Outside the Indigenous Lens: Zapatistas and Autonomous Video-making

Alexandra Halkin

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 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

On January 1st, 1994, the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN/Zapatistas), a Mayan indigenous organization based in Chiapas, Mexico, declared war against the Mexican Government in an armed uprising that took over six towns in Chiapas. The international press blasted news of the uprising over broadcast media and the internet, and analyses of the underlying causes of the Zapatista revolution jumped off the pages of the international press for weeks: the Mexican Constitution had failed to recognize indigenous peoples, their rights, and their cultures. Thus, the Mexican government was treating Mexico’s indigenous peoples socially, and through legal fiat, as second-class citizens, effectively denying indigenous peoples the rights guaranteed to all Mexicans under the Mexican constitution. With a strong sense of the
importance of media events, the Zapatistas chose January 1, 1994— the date that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect— for the uprising. Since the Zapatistas are primarily an agricultural people, they argued that NAFTA would have a significant impact on indigenous peoples throughout Mexico. Yet the Zapatista concerns were never heard, let alone solicited, by either the Mexican or US negotiating teams.iii

In addition to guns, the media were always an important 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 allowed the Zapatistas to call to international civil society to join them in “building a new world.” With appeals made via the internet, they focused international attention on the uprising and, in so doing, used the resulting international pressure to force the Mexican government into negotiations, and a subsequent truce, by January 12th, 1994. It is, then, by their own design that the Zapatistas have become something of a “spectacle” spawning everything from PhD dissertations to conferences to rock music.iv

This chapter focuses on both the product and process of indigenous media and offers a “best practice” model of cooperative, transnational, indigenous media-making, based upon 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. As the founder, former director, and now international coordinator of the Chiapas Media Project/Promedios, it is clear that the CMP/Promedios model is not the only means of facilitating and promoting indigenous media; rather, my hope is that our story, including our mistakes, over the past ten years, might encourage others to join in this struggle.
Here, I emphasize the local, domestic and global contexts in which media operate as agents of social change.

The difference between the videos the communities produce about themselves and what "outsiders" produce about them is notable. 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. Within the category of self-produced videos, there is also a notable distinction between Zapatista videos produced to tell the world about their issues and those produced for internal community use and local circulation. CMP/Promedios productions—documentaries focusing on collective projects such as coffee, textiles, education, and organic agriculture—circulate internationally chiefly via universities and film festivals. In contrast, the vast majority of videos produced for internal consumption focus upon meetings, celebrations, and religious and cultural gatherings. These internal videos are almost exclusively in Mayan languages, addressing an audience assumed to be Mayan as well. Thus, while the Zapatistas strategically use the media for international recognition, videos produced for local circulation demonstrate the integration of media into the Zapatista-Mayan cultural fabric.

The Zapatista-produced videos have a powerful effect on outside viewers. Audiences in the “developed world” are seeing ordinary indigenous people (with no stereotypical ski masks or guns, as they are seen in the outsider-produced images)), organized collectively to work in their organic municipal garden and talking about how they want to be self-sufficient and neither use chemical fertilizer nor take government handouts—something that completely goes against the corporate-media-perpetrated image of the Zapatistas as armed guerillas only interested in state power. For other indigenous communities in Mexico and beyond, the videos offer an example of
successful indigenous resistance to globalization and present a sustainable agricultural model for collective survival. This paradigm shift benefits CMP/Promedios in many ways: by increasing video sales, providing word of mouth promotion for future presentations, recruiting student interns, and creating sensitivity to indigenous struggle and self-representation. As I will demonstrate, there are ways that “outsiders” can help to facilitate the process of indigenous media production and distribution that not only document and educate but that will also help to integrate new media into other forms of cultural production.

**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 CMP/Promedios works 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 matters 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 local Mexican government judiciary now refers to them to mediate between Zapatista and non-Zapatista individuals.

Other communities support the Zapatista cause but do not identify themselves as Zapatista. At the other end of the spectrum are the non-Zapatista communities, ranging 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.

This larger sociopolitical context is key to understanding the environment in which the CMP/Promedios operates. In December 1997, a month before the first CMP/Promedios workshops were to take place, government-trained paramilitary forces killed 45 indigenous people, mostly women and children, in what is now referred to as the “Acteal Massacre.” This bloody event received much international mass media attention that mostly reiterated the Mexican Government’s version of the story: The official government claim was that the massacre was a result of longstanding inter-community conflict—not government-sponsored violence against Zapatista supporters. The story of the communities was not present in the coverage. Concurrent with this, the Mexican Government had begun to expel foreigners, including human rights workers, from Chiapas under the pretext that they were violating the constitution by involvement in internal politics. With this backdrop, CMP/Promedios made its first, formal, bi-national media exchange.
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

It was in this environment and under an apparently impenetrable cloak of censure that the Zapatistas recognized the power of the media. In the spring of 1995, I made my first trip to Chiapas while producing a documentary for a US-based NGO taking a humanitarian aid caravan to a Zapatista region. During the production, our caravan arrived in a community that was swarming with press (both national and international): 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, *the Zapatistas initiated and directed this international media presence,* recognizing their dependence on outside (both mass and independent) media for visibility, for a degree of protection, and for leverage. The Zapatistas understood the power of their 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 and an obvious desire
to communicate their message to the outside world. It was clear that the Zapatistas would benefit
from access to video technology. Before leaving Chiapas, I began a discussion with Zapatista
authorities, who expressed a strong interest in bringing video technology to their communities,
and with representatives of local NGOs who had a working relationship with the Zapatista
communities; their pre-existing relationships with the Zapatista communities helped facilitate our
communication and gave us credibility within the communities.\textsuperscript{vii} I returned to the U.S. with the
kernel of an idea for a project and with the Zapatistas’ encouragement 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.

\textbf{Getting Organized}

\textit{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 (personal communication, October 1997)

In the fall of 1995, I returned to Mexico and, during this period, 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.\textsuperscript{viii}
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 upon 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 thinking that this would only 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.

After some extensive conversations with Monteforte, we decided that we needed to present a formal proposal of a media training strategy to the Zapatistas. It had been suggested by several people that we go and speak with David, a Zapatista authority who lived in Oventic (in the Highlands region). David was extremely supportive of our proposal for the workshop and offered to facilitate the negotiating process with various Zapatista communities.

**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 U.S. Senator (personal communication, January 7, 1998)

This project could not have “gotten off the ground” without the support of many activists, NGOs, and media makers within the United States and Mexico. As in any process of social change, it is the individual, the community, and the vision that create the ability for sustainability. We welcomed the opportunity to work within already-existing connections while keeping our vision of media activism. Besides Guillermo Monteforte, other people were essential
to getting CMP/Promedios off the ground. Tom Hansen (currently National Coordinator for the Mexico Solidarity Network) was at that time the Director of Pastors for Peace, a U.S.-based NGO that had been working in Chiapas since the uprising. Hansen 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. Via one of Hansen’s contacts in Mexico City, I met Jose Manuel Pintado, an independent video producer based in Mexico City, who had earlier introduced me to Guillermo Monteforte and also provided an introduction to Fabio Meltis, an indigenous youth organizer in Mexico City, who encouraged many indigenous youths to participate 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. Vazquez had been involved in his community’s collective projects and had a built-in sensitivity about dealing with the communities in Chiapas. Without Vazquez, the project would never have advanced beyond the first workshop. When I met Vazquez, 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. Vazquez helped me navigate Mexican indigenous culture, understand Mexican bureaucracy, and in many ways served as my protector the numerous times the Mexican military and Immigration Authorities stopped me at roadblocks and checkpoints.

**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, Zapatista participant in the 1st workshop in Ejido Morelia
(personal communication, February 1998)

The first workshop was held in February of 1998 in the town of Ejido Morelia. Through our existing network of contacts, we met Miguel, a Zapatista authority who served as our link to the local, and regional authorities and who was key in planning the project. It was through Miguel 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. ix 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 them. This was only possible by asking and listening to the experts who were living within that community.x

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. 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, the Acteal Massacre in 1997 created panic within the Street Level Youth Media group, and we had to reorganize some of our initial plans. XI 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, Meltis’s group of indigenous youth from Mexico City, and Monteforte’s group of indigenous video makers from
Oaxaca. A grant from the US-Mexico Fund for Culture, based in Mexico City, funded these first workshops.

During our time in Ejido Morelia, there was a lot of tension due to non-Zapatista illegal logging in the community. This situation resulted in a rock throwing incident where a Zapatista member of the community was hit in the head. Miguel and other local authorities asked us to assist them in documenting the injury and, if necessary, to help transport the person to a hospital in a nearby town. The staff of Street Level, the Chicago group, fearful of the violence, did not want any of their youth involved and forced them to stay behind, locked up for safety. The staff of Street Level wanted constant assurances that “nothing would happen,” and when something did happen, be it a very minor incident, it added tension to an already tense situation. The entire situation illustrated the difficulty in organizing cultural exchanges in a highly-conflicted area.

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] .... The lights went out 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 (personal communication, February 1998)

During the 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, and so on. 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. We understood this to mean that there would be inevitable interruptions of the workshops.

The first equipment we purchased consisted of S-VHS and VHS camcorders and S-VHS editing systems. Early on, we accepted used equipment from sympathetic U.S. supporters, 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 we quickly 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.

**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 (personal communication, October 2000)

Through the success of the first video workshops in Ejido Morelia and Oventic, the Zapatista communities indicated their interest 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. My own cultural style of decision-making—and my frustration at the long meetings with local Zapatista authorities and the
Outside the Indigenous Lens

slowness of decision-making within the communities—created friction within our organization. Realizing that my strengths could be better utilized elsewhere, I removed myself from the day-to-day decision making in Mexico and focused on international distribution and promotion.

In 2001, the organization incorporated in Mexico as Promedios de Comunicación Comunitaria and became CMP/Promedios. CMP/Promedios is organized as a collective with no director or hierarchical structure but with three full-time staff members in Chiapas and one full-time and one part-time staff member in the U.S. The organization is an attempt to reflect the organizational structure of the Zapatista communities with which CMP/Promedios works. Currently, CMP/Promedios is assisting the communities in Chiapas 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. But if you listen to how they express themselves, without applying syntax rules or grammatical prejudice, you will see that their verbal expression, even in their poor Spanish, is very profound and intense. This becomes greatly magnified with audiovisual media”*

Guillermo Monteforte (personal communication, April 1998)

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: *what kind of videos would*
the Zapatistas produce once they had the equipment and training? In my mind, I was facilitating the education of video makers by transmitting technical skills to my peers. In the summer of 1998, we held our first video production workshop in the village of La Realidad. I was sitting next to Manuel, a local Zapatista authority who had 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. After this incident, we made sure during the workshops to reiterate that the equipment belonged to the communities, that no government permission was needed, and that the training we were providing was professional and no different then what the people with the credenciales have received. Put simply: they had just as much right as the people with the credenciales to tell their story and distribute it as they saw fit.

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 introductory video and computer workshops the first two years were taught by either indigenous video makers from Oaxaca or by Mexican CMP/Promedios staff.

CMP/Promedios staff felt that it was extremely important for the instructors to be Mexican—, preferably, indigenous Mexican—in order to provide a continuity of process and to connect Zapatista video makers to the broader network of indigenous video makers in Mexico
Outside the Indigenous Lens

and Latin America. The development of a network of Media Centers is a long-term commitment that can only succeed if it is self-sustaining. In this respect, CMP/Promedios relies on good relations with indigenous video makers in Oaxaca and elsewhere who strengthen and broaden CMP/Promedios as a link in the larger network of indigenous media organizations.

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, when we noticed that certain people were dropping out of the courses whom we would later encounter in leadership positions. Another dynamic operating was the presence of so many “outsiders.” Many people of goodwill came (and continue to come) from around the world to Chiapas with the intention of assisting the communities. Yet many broken promises have left locals 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.

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 to CMP/Promedios, August 1997
We entered the project knowing that neither goodwill nor passion would buy us a video camera or a Final Cut Pro editing system. Self-sustainability also requires a media product that can be shown, distributed, and sold. Unfortunately, selling indigenous-made videos does not often generate enough revenue to support the project on its own. Working within a political movement that offers a potent critique of international capitalism means that organizers and participants are suspicious of both government support and corporate interests. We needed to respect this political framework, balancing it with the need for consistent funding. Therefore, for the first five years, the U.S. side of the project took full responsibility for securing funding.

The costs involved in equipment maintenance alone necessitated 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. It is this element of structural financial solvency—a sustainable infrastructure—where outsiders can provide the clearest support. But it is also one of the most complicated aspects of indigenous media-making.

When we first began discussions with the communities about the project, we explained that the equipment was theirs to do whatever they wanted, 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. In the Spring of 1998, in Ejido Morelia, workshop participants made the first video produced by the communities, *La Familia Indigena (The Indigenous Family)*. 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 rather than Tzeltal; this was a long time before they began recording in their own language for international distribution. The tape was well received, and we sold at least 150 copies in the first 6 months.
CMP/Promedios used this tape as our first promotional video. 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.

CMP/Promedios is 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. The presence of CMP/Promedios at large academic conferences like the American Anthropological Association (AAA) and the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) 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. Currently, video sales cover the monthly satellite internet connection fees in all four of the Regional Media Centers.

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 that will conflict with our work. 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, although, at times, it has also proved a source of tension. These problems were often premised upon a foundation’s desire for us to recreate their pre-conceived cultural context, one that was often totally unrelated to the cultural context in which we are operating. A good illustration of this is that many foundations want a certain level of gender equality in the composition of
workshops. In the early days of the CMP/Promedios project, we spent a lot of time talking with local Zapatista authorities about the need for women’s participation. We would then see women participating in the introductory workshops but not returning to subsequent workshops. We soon understood that our input really made no difference and that women’s participation was the decision of the communities, not that of outsiders, however well meaning. We realize that foundation support will not last forever, and we 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.

**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 “ooohs 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 [showing] 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 (personal communication, 2000)

Over the past ten years, 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 24 videos for international distribution; and provided the means for
hundreds of videos utilized internally by the indigenous communities in Chiapas.\textsuperscript{xiv} 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.\textsuperscript{xv}

As mentioned earlier, the CMP/Promedios model is not 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 (see Salazar and Cordova, this volume). In addition to the better-known projects such as CAIB (Indigenous Audiovisual Coordinator of Bolivia), Brazil’s \textit{Video nas Aldeias} (Video in the Villages), and CONAIE (Confederation of the Indigenous Nations of Ecuador), 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 in an increasing number of communities.

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.

The communities in Chiapas have adapted 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 of indigenous communities and other marginalized groups to record, edit, and distribute their own story is vital
to a functioning society. Indigenous-controlled video 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.

*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, letter written to CMP/Promedios

*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,

First video production distributed by CMP/Promedios
Fig. 1. Zapatista women with camera

Fig. 2. Zapatista women and children with camera
Fig. 3. CMP/Promedios education shoot

Fig. 4. CMP/Promedios editing bench
Fig. 5. Zorida, a Zapatista woman, with baby and camera
Notes

i I would very much like to thank Shayna Plaut, who helped me edit this article.

ii From the CMP/Promedios video of the announcement of the formation of the Caracoles and Good Government Assemblies. In this paper, I use only first names to refer to Zapatista persons. All of the Zapatista Authorities and many of the Zapatista video makers only use a first name, a nombre de Guerra, that usually has no relation to their actual names.

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

iv Our office has been inundated with requests for interviews, office visits, and access to the communities.

v 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.

vi 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.

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

viii The National Indigenous Institute is now known as the National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples (CDI).

ix 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.
Our contacts initially were with local authorities and now are via Regional Media Coordinators and the Good Government Assemblies.

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.

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.

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.

In 2000, we began work in Guerrero with the Campesino Environmentalists of the Sierra de Petatlán.

The Zapatista video makers produce videos in collaboration with their community, region, and/or municipality.