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# Civil Society, the Internet, and the Zapatistas

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Maria Elena Martinez-Torres

The roots of today's globalized economy can be found in the technological revolution of the 1970s and 1980s, which provided the high-tech information technologies crucial for transforming the processes and organization of production. A paradox has emerged from the revolution in communications: the same technology that has taken world capitalism to a new stage of development—corporate globalization—has also provided a significant boost for anti-corporate and anti-globalization movements. In this context, we can examine the Internet's role in the Zapatista movement—a movement, while based locally in the Mexican state of Chiapas, that also has international aspirations, dimensions and impacts.

On the first day of combat on January 1, 1994, the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) virtually transformed itself from a conventional to an informational guerrilla movement. By the ninth day of battle, then-President Carlos Salinas de Gortari accepted a ceasefire despite his troop's military superiority. Information flow out of the guerrilla zone was fueling a level of international protest and a consequent loss of investor confidence in Mexico that went well beyond the threshold the Mexican government could tolerate.

This happened despite a military cordon, which prevented the press from entering combat areas. The primary means of information flow came via the Internet, allowing the international media to report what their reporters could not see, as local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) connected to the Net sent out hundreds of eyewitness reports. That information also flowed to members of a rapidly congealing transnational solidarity network, which today is a part of the broadening and thickening of civil society inside Mexico, in the Mexican diaspora outside the country, and among anti-globalization activists around the world.

The transition from a conventional guerrilla war to an informational war was possible because information technologies had already created new spaces of discussion and diffusion of information through electronic networks. The entrance of civil society into these new spaces is changing the nature of social conflict and transforming information, already this era's most valuable commodity. The phenomenon of social movements on the Internet has grown to the point where Rand Corporation consultants, under contract to the U.S. Department of Defense, have identified "net warfare," carried out by decentralized,

non-hierarchical social movements, as a principal security threat to intelligence and military establishments.

The Internet has allowed global civil society to form cyber-communities defined by common interests, and to organize themselves across borders. The personal computer revolution and electronic mail form a somewhat democratized technology that permits information exchange and coordinated action in dispersed, non-hierarchical networks. Environmentalists, human rights activists, indigenous activists, and many other social movements are now being strengthened by their growing ability to communicate via the Internet and, more recently, the World Wide Web. Harry Cleaver argues that these computer-linked global social movements are challenging both national and supra-national policy-making institutions.

The paradox of this technological revolution is that while on the one hand technological development itself is ever farther from the reach of the masses, on the other hand the spread of these technologies has made powerful tools available to more people and organizations than ever before. L. Dery describes the computer as “a Janus machine, an engine of liberation and an instrument of repression.” Janus, of course, was a two-faced god. As the center of corporate power moves offshore and loses national identity, transnational social movements, made possible in part by the Internet, remain one of the few arenas where significant counter-hegemonic power might be developed and exercised.

The Zapatistas in particular—using a quasi performance strategy—have transformed the battlefield into a stage, where they use symbols, characters and narrative to capture the imagination and creativity of a growing audience around the world. Within Mexico their innovative use of the media has converted their struggle into a war of images, words, legitimation, and moral authority, which has provoked a strong echo in Mexican civil society. The Zapatistas have sparked a series of related social movements that now include a large portion of civil society in Mexico, with substantial participation elsewhere in Latin America, the United States, Europe, and even in Asia and Africa.

**T**he Zapatista support movement successfully stopped the shooting war in 1994 because the Mexican government is susceptible to adverse publicity in the U.S., a by-product of economic restructuring. In the larger Third World, structural adjustment programs imposed by the World Bank and other supra-national bodies have stripped the nation state of its power to regulate the domestic economy, and free trade policies have reduced it to the level of a beggar pleading for foreign investment.

Nowhere was this truer than in the Mexico of Salinas. Ex-President Salinas created a temporary “bubble economy,” based on a massive inflow of speculative investments in high interest government bonds, which via a spiraling trade deficit and debt, allowed the middle and working classes to enjoy a multitude of imported consumer goods for a while. Yet as easy as it was to lure investors in, any loss of investor confidence could spiral into a panic and a run on Mexican bonds, potentially causing a collapse of the system.

In effect the Mexican economy was an enormous confidence game. Since confidence is basically created by the manipulation of information, it can be

destroyed in exactly the same way. The Mexican government was more sensitive to what CNN broadcast in the U.S. than it was to domestic dissent, because the U.S. is where the investors are. By the same token, copycat protests in 1994 (spread via the Internet rather than CNN) in front of Mexican consulates in the U.S., Europe and Japan were perhaps more effective at scaring the government than much larger protests in the Zocalo plaza outside government buildings in Mexico City. Thus in the New World Order, where information is the most valuable commodity, that same information can be much more powerful than bullets.

The Zapatistas were able to turn information—essentially the scaring of investors and the mobilizing of international support—into a key tool to force a ceasefire and bring the government to the negotiating table. The Zapatistas had learned important lessons from the previous Latin American guerrilla experiences—crushed either militarily or by elections—and remain convinced of civil society’s key role in guerrilla warfare. During the opening confrontation between the EZLN and the Mexican army in January 1994, 124 Zapatistas and 50 government soldiers fell on the battlefield. The battle lasted for nine days, until the pressure of civil society and international opinion stopped the fighting.

Various Zapatista characteristics predisposed them toward being effective using a civil society strategy and on the Internet stage. The Zapatistas differ from earlier revolutionary movements, especially in neighboring Central America. They have, for example, a relatively non-hierarchical form of organization. They have more of a Gramscian style than earlier revolutionaries, focusing more on strengthening civil society than on the force of arms. Sub-Comandante Marcos has said, “it is civil society that must transform Mexico—we are only a small part of that civil society, the armed part—our role is to be the guarantors of the political space that civil society needs.” To fully understand the Zapatistas, we must explore their historical origins.

In January 1994, the day the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect, the Zapatistas emerged from the Lacandón jungle area to seize towns in the populous Chiapas highlands. Yet their origins date back well before NAFTA. The EZLN was forged in communities of colonists in remote jungle areas on poor rainforest soils. A new sort of community had been taking shape in Eastern Chiapas, in the isolated settlements of the Lacandón jungle. These communities were different both from the *Mestizo* (or mixed) communities to the North where some had come from, and from the Chiapas Highlands from whence the indigenous majority came. For the latter, they were no longer in monolingual or bilingual (*Tzotzil*/Spanish, *Tojolabal*/Spanish, etc.) villages, but rather mixed together with indigenous people of different language groups and *Mestizo* as well. As for the *Mestizos*, they found themselves living with indigenous people. All faced the same enemies: cattle ranchers, forest rangers, corrupt bureaucrats, poor soils, and declining prices. Displaced peoples, driven from their places of origin by diverse manifestations of capitalism and Mexican government policies, joined in a struggle for survival against perceived injustices.

Various ideological elements can be seen in the early organizations they formed in the jungle and in the EZLN itself. First, there is anti-*cacique*-ism (*cacique*

is the word Mexicans use to refer to village strongmen, or to strongmen in general), which led to a certain rejection of top-down authority, and a critique of vanguardist movements. There is also the consensus style of decision-making, traditional in many indigenous cultures in Mexico. Then there are the elements of liberation theology contributed by the Catholic and Protestant churches, and the revolutionary politics brought by fugitives from the generation of 1968 (Marcos may have been one of them). The Zapatistas, not surprisingly then, have a humanistic and revolutionary but also anti-vanguardist ideology, having repeatedly stated that they do not want state power.

What can we say about identity amongst the Zapatistas? Their own statements, as well as writings about them, seem contradictory at first. On the one hand they use the language of class struggle, even as they renounce earlier vanguardist formulations in their Gramscian appeals to civil society. They go to great lengths to appeal to the poor of all Mexico, regardless of ethnicity, yet on the other hand they cloak themselves in ethnicity, in Indianness, though, strangely, they seem to count *Mestizos* as one of several indigenous ethnic groups of which their rank-and-file are composed.

The inhabitants of the Zapatista zone invented a new multiple identity, a hybrid of Mexicanness, Indianness and *Mestizaje*. *Mestizo* is given weight equal to each Indian ethnicity, yet all is cloaked within and justified by the Constitution of Mexico and international law. In the new kind of community that arose in the Lacandón jungle, identity was both ethnic and class based. In the mono- or bilingual indigenous communities of the Highlands, indigenous people did reflect upon their ethnicity, but only in a narrow sense, as “*Tzotzil*,” or “*Tzeltal*,” for example. But once uprooted and forced to move to a foreign space, much as with uprooted, diasporic peoples everywhere, they were forced to confront their own ethnicity more directly. In this process they gave indigeness new importance, even while re-inventing its meaning and merging it with elements brought by their new neighbors and comrades in struggle.

Running contrary to a global trend toward ethnic conflict, the Zapatistas proved to be inclusive rather than exclusive. An inclusive form of social movement had not been predicted as a reaction to the globalized economy by analysts of globalization. As the most negatively affected zones shifted from exploitation to irrelevance in the economic panorama, most expected widespread violence and disorder, with conflict arising along ethnic lines. Clearly the EZLN did not fit this expectation, though many movements elsewhere, such as in Bosnia or Guatemala, do. This difference stems precisely from the jungle’s hybrid identity.

This exceptional and perhaps unlikely movement has echoed powerfully in the broader civil society—locally, nationally and internationally. Precisely because of their inclusive rather than exclusive message, they have been able to reach out not only to the socially marginalized across borders and through new media, but have also found a powerful echo among the middle classes in Mexico and beyond.

**A**lthough electronic networks have existed in Mexico since the 1980s, linking the government, the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM)

and the Technological Institute of Monterrey, there was no access for broader civil society until the early 1990s. The Institute for Global Communication (IGC), a non-profit organization based in San Francisco, and a Mexican counterpart established a new connection in Mexico in 1989. After passing various legal barriers, they created PaxMex using the governmental Telecom organization in Mexico, with a node in San Francisco. This jury-rigged system lasted until 1993, and was the predecessor of the electronic non-governmental organization (NGO) network called *La Neta*. In Mexican slang *La Neta* means “the real story,” and the name is thus a play on words, as *Neta* sounds like the English “Net.”

*La Neta* originated in the attempts by NGOs to find an efficient but cheaper way to communicate with their international counterparts than by fax. Several NGOs were involved, with a key developmental role played by the women’s group *Mujer a Mujer*, *Red Interinstitucional* and *Servicios Informativos Procesados* (SIPRO). In the beginning of 1991 SIPRO invited 25 organizations to donate a small amount of money to buy a telephone line and they established a local network as an NGO itself, rather than a private company. This was the direct precursor to *La Neta*.

The fledgling *La Neta* got a grant from the *Fundación de Apoyo a la Comunidad* (which no longer exists) of the Mexican episcopate (the official Catholic office) in 1992. These funds allowed the acquisition of a local server that permitted *La Neta* to become its own node. PaxMex and the local NGO network merged, giving birth to the Mexican NGO electronic network, *La Neta*. Since 1993 *La Neta* has been part of the Association for Progressive Communicators (APC) linked to PeaceNet.

The number of users grew during the early 1990s. Eventually, *La Neta*’s node was insufficient for the quantity of mail traffic. *La Neta* then reached an agreement with UNAM to use the university node for *La Neta*’s storage and traffic. In February 1994 the Ford Foundation provided grant money and the program grew substantially. The node was then moved to a private Internet provider in Mexico City. Today there are many support staff in Mexico City, and some technical support around the country.

Before *La Neta* was born, the group *Convergencia de Organismos Civiles por la Democracia* surveyed many Mexican institutions about their interest in electronic connections. Among those organizations that responded were various organizations in Chiapas. In 1993, I served as the *La Neta* representative in Chiapas, with the task of getting local NGOs and popular organizations “on line.” I gave workshops about *La Neta* to the *Convergencia* organizations and other NGOs and research institutes in the area. I connected a dozen organizations in the cities of San Cristóbal de las Casas and Comitán. These included the Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Center for Human Rights, among others who later played key roles in the January 1994 information flow that stopped the Mexican federal army in its tracks.

In the early years *La Neta* was the key connection to the exterior, via PeaceNet. People would take information from PeaceNet and then forward it to other networks such as the university-based Usenet, and to many lists and conferences

in other networks. Since 1994 a large set of lists, discussions, and conferences about Mexico–Chiapas have been established on almost all the networks.

On the World Wide Web the first home page with Zapatista information was created in the spring of 1994 by a graduate student of literature at Swarthmore College, Justin Paulson. After that, many Zapatista pages were created, with more and more information, easily accessible, with color and graphics. The easy navigation feature of the WWW permits multiple links to other homepages, thus allowing access to a huge set of information.

Harry Cleaver tells us that with the creation of *La Neta* a space was “open to appropriation by those whose own forms of organization were pre-disposed to building strength through linkages with others.” The Zapatistas were indeed pre-disposed. Based on this innovative informational interaction people or organized groups were able to extend their struggles into cyberspace and exchange information and experiences with similar groups around the world. He points out how difficult it is for corporations and states to manage this new composition of social relations based in cyberspace. This is one of the characteristics of cyberspace that parallels the Zapatista movement. There are other similarities as well.

The parallels to the structure of the Internet may have given the Zapatista movement an edge in that medium. The Zapatista structure is a non-hierarchical network, a horizontal organization with a hybrid identity, hidden behind masks. On the Internet, which is non-hierarchical and horizontal in structure, instead of masks we find usernames—pseudonyms that represent people, many of whom may be marginalized socially when off-line. The Zapatista movement has a strong appeal to the most marginalized elements in Mexican society, including the indigenous and the poor, but also activists, rockers, punks, students, gays, and so forth.

The strategy of Zapatista communication and participation resembles the Internet. The Zapatistas open spaces for free discussion of controversial issues, organizing open forums, conventions, national and international gatherings, all with a free-form methodology where all have equal right to express themselves. This resembles the open spaces on the Internet for free discussion of controversial issues, such as conferences, chat rooms, and listservs, which also use a free-form methodology where all have equal right to express themselves.

Che Guevara believed that the function of informing the world is as important for a guerrilla army as fighting. Today the EZLN have perhaps the most exceptional media policy ever seen in a guerrilla war. With their tactics of mass communication and access to information, they have allowed relatively free access by the press and the media to the conflict zone and to their headquarters. Interviews with the *Comandantes* now number in the hundreds. As a result of this policy, the Zapatistas have been covered by all different types of media including newspapers, magazines, videos, audio tapes, CD-ROM, and of course radio (both legal and pirate) and TV. As Mexican Foreign Affairs Secretary, Jose Angel Gurria, has suggested, “*Chiapas ha sido una guerra de tintas, de palabra escrita, una guerra en el Internet*” [“Chiapas has been a war of ink, written words, a war on the Internet”].

The Internet serves to link support organizations, human rights groups, and other NGOs in Mexico. Internationally in many cases it has been Internet reports that have led journalists to travel to Chiapas to cover the Zapatistas in other media, including print and TV. Unlike the press, TV and radio, the Internet doesn't have experts in charge of making the news, leading to a much more open forum for reporting and debating the issues.

Zapatista communiqués are posted very quickly on the Internet, but just posting messages is not enough. The Zapatistas combine Internet use with traditional solidarity strategies (demonstrations, consulate blockages, etc.), which put the whole media machine to work and thus makes international public opinion aware of what is happening in Chiapas.

In 1995, David Ronfeldt of the Rand Corporation used the Zapatista rebellion as his prime example of netwar, saying that the future of Mexico could be determined by civil society organized in national and transnational networks. He warned that the progressive left was at the forefront of cybernet activism in the world, and asserted that the battle over information involved public opinion and media coverage in netwars. He argued that networks are superior to hierarchies—still used by governments and the military. His pre-eminent example was the cooperation of NGO/solidarity activists around the world who sympathized with the Zapatista struggle, in what he called “NGO swarms,” or rapidly spreading, almost anarchic, protests around the world against the Mexican government, without any central coordinating body that could be neutralized. Ronfeldt argued that what made the Zapatistas different were their links to transnational and local NGOs “that claim to represent civil society.”

Ronfeldt laid out a challenge for governments to learn how to cope with NGOs and fight in netwars:

Dealing with civil-society NGOs—whether as allies, as in humanitarian and disaster relief operations and democracy movements, or as antagonists, as in some cases of human rights and environmental abuse—is a new frontier for government officials around the world.

That the Zapatista movement has been extraordinarily successful at using the Internet cannot be doubted. While I have mentioned how the Mexican army was forced to stop its troops in the early days of the conflict, the infamous Chase Manhattan case provides another excellent example. When Alexander Cockburn wrote an article in *The Nation* exposing an internal Chase Manhattan Bank memo about Chiapas and the Zapatistas, few people saw it because *The Nation* has a limited readership. The memo was important because it argued that “the [Mexican] government will need to eliminate the Zapatistas to demonstrate their effective control of the national territory and of security policy.” When it was published on a large number of listservs and USENET, it suddenly reached a very large number of people. These people in turn coordinated a protest against the U.S. and Mexican governments and especially against the Chase Manhattan, which eventually was forced to distance itself from the memo.

Mexican and/or U.S. governmental forces may have been using netwar countermeasures against the Zapatistas. Among the possibilities are fake alarmist

reports used to mobilize protests by solidarity activists that would discredit the movement once it became known that they had been protesting something that never took place. I have been able to track down at least two cases that raise such suspicions. The first was a short message that was circulated and recirculated around the world suggesting that the Mexican army had encircled San Cristóbal de las Casas and calling for international protest. While the army had not encircled San Cristóbal, it was undertaking troop re-deployment against the EZLN, and this fake news item might have served to discredit protesters. This did not happen since counter-messages were rapidly circulated, indicating the news was false, and claiming it had been fabricated by Mexican military intelligence.

A second incident took place in 1995, just as the security forces were arresting supposed Zapatistas outside Chiapas, and may have been an attempt to discredit protests concerning the roundup. A message circulated saying the Metropolitan University at Xochimilco (UAM-X) had been invaded by the army and asking for mass mobilizations. Immediately afterward another E-mail was widely received confirming that the invasion had not taken place, and calling for caution on alarmist news. Other incidents include a critical period in the spring of 1994 when *La Neta* kept crashing due to weird local blackouts, bad telephone lines, and similar incidents.

In sum, recent changes in the world have converged with a novel guerrilla organization to create the conditions for an international support movement. While economic restructuring made the Mexican government more susceptible to international pressure, the technological revolution opened a new medium, the Internet, even as networks were becoming the dominant form of organization from business to warfare. Into this new reality stepped the Zapatistas, a non-hierarchical movement of the most marginalized members of Mexican society, yet who used a performance strategy with a narrative and organization uniquely adapted to cyberspace. A participatory, synergistic and cybernetic feedback has been established between the Zapatistas and their international audience, leading to an explosion of creativity and of civil society. As civil society spreads in Mexico, we may expect that the Zapatista cyber-example of inclusiveness will continue to strike chords of resonance internationally.

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Maria Elena Martínez-Torres is a geographer at the Center for Latin American Studies of the University of California at Berkeley, and at the Multidisciplinary Research Program on Mesoamerica and the Southern Mexico (UNAM-PROIMMSE), in Chiapas, Mexico. She wishes to thank Professor Manuel Castells of the Sociology Department at the University of California at Berkeley, and Peter Rosset of the Institute for Food and Development Policy (Food First), for their encouragement and helpful suggestions on this essay. *Correspondence*: metorres@socrates.berkeley.edu or memtorres@correo.unam.mx