## Zapatista Success Through Internet

## (Selection from journal article, “The Zapatista Effect: The Internet and the Rise of an Alternative Political Fabric”)

### https://webspace.utexas.edu/hcleaver/www/zapeffect.html

### The Role of the Internet: from the Margins to the Center

The role of the Internet in the international circulation of the indigenous rebellion in Chiapas developed quickly and has continued to evolve. Early on, the Internet provided a means for the rapid dissemination of information and organization through pre-existing circuits, such as those which had been created as part of the struggle to block NAFTA, or those concerned with Latin American or indigenous issues. These existed primarily at an international level and mostly in computer-rich North America and Western Europe. News reports on radio and television were complemented in cyberspace by first-hand reports of observers (who flooded into Chiapas in record numbers with hitherto unseen alacrity) and more analytical commentary by specialists who could voice their opinions and enter into debates more quickly and easily in cyberspace than in other media. These few circuits were rapidly complemented by the creation of new, specialized lists, conferences and web pages devoted specifically to Chiapas and what was soon being called the struggle for democracy in Mexico. The breadth of participation in these discussions and the posting of multiple sources of information has made possible a degree of verification unusual in the history of the media. Questionable information can be quickly checked and counter-information posted with a rapidity unknown in either print or radio-television. Instead of days or weeks for objections or corrections to be registered, the norm is minutes or hours.

In all of this the EZLN has played no direct role; these efforts were initiated by others to weave a network of support for the Zapatista movement. Although there is a myth that Zapatista spokesperson Subcommandante Marcos sits in the jungle uploading EZLN communiques to the world from his laptop, the reality has been that the EZLN and its communities have had a very mediated relationship to the Internet. The Zapatista communities are indigenous, poor and often cut-off from not only computer communications but from the electricity and telephone systems through which the former mostly operate. Under these conditions, EZLN materials were initially prepared as written communiques for the mass media and handed to reporters or to friends to give to reporters. Such materials then had to be typed or scanned into e-text for distribution on the Internet.

Today there are dozens of web pages with detailed information on the situation in Chiapas and Mexico more generally and several widely used news and discussion lists devoted to the daily circulation of information and its assessment. These various interventions operate from many countries in many languages. All of these efforts are the result of work by those sympathetic to the indigenous, to the Zapatistas or to the whole struggle for democracy in Mexico. Some of these efforts were launched in Mexico, e.g., the list chiapas-l is run through the UNAM computers in Mexico City and the Frente Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (FZLN, or Zapatista National Liberation Front) operates both a list (fzln-l) and a series of voluminous multi-lingual web pages carrying news and documents generated through the negotiations in Chiapas and discussions in Mexico more widely. Many others have originated outside of Mexico, e.g., the first, unofficial EZLN web page was implemented through the Swathmore web server in Pennsylvania.[11](https://webspace.utexas.edu/hcleaver/www/zapeffect.html#11)

More recently, as they have come to understand the effectiveness of this technology for making their voices heard and for communicating with supporters and making allies elsewhere, the Zapatistas have begun to craft their missives and adapt their interventions accordingly. Today through the intermediary of the FZLN or other friendly groups and individuals, Marcos and the EZLN regularly send messages to others around the world, e.g., to a European-wide demonstration in Amsterdam against Maastricht and unemployment, to an Italian gathering in Venice against regional separatism, to a conference of media activists in New York and so on. In these communications they make their position on various issues known and seek to create or strengthen ties with other, far-flung groups.

The Internet has also played a more and more central role in particular organizing efforts initiated by the EZLN. While its role was limited in the formation of the meetings of the National Democratic Convention in 1994 and 1995 which drew together a wide variety of groups from all over Mexico, it was much greater in the subsequent national and international plebiscite in which the Zapatistas sought feedback from their supporters about the direction of their political struggle. Participants in Mexico voted at booths set up throughout the country by Alianza Civica and some 80,000 from outside the country took part mostly via the Internet. Total participation is said to have been over one million persons.[12](https://webspace.utexas.edu/hcleaver/www/zapeffect.html#12)

The most dramatic organizational efforts in which the Internet has played a central role have involved the joint cooperative efforts of the Zapatistas and those linked to them. These have been the organization of very large-scale meetings in response to a January 1996 Zapatista Call for continental and intercontinental "encounters" to discuss: 1. contemporary global capitalist policies (summed up by the term "neoliberalism" in Latin America), 2. ways of elaborating a global network of opposition to those policies and 3. ways of interconnecting various projects for elaborating alternatives. The result of these organizing efforts included: a series of continental meetings in the Spring of 1996, an intercontinental meeting in Chiapas in the Summer of 1996 and a second intercontinental meeting in Spain in the Summer of 1997. Through extensive e-mail, and a small number of intermittent, face to face meetings, possible approaches to the organization of discussion were debated, agendas were hammered out and logistical arrangements were made. The results were stunning: thousands came to the continental meetings, 3,000 to the intercontinental in Chiapas and 4,000 to the intercontinental in Spain. The significance of these continental and intercontinental meetings includes the very fact of their existence.

When the Zapatistas initiated their Call, they did so with trepidation and even characterized it as a possible folly. Such gatherings are unusual even when initiated by governments. It is only recently, historically speaking, that they have become regular features of the activities of supranational state institutions such as the United Nations. Governments have the wherewithal to organize such gatherings, not poor villages of indigenous peoples. In recent years middle class activists and well funded non-governmental organizations have organized parallel meetings to those of governments, e.g., at the 1992 environmental meetings in Rio de Janeiro or the 1995 women's meetings in Beijing, but no such global meetings had ever been organized by virtually unfunded grassroots organizations. That they were held and on a scale that far exceeded anyone's expectations took the Zapatistas by surprise and warrants close attention by anyone interested in the evolution of international politics.