

Outside the Indigenous Lens: Zapatistas and Autonomous Videomaking.

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Fotografo: Francisco Vazquez.

"The work of video has really moved us; it has a great importance in helping us to construct our indigenous history. We can see that we will be able to do many things for our wellbeing and the future of our children." - Estella, Zapatista video maker, April 2003.

This is an article about the importance of indigenous media – both in terms of product and process--that offers a "best practice" model of cooperative, transnational, indigenous media making^[1]. These observations are based on my personal experience with the Chiapas Media Project (CMP)/Promedios, a bi-national NGO that provides video and computer equipment and training to indigenous communities in Chiapas and Guerrero, Mexico^[2]. CMP/Promedios has trained over 200 indigenous men and women in basic video production; built and equipped four Regional Media Centers in Zapatista territory with digital video production, post-production, audio and satellite internet access; enabled the production of 22 videos for international distribution; and provided the means for hundreds of videos utilized internally by

the indigenous communities in Chiapas. I am the founder, former director, and now international coordinator of the Chiapas Media Project/Promedios. I do not believe, nor do I want to promote, that CMP/Promedios is the only means of facilitating and promoting indigenous media; rather, I hope to share my story, including my mistakes, over the past ten years to encourage others to join in this struggle. I use the word "struggle" very consciously, since any person involved in social change--as an artist, academic, or activist, or all the above--must be aware of the role they play within greater human rights, especially the presentation of these realities. In this article, I will emphasize the contexts in which media as agents of social change operate: local, domestic and global.

I've been a documentary video maker for over 25 years and, early on in my career, I became aware of the power of media to create social change. I've produced videos on AIDS, women's reproductive rights, job loss and gentrification, in addition to videos on Cuba. Throughout my career, I have come to the conclusion that documentary video making is not only about the end product, but also about the process.

This became most clear to me in the late 1980's, when I saw a short video production of Video Sewa, a women's organization based in Ahmedabad, India, that uses video as a means of

empowering illiterate, unemployed, and self-employed peasant women. The video was shot by a woman who had little video production experience, and the production quality was poor, but there was something about the images that resonated with me. It was clear that the video maker was not an outsider presenting someone else's story but rather a person documenting their own experience. Viewing this video gave me the idea of the power of providing marginalized people access to video technology to tell their story--a story no one else is going to tell.

The Zapatistas

"We are indigenous people of different languages and cultures, descendents of the ancient Mayan people. The indigenous people of Chiapas and all the indigenous peoples of Mexico have been suffering great injustices--plundering, humiliation, discrimination, and marginalization--for several centuries; many other peoples around the world also live in the same situation, in the Americas



Fotografo: Francisco Vazquez.

and beyond. This is a consequence of the violent Spanish conquest and after that, the North American invasions. This left us living in complete misery and on the way to being exterminated. These are the reasons that forced us to rise up in arms on January 1st, 1994 and say, 'Enough!'" - Comandante David, Oventic, Chiapas 2003.

The Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN/Zapatistas) is a Mayan indigenous organization based in Chiapas, Mexico. On January 1st, 1994, the EZLN declared war against the Mexican Government in an armed uprising that took over six towns in Chiapas. The stated reason for the uprising was that indigenous people, their rights, and their culture were not recognized in the Mexican Constitution, and thus indigenous people in Mexico were treated socially and through legal fiat as second-class citizens. These were (and are) people denied the rights guaranteed to all Mexicans under the Mexican constitution. It is significant that the Zapatistas chose January 1, 1994 for the uprising, since it was the date that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect. As a primarily agricultural people, the prospect of NAFTA would have a significant impact on indigenous peoples throughout Mexico, and yet their concerns were never heard, let alone solicited^[3].

Media were always a part of the Zapatista "arsenal"; in fact, in the days immediately following the uprising, the Zapatistas (via sympathetic supporters) used the internet to broadcast their cause

to the world. This strategic use of the media was to create a call to international civil society to join them in building a new world. This use of the internet generated much international interest and the global scrutiny that is often credited with forcing the Mexican government into a truce 12 days later and into negotiations with the Zapatistas.

Since 1994, the Zapatistas have become a “spectacle” spawning everything from PhD dissertations to conferences to rock music^[4]. Based on the inundation of requests for interviews, office visits, and access to the communities, our organization has had to create a mechanism to filter and control our time and focus. We appreciate the interest in our work but struggle to ensure reciprocity.

Mapping the territory

“What we ask from those who are not Zapatistas, who do not agree with us or do not understand the just cause of our struggle, is that you respect our organization, that you respect our communities and Autonomous Municipalities and their authorities. And respect the Good Government Assemblies in all the regions, which have been formally constituted today, witnessed by many thousands of indigenous and non-indigenous brothers and sisters from our country Mexico and from many countries around the world.” - Comandante David, Oventic, Chiapas 2003.

Not every indigenous community in Chiapas is Zapatista. The communities that we work with are communities that clearly identify themselves as Zapatista, also known as “Zapatista civilian communities” thereby distinguishing them from the armed wing of the Zapatistas, the EZLN. These communities organize themselves via local, regional, and municipal authorities, elected through community consensus. They also have a rotating governance board, the Good Government Assemblies (Juntas de Buen Gobierno), that deal with all matter of decision-making for their given autonomous municipality. The members of the Good Government Assemblies rotate out every 15 days and are members of the communities that are part of each particular autonomous municipality. In some regions, the Good Government Assemblies have been so successful at mediating local conflicts (cattle theft, land disputes, etc.) that they are now referred to by local Mexican government judiciary to mediate between Zapatista and non-Zapatista individuals.

Other communities exist that support the Zapatista cause but do not identify themselves as Zapatista. At the other end of the spectrum are the non-Zapatista communities that can range from communities that self-identify with political parties (PAN, PRD, PRI) to communities that openly support paramilitaries. Many of these paramilitary organizations receive support from local ranchers and, in many cases, state and federal funds^[5].

This larger sociopolitical context is key to understanding the environment in which the CMP/Promedios operates. In December 1997, a month before the first workshops were to take place, 45 indigenous people, mostly women and children, were killed by government-trained paramilitary forces in what is now referred to as the “Acteal Massacre.” At the same time, the Mexican Government had started to expel foreigners, including human rights workers, from Chiapas under the pretext of violating the constitution by involvement in *internal politics*^[6].



Fotografo: Francisco Vazquez.

Personal Involvement

“With the purpose of creating an inter cultural dialogue from the community level up to the national level, that may allow a new and positive relationship between the various indigenous groups and between these groups and the rest of society, it is essential to endow these communities with their own means of communication, which are also key mechanisms for the development of their cultures. Therefore, it will be proposed to the

respective national authorities, to elaborate a new communications law that may allow the indigenous towns to acquire, operate and administrate their own means of communication.” - Under Article III of the San Andres Accords, 1996^[7].

It was in this environment and with an apparently impenetrable cloak of censure that the Zapatistas recognized the power of the media; it is also in this environment that the Zapatistas needed to tell their own story. In the spring of 1995, I was producing a documentary for a US-based NGO taking a humanitarian aid caravan to a Zapatista region and thus made my first trip to Chiapas. During the production, we ended up in a community that was swarming with press (both national and international), with photographers and TV news cameras all “capturing the story” of the Zapatista representatives and community members who were present. It is important to note that this media presence was not a by-product of the Zapatista struggle; rather, it was extremely intentional on their part, yet it was forged out of a dependence on outside (both mass and independent) media. It was clear that the Zapatistas had the story; what was lacking was the means of transmitting that story themselves.

While the “external” journalists were “getting their story,” several people in the community came up to me to ask about my Hi8 camera (where I bought it, how much it cost, etc.), clearly demonstrating an interest in and awareness of this technology. I was impressed with the Zapatista organization and their obvious interest in communicating their message to the outside world. I thought: here is a group of people that would clearly benefit from access to video technology. Before I left Chiapas, I began a discussion with Zapatista authorities about bringing video technology to their communities; they expressed a strong interest. I also spoke with representatives of local NGOs who had a working relationship with the Zapatista communities as well, and they were very supportive^[8]. Their pre-existing relationships with the Zapatista communities helped facilitate our communication and gave us credibility within the

communities.

So I went back to the U.S. with the kernel of an idea and the Zapatistas' OK to move ahead. In this stage of the project, I really only envisioned a workshop or a series of workshops in one region—I never imagined what the project would become.

Getting Organized

“I have always wanted to provide the people in the Zapatista region with video equipment so that they can communicate, with sounds and pictures recorded by them, what is happening and what is NOT happening within their communities. I am immensely pleased to know that it's finally going to happen.” - Guillermo Monteforte, first correspondence, October 1997.



Fotografo: Francisco Vazquez.

I returned to Mexico in the fall of 1995, and during this period, I began making contact with people who would be crucial to the success of the project. Through a series of transnational connections, I met Guillermo Monteforte, a video maker and trainer who turned out to be indispensable. Guillermo was involved with a government-funded initiative administered by the National Indigenous Institute (INI), a government institution that provided training and video technology to indigenous communities throughout Mexico in the late 1980s and early 1990s^[9]. He was also the Founding Director of the Indigenous Video Center (CVI) in Oaxaca, a center created as part of the INI program. Not only was Guillermo familiar with working in indigenous communities in Mexico, but he was also a skilled video professional with sensitivity in teaching these skills.

Based on his many years of working successfully with indigenous video makers and their communities, Guillermo was able to provide contacts for potential video instructors. At the time, we were still only thinking that this would be a two-week workshop. Since he was the *expert*, I deferred to Guillermo to organize the training program, while I focused on logistics and financing the donated equipment as requested by the communities

During this same trip, I met David, a Zapatista authority. David lived in Oventic (in the Highlands region) and, after hearing our idea for a video workshop, he was extremely

supportive. It was also handy that Oventic is the closest Zapatista *Caracol* (center and meeting place for the Zapatistas) to the town of San Cristobal de las Casas where we were staying and eventually set up our first office^[10]. David suggested that we contact the authorities in Ejido Morelia (located near Altamirano in the *cañadas*), about a six-hour drive from Oventic^[11]. Before leaving Mexico for the U.S., we sent word via an NGO in San Cristobal that we were interested in meeting with the authorities in Ejido Morelia.

When I returned to the US, it was clear to me that the Zapatista media strategy was successful: information about the Zapatistas was everywhere. I quickly realized that I could utilize this interest to generate financial support for this fledgling initiative. Back in Chicago, I decided that the best way to fund this workshop would be to organize it as a youth cultural exchange. As this was 1995--only one year after the uprising, with much of the corporate media still portraying the Zapatistas as guerilla fighters trying to take over Mexico--I felt it would be much easier to first access funding for a cultural exchange, then to equip and train the Zapatistas as video makers.



Fotografo: Francisco Vazquez.

Key Actors

“It is deeply encouraging to see young people come together to build bridges of friendship, cooperation and communication. I applaud your vision and I hope this project will inspire future cross-cultural exchanges with youth groups around the world.” – Carol Moseley-Braun, Former US Senator, letter of support, January 7, 1998.

A key figure in funding the start of this effort was Tom Hansen (currently

National Coordinator for the Mexico Solidarity Network), who at the time was the Director of *Pastors for Peace*, a U.S.-based NGO that had been working in Chiapas since the uprising. Tom helped me make initial contacts with Chiapas NGOs and shared his contact list to raise funds for the first equipment. This primary list of individuals was the initial direct mail list that provided significant support early on and that we still use to this day^[12].

Via one of Tom’s contacts in Mexico City, I met Jose Manuel Pintado, an independent video producer based in Mexico City, who had introduced me to Guillermo Monteforte as well as Fabio Meltis, who was working with indigenous youth in Mexico City. Fabio helped organize the indigenous youth who participated in the first workshop.

Another key actor in the formation of the CMP/Promedios was Francisco (Paco) Vazquez, a Nahua youth from near Mexico City, who participated in the first workshop. Paco had been involved in his community's collective projects and had a built-in sensitivity about dealing with the communities in Chiapas. Without Paco, the project would never have advanced beyond the first workshop. When I met Paco, he was a self-taught, fluent English speaker, and he became my default translator/partner since I could barely speak Spanish during the first 1 1/2 years of the project. Paco helped me navigate Mexican indigenous culture, understand Mexican bureaucracy, and in many ways was my protector the numerous times I was stopped at immigration roadblocks and army checkpoints.

Street Level Youth Media was the Chicago-based youth organization that I contacted to participate in the first workshop. The organization was made up of inner-city, mostly Chicano, youth. Street Level provided me with a 501-c-3 tax-exempt status that was helpful in soliciting funds. However, Street Level's involvement in the first workshop proved to be problematic and, after the workshop and completion of the grant requirements, CMP/Promedios decided to end our relationship.

First Workshop

For me it is an awakening, because before we've never even seen this kind of equipment that is now in our hands. But now we see we can do this work. - Emilio, 1st workshop in Ejido Morelia, February 1998.

The first workshop was held in the Autonomous Municipality of Ejido Morelia. Through our existing network of contacts, we were introduced to Miguel, who served as our link to the

community and the local and regional authorities. He was key in planning the evolution of the project. It was through him that we began to understand the governing structure of the Zapatista civilian authorities. We found that communication and logistics were much smoother when one person per community served as a "key person."

From the beginning, we realized that we had to work within the given organizational structure of the Zapatistas^[13]. It's important to mention there is no cookie cutter "Zapatista structure"; each community and each region differ, and it is crucial to understand the dynamics on a local level. By respecting how each individual community works, we were able to work with those people.



Fotografo: Francisco Vazquez.

This was only possible by asking and listening to the experts who were living within that community^[14].

Due to the larger political and military events taking place throughout Chiapas by the Mexican government, it took two years to fund and organize the first workshops. The Acteal massacre in 1997 created panic within the Street Level Youth Media group, and we had to reorganize some of our initial plans^[15]. In February 1998, we held the first bi-national workshops as part of a youth intercultural exchange project under the name *Chiapas Youth Media Project*; the participants were Street Level Youth Media from Chicago, Fabio's group of indigenous youth from Mexico City, and Guillermo's group of indigenous video makers from Oaxaca. These first workshops were funded by a grant from the US-Mexico Fund for Culture, based in Mexico City.

We arrived in Ejido Morelia when there was a lot of tension about illegal logging that resulted in a physical altercation. The entire incident illustrated the difficulty in organizing cultural exchanges in a highly-conflicted area. The staff of Street Level wanted constant assurances that "nothing would happen," and when something did happen, be it a very minor incident, it threw them into a panic, adding tension to an already tense situation.

What can we plug in and where?

"[We are giving a hand to the compañeros here in Chiapas who are interested in receiving this video workshop].... We lost the lights and we had to use the electrical generator from the clinic, then we got started. And the dogs ate our food last night and we had to return (to San Cristobal) to get more food. These are the different problems that we've had in doing these workshops". – Sergio Julián, Oaxacan Indigenous video instructor during first workshop in Oventic, February 1998.

During these first meetings with Zapatista authorities David and Miguel, we asked many questions about infrastructural issues such as electricity, (relatively) weatherproof buildings, security for the equipment, etc. In both Oventic and Ejido Morelia, only ungrounded electricity was available—lines pulled from the government electricity grid in the area. Community leaders explained that there was no guarantee of consistent electricity or voltage--which we understood to mean there would be inevitable interruptions of the workshops.

The first equipment we purchased was S-VHS and VHS camcorders and S-VHS editing systems. Early on, we accepted used equipment from sympathetic supporters, all of whom were from the U.S., but we quickly realized that these donations had a very short life span and were too hodge-podge. We recognized that people were attempting to be altruistic by sending us their used equipment, but I quickly I learned to say, "If you won't use it, we don't need it!" The Zapatistas needed good equipment and training, not the cast-offs from technology-saturated American consumers.



Fotografo: Francisco Vazquez.

How do we organize?

“We decided that the television was saying pure lies about what happens in our Chiapas. Or they add or take out words but never say the truth. We also thought that it would be good to have a camera because there are so many soldiers on our lands, at any moment something could happen. This means that when the soldiers are beating us you can enter with the camera and shoot it, record testimony – denounce it”. – Moises, Zapatista video maker

interviewed in La Jornada, October 2000.

Through the success of the first video workshops in Ejido Morelia and Oventic, it was apparent the Zapatista communities were interested in continuing with the video training. In March 1998, we decided to formalize the project as the Chiapas Media Project (CMP), a non-profit organization based in the U.S. Pretty early on in the project, it became clear to me that there were certain aspects of my cultural conditioning (white, middle class, college-educated American female) that were causing conflicts within the project. Most notable was my frustration at the long meetings with local Zapatista authorities and the slowness of decision-making within the communities. My dissatisfaction with this process created friction within our staff, and I quickly realized that my strengths could be better utilized elsewhere. At that time, I removed myself from the day-to-day decision-making in Mexico and focused on international distribution and promotion.

In 2001, we incorporated in Mexico as Promedios de Comunicación Comunitaria and now refer to ourselves as CMP/Promedios. We are organized as a collective with no director or hierarchical structure. We have three full-time staff in Chiapas, one full-time staff in Guerrero and one full-time and one part-time staff in the U.S. Our organization is an attempt to reflect the organizational structure of the Zapatista communities we work with.

Our current work in Chiapas is to assist the communities to build and equip four Regional Media Centers. We see ourselves as working for the communities, taking their lead and working with them to create an autonomous media network that reflects their needs.

How do we teach?

“It isn’t easy to translate Indigenous Spanish into English. There is a complex sometimes unclear mixture of expressions and sentence structures that on the surface shows inability of precise expression in a language that is not their own, and one that fills them with a complex of being dominated by mestizos who scorn them for not speaking it ‘properly’”. - Guillermo Monteforte, email correspondence, April 1998.



Fotografo: Francisco Vazquez.

I came into this project with very little knowledge of indigenous media or its processes. My primary vision of the CMP/Promedios came from my background as a documentary video maker/artist with my interest and curiosity focused on the question of *what kind of videos would the Zapatistas produce once they had the equipment and training?* In my mind, I was facilitating the creation of video makers; I was transmitting technical skills to my peers. In the summer of 1998, we gave our first video production workshop in the village of La Realidad. I was sitting next to Manuel, a local Zapatista authority with a camera in his hands, when he turned to me and asked, “Don’t we need special government permission to use this equipment?” I was surprised at the question and asked him why he was asking. He replied, “Because all of the people who come here always have *credenciales* hanging around their necks, given to them by the government.” He was referring to the press and, after further discussion, I realized that Manuel thought ownership of video equipment had to be authorized by the government.

In the beginning of the video training process, we were all aware of the pitfalls of bringing in temporary “outsiders” to do the training, particularly as “instructors.” Bringing in people from outside of Mexico would not work from either a sociopolitical or economic standpoint--we did not want to replicate the colonial model. With very rare exceptions, all of the beginning video and computer workshops the first two years were taught by either indigenous video makers from Oaxaca or by Mexican CMP/Promedios staff.

In the first workshops, the students were primarily local authorities, put there to check us out and make sure we “weren’t up to no good.” We found this out later after working in the communities for a while, noticing that certain people dropped out of the courses that we would later encounter

in leadership positions^[16]. Another dynamic operating was the presence of so many “outsiders.” Many people came (and continue to come) to Chiapas with much goodwill to assist the communities. There is a tendency for people to come and make a lot of promises--that they can’t accomplish--and never come back. This leaves people in the communities wary of first-time visitors. We knew from the beginning that we couldn’t make any promises we couldn’t fulfill and that the most important thing was continuity--to maintain a presence.

I was never an instructor in any formal video production or post-production workshop for the communities. My role was always more like a technical consultant advising on equipment and talking with the instructors. We all felt that it was extremely important to have the instructors be Mexican or, even better, indigenous Mexicans. This would provide a continuity of process utilizing local people that could also connect the Zapatista video makers to the broader network of indigenous video makers in Mexico and Latin America. My intention was always to work myself out of a job. Once we formalized the project, we realized that this was a long-term commitment. We would need to create self-sustainability wherever possible and having a close relationship with indigenous video makers in Oaxaca who would facilitate our ability to have continuity of training and strengthen and broaden the network of indigenous media.



Fotografo: Francisco Vazquez.

The Hydra of Funding

“The Funds Executive Committee has agreed on a grant of \$21,400 for the development of the above mentioned project (Chiapas Youth Media Project). The award of the funding assigned to the granted projects is established through an agreement signed by the Fund and the person appointed as project manager, who will be responsible for signing the agreement, receiving the checks and keeping the Fund informed on the

development of the project as well as the application of the funds granted”. – Marcela S. Madariaga, Program Coordinator, US-Mexico Fund for Culture, notification letter of first grant, August 1997.

From the very beginning, we recognized the vulnerability of this project, and we realized that there needed to be elements of self-sustainability and that the self-sustainability needed to be a media product that could be shown, distributed, and sold. Unfortunately, selling indigenous made videos does not support the project on its own. We knew that we were working within a political

process that was extremely critical of international capitalism and suspicious of government support and corporate interests. We needed to respect this political framework, balancing it with the reality of needing consistent funding. Therefore, for the first five years, the U.S. side of the project took full responsibility for securing funding^[17].

As a video maker myself, I understood the costs involved just in equipment maintenance alone and knew that we would need some creative strategies for self-generating funds. In addition to foundation/corporate funding and personal altruism, we also created a system of self-generating income: video sales and university presentations.

When we first began discussions with the communities about the project, we explained that the equipment was theirs to do whatever they wanted with, but if they decided that they didn't want to produce some videos for outside consumption (a product to *sell* to the outside world), it would be hard to maintain financing. So it was a basic agreement from the beginning that, to generate income, some of their videos would be sold. The first video produced by the communities, *La Familia Indígena (The Indigenous Family)*, was made during the first series of workshops in the Spring of 1998 in Ejido Morelia. It was a very simple, straightforward video about the differing roles/jobs of men and women within the community. People in the tape spoke Spanish (this was a long time before they began recording in their language for international distribution)^[18]. This tape was used as our first promotional video for CMP/Promedios. We organized our first U.S. tour with this video and developed a viable model for doing presentations that generated income and raised the visibility of the project.

Over the years, there has been a significant shift in the quality of production in the videos. All productions (those intended for both external or internal usage) go through some type of community consensus about topics and content^[19]. What has always been interesting to me is the difference between what the communities produce about themselves and what "outsiders" produce about them. There has been a tendency for "outsiders" to focus on the militarization and violence in Chiapas, while the communities portray themselves as survivors involved in the next level of the struggle and resistance against neo-colonialism/globalization. The productions in international distribution are documentaries focusing on collective projects such as coffee, textiles, education, organic agriculture, etc^[20]. The vast majority of videos produced for internal consumption are of meetings, celebrations, religious and cultural gatherings, etc. These internal videos are almost exclusively in Mayan languages, and CMP/Promedios staff rarely see these productions.

We are currently distributing 24 videos internationally produced in Chiapas and Guerrero with most distribution done via our Chicago office. Video sales last year exceeded \$17,000, with university sales making up the majority of the income. It has really only been in the last couple of years that the communities can see a direct financial benefit from video sales. Currently, video sales cover the monthly satellite internet connection fees in all four of the Regional Media Centers^[21].

In 2003, I began attending large academic conferences like the American Anthropological Association (AAA) and the Latin American Studies Association (LASA). Presence at these conferences has been instrumental in raising our visibility within the academy, greatly increasing

our video sales, and adding names to our direct mail list. One of our other main sources of self-generated funding comes from honoraria from university presentations.

An added benefit of doing these academic presentations is the direct contact with the American university students. For many students, this is the first time they have heard of or seen indigenous media. The students are often affected by the power of self-representation. The videos produced by the Zapatistas can have a powerful effect on even the most jaded college student. Seeing



Fotografo: Francisco Vazquez.

people organized collectively to work in their organic municipal garden (with no ski masks or guns) talking about how they want to be self-sufficient, not use chemical fertilizer, nor take government handouts, completely goes against their pre-conceived image (and corporate media misinformation) of the Zapatistas as armed guerillas only interested in state power. These academic presentations benefit CMP/Promedios in many ways: by increasing video sales, providing word of mouth promotion for future presentations, recruiting student interns, and creating a sensitivity to indigenous struggle and self-representation.

CMP/Promedios also seeks funding via philanthropic resources. At the beginning of the project, we made the decision that we would only apply for grants as long as there were no strings attached and no political agenda of the foundation that conflicted with our/the community's agenda. We have found that we can secure funds that have no outside agenda attached to conflict with our work^[22].

It took us a while to identify which foundations had funding priorities that matched our work and were willing to take a risk on a project such as ours. Support from private foundations has made it possible for us to grow as an organization.

Over the years, we have run into funding relationships that have caused problems. These problems were based on a foundation's need to recreate a pre-conceived cultural context that was often totally unrelated to the cultural context in which we are operating^[23]. We realize that foundation support will not last forever and are hoping that we will be able to maintain our funding relationships long enough to finish the infrastructure needed to make all of the Regional Media Centers completely operational and self-sufficient.

Since beginning the project, we have had conflicted feelings about going after corporate support and, until recently, we chose not to pursue that option. With increased pressure to generate larger amounts of money to support the Regional Media Centers with their expensive equipment and advanced training needs, we finally decided to pursue corporate funding. In 2004, I nominated one of our staff for a high-profile human rights award sponsored by a U.S. corporation, and we received the award. The award recognition goes to an individual, but the money goes to their organization. Corporate money has its benefits but also drawbacks: namely, that it is filled with contradictions, and the spectacle and individualization of it runs counter to indigenous philosophy. Will we pursue other corporate sponsorship? I guess it is still something that we are evaluating at this time. We now know that, in the future, we will need to seek out corporations whose philosophies are more reflective of our own.



Fotografo: Francisco Vazquez.

Conclusion

We set up the projector and a white sheet over the wall of one of the classrooms. It was getting dark and people started to come out and sit on the grass...out came the first image: color bars, I heard “oohs and ahhs”...but what was even more impressive than the response to the color bars was to see these people moved by a video produced in their own language by their own people: men, women and

children a sense of pride as well as excitement to be able to see themselves speak about their work, their organization and their struggle. - Cruz Angeles, Filmmaker and CMP/Promedios intern, 2000.

As mentioned earlier, I do not see the CMP/Promedios as the only model for supporting indigenous media initiatives—it is just an example of one of the myriad possibilities. Within Latin America there are a number of important and successful indigenous media projects. In Bolivia, a national Indigenous video initiative, CAIB (Indigenous Audiovisual Coordinator of Bolivia), has produced over 150 video productions, with hundreds of communities involved. In Brazil, Video nas Aldeias (Video in the Villages) has been working with Indigenous populations to produce feature-length documentaries demonstrating important cultural practices and community life. In Ecuador, CONAIE, (Confederation of the Indigenous Nations of Ecuador) has been producing Indigenous videos for a number of years. In addition, there are a number of smaller initiatives whose work does not receive wide recognition or distribution. Video Production and dissemination within the communities has become a regular feature of indigenous life^[24].

Many have asked me how I feel as a white, middle-class woman working with indigenous communities in Mexico. I have learned that there is an important role for “outsiders” to play as collaborators with indigenous communities/organizations in fostering media initiatives—namely, in the initial transfer of media technology and the creation of infrastructure and sustainability. As I have seen myself, my most important contribution has been my ability to raise the initial funding that supported the creation of a permanent infrastructure and my current role in getting the videos distributed to the widest audience possible. Utilizing the resources that are available here in the U.S. in furthering the collaborative work is the most important contribution I have made.

Through my work with the CMP/Promedios, I have witnessed the communities in Chiapas adapt video technology as an important tool for internal communication, cultural preservation, human rights, and as a vehicle for communicating their own truths, stories, and realities to the outside world. The ability to record, edit, and distribute one’s own story is vital to a functioning society. Video controlled by indigenous people has the power to make connections within communities and to extend communication/information internationally to non-indigenous people. All of us have a role to play in supporting these important processes.

“With this group of young people or not so young people, it’s my intention to insist that they learn more, that they prepare more, in order to be able to make a testimony or tell a story, all of this is recorded so that the town can see that the work is moving ahead“. - Miguel, Local Zapatista Authority, Ejido Morelia, February 1998.

^[*]*—Documentalista, ex-directora, y actual Coordinadora Internacional de Chiapas Media Project/Promedios.*

^[1]*I would very much like to thank Shayna Plaut, who helped me edit this article.*

^[2]*In 2000, we began work in Guerrero with the Campesino Environmentalists of the Sierra de Petatlán.*

^[3]*The EZLN said that NAFTA was not going to benefit indigenous people in particular and poor people in general in Mexico—unfortunately, this unheeded prediction has proven true.*

^[4]*A recent Google search using the word “Zapatista” came up with 649,000 listings, with 740,000 for the acronym “EZLN.”*

^[5]*The paramilitary’s role is to provide a constant threat of violence and destabilization to the Zapatista communities. The Mexican Government manipulates the situation as an eternal inter-community conflict while at the same time instigating divisions within the communities.*

^[6]Tom Hansen, instrumental in helping start CMP/Promedios, was kidnapped and expelled by Mexican immigration authorities during a delegation bringing video equipment to Ejido Morelia in February, 1998.

^[7]The San Andres Accords were an agreement signed between the Zapatistas and the Mexican Government in 1996. Even though the Accords were never formalized into the Mexican Constitution, the Zapatista communities used them as a framework for actions/work they have assumed since 1996. Video is one example of these actions.

^[8]The project would not have been possible without developing relationships with NGOs in the area, and we work hard to maintain those relationships.

^[9]The National Indigenous Institute is now known as the National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples (CDI).

^[10] Carocol were previously know as Aguas Calientes; there are five in all.

^[11]The cañadas--canyons--are where some of the newer Zapatista communities are located.

^[12]Our direct mail list is a list of individuals to whom we send letters soliciting donations twice a year.

^[13]Although the Zapatistas' first language is Mayan, in order to facilitate communication with us, they decided to hold their meetings in Spanish, the default lingua franca.

^[14]Our contacts initially were with local authorities and now are via Regional Media Coordinators and the Good Government Assemblies. We have never had a community meeting to discuss organizational issues. Community meetings are part of the internal structure and decision-making and we understand that we are not part this process.

^[15]In reaction to the increasingly volatile internal Mexican political environment, we decided to insure the safety of the youth delegation by asking Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) Deputies to escort our group through immigration checkpoints to Ejido Morelia.

^[16]It was understandable that they dealt with us like this considering how tense the situation was in Chiapas when we first started working there: we were outsiders who could potentially make trouble.

^[17]During the first 18 months of the project, we also received individual donations in Mexico via personal contacts. This decision was made for a number of reasons: we had not-for-profit status

in the U.S.; the proposals needed to be written in English; I had previous experience as a documentary producer in writing grants; and we had some already established funding contacts in the US.

^[18]*In the first video productions, Spanish was used, because the videos were seen as productions for all of the Zapatista Autonomous Municipalities, where Spanish is the common language. As the project became more integrated on a local and regional level, local languages began to be used.*

^[19]*These discussions can take place on a local, regional or municipal level. The Zapatista video makers produce videos in collaboration with their community, region and/or municipality.*

^[20]*All videos in international distribution are translated into English, Spanish and French.*

^[21]*The Regional Media Centers are equipped with satellite internet access. This involves a PC computer that controls the positioning and programming of the satellite dish. The communities use the internet for email correspondence with fair trade projects that distribute their products, for news gathering, and for communicating with the other Regional Media Centers.*

^[22]*The most that has ever been asked of us is to put the name of the foundation on our printed materials, which of course we are happy to do.*

^[23]*Many foundations have a specific focus on gender and want guarantees of women's equal participation. A couple of years ago, we actually had a program officer who, during a meeting with local Zapatista authorities in the Highlands region, scolded them for not including more women in their workshops. The cultural insensitivity shown was startling (the idea that you can ignore community processes and cultural context and demand a specific outcome), and the incident created a tension with Zapatista authorities who as a result may not agree to such meetings in the future. The Zapatistas released a declaration of equal rights in 1994. If one looks at the Zapatistas within the broader context of gender roles within indigenous communities in Mexico, the Zapatistas in many ways are light years ahead of the majority.*

^[24]*All of these indigenous media projects (including CMP/Promedios) are part of the Latin American Council for Indigenous Film and Communication (CLACPI). CLACPI also organized the most important Latin American indigenous film festival that exists on a rotating basis throughout Latin America.*