The Zapatista Effect: Information Communication Technology Activism and Marginalized Communities

Abstract

This paper will demonstrate how access to relatively inexpensive Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) has allowed marginalized communities to bypass traditional channels and agitate for political changes. Widespread ICT usage has allowed marginalized peoples not only to disseminate their views, but to build grassroots alliances with similarly minded groups. Access to ICT has allowed groups in countries such as Burma, China and Sudan the freedom to share information that may otherwise be suppressed.

The ability to freely access and disseminate information is a considered a fundamental right in most free and democratic societies. In many countries, this principle fails to translate into reality. Many of the world’s governments actively constrain their citizens from information access to the commons. Marginalized groups are denied participation in decision-making processes and are ignored by traditional media. They often live in “ICT Poverty”, a state in which little information flows into or out of their communities. As a result, these

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peoples are denied their ability to benefit from their citizenship rights.

Particular attention will be paid to indigenous groups such as the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, a largely Mayan group from the impoverished state of Chiapas, Mexico. The Zapatistas burst onto the scene in 1994 and used the Internet to build a trans-national solidarity network among human rights groups. The media spectacle they created forced the Mexican government to negotiate with Zapatista communities over issues such as land rights, compensation for resource extraction and indigenous political autonomy.

Many other marginalized groups have used the Zapatista model to overcome social barriers and improve local conditions. Perhaps the most important use of ICT is to raise awareness and build relationships with advocates in other nations. The use of ICT by these groups can have a major impact on global coverage of events and help create public pressure to change policy. As information professionals, what are our responsibilities in regards to bridging the gap between Canadian libraries and marginalized peoples in the international community?

**Introduction**

On January 1st, 1994, the day the North American Free Trade Act (NAFTA) became law, a ragged group of Mexican peasants staged a massive uprising, occupying five municipalities in Chiapas, Mexico (Klein, 2001). Armed primarily with fake wooden rifles, the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN in Spanish) declared war on the Mexican state. In doing so the Zapatistas became an example for both indigenous Mexicans and anti-globalization activists worldwide (Russell, 2001), while the group freed scores of prisoners before setting fire to police stations and military barracks. The reaction of the Mexican government was swift: the Mexican Army counterattacked and crushed the rebellion, killing dozens while forcing the surviving insurgents to retreat into the surrounding jungle.

Canadian writer and activist Naomi Klein argues the anti-globalization movement began over 500 years ago when European visitors first attempted to colonize American indigenous peoples (Klein, 2001). This initial meeting began a long tradition of resistance to the unchecked privatization of natural resources and the marginalization of Native peoples. The contributions made by indigenous groups (such as the EZLN) who combat global inequalities cannot be underestimated.

If the Zapatistas had been a ‘traditional’ guerrilla group, their initial military defeat would surely have spelled their end. However, realizing that impoverished farmers could never hope to defeat the Mexican Army, Marcos proposed a
startling shift in strategy. After negotiating a ceasefire with the Mexican government, the EZLN laid down their arms and took their fight to a new battlefield – the Internet. The use of the Internet as a tool for social change prompted the New York Times to refer to the movement as the first “post-modern revolution” (Klein, 2001, p. 7). Ostensibly led by the mysterious Subcommandante Marcos, the EZLN are a group who found themselves on one side of the digital divide, yet managed to use Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to their advantage.

Zapatistas and the Chiapas Situation

The Zapatista core group consists of some 3000 indigenous Mayan peoples residing in the state of Chiapas, Mexico. Many speak neither English nor Spanish (Collier, 1994). The majority of the Chiapan population make their living as subsistence farmers. Although the Zapatistas consider Chiapas the traditional land of their people, the Mexican government extracts huge amounts of wealth and resources from the area. For example, there are nine hydroelectric dams in the state – enough to power over half of Mexico. Most of the country’s petroleum originates in Chiapas, as do most of the country’s coffee, bean, corn and banana crops. Chiapas has (or at least had) massive rainforests, vast lumber resources, and an abundance of fresh water (Hayden, 2003).

Despite being rich in natural resources, Chiapas is the poorest of all Mexican states (Hayden, 2003). Further, Chiapan residents were largely alienated from the spoils of production as the Mexican government extracted Chiapas’ resources but returned little to the state. At the time of the 1994 uprising, Chiapas suffered from a 21% illiteracy rate (Collier, 1994). Only half of households enjoyed running water or electricity, and Chiapans suffered from a severe lack of access to proper education or medical facilities (Collier, 1994). During this time, Chiapans also dealt with high infant mortality rates, malnutrition, and often fell prey to untreated but easily curable diseases. While the rest of Mexico was enjoying the mid-90s ICT boom, Chiapans were left in the dark. Situations such as this are not uncommon: indigenous peoples worldwide often suffer from ethnic, economic and geographic isolation from mainstream society (McCallum, 2009). Instead of allowing the digital divide to be added to their laundry list of inequalities, however, the Zapatistas declared ICT a tool to ameliorate their situation.

The time was ripe for a group like the EZLN to make their impact. The mid-late 1990s saw a huge rise in the number and popularity of anti-globalization groups and activist groups of all kinds (Langman, 2005). Anti-World Trade Organization (WTO) protests in Seattle, Genoa and Quebec drew hundreds of thousands of protesters invested in resisting a neo-liberalist conception of globalization. Unfortunately, the “anti-globalization” tag is something of a misnomer. By large, these groups are not against globalization itself, but rather the version of globalization that is driven by unfettered commoditization (Marquez, 2001). The groups
often seek an alternative form of globalization that incorporates ideals of democracy and the social inclusion of marginalized groups. In fact, it is the very globalization of ICT that allowed the Zapatistas to flourish.

**Zapatista beliefs and goals**

EZLN figurehead Marcos made full use of the new media available to him. Marcos was careful in constructing a visual iconography that would be immediately recognizable and appealing to television audiences. In the tradition of Ernesto “Che” Guevara, Marcos donned a costume consisting of military garb, a black balaclava and corncob pipe. The balaclava did more than simply disguise Marcos’ identity from the authorities – anyone could don the mask and thus affect the Zapatista persona (Marquez, 2001). Even though his identity is now an open secret, Marcos continues to sport the mask as it has become a recognizable EZLN logo. Instead of pistols and ammunition, Marcos’ bandolier carried a cellular phone (Marquez, 2001). Marcos famously declared “Our weapons are words” (Marquez, 2001, p. 77), and like a modern-day Tiresias, Marcos was often seen carrying a torch or lantern. Although the device served no physical purpose, it demonstrated Marcos’ desire to “bring light” to the situation in Chiapas (Marquez, 2001). The choice of the “Subcomandante” moniker was also highly symbolic. It was never Marcos’ intention to rule or lead the group. Marcos was simply a spokesperson, and the “Sub” portion of his title referred to his subservience to the will of the collective (Marquez, 2001).

Marcos’ strategic use of symbolism has also been the target for criticism. Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000) sought to discredit Marcos by exposing him during a televised speech (Henck, 2009). Zedillo alleged Marcos to be Rafael Vicente, a professor of philosophy at the Metropolitan Autonomous University (UAM) in Mexico City (Ross 2003). Zedillo accused Marcos of playing the “indigenous card” even though he himself was not of “authentic” Mayan ancestry (Ross, 2003). The tactic failed brutally as thousands protested outside the television station (Ross, 2003). Perhaps this characterization played directly into Marcos’ love of Cervantes’ Don Quixote. Like Quixote, Marcos had rejected the trappings of luxury to defend the rights of the masses. Chiapans declared Marcos an adopted Mayan, successfully claiming the right to determine the membership of their own group.

EZLN ideology is based on a unique hybrid of Socialist Marxism and traditional Mayan beliefs. They primarily agitate for improved social and economic conditions in Chiapas as well as agrarian land reform and redistribution (Oleson, 2004). For hundreds of years, indigenous issues have been largely ignored in Mexico. The Zapatistas argued that their issues should be included in public discourse and that their needs be taken into account during government policy making activities. Instead of running for office in what they consider an illegitimate government structure, the Zapatistas sought indigenous autonomy and the right to negotiate with governments on a nation-to-nation basis (Semo,
2006). One of their primary goals was to have Chiapan municipalities recognized by the Mexican government as sovereign and autonomous states.

In the new millennium, the traditional Marxist idea of the overthrow of the capitalist system no longer seems realistic or even possible (Gonzalez, 2000). The famous Rosa Luxemburg/Eduard Bernstein debates in classic Marxism now seem moot (Bruhn, 1999). Luxemburg was a famous proponent of the “general strike”, or the sudden and spontaneous revolution that would swiftly dispose of capitalism and replace it with a Marxist utopia. Bernstein desired the same end result, but believed this would be achieved via gradual social change brought on by workers (Bruhn, 1999). While they envisioned different paths, both believed that only the destruction of capitalism could produce a just society. The Zapatistas, however, broke this seemingly incontrovertible link between revolution and the end of the state (Holloway, 2002). They envisioned an alternative system that would produce social justice, yet did not require the dismantling of the government. Indigenous autonomy meant that the Mexican government could still exist, but that the Zapatistas could form their own alternative structure. This sovereign Zapatista collective would have the right to negotiate with the Mexican government as equal partners.

ICT activism as a tool for social change

Marcos railed against the often violent tactics employed by other revolutionary groups. Some of these groups, especially those in other Latin countries such as Bolivia and Peru, were fond of kidnapping, bank robbery and extortion (Bruhn, 1999). Many claimed to steal back from capitalists the money that rightfully belonged to the people. Not only were such means inherently dangerous and unsustainable, they served to alienate useful allies who may not agree with the use of violence (Bruhn, 1999). The Zapatistas instead made use of the relatively inexpensive medium of the Internet to spread their message and gain support. Their worldwide support network generated far more money through donations than would have been possible to gain from traditional guerrilla activities (Bruhn, 1999).

Instead of running for office, the EZLN sought to influence the decision-making process by exposing political corruption and promoting their needs via the media. The Zapatistas wanted shifts in policy, not mere personnel changes. If a corrupt president were to be ousted, he would simply be replaced by another one, with the same ideas and schemes. In 1994, the Zapatistas began using email lists, Usenet groups, listservs and websites to disseminate communiqués written by Marcos. Initially, the Mexican media refused to cover Zapatista events or publish their communiqués. The denial of access to traditional media outlets did not deter the group. Further, new forms of
communication would allow them to side-step traditional practices.

ICT information sharing has several characteristics that are beneficial to digital guerrillas. Even among impoverished farmers, access to ICT is much closer at hand than access to corporate news media (Russell, 2001). A website can be administered from a single computer in a Zapatista village, for example, and sending communiqués to an email list of supporters does not require the permission of an editorial board. Information shared via the Internet cannot easily be regulated or censored by corporate or government organizations. Further, information can originate from multiple sources and is not subject to a structured vetting process. While the lack of vetting can lead to the dissemination of inaccurate and false information, it generally allows for a greater variety of opinions. Authors do not have to rely so heavily on the permission of others in order to publish their views. Through the use of ICT, Marcos was able to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and enjoy a direct line of communication to the leaders of other activist groups while the Zapatistas employed what is sometimes referred to as a “swarm strategy”: Even if dozens (or even hundreds) of Zapatista authors are neutralized, there are hundreds more within the swarm to take their place; silencing the entire group is effectively impossible.

The grassroot murmurs of Zapatista supporters garnered the interest of the Cable News Network (CNN) in 1995. Oddly enough, CNN did not report on the armed NAFTA uprising, but focused instead on the social phenomena of mass Zapatista support. This story, and the media furor it elicited, shamed President Zedillo into abandoning his military hunt of Marcos and his supporters. Instead of imprisoning Marcos, Zedillo was forced to negotiate with him. The media gaze lent the Zapatistas the support and credibility they needed be taken seriously by the government.

The so-called “Zapatista Effect” snowballed, and the group elicited a great deal of interest from global news media. It was only a matter of time before Mexican media was forced to follow suit. This exposure, in conjunction with the use of ICT, allowed the Zapatistas to consolidate a trans-national network of supporters (Oleson, 2004). The group was then able to communicate and form bonds with feminists, environmentalists, GLBT, indigenous and unionist groups. In Marcos’ eyes, anyone who is marginalized is Zapatista.

Celebrity support of the group had a role to play in making the Zapatistas a fashionable cause. Noted supporters include authors Naomi Klein and Noam Chomsky, environmentalist groups such as Greenpeace, and media outlets like La Jornada and the New York Times. The highly-political musical group Rage Against the Machine has encouraged fans to agitate on behalf of Chiapans. Left-leaning actors such as Tim Robbins, Susan Sarandon, Antonio Banderas and Martin Sheen count themselves as supporters, while Marcos has formed close personal friendships with director Oliver Stone and Hispanic actor/activist Edward James Olmos. Many of these celebrities have attended the high-profile international...
conferences hosted by the EZLN to discuss human rights and neo-liberalism.

It is interesting to note that Zapatista websites and communiqués are produced in the English language, as English is seen by many indigenous peoples as the mother tongue of their oppressors and colonizers (Marquez, 2001). Indigenous peoples come from thousands of traditional language groups, making it extremely difficult to share a single discourse. The Zapatistas repurposed the global spread of English and used it as a tool to unite indigenous groups from across the globe.

The Zapatista solidarity network exhibits four characteristics upon which its strength is based:

1. The lack of centralized control makes it extremely resistant to attacks by government groups. Shutting down a single Zapatista listserv or website would hardly have a noticeable effect on the tapestry of support;

2. The use of “de-centred authorship” means no single person has the authority to command the actions of the group. The lack of an authoritative figure means the organization can survive the removal or imprisonment of any single actor. Certainly Marcos is an important spokesperson, but he has no formal power to compel others into action. There is no real structure or hierarchy to destroy;

3. The ICT network is interactive, meaning that communication flows in multiple directions. Multiple authors are able to engage and enrich the discourse by bringing varied knowledge sets;

4. ICT has an inherent alliance-building capacity. The Internet allows for quick dissemination of information and quick response and cooperative decision making (Russell, 2001, pp. 404-406).

The Zapatista legacy

The use of ICT activism is not without its drawbacks. The Zapatistas, and Marcos in particular, have been oddly quiet since 2000 (Oleson, 2001). The group has not held a conference in several years. To a great extent their profile has fallen from the public eye. The plight of indigenous Chiapas has likewise fallen out of fashion. Given the 500-year history of indigenous resistance, however, it would be a mistake to assume their cause has been laid to rest. During the 1990s the Zapatistas were constantly in the public gaze, while media attention shielded them from their detractors. During this time, the Mexican government was effectively prevented from launching anti-Zapatista tactics that would have negatively reflected on them in the media. Now that the media gaze is no longer present the Zapatista’s shield has arguably been weakened (Russell, 2001).

Their situation has become somewhat better. In 2000, President Zedillo was voted out of office and replaced with the more progressive Vicente Fox. Given the small size of the Zapatista population and their general refusal to vote, it is unlikely they had an effect in the polls. Marcos’ anti-Zedillo media campaign exposed
his mishandling of the Chiapas situation just
enough to turn voter opinion against him
(Marquez, 2001). Zapatista refusal to participate
in Mexican politics has not always benefited
them. In 2006, the Zapatistas refused to endorse
the socialist/leftist Andrés Obrador for
president. Obrador lost to right-of-centre
candidate Felipe Calderón by a slim margin of
35.89% to 35.31% of the popular vote (Semo,
2006). By openly attacking Obrador as a “false
socialist” the Zapatistas splintered the leftist
vote and squandered an opportunity to install a
sympathetic president.

Critics argue that the Zapatistas never
accomplished their ultimate goals of
reconstructing Mexican politics into a Marxist
and egalitarian utopia. The Zapatista dream of
having Chiapas declared an autonomous state
has never been realized. This may be true, but
one can speculate a worsened or unaltered
Chiapan plight had they not risen up. The
simple fact that they mobilized political change
is a revolutionary accomplishment in and of
itself. The Zapatista Effect successfully shifted
the balance of power from traditional media
authors to the audience. No longer was the
general public a mere receptacle for
information, but rather became an active
participant in creating discourse. A small group
of powerless and marginalized people took their
grievances to the commons and forced the
entire world to hear their voices.

The experiences of the Zapatistas
produced a multitude of lessons for information
professionals. Librarians are often called upon
to serve and advocate on behalf of marginalized
or disenfranchised groups within our
communities. The Zapatistas prove that even
the weakest among us can speak directly to
those in power. The Zapatista Effect is a
strategy that is easily portable to other groups in
society. Dissident groups in countries such as
Burma, China and Afghanistan have all
employed similar use of ICT in order to shed
light on issues that would have otherwise been
censored by oppressive governments. Bearing in
mind that these strategies need not always be
used on such grand scales, information
professionals can utilize ICT to increase
information access and access to citizenship
rights for every user who walks through the
doors of their library, archive or other
information service point.
References


