the immediate availability of the postings from the EZLN constituted an important tool in the process of building the globe. As communications theorist DeeDee Fekete put it: "This was war news in real time" (1995).

The Zapatistas now come to plot strategy and take refuge from the hostile advances of the Mexican army deep in the Lacandon jungle of south-eastern Mexico. In dialogue with their compañeros, the subcomandante Marcos, the political and spiritual leader of the EZLN, regularly issues his political/philosophical musings to national and international audiences. Marcos has become a respected figure—despite (and because of) his urban/democratic ways. As the story goes, Marcos writes on a lap-top computer, plugged into the cigarette lighter of a truck, and the disks are smuggled out of the jungle into the waiting hands of contacts who post the material on the Internet (The Globe and Mail, 1995). In his postings, he is equally at home quoting from Shakespeare, Cervantes, the Beatles or from Mexican soap operas. He demonstrates his historical and political survey in long open letters to foreign intellectuals such as John Berger and Eduardo Galeano. He recounts oral fables—some presumably gathered from his Mayan hosts—and he issues sharp press releases as the events require him. His semi-mythic status has not been broken despite the discovery of his identity, one Rafael Guillen, a philosophy grad and son of a Salvation Army officer from northern Mexico. Approval of these details, the Mexican government gleefully, but—as it now appears—prematurely, announced that "the Marcos myth is over."

Subcomandante Marcos, whom Guillermo Gomez-Pena describes as "the quintessential postmodern guerrilla," has an after ego writing partner, Guatuko the bearded, who keeps him on his toes. The Sandinista Panza to his Don Quijote or vice versa, "Don Durito" of the Lacandon, errant knight for whom Sartrean existentialism is shield bearer, jokes fun at Marcos' writing style.

Three points in a single paragraph, three dense points similar to a pozol (corn meal). This is the style of the Sup: murkly concepts, and difficult ideas to understand and more difficult to digest (Subcomandante Marcos, 1995).

Among many other matters, Marcos displays a keen interest in media analysis. He speaks of the tautological way in which power reproduces itself, "ad infinitum in that bouncing of images from one mirror to another," and he points out that while the image may say "the well being of your family, it shows scarcity, unemployment and the fall of economic indicators" EZNL, 1995b.

In an open letter to John Berger, Marcos describes the photo of Alvaro, a dead young combatant of the Chiapas uprising. Marcos discusses the possible multiple readings of this photo which can allow some foreign viewers to distance themselves from the problems "over there" in strife torn Chiapas.

This did not happen here... this is Chiapas, Mexico, a historical accident, untold, forgettable, and... far away (EZLN, 1995b).

Marcos points out that it may strike some other viewers as an indictment.

I am Alvaro, I am an indigenous, I am a soldier. I took up arms against being forgotten. Look at me. Something is happening in the closing of the 20th century that is forcing us to die in order to have a voice, to be seen, to live (EZLN, 1995b).

What is present in both readings, according to Marcos, is "the new division of the world, with the democratization of death and misery, with the dictatorship of power; and
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The Zapatistas set out to play a strategy game and take refuge from the hostility of the Mexican army deep in the Lacandon jungle of southeast Mexico. In dialogue with the Zapatistas, Subcomandante Marcos, the political and spiritual leader of the EZLN, regularly issues his political philosophical musings to national and international audiences. Marcos has become a respected figure, despite (and because of) his unorthodox ways. As the story goes, Marcos writes on a laptop computer, plugged into the cigarette lighter of a truck, and the disks are smuggled out of the jungle into the waiting hands of contacts who post the material on the Internet. (The Globe and Mail, 1995). In his postings, he is equally at home quoting from Shakespeare, Cervantes, the Beatles or from Mexican soap operas. He demonstrates his historical and political savvy in long open letters to foreign intellectuals such as John Berger and Eduard Galeano. He reconects oral fables—some presumably gathered from his Mayan hosts—and he issues sharp press releases on the events despite them. His semi-mythic status has not been broken despite the discovery of his identity, one Rafael Guillen, a philosophy grad and son of a salesman from southern Mexico. Approval of these details, the Mexican government głąflets, but—as it now appears—prematurely, announced that “the Maruoso myth is over.”

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money, with the regionalization of pain and despair, with the internationalization of arrogance and the market." (EZN, 1995b).

While Marcos, the postmodern guerrilla leader whom Deedee Balcellis calls "the first super-hero of the art" (1995), was an international symbol for the EZN with his reflective and reflective pose, he has also gained the attention of the Mexican government and the international media. The Washington Post, Newsweek and CNN have all commented on the effectiveness of the Internet by the Zapatistas. Jose Angel Gurria, the Mexican foreign minister, stated that the Zapatista rebellion was a "war of info, of written words, an Internet war" (The Globe and Mail, 1995). In 1995, the major Internet provider in Mexico, went down for awhile, fueling charges of conspiracy. This test to the activist potential of the Internet proved move, however, as the Zapatistas lost little power finding alternate routes for its postings, "proving to many that it is not easy to censor the Internet" (Balcellis, 1995). As well as having its postings distributed on a number of solidarity lists, the Zapatistas have their own homepage, Ya Basta (Enough Already), where net surfers can even catch a glimpse of the elusive Marcos (http://www.peak.org/~justin/cdtn/czln.html).

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Birrell, 1995). This leakage sparked international outrage which helped to force the Mexican government to negotiate with the EZN and fueled domestic support for their cause. In the US the issue was picked up by both Republicans and Ross Perot to put pressure on the Clinton administration, and it prompted Chase Manhattan to fire the memo’s author, Birden Boett. The significance of this series of events for the Zapatistas cannot be overstated; they have now become a recognized political force in Mexico. As one Cornell professor said it was all "the result of one small act of guerrilla research."

Given the dramatic potential of the Internet for social activists organizing around social, economic issues worldwide, it comes as no surprise that there are attempts to make some restrictions. Groups have raised international awareness and the potential of the Guerrillas to oppose the NAFTA negotiations. In the US, for example, the Internet has been used to organize protests and disseminate information about the negotiations. The Zapatistas have also used the Internet to disseminate their message and mobilize support. However, the Mexican government has attempted to block access to the Internet in an attempt to silence the Zapatistas. This has sparked international condemnation and further galvanized the Zapatistas' support. The Internet has become a powerful tool for social activists, enabling them to organize and mobilize on a global scale. However, the struggle to control the Internet continues, as governments and corporations seek to limit its potential for social and political change. 

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According to Ronfeldt, the "heaviest users are..." proposals...centered...social activists who deal with..."environmental, consumer, labor, immigration, racial and gender-based issues." While Ronfeldt may seem to overstate the actual political implications of the Internet for social activism, he appears to believe that the political power relationships of the Internet privilege grassroots organizational structures. The intention of his brief was to contrast these structural considerations and to develop more effective uses of the Internet for his employers.

The most significant contribution to Chiquis solidarity efforts in the US was a telephone call to a Chase Manhattan Bank manager which was forwarded by Alexander Cockburn to the limited leadership of Counterpart and then made widely available over the Internet. The Chase memo, dated January 17, 1995, stated that the Mexican government "will have to eliminate the Zapatistas to demonstrate their effective control of the national territory and security policy" (in Neel

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While Marcos, the postmodern guerrilla leader whom Deedee Ballick calls "the first super-hero of the sort" (1995), won international support for the EZLN with his reflective and reflective prose, he has also gained the attention of the Mexican government and the international media. The Washington Post, New York and CNN have all commented on the effects of the Internet by the Zapatistas. Jose Angel Gurria, the Mexican foreign minister, stated that the Zapatistas rebellion was a "war of ink, of written words, an Internet war" (The Globe and Mail, 1995). In Mexico, the major Internet provider in Mexico, went down for awhile, fueling charges of conspiracy. This test to the activist potential of the Internet proved minor, however, as the Zapatistas had little problem finding alternate routes for its postings, "proofing to many that it is not easy to censor the Internet" (Ballick, 1995). As well as having its postings distributed on a number of solidarity lists, the Zapatistas have their own home page, Ya Basta (Enough Already), where net surfers can even catch a glimpse of the elusive Marcos (http://www.peak.org/~justin/cdln/ezln.html).

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Given the dramatic potential of the Internet for social activists organizing around social and economic issues worldwide, it comes as no surprise that there are attempts being made to enforce some restrictions. Greatly exaggerated reports on the dissemination of pornography are an attempt to begin to control the flow of information through the Internet. Philip Elmer-Dewitt, a Time magazine editor, admitted in an interview published in Harper's Magazine that it is a legal activity on child pornogra phy which carried a great upsurge last summer was produced under the constraints of strict deadlines and that he in ered in including some criticism of the study it was based on. This arti

groups and suggested that the Internet had provided immediate international pressure on the Mexican government to negotiate with the Zapatistas and not simply to defeat them, by force. Ronfeldt makes some compelling arguments for the activist potential of the Internet.

"The information revolution... disrupts and erodes the hierarchies around which institutions are normally designed. It diffuses power, often to the benefit of what may be considered weaker, smaller actors" (Ronfeldt, 1995).

According to Ronfeldt, the "weakest among" are "progressive, center-left, and social activists" who deal with "human rights, peace, environmental, consumer, labor, immigration, racial and gender based issues."

While Ronfeldt may seem to overstate the actual political implications of the Internet has had for social activists, he appears to believe that the horizontal power relationships of the Internet privilege grass-roots organizational structures. The intention of his brief was to contrast these structural considerations and to develop more effective uses of the Internet for his employers.

The most significant contribution to Chiapas solidarity efforts in the US was the disclosure of a Chase Manhattan Bank memo which was exposed by Alexander Cockburn to the limited readership of Counterpunch and then made widely available over the Internet. The Chase memo, dated January 12, 1994, stated that "the Mexican government will have to eliminate the Zapatista to demonstrate their effective control of the national territory and security policy" (in Neil, 1995).

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