



Revolution GOES GLOBAL: ZAPATISTAS ON THE NET

by Michael Hoechsmann

**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.**

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 infallible wartime communications technology, has now been adapted by social activists as a rapid and effective means of organizing international solidarity. The horizontal power relationships of the internet, which allow both senders and receivers 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 be in close contact across international boundaries, 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 forebodings, 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, cut its activist teeth in Tiananmen Square, the activist implications of the internet have been most forcefully rehearsed in Chiapas, Mexico by the EZLN (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 uprooted 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 a 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 disastrous 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 painted in San Cristobal 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 turn-around for insurgent forces around the globe. As communications theorist Deedee Halleck put it: "This was war news in real time" (1995).

The Zapatistas continue 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 his pet beetle Durito, Subcommandante 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/or because of) his unorthodox 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 wait-

ing 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 Eduardo Galeano. He recounts oral fables—some presumably gathered from his Mayan hosts—and he issues sharp press releases as the events require 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 northern Mexico. Apprised of these details, the Mexican government gleefully, but—as it now appears—prematurely, announced that "the Marcos myth is over."

Subcommandante Marcos, whom Guillermo Gomez-Pena describes as "the quintessential postmodern guerrilla," has an alter-ego writing partner, Durito the beetle, who keeps him on his toes. The Sancho Panza to his Don Quixote or vice-versa, "Don Durito of the Lacandon, errant knight for whom SupMarcos is shield-bearer," pokes fun at Marcos' writing style:

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

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, remedial, forgettable, and . . . far away (EZLN, 1995b).

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

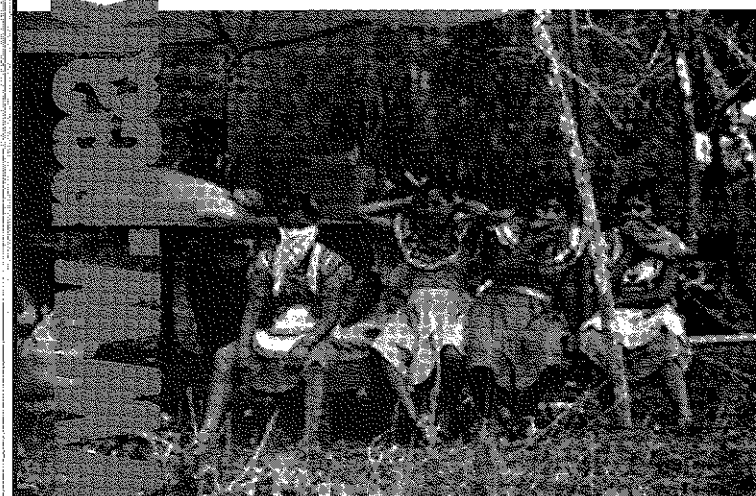
I am Alvaro, I am an indigenous, I am a soldier, I took up arms against being forgotten. Look. Listen. Something is happening in the closing of the 20th century that is forcing us to die in order to have a voice, to be seen, to live (EZLN, 1995b).

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

WWW.peak.org/~justin/ezln/ezln.html



images from ezln web site



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

While Marcos, the postmodern guerrilla hacker whom Deedee Halleck calls "the first super-hero of the net" (1995), woos international support for the EZLN with his reflective and reflexive prose, 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 effective use of the internet by the Zapatistas. Jose Angel Gurria, the Mexican foreign minister, stated that the Zapatista rebellion was a "war of ink, of written words, an Internet war" (*The Globe and Mail*, 1995). Laneta, 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, "proving to many that it is not easy to censor the internet" (Halleck, 1995). As well as having their 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/ezln/ezln.html>).

David Ronfeldt, a researcher for the military-industrial Rand corporation, wrote a major brief on the use of the internet by activist

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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. States Ronfeldt:

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

(In Jason Wehling, 1995).

According to Ronfeldt, the "heaviest users" 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 the internet has had for social activists, he appears to believe that the horizontal power relationships of the internet privilege grassroots organizational structures. The intention of his brief was to confront 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* but then made widely available over the internet. The Chase memo, dated January 13, 1994, stated that "the [Mexican] government will have to eliminate the Zapatistas to demonstrate their effective control of the national territory and security policy" (in Neil

Birrell, 1995). This leakage sparked international outrage which helped to force the Mexican government to negotiate with the EZLN 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, Riordan Roett. The significance of this series of events for the Zapatistas cannot be overstated; they have now become a recognized political force in Mexico. As Harry Cleaver states, 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 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 the cover story on child pornography which caused a great uproar last summer was produced under the constraints of strict deadlines and that he erred in not including some criticism of the study it was based on. This arti-

have raised national and international awareness of the plight of the poor Mayan communities in Chiapas. The brazen exploitation of the Maya by Chiapas landowners goes unmatched anywhere in Mexico. With the trend to large-scale agri-business further stimulated by the passing of NAFTA, it was only the dramatic and courageous efforts of the Zapatistas that alerted the world to this relatively isolated region. While the carefully staged armed uprising brought the global press corp running and momentarily fixed the spotlight of global media attention on the EZLN, it was the ongoing and sustained use of the internet which has allowed the Zapatistas to advance their political agenda and to block disinformation efforts. As a communications tool for activists located in far-flung corners of the world but united in the struggle for social justice in the brave new global economy, the internet is a powerful new technology. In thanking his many supporters around the world, Marcos stated that those playing even a small role on behalf of the Zapatistas can say: "I struggled for Mexico at the end of the 20th century" (Wehling, 1995).

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cle was in turn cited by the US Senator Grassley without his questioning its veracity in his submission to Congress (*Harper's Magazine*, 1995). US Bill S314, the Communications Decency Act, was proposed to the US Congress to prohibit "obscene, lewd, lascivious, filthy or indecent" messages on the internet. If passed, this Act would give authorities the powers to impose fines or jail terms and to shut down internet sources who disobey it (Wehling, 1995). It appears that the moral panic surrounding the distribution of pornography is the thin edge of the wedge of internet control. Once the mechanisms are put into place to regulate the internet, then other political forces can come into play. The US Congress is considering an Omnibus Counterterrorism Act, a bill which would give the government and the President executive powers to detain and deport "aliens" without criminal charges and without having to disclose any information in support of their actions. It would give the government the right to freeze the assets of organizations "detrimental to the interests of the US" and would prohibit US citizens from supporting the non-violent, legal activities of any group which has been labeled as a "terrorist organization" (EFFector Online, 1995). US citizens who support so-called "terrorist organizations" would be subject to fines and prison terms. The implications of this far-reaching legislation are enormous, not only for the rights and freedoms of US citizens and those present on US soil, but also for the political future of small insurgent groups such as the Zapatistas.

The actions of Subcommandante Marcos and the EZLN

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