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The beginning of warfare on the internet: Zapatista Strategic Communications
Measuring the effect of Russian Internet Research Agency information operations in online conversations
Reverse engineering Russian Internet Research Agency tactics through network analysis
From swords to ploughshares: time for a CVE step-change?
On finding the ethical in the age of digital battle spaces

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THE BEGINNING OF WARFARE ON THE INTERNET: ZAPATISTA STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

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Abstract

This article discusses the development of the strategic communications of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, the EZLN, between 1994 and 1996. During this period, the Zapatista movement transformed from a group focused on armed struggle into a social movement. The EZLN used rhetorical and communications strategies, not only to construct group identity but as a way to pressure the Mexican government into guaranteeing their rights as citizens and as an indigenous minority. The article also reflects on the discursive strategies employed by the group's main leader, Subcomandante Marcos, and on the Zapatistas' narratives and the structure of the communications they disseminated to their worldwide network of committees connected through the internet.

Keywords—*strategic communications, speech and power, Zapatistas, EZLN, guerilla*

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Introduction

Gabriel García Márquez: Do you still have time to read in the middle of all this mess?

Subcomandante Marcos: Yes, because if not...what would we do? In the armies that came before us, soldiers took the time to clean their weapons and rally themselves. In this case, our weapons are our words, so we have to depend on our arsenal all the time.¹

The Zapatista Army of National Liberation—EZLN—is a *guerrilla* group with indigenous roots. It emerged on 1 January 1994 in the state of Chiapas, Mexico. Its primary aim was the preservation of land rights, constituted under Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution of 1910. Hence, it did not seek the overthrow of the government, nor even to change the political regime, a common ambition among Latin American revolutionary movements.

Five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in 1994, the members of the newly formed Zapatista Army of National Liberation came together to stage an armed insurrection against the Mexican state. This action had a great impact on national and international public opinion. However, early on in its operations the EZLN shifted from the classic strategy of ‘revolutionary focus’ (*foco*) by means of guerrilla warfare, popularised by Che Guevara, to one based on communication, using the internet as a vehicle for disseminating their demands. In doing so they were hugely successful in reaching beyond the geographical limits of the Lacandon Jungle in Chiapas, where they were based, by networking their ideas across the internet.

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1 Excerpt from ‘Gabriel García Márquez interviews Subcomandante Marcos’, *The Nation*, 2 July 2001.

Gabriel García Márquez: *¿Todavía, en medio de todos esos rollos, tiene tiempo para leer?* **Subcomandante Marcos:** *Si porque sí no... ¿qué hacemos? En los ejércitos de antes, el militar aprovechaba el tiempo para limpiar su arma y rebacerse de parque. En este caso, como nuestras armas son las palabras, tenemos que estar pendientes de nuestro arsenal a cada momento.*

This article analyses EZLN documents and communications, and the group's decision to focus on strategic communications instead of armed conflict in their early years.

When the novelist Jorge Castañeda wrote *La Utopía desarmada: Intrigas, dilemas y promesas de la izquierda en América Latina*²—using the same title as for his article of 23 April 1993 in the newspaper *El País*³—he did not suspect that he would soon see an armed rebellion waged by the EZLN in his own country. Nor that the Zapatista movement would prove wrong his prediction that post-Cold War leftist politics would no longer engage in armed combat. In the preface to the Brazilian edition, he would contradict himself, stating that he had been misunderstood at the time, that he had not denied the possibility of new armed conflicts, merely the idea of a new revolution. He would classify the EZLN as an armed reformist movement. Twenty-five years later the EZLN remains both operational and active in the media.⁴

Whether the EZLN was a revolutionary or reformist movement, its success was largely due not to armed struggle but to its strategic communications.⁵ While its military power was inferior to that of the Mexican Federal Army, its early use of the internet in creating a communications network won a key advantage in an asymmetrical conflict that contested the physical, not the virtual, domain.

The architecture of EZLN strategic communications would be based on a system organised through networks. The first level of this network was formed by the EZLN's Clandestine Indigenous Revolutionary Committee. Historically, some ethnic Maya (Tzeltales, Tzotziles, Tojolabales, Choles) joined together to form the biggest group in Zapatista movement.⁶ Other small ethnic groups were also represented in their ranks. Solano described the Lacandona Jungle as a complex ethnic space, with many different languages and native identities.⁷ The second level was composed of numerous civil, local, regional, and international committees,

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2 In English the article was titled 'Utopia Unarmed: The Latin American Left After the Cold War'. In the Brazilian Portuguese edition it was 'Utopia Unarmed: Intrigues, Dilemmas, and Promises of the Left in Latin-America'.

3 Jorge Castañeda, 'La utopía desarmada', *El País*, 23 April 1993.

4 Alberto Nájjar, 'EZLN y Marcos: ¿cuál es el principal aporte del zapatismo a México a 25 años de su levantamiento armado?', [EZLN and Marcos: What have the Zapatistas contributed to Mexico 25 years after the uprising?], *BBC News Mundo*, 1 January 2019. México. [Accessed 14 April 2019].

5 Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture. The Rise of the Network Society*. (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), Vol I, p. 82.

6 Neil Harvey, *La Rebelión de Chiapas: La lucha por la tierra y la democracia* [The Chiapas Rebellion: The struggle for land and democracy] (México: Ediciones Era, 1998).

7 Xochitl Leyva Solano, 'Lacandonia Babilonia' in Xochitl Leyva Solano and Gabriel Ascencio Franco, *Lacandonia al filo del agua* [Lacandonia on the Edge of the Water]. (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1996), p. 95–103.

providing a concentrated communications channel for easy dissemination of texts produced by the Zapatistas.⁸ This information infrastructure was generated by multiple communications networks of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation. It represents not only the transformation of the Latin-American Left, departing from armed revolution to seek reform through dialogue, but also characterises the creation of communicative spaces directed at challenging power and mediating conflict.⁹ The EZLN was established on 1 January 1994. In a quick operation that began at dawn, the EZLN occupied the *cabeceras municipales* [municipal seats] of Altamiro, Chamula, Chanal, Larrainzar, La Libertad, Las Margaridas, Ocosingo, Palenque, and Simojovel of Allende, as well as the former capital of Chiapas State, San Cristóbal de Las Casas. The Zapatistas seized a radio station from which they transmitted their demands and the reasons for the armed uprising.

The First Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle [*I Declaração da Selva Lacandona*]¹⁰ and The Mexican Alarm [*O Despertador Mexicano*],¹¹ the EZLN's first documents, rapidly circulated in the press along with several photos of armed indigenous people walking the streets of the occupied areas. Before the end of the week, pictures appeared in some of Mexico's leading journals showing encounters between the EZLN and the Mexican Federal Army—and summary executions.¹² The rebel army that had been in gestation for more than ten years in the interior of the Lacandón Jungle had come into being.

One characteristic of the EZLN was the ethnic appeal that permeated its rhetoric. Although the movement had tried over years to build a more pluralist and open discourse to win support from other sectors of Mexican society, its words and actions demanded legal rights for indigenous communities. The texts of the San Andrés Accords [*Los Acuerdos de San Andrés*]¹³ addressing indigenous law and

8 Tássio Franchi, 'O Movimento Zapatista e a Constituição de Redes Intelectuais ao seu redor' [The Zapatista Movement and the Construction of the Intellectual Networks Around It], *Revista UNIVERSUM* № 18 (2003): 285–86.

9 Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, *Strategic narratives: communication power and the new world order*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), p. 209–10.

10 Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indígena del EZLN, (CCRI-CG del EZLN) 'I Declaração da Selva Lacandona' [First Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle] 1 January 1994, *EZLN, Documentos y Comunicados* (México: Ediciones Era, 2000) Vol. I. p. 33–36; Subcomandante Marcos, 'I Declaração da Selva Lacandona', 1 January 1994, *Documentos y Comunicados*, Vol. I.

11 Idem, *O Despertador Mexicano* [The Mexican Alarm], 1 December 1993, p. 36–48.

12 'Sublevación in Chiapas' [Rebellion in Chiapas], *La Jornada* (Mexico City), 2 January 1994. For bombing in the south of San Cristóbal: an investigation will be conducted to ascertain whether 5 rebels were executed; the guilty will be punished. In: 'Sublevación in Chiapas', *La Jornada* (Mexico City), 5 January 1994 in Pedro Henrique Ortiz Falco, *Z@patismo on-line* (São Paulo: PROLAN-USP, 1997), 2 Vols., p. 574–77.

13 'Acuerdos de San Andrés' [San Andrés Accords] in José Ramón Cossío Díaz et al., *Derechos y cultura indígena* [Indigenous rights and culture] (México: Miguel Angelo Parrúa, 1998). p. 294.

culture sought to change the relationship between the Mexican nation state and indigenous communities,¹⁴ and to protect the latter from the globalisation process. This characteristic of celebrating indigenous culture and ethnicity, while asserting the fundamental difference between indigenous societies and modern society, positions the EZLN in a group of movements that resist neoliberal reforms in their countries through the construction and affirmation of an ethnic identity free of any separatist or revolutionary project.¹⁵ The Zapatistas say: 'We do not want to separate ourselves from the Mexican nation, we want to be part of it, we want them to accept us as equals, as dignified beings, as human beings.'¹⁶

Miskimmon *et al.* argue that relations between actors do not occur in a vacuum but in spaces of encounter.¹⁷ The San Andrés Accords, based on acceptance of identity and equal rights for the natives, exemplified the EZLN's use of communications strategies and indirectly generated a further form of inclusion for their communities and soldiers (most of whom were indigenous). In the early 1990s, the internet was not widely used to communicate across social groups. By adopting communications through worldwide computer networks, the Zapatistas acquired communicative autonomy and a way to present the immediacy of the plight of impoverished and uneducated Indians in the remote south of Mexico in social spheres hitherto inaccessible to them, namely, the Mexican intellectual and academic communities, and the political elites.

This innovation had an impact on Mexico's politics and economy, influencing the country's foreign relations, while at the same time preventing the use of large-scale repression by the Mexican government.¹⁸ In their communication on 6 January 1994 the EZLN accused the Mexican Army of repression. Mexican President Carlos Salinas Gortari responded by ordering a cease-fire against the EZLN. From that moment, the Zapatistas began reporting the growing repression against the movement, which continued during the cease-fire.¹⁹

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14 Note the tension: 'Context of the new relationship talks about the need for a State policy that must be developed by the Federal Government in the framework of State reform, and the need for society to be involved in the desire to banish the discriminatory mentality that is maintained towards the natives.' Cossio Díaz *et al.*, *Derechos y cultura indígena*, p. 51.

15 By revolutionary we mean a movement that seeks radical change in the institutions of power in the country. As the Zapatistas claim they do not intend to change the Mexican political regime, we understand them not to be revolutionaries in the strict sense of the term. See Saint-Pierre on revolutionary war as 'only that phase in which the historical process seems to engage all its forces looking for an institutional rupture'. Héctor Luis Saint-Pierre, *A política armada [fundamento da guerra revolucionária]* (São Paulo: Editora UNESP, 2000), p. 33–34.

16 Massimo di Felice and Cristóbal Muñoz, (org.) *A Revolução Invencível* [The Invincible Revolution] (São Paulo: Boitempo, 1998), p. 21.

17 Miskimmon *et al.*, *Strategic narratives*, p. 209.

18 Castells, *The Information Age*, Vol. II, p. 84.

19 CCRI-CG del EZLN, 'Alto al Fuego' [Stop the Fire], 23 February 1994, *Documentos y Comunicados*, Vol. I, p. 81.

This article analyses the architecture of the discursive strategies of the Zapatistas. It examines how they created, implemented, and disseminated their strategic communications to advance their struggle to gain social and economic equality for indigenous communities in Chiapas in opposition to the influence of neoliberalism. The central figure in this new strategy was the man known only by his *nom de guerre*, Subcomandante Marcos. ‘Marcos was a major component of the EZLN’s propaganda machine and was responsible for many of the group’s communiqués,’²⁰ writes Blake Burgess.

We also interrogate the Zapatistas’ use of the internet as part of their communications infrastructure and their media ecology, which otherwise relied on local, less international means of communication. The potential of strategic non-state actors in cyber-warfare is real. David Betz identifies this as a cause for change in strategic affairs:

[There is now a] vast increase in the number and type of potential strategic actors as more and more people and organisations find ways of using cyberspace to mobilise contention globally for causes which would likely have failed to find a constituency in a less densely networked age.²¹

We highlight here one of the most relevant aspects in the contest for power in cyberspace, namely the narrative element of communications strategy, or the effort to describe values rooted not in actual information but in symbolic representations. Thus, they make history and create a story. The enduring existence of the EZLN may be explained by its continuous modifying and re-writing of EZLN materials. This strategy is apparent in how Subcomandante Marcos responded in an interview to the writer Gabriel García Márquez: ‘What’s in play here is what Subcomandante Marcos is, and not what he was.’²²

Limits, concepts, and methods

Reflecting on the Information Revolution, Joseph Nye writes: ‘The diffusion of information means that power will be widely distributed, and informal

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20 Blake Burgess, ‘People of the Sun: The EZLN in an Age of Mass Media’, *The Forum: Journal of History* Vol. 8, Issue 1 (2016): 7–17, p. 9.

21 David Betz, ‘Cyberpower in Strategic Affairs: Neither Unthinkable nor Blessed’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 35, No 5, (2012): 689–711.

22 ‘Gabriel García Márquez interviews Subcomandante Marcos’.

networks will weaken the monopoly of traditional bureaucracy.²³ It is precisely the egalitarian distribution of power among EZLN committees that we believe enabled the dissemination of information aimed at gaining international support for the Zapatista cause. The process of revolutionary transformation from armed combat to the use of discourse and dialogue as weapons was consolidated through the construction of a networked society—an extensive community connected by the need to communicate and to build on the content of that communication. We conclude that what ‘characterizes the current technological revolution is not the centrality of knowledge and information’,²⁴ rather, it is the diffusion of information that neutralises the asymmetries of power, ‘flattening the bureaucratic hierarchies’ and replacing them with a network of organisations.²⁵ We adopt James Farwell’s definition of strategic communications as ‘the use of words, actions, images or symbols to influence the attitudes and opinions of target audiences seeking to shape their behaviours in order to introduce interests or policies or to achieve objectives’.²⁶

For this study we systematically analysed some 400 documents relating to the Zapatista movement. Of these, 361 were letters and statements from the EZLN; seven were joint statements of the EZLN and the Mexican federal government; and six were unilateral proposals of the federal government or its organs and political parties. Not all are quoted in full; we have extracted only relevant and recurring passages to identify them.²⁷

The time frame for the study begins on 1 January 1994 with the emergence of the EZLN, and ends on 24 January 1997, a few months after the Zapatistas officially withdrew from peace talks with the Mexican federal government on 3 September 1996.

The discourse of the Zapatista movement plays a fundamental role. EZLN communications spread through the internet became the ‘spearhead’ in conflict, thus replacing kinetic weapons, and transforming the group’s discourse into its main instrument of the struggle. This feature makes the EZLN unique compared to other *guerrilla* movements, all of which rely or have relied on violence.

23 Joseph Nye, *O Futuro do Poder* [The Future of Power] (São Paulo: Benvirá, 2011) p. 155.

24 Castells, *The Information Age*, Vol. 1, p. 31.

25 Nye, *O Futuro do Poder*, p. 152.

26 James Farwell, *Persuasion and Power: The Art of Strategic Communication* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2012), p. xix.

27 This study did not seek to correlate the impact of daily internet use by the Zapatistas with the actions of the Mexican Army. We do not include Mexican army reports to check direct responses to each EZLN communication, nor daily changes in tactical planning of armed forces.

We do not argue that other guerrilla movements do not use communiqués and declarations to express their demands, only that this is not their primary means of action. The Zapatistas changed the game, also for groups that continue to use violence, as Burgess points out: ‘The ELZLN’s use of eloquent rhetoric and the Web provides a useful tool for other revolutionary groups.’²⁸

We emphasise that the use of media in war is not a new strategy for governments or revolutionary movements. The EZLN’s innovation was to make the internet their theatre of operations, the arena where they fought, won audiences, and connected with supporters. With this choice, they avoided conventional media vehicles and escaped government censorship. Internet use was effectively the heart of the Zapatista movement.

Zapatista reports gained prominence almost immediately because of widespread media coverage. Numerous periodicals reproduced the reports in full,²⁹ bearing the agonies and hopes of the indigenous people of Chiapas to their readers. Widespread media coverage garnered popular support for the Zapatistas from both ordinary people and intellectuals around the world.³⁰ This support exerted pressure on the Mexican federal government; after the ‘March of the Hundred Thousand’ in the Zócalo of Mexico City,³¹ it called off its military offensive and started a process of dialogue with the rebels. Once talks were established, the Zapatistas found institutional channels open and their words reinvigorated. According to Subcomandante Marcos, the use of discourse had not been considered the Zapatistas’ primary operating concept prior to 1 January 1994:

We have moved very quickly to a phase for which we were not prepared: dialogue. We were prepared for a long process of war of attrition, of military clashes, of political disputes over villages, of ideological struggle...³²

28 Burgess, ‘People of the Sun’, p. 8.

29 PROCESO: *semanario de información y análisis*. [PROCESS: Information and Analysis Weekly], México, Special Edition, 1 January 1999; PROCESO: *semanario de información y análisis*, ‘Memoria gráfica La marcha indígena’ [Graphic Memory: The Indigenous March], México, Special Edition, 8 April 2001; Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, ‘Na clareira da revolução’ [In the Glade of Revolution], *Folha de S. Paulo*, 4 September 1999; Pedro Ortiz (interviewer), ‘Ya Basta! Atencão!’ [Enough already! Listen!], *Revista Atencão*, (Año 2, Nº 8), 1996.

30 Prominent personalities who have written or demonstrated support for the Zapatista cause include: José Saragago, Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, Oscar Oliva, João Cabral de Melo Neto, Antonio García de León, Ariovaldo Umbelino de Oliveira, Adolfo Gilly, Eduardo Galeano, Luis Hernández Navarro, Marco Antonio Bernal, Frei Betto, Carlos Montemayor, Carlos Monsiváis, among others.

31 The ‘March of the Hundred Thousand’ took place on 12 January 1994 in the Zocalo in Mexico City, and provoked a unilateral ceasefire by the Mexican government.

32 C. De Lela and A. M. Escurrea (comps), *Chiapas: entre la tormenta y la profecía* [Chiapas: Between Torture and Prophecy] (Buenos Aires: Lugar, 1994), p. 162.

Using words as weapons assumed greater significance as they grew to become one of the movement's most identifiable characteristics.

Cyber-militancy or internet warfare?

‘¿Guerra de Internet?’ [‘Internet warfare?’]. Pablo Espinosa, a columnist for the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada*, began his article with this question on 10 August 1995.³³ ‘War’ on the internet began with EZLN sympathisers and people searching for information about the movement. Later the Zapatistas used the internet as a means to obtain external support for the region where they were surrounded by the military, and also to publish communications and alerts regarding events inside the conflict zone. In an era when almost all information was transmitted by fax, television, or print, Zapatism enjoyed the benefit of a networked infrastructure available only to the few.

Initially created for NGOs in Chiapas, this network became known as *La Neta*. According to Maria Elena Martínez-Torres, former delegate of *La Neta*, the network was a communications channel, created to facilitate NGO communication with the capital and to spread the vision of the minorities they represented.³⁴ In the early days of the rebellion, *La Neta* was the main Zapatista vehicle for communication and access point to what would become its new theatre of operations: cyberspace. As Manuel Castells explains, the Zapatista’s internet use can be divided into two moments. First, in 1990, when *La Neta* was supported by the Catholic Church and used as an alternative network for NGOs. Second, from 1994, with Ford Foundation funding, *La Neta* was supported on a private Internet provider.³⁵ Henceforth, there were no longer constraints on the proliferation of the Zapatistas’ words.

EZLN use of *La Neta* and the internet became a cyberwar conducted against the Mexican government. Cyberspace was used to pursue their political aims, and virtual campaigns (‘internet warfare’) subverted military campaigns on the ground (Zapatista and Government). We argue this kind of action may be defined as Information Warfare, consistent with its *modus operandi* when transmitting strategic information. Thus, it initiated a new information warfare with more

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33 Pablo Espinosa, ‘Mi página en Web no es la voz oficial del EZLN: Justin Paulson’ [My Web Page Is Not the Official Voice of the EZLN], Cuaderno Cultura, *La Jornada*, 10 August 1995 in Pedro Henrique Falco Ortiz, *Zapatismo on-line* (São Paulo: PROLAN-USP, 1997), 2 vols., p. 585.

34 Maria Eleno Martínez-Torres, ‘Civil Society, the Internet, and the Zapatistas’, *Peace Review* Vol. 13, Issue 3 (2001): 347–55, p. 351.

35 Castells, *The Information Age*, Vol I, p. 84.

effective outcomes than EZLN might otherwise have achieved through armed combat.³⁶ RAND analysts attribute the first Netwar to the Zapatistas: use of strategic communications was essential.³⁷

We will later demonstrate that cyberspace became the primary theatre of operations, targeting both society and the Mexican government. The goal directed at Mexican society was to recruit supporters and create a militancy to pressure the Mexican Government. The goal aimed at the government was to exert their claims and establish limits to the Mexican Army's actions. Their weapons were their words, documents, and reports, used strategically to gain support, to denounce, and to construct a proper narrative for the conflict, as discussed by Burgess:

Everything from EZLN communiqués to official government reports to mainstream news articles is disseminated across the net, thus subverting official channels and biases. The use of the Internet has allowed for a more informed and capable audience in assessing the situation in Chiapas.³⁸

The first webpage to release information about EZLN was posted online in March 1994 by Justin Paulson. Recently graduated in English literature from the University of Pennsylvania, Paulson explained why he created it:

Think: if I am looking for information about it and I find so little material, why not share with the world all that, even if little, of what I found? So I started a file on the network, with news communicated and everything related to the EZLN. That was at the end of March and beginning of April 1994.³⁹

Paulson's page was the first of a series that appeared over the following months and years. The Zapatistas, and especially their sympathisers, soon began to use the internet strategically, reporting allegations of abuse by government troops or major landholders, organising meetings, public mobilisations, and discussion groups by e-mail,⁴⁰ and disseminating documents, letters, and reports produced

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36 David Ronfeldt, John Arquilla, Graham E. Fuller, and Melissa Fuller, *The Zapatista 'Social Netwar' in Mexico* (RAND Corporation, 1998). p. 55

37 John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, 'The Advent of Netwar (revisited)' in *Networks and Netwars: The future of terror, crime, and militancy* (RAND Corporation 2001): 1–25, p. 17.

38 Burgess, 'People of the Sun', p. 8.

39 Paulson as quoted in Espinosa, 'Mi página en Web' in Ortiz, *Z@patismo on-line*, p. 585.

40 In Brazil, one of these lists is organised by the Zapatista Avante Committee—CAZ.

by the movement. This intense use of the internet was a coincidence that gradually became a necessity and increased when the EZLN replaced its strategy of armed struggle with dialogue. By drawing the struggle into the theoretical field via discussions on ethics and law, the Zapatistas fought their adversaries as equals, contrary to what had taken place in the ‘real world’ where the Federal Army was disproportionately stronger and better armed. Héctor Saint Pierre pointed out that: ‘At the tactical level, the use of symbols is incorporated to maximize the effect of weapons used—and sometimes replace it—and the large-scale application of the Internet communication system as a way of contrasting the effect of the completely adverse force relationship.’⁴¹

The use of the internet was crucial for the Zapatistas to reach a wide audience. This can be seen in the number of internet-support committees and online sites created by those keen to support the EZLN cause. Table I shows some of these committees and sites.

Country	Committee’s Name
Brazil	Avante Zapatista Committee
Brazil	EZLN Archive
Spain	Aragon Zapatista
Spain	Ellokal
Spain	Madrid’s Solidarity Platform with Chiapas
USA	Acción Zapatistas
France	Collectif ¡Ya Basta!
Italy	Comitato Chiapas – Torino
Mexico	FZLN
Mexico	Enlace Civil
Switzerland	Direkte Solidarität mit Chiapas

*Table 1 – Zapatista committees that use the internet to disseminate materials linked to EZLN through web pages or groups of emails.*⁴²

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 41 Saint-Pierre, *A política armada*, p. 208.

42 Franchi, ‘O Movimento Zapatista’.

The Zapatistas created a network of information pages and support committees via the internet where they contacted people and non-governmental organisations around the world. These contacts produced e-mails and letters addressed to the Mexican government asking them to respond to EZLN demands or cease military offensives (see February 1995 attack). For Saint-Pierre, the Zapatistas' use of the internet made a significant difference during the confrontation:

The Zapatistas were able to set up an international communication network by internet that made the difference in the war. The military use of these elements of action by a *guerrilla* group seems to indicate that we are faced with another type of war, 'this war'—as Yvon Le Bot said—after the fall of the Berlin Wall, where symbols matter more than weapons, communications matter more than the correlation of forces.⁴³

The EZLN was the first *guerrilla* force to use the internet in a systematic way to publicise its written materials and to create space for debates in which the movement itself was the central theme. The widespread use of a worldwide computer network to link the Zapatista movement to Mexican and international public opinion provided significant support for the EZLN.⁴⁴ The webpage <<http://www.enlacecivil.org.mx>> was linked to the entity called Enlace Civil or Civil Liaison, and was intended to be a bridge between indigenous communities and civil society.⁴⁵ It has been replaced by the webpage Enlace Zapatista <<http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/>>, where all the group's announcements can be found up to the present. The webpage Zapatista National Liberation Front <<http://www.fzln.org.mx>> was active in publishing denunciations of activities that occurred in Chiapas and articles on various topics affecting indigenous communities, but has now been replaced by Zeztainternacional <<https://zeztainternacional.ezln.org.mx/>>, which continues to circulate a variety of information to the communities. The diversity of internet pages linked to the cause bears witness to the enduring support for the movement.

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43 Saint-Pierre, *A política Armada*, p. 211.

44 Today several webpages link to them directly. They are updated weekly. The official page of the movement is: <http://www.ezln.org>. Here we found communiqués issued by the movement since 1994; some translated from Spanish to English, Portuguese, Italian, French, and German. The virtual memory of the entire movement is collected in the webpage <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx>.

45 Here we read: 'Enlace Civil A.C. arose from a request from a group of indigenous communities from the Altos, Selva and North regions of the southeastern Mexican state of Chiapas. The objective of ENLACE CIVIL is to serve as a bridge between the indigenous communities of Chiapas and national and international civil society in a common project to improve the living conditions of the indigenous peoples.' www.enlacecivil.org.mx [Accessed 7 December 2003].

Constructing power through discourse depends on a communications strategy. Here, discursive strategies are adjusted to different individuals and groups, both foreign and local. As Neville Bolt states: ‘power is constructed around the opposition between the local and the global, and is centred on networks, no longer on individual units of organisation’.⁴⁶

Forms of discourse

Zapatista discourse is diverse in form. We sort it into six categories below. Some communications are pragmatic and efficient, providing information or expressing demands, while other letters and reports are permeated with imaginary characters: the little indigenous girl Tonita, Don Durito de Lacandona the talking beetle, the Zapatista children, *guerrilla* companions, and *Viejo Antonio* [Old Antonio]. We cannot ascertain whether or not these characters are based on real individuals. Although certain short communications had only an informative function, Subcomandante Marcos occasionally used post-scripts to insert a comment or story that would make a text more attractive.⁴⁷

Informational or Coordination Reports

These are reports of an informative character about an event or organisation, or provide practical information such as how to get a press badge or why a newspaper failed to receive a copy of the latest EZLN communiqué; in short, practical considerations aimed at resolving or reporting an immediate problem.

Denunciation Reports

These denounce the actions of the Federal Army or White Guards during periods of peace.⁴⁸ Their purpose is to draw public attention to military manoeuvres conducted in the conflict zone, as well as to demonstrate to the military that the Zapatistas have intelligence on their activities (air patrols, trains crossing territory, and detachments camped in the jungle). These communiqués sometimes have

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46 Neville Bolt, ‘Unsettling Networks’, *The RUSI Journal* Vol. 154, Issue 5 (11 January 2010): 34–39, p. 35.

47 An analytical investigation classifying and differentiating between various forms of writing found in letters, communiqués, and other Zapatista documents would be a valuable contribution to thematic studies of the sort we have undertaken in the present article. A literary analysis of the creation and use of apparently fictitious personages who link the images constructed around the movement and associate it with a historical past would be of interest to researchers trained in the social sciences, most of whom might hesitate to engage in such work themselves.

48 The White Guards are armed groups usually financed by important landowners—‘[...] war mercenaries [...] commonly known as *Guardias Blancas*, paramilitary groups, death squads, among others’. Alejandro Buenrostro y Arellano and Ariovaldo Umbelino de Oliveira, ‘Chiapas: *construindo a esperança*’ [Chiapas: Building Hope] (São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 2002), p. 319.

a political stamp: they report on the government militarising the region during periods of peace talks where such actions have been prohibited by agreement.

Claim Reports

These are usually the longest form of communication, with demands accompanied by explanations. They include not only demands directly related to social issues but seek minimal conditions for dialogue or a return to it, as in the period following the February 1995 'betrayal', when the government suspended the cease-fire. Reports containing the movement's social demands appear in the form of proposals presented to the negotiations. Witness the First Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle:

To the People of Mexico: We, the men and women, full and free, are conscious that the war that we have declared is our last resort, but also a just one. The dictators have pursued an undeclared genocidal war against our people for many years. Therefore, we ask for your participation, your decision to support this plan that struggles for work, land, housing, food, health care, education, independence, freedom, democracy, justice, and peace. We declare that we will not stop fighting until the basic demands of our people have been met by forming a government of our country that is free and democratic.⁴⁹

Over time, the demand 'for work, land, housing, food, health care, education, independence, freedom, democracy, justice, and peace' was simplified with some documents adopting the expression: 'Democracy! Freedom! Justice!'⁵⁰ Sometimes the insurrection is justified by presenting social economic indices of the State of Chiapas, citing the infant mortality rate, malnutrition, and basic sanitation rates in contrast to the production of oil, electricity, and grain.

Letters

These are usually addressed to a specific person as a response or question. However, they are made public to all and published in the press. The letters do not conform to a set pattern but deal with a variety of subjects. When Mexico's

49 Subcomandante Marcos, 'I Declaración da Selva Lacandona', 1 January 1994, *Documentos y Comunicados*, Vol. I.

50 Idem, 'Segunda Declaración de La Realidad' [Second Declaration of Reality], 3 August 1996, *Documentos y Comunicados*. Vol. III.

President Ernesto Zedillo took office, he received a letter of ‘welcome to the nightmare’. In his first letter addressed to the new president, Subcomandante Marcos wrote: ‘Mr. Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León: Welcome to the nightmare. In this letter I am addressing your inauguration speech.’⁵¹

Reports with Stories

Characters created by Subcomandante Marcos appear in various communications, both in documents and long reports. The intention of these stories varies according to the characters involved or the legends they are addressing. There are also combat narratives that tell of *guerrilla* actions, containing mixed exaltations of confrontation featuring the fear and death of comrades, besides offering many comic stories showing the misadventures and privations of life in the jungle. Some of these tales have since become books, as in the case of *A História das Cores*⁵² [The Story of Colours] and *A Caverna do Desejo*⁵³ [The Cave of Desire]. The main characters in several communiqués have specific themes attached to them. Don Durito of Lacandona says he is a scholar of neoliberalism and so in communiqués where he meets Marcos, the theme of neoliberalism is addressed. Don Durito’s speech adopts a more academic tone and demonstrates the vision that the Zapatistas—or Marcos—have of neoliberalism, and how they perceive its impact on their lives.⁵⁴

Reports of Zapatista Children

Tonita and Heriberto are usually the protagonists of this type of report. They describe the children’s routines and how they behave in different situations. The image of purity and innocence captured in the characters of these children reminds us of the values of innocence, kindness, and joy that Marcos associates with the indigenous way of life. The character Heriberto appears for the first time in a July 1994 report. ‘Heriberto (3-year-old Tojolabal⁵⁵ boy) smiles toothlessly when he consoles his sister Eva (5-year-old Tojolabal girl) who woke up crying

51 Idem, ‘A Ernesto Zedillo, 31 December 1994’, *Documentos y Comunicados*, Vol. II, p. 141.

52 Idem, *A História das Cores* [The Story of Colours]. Transl. Marcelo Brandão n.p. 2003, compare *Veja Magazine* (Edição 1810, Año 36) No 27, 9 July 2003.

53 Idem, ‘Cómo el Jolmash se entró en la cueva del deseo’ [How Jolmash Entered the Cave of Desire] 17 March 1995, *Documentos y Comunicados*, Vol. II, p. 277–83. This communication was later transformed into a book by Erica Chappuis: *The Cave of Desire*. Illustration by Erica Chappuis. Text by Sub. Marcos. 1999.

54 Subcomandante Marcos, *Conversations with Durito: Stories of the Zapatistas and Neoliberalism* (Canada: Autonomedia, 2005).

55 Tojolabal is a Mayan language spoken in Chiapas, Mexico by an indigenous group of the same name.

because she dreamed that the cat did ‘mau’ [bad] and not ‘miau’ [meow].⁵⁶ The main point is to show the brother actively comforting his sister Eva, with care and love while giving her his chocolate. The tale builds the image of a kindly, indigenous child who protects his sister. A few paragraphs later, we read:

At the dawn of a year, an army formed by indigenous people declares war against the government, they fight for ‘utopias’, that is, for democracy, freedom, and justice in THE MEXICO WE WANT. On a wall of a Chiapanecan city hall—the caciques’ palace—is painted ‘YA BASTA!’ [Enough already!] in dull red, from dried blood. The employees will uselessly try to erase it. ‘Just knocking down the wall,’ the employees keep saying. Someone, anywhere in the country, begins to understand ... THE MEXICO WE WANT.

Heriberto wears only a red bandana for clothing. At three years of age the bandana covers his navel and little finger of sex. When Heriberto falls in the mud, he quickly turns to see if someone is observing him or laughs, if there is nobody in his sight, he gets up again and goes to the stream to bathe; he will tell his mom that he bathed because he went fishing. If someone makes fun of him when he stumbles, Heriberto reaches for a machete of his size and, wielding it, attacks everything around him. Heriberto cries not because the fall hurts. Because mockery hurts more, that’s why Heriberto cries.

In THE MEXICO WE WANT, Heriberto will have good shoes for the mud, trousers for scrapes, a shirt so that the hopes that normally nest in the chest do not escape; a red bandana will be only a red bandana, and not a symbol of rebellion. His stomach will be satisfied and clean and there will be a great hunger to learn in his thinking. Crying and laughing will be just that, and Heriberto will not have to become an adult anytime soon.⁵⁷

The first paragraph locates the characters in Chiapas after 1 January 1994. In the second paragraph, we learn more about the thinking and personality

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⁵⁶ Subcomandante Marcos, ‘El México que queremos’ [The Mexico We Want] 17 June 94, *Documentos y Comunicados*, Vol. 1, p. 162.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

of Heriberto, whose characteristics anyone can easily identify with. The last paragraph associates Heriberto's desires with the demands of the Zapatista movement in a subliminal message based on a child's need for well-being. Again, the writing deliberately invites people to identify with Heriberto and the Zapatista movement. Different forms of Zapatista discourse may appear merged in the same communiqué, either in the text itself or as a post-script. It is unusual, however, to find short stories in informative communications. An important point to highlight is that both statements in which descriptions of children appear and those containing short stories and other forms of fictional writing are, without exception, signed by Subcomandante Marcos. Documents signed by the Comitê Clandestino Revolucionário Indígena Comando Geral⁵⁸ (CCRI-CG) and other members of the EZLN do not share this characteristic.

A taxonomy of EZLN discourse

While acknowledging the six forms of discourse described above, for a useful taxonomy we further cluster them into three groups. The first group includes only informational and coordination reports. Their primary aim is to preserve relations with the press and the public. The Zapatistas were careful with professional communications outlets since they considered them important to their success in disseminating documents across national and international audiences.

The second group includes fictional stories and reports from the Zapatista children; these fulfil other functions. Their aim is to generate public empathy, to communicate the values of indigenous communities and explain the effects of government actions on them, and to connect the EZLN to today's Mayans. A few stories featuring the *Viejo Antonio* character connect contemporary Zapatistas to those historical Zapatistas who followed Emiliano Zapata in 1910 in support of his fight for land rights. Here we also find conversations between Subcomandante Marcos and Don Durito de Lacandona, in which the beetle performs a didactic role, explaining how the Zapatistas undermined the globalisation process (and NAFTA agreement) from the perspective of Chiapas.

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⁵⁸ Indigenous Revolutionary Clandestine Committee General Command, hereafter referred to as CCRI-CG.

Old Antonio took from his backpack a little bag of nylon. Inside there was a very old picture from 1910 of Emiliano Zapata.

In his left hand Zapata had his sword raised to his waist. In his right hand he had a pistol, two cartridge belts of bullets crossed his chest, one from left to right, the other from right to left. His feet are positioned as though he's standing still or walking and in his gaze there is something like 'here I am' or 'there I go'. There are two staircases. One comes out of the darkness, and there are dark-skinned Zapatistas as though they were coming out of something. The other staircase is lit but there is no one and one can't see where it goes or where it comes from. I would be lying if I told you that I noticed all those details. It was Old Man Antonio who told me. On the back of the picture, it said:

*'Gral. Emiliano Zapata, Jefe del Ejercito Suriano.
Gen. Emiliano Zapata, Commander in Chief of the Southern Army.
Le General Emiliano Zapata, Chef de l'Armée du Sud.
C. 1910. Photo by: Agustin V. Casasola.'*

Old Antonio says to me 'I have asked a lot of questions of this picture. That is how I came to be here.' He coughs and tosses the cigarette butt. He gives me the picture. 'Here', he says, 'So that you learn how to ask questions...and to walk.'⁵⁹

This story portraying a meeting between Subcomandante Marcos and Viejo Antonio is one example. In this particular scene, Viejo Antonio gives Marcos a photo of Emiliano Zapata (representing the connection between today's struggle and that of 1910) and a word of advice (representing knowledge of the indigenous people). It seems a simple literary construction; however, its meaning is more elaborate. By creating a bridge between the current struggle and the Mexican Revolution of 1910, so important to the formation of Mexican national identity, the story tries to create a connection between Marcos and all Mexican citizens who feel they are represented by Emiliano Zapata, a symbol of national heroism. By using the character of an indigenous old man, Old Antonio, to advise the young leader, the story creates a connection between

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⁵⁹ Idem, 'Carta de Marcos a remitentes que aún no obtienen respuesta' [Letter from Marcos to Senders Who Still Have No Answer], 13 December 1994, *Documentos y Comunicados*, Vol. II, p. 162.

the wisdom of maturity and indigenous ancestry and the new spokesperson, making him a legitimate representative of the movement.⁶⁰ David Betz offers some context to discursive strategies evidenced by the ‘power of stories’:

Clausewitz included ‘passion’ amongst the famous trinity that he argued constituted war, because he grasped that war requires society to cohere around the project that violence is aimed at achieving. [...] Myth construction is an aspect of power that the West has taught itself to mistrust (because of its experience of wars of mass mobilisation) and, by and large, to abjure, for ill and for good.⁶¹

We could compare this form of discourse to literary devices used by magic realists such as the Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez. Or as Claire Yorke states, ‘Empathy in strategic communications is not about better understanding an audience in order to tailor a message more accurately. If used correctly, it should reinforce processes of critical thinking in the initial stages of strategy development.’⁶² During their first years, the ability to transform fictional stories into a tool (or weapon) generated empathy and support for the EZLN.

The third group includes claim reports, letters addressed to politicians, and denunciation reports. These form the core of Zapatista communications—where they reveal their intentions and where negotiations are held. These provide important source materials and allow us to establish changes in Zapatista strategies. In this article, we address those points in greater detail as the primary evidence for our analysis. However, all types of discourse were analysed to build an understanding of their achievements.

The shift from the rifle to the word

A recurring feature of the documents produced during the early months of the Zapatista Rebellion was the argument that the EZLN was a military force capable of responding effectively to the Mexican Army, and consequently able to return to the fight at any moment. Before February 1995, threat of military

60 John Womack Jr., *Zapata e a Revolução Mexicana* [Zapata and the Mexican Revolution] (Lisboa: Edições 70, 1980), p. 10.

61 David Betz and Vaughan Phillips, ‘Putting the Strategy Back Into Strategic Communications’ in *Defence Strategic Communications* Vol. 3, (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, Autumn 2017): 41–69, p.48

62 Claire Yorke, ‘The Significance and Limitations of Empathy in Strategic Communications’, *Defence Strategic Communications* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2017): 137–60, p. 152.

action was used to intimidate the government, demonstrating a willingness to fight. Public opinion exerted considerable pressure, seeking a peaceful way out of the conflict.⁶³ The public understanding that emerged around the conflict was one of poorly-armed Indians facing a heavily-armed Mexican Federal Army with overwhelming numerical superiority. The Mexican magazine *Proceso* reported that 12,000 soldiers had been deployed in the first days of fighting. Faced with this, the population foresaw a massacre that had to be avoided. Popular demonstrations calling for the cessation of hostilities occurred in several places throughout the country. The most significant was the ‘March of the 100,000’ in Zocálo Square, Mexico City, on 12 January 1994. Any return to hostilities would entail the loss of popular support so important to the government.

It is instructive to review some of the documents addressed to the federal government, in which the threat of civil war is made explicit:

Advance to the capital of the country, defeating the Mexican federal army, protecting the civilian population in its liberating progress, and allowing liberated peoples to choose, free and democratically, its administrative authorities.

JOIN THE INSURGENT FORCES OF THE ZAPATISTA
ARMY OF NATIONAL LIBERATION.⁶⁴

This text from the First Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle is the first public document of the EZLN. This is an example of a *Claim Report* and should therefore be interpreted with caution. The threat of a warlike attitude with its ‘strong determination to act’ can be interpreted as a way of provoking a reaction and drawing national attention to the problem without any real intention of putting words into practice. Consequently, the phrase: ‘Advance to the capital of the country’ is mere allegory with little real intent. At the time, the EZLN was aware of its limited military capabilities in both human and material resources.

On 23 February 1994, the CCRI-CG published a document referring to the first cease-fire: ‘All regular, irregular, and urban units of the different weapons in the service of the Zapatista National Liberation Army, must remain in their positions and should answer firmly and decisively if attacked by ground troops

63 PROCESO: *seminario de información y análisis*. México, Special Edition, 1 January 1999.

64 The formatting of this paragraph follows the original, centralised and uppercase. CG-CCRI del EZLN, ‘1 Declaração da Selva Lacandona’, 1 January 1994, *Documentos y Comunicados*, Vol. 1, p. 34–35.

or federal army air force.⁶⁵ This document suggests the choice of a military option. The Zapatistas were, however, poorly armed compared to the Mexican Federal Army, so could only face them in asymmetrical combat; their advantage lay in the protection of and benefits offered by forested terrain.

Denunciation reports appear in communications dating back to the inception of the movement. An intention to use military force and threats forms part of their statements. In a communiqué dated 6 January 1994, coinciding with a military confrontation, the Zapatistas accused the army of indiscriminate repression and threatened to retaliate:

The present conflict unmasks, once again, the nature of the federal army, and presents it in its true essence: indiscriminate repression, the violation of all human rights, and the total lack of ethics and military honour. [...] We have respected the lives of soldiers and police who surrender to our forces; you summarily execute the Zapatistas who are injured, prevented from fighting, and those who surrender. If you start attacking our families and do not respect the lives of wounded and prisoners, then we will begin to do the same.⁶⁶

On 8 December 1994 at 09:45, the CCRI-CG of the EZLN formally broke the ceasefire⁶⁷ and ordered the beginning of a military campaign called 'Peace with Justice and Dignity to Indigenous Peoples'.⁶⁸ In subsequent releases, we find reports of units that participated in the declared military campaign. These units are the 75th Infantry Division, 25th Infantry Division, 1st Southeast Army Corps, and 21st Infantry Division. The existence of several groups subdivided within the overall organisation of the EZLN is feasible. But the existence of several rebel divisions within the Lacandon Jungle force seems less so due to the number of combatants we estimate the Zapatistas had in January 1994, and the number of combatants needed to form a division. In military organisation, a classical division has approximately 25,000 men divided into regiments and companies. If the Zapatistas had three divisions, they would have numbered

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65 CCRI-CG del EZLN, 'Alto al Fuego', 23 February 1994, *Documentos y Comunicados*, Vol. I, p. 81.

66 Subcomandante Marcos, 'Composición del EZLN y condiciones para el diálogo' [Composition of the EZLN and Conditions for Dialogue], 6 January 1994, *Documentos y Comunicados*, Vol. I, p. 77.

67 See: 'The Zapatista Army of National Liberation terminates, at this time, its commitment to respect the cease fire' in CCRI-CG del EZLN, 'Da por terminado el compromiso de cese al fuego' [He Regards the Commitment to Cease Fire as Being terminated], 8 December 1994, *Documentos y Comunicados*, Vol. II, p. 169.

68 Ibid.

some 75,000 men. A more realistic estimate is three thousand combatants, the approximate number of indigenous people who fought on 1 January 1994.⁶⁹

Moreover, the argument of returning to armed struggle that had been losing momentum over the course of 1994, practically disappears from Zapatista discourse after 9 February 1995 when the Mexican Federal Army launched a major military operation against the region under the pretext of arresting Subcomandante Marcos. The offensive failed to achieve its anticipated success, and Marcos evaded the Mexican Army. However, even though the attack failed to neutralise the EZLN, the Zapatista's position changed. They realised that fighting the Mexican Federal Army was no longer an option, and their use of weapons as the main strategy for challenging the government, diminished. A greater appeal to reason emerged, a search for dialogue (they did occasionally express a continuing willingness to die in combat, but for the purpose of becoming martyrs for their cause, not as a way to achieve military and political goals). In a document addressed to Esteban Moctezuma, Secretary of the Mexican Government, Subcomandante Marcos wrote: 'If everything is a pretext for military action, I regret that Mr. Zedillo's regime has decided to stain his hands with indigenous blood, and you are an accomplice to this barbarism.'⁷⁰ Rather than a declaration of armed resistance, it more poignantly represents a protest against a government that has chosen to sacrifice the lives of its own people. A week later, a further *Denunciation Report* announces:

Brothers, the Ernesto Zedillo government is killing us, killing children, beating women and raping them. We ask the Mexican people and the peoples of the world to do something to stop this war. We ask you brothers once again, do not leave us alone.⁷¹

Subsequently, we observe a new tone in Zapatista discourse. No longer is there a strong military ideal behind the words but a plea for the war to be interrupted and for dialogue to return. Communications with a bellicose tone no longer

69 The Zapatistas speak of 5000 natives taking up arms. Emilio Zebadúa identifies 3000; several authors oscillate between 3000 and 5000, Compare: Alejandro Buenrostro, *As raíces do fenómeno Chiapas* [The Roots of the Chiapas Phenomenon], (São Paulo: Alfarrábio, 2002), p.15 and Emilio Zebadúa, *Breve história de Chiapas*. [A Brief History of Chiapas], São Paulo: Alfarrábio, 2002, p.15.

70 'Si todo es un pretexto para la acción militar, lamento que el régimen del señor Zedillo haya decidido mancharse las manos con sangre indígena, y usted sea cómplice de esta barbarie. Es todo.' Subcomandante Marcos, 'Carta de Marcos a Esteban Moctezuma' [Letter from Marcos to Esteban Moctezuma], 2 February 1995, *Documentos y Comunicados*, Vol III, p. 212.

71 CCRI-CG del EZLN, 'Denuncia acciones del Ejército Federal mexicano y llama a detener la guerra' [Denouncing the Actions of the Mexican Federal Army and Calling to Stop the War], 11 February 1995 *Documentos y Comunicados*, Vol. III, p. 226.

appear as before. Increasingly weapons become adornments while words become weapons. Between 1994 and the beginning of 1997 the Zapatistas issued more than 400 media releases. These were in addition to actions by the movement's support groups in the form of public demonstrations in the capital and media appearances during the San Andrés dialogue process, mediated by the Catholic Church. In the text of the San Andrés Accords they appeal to the government to:

Expand political participation and representation. The State must impose legal and legislative changes that broaden the participation and representation of local and national politics of indigenous peoples, respecting their diverse situations and traditions, and strengthening a new federalism in the Mexican Republic.⁷²

Zapatista proposals are directed at the pursuit of legal equality and respect for ethnic differences. This direction can also be seen in a statement produced during the negotiations in San Andrés in 1996:

Pluralism. The agreement between peoples and cultures that make up Mexican society must be based on respect for their differences, under the assumption of their fundamental equality. [...] The recognition and promotion of the pluricultural nature of the nation means that, in order to strengthen the culture of diversity and tolerance in a framework of national unity, the action of the State and its institutions must be carried out without making distinctions between indigenous and non-indigenous, or before any collective sociocultural option. The development of the nation must be based on plurality, understood as a peaceful, productive, respectful, and equitable coexistence of the diverse.⁷³

Nevertheless, the Zapatistas failed to secure reforms to Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, which they had striven for in their written appeals. The search for equal treatment along with recognition of cultural differences was based on the idea of consolidating a new social pact, rooted in diversity and tolerance as fundamental principles for the construction of a more pluralistic Mexican State (evident in the passage above). Criticism is levelled against the

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⁷² 'Acuerdos de San Andrés' in Cossío Díaz et al., *Derechos y cultura indígena*, p. 291–92.

⁷³ 'Acuerdos de San Andrés' in Cossío Díaz et al., *Derechos y cultura indígena*, p. 294.

Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and its consequences for indigenous communities. Continuing poverty and misery of communities were to underscore differences between the Zapatistas and the Mexican government. Subcomandante Marcos writes:

‘Die as a social group, as a culture and, above all, as a resistance. Then you can be part of modernity’, says big capital from the seat of government to the indigenous peasants. These indigenous people irritate the modernising logic of neomercantilism. It is not only their rebellion, their defiance, their resistance, that irritates. The anachronism of their existence also irritates within a project of globalisation, an economic and political project that suddenly discovers that all the poor people impede it⁷⁴

Mexico’s entry into the FTA was seen as a death sentence. Neoliberal politics became rhetorically associated with Nazism, creating a strong image of genocide. An ethnic extermination is suggested in the following *Denunciation report* also written by Marcos:

Neoliberalism, as a theory of modern chaos, of the destruction of humankind, is the ideological heir of Nazism and the theoretical foundation of wars for ‘ethnic purity’ and intolerance. [...] Its objective is, as in any war, the destruction of its enemy: physical and moral humanity.⁷⁵

By adopting the term Nazism and by associating it with the neoliberal system, they not only connect it indirectly to the Mexican government but classify the militarisation of the State of Chiapas as an ‘ethnic war’ waged against the indigenous people, who had once again been made victims. The construction of Zapatista discourse is based on maintaining the ethnic factor and the construction of group identity. Zapatistas present themselves as different from other Mexican citizens due to their ethnic-social exclusion that, according to their texts, dates back to the period of the Spanish Conquest. This association paints them as underprivileged compared to other Mexican citizens; hence the justification for their claims. This is celebrated in the San Andrés Accords

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74 Subcomandante Marcos, ‘Carta a John Berger’ [Letter to John Berger], 12 May 1995, *Documentos y Comunicados*, Vol. II, p. 355.

75 Idem, ‘Fin de la consulta nacional’ [End of the national consultation], 29 September 1995, *Documentos y Comunicados*, Vol. II., p. 458.

texts, where they demand from the government the recognition that they are ‘descended from populations that inhabited the country at the time of the conquest or colonization’.⁷⁶ Later they claim that ‘The State must promote juridical and legislative changes that broaden the participation and representation of local and national policies of indigenous peoples’.⁷⁷ The equality perceived by them takes two forms: sometimes they present themselves as the same as minority groups in order to seek their support; sometimes as equals before the laws of the Mexican State. Here, once again, we see the search for legal rights for indigenous people as the driving force of the EZLN with the same concepts captured in their documents.

Discussion

We have evaluated the importance of Zapatista discourse, recalling elements present in its formation. We have indicated its diverse make-up and characteristics. We demonstrated how the question of war disappeared as an argument between 1994 and 1996. And, finally, we observed how the Internet emerged as the primary space for disseminating this discourse. We asked: What happened to the rebel army that in 1994 promised ‘Advance towards the capital of the country, overcoming the Mexican federal army’? What prompted the armed group founded and rooted in Ernesto Che Guevara’s revolutionary *foco* theory⁷⁸ to choose to use communication over confrontation? In short, they were ill-prepared for this change of strategy, as Subcomandante Marcos suggests:

We have gone very quickly to a phase for which we were not prepared: dialogue. We were prepared for a long process of war of attrition, of military clashes, of political dispute over villages, of ideological struggle.⁷⁹

Zapatista communications between 1994 and 1996 reflect the shift from military strategy to communications strategy. In other words, during this period the group broke from the ideals of armed struggle. Our study notes that using arms as a viable means of realising their claims remained in the Zapatista discourse between 1 January 1994 and 9 February 1995. This, in spite of the movement’s

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76 ‘Los Acuerdos de San Andrés’ in Cossío Díaz et al., *Derechos y cultura indígena*, p. 291.

77 *Ibid.*, p. 292.

78 Yvon LeBot, *Subcomandante Marcos, el sueño zapatista* [Subcommander Marcos: Dream of the Zapatistas] (México: Plaza & Janés., 1997), p. 135.

79 C. De Lelle and A. M. Escurra, (comps). *Chiapas: Entre la tormenta y la profecía* [Chiapas: Between the storm and the prophecy] (Buenos Aires: Lugar, 1994), p. 162.

military inferiority and a civil society calling for peace. However, after the military offensive of February 1995, a sharp change took place within Zapatista discourse and actions. Bellicose argument disappeared from their reports, giving place to constant requests for dialogue. The war came to be portrayed as a form of extermination of innocents or even martyrdom. This change of rhetoric promoted a dual gain for the Zapatistas. First, their pacifist speeches raised greater support among civil society. And later, the pacifist argument inhibited the Mexican Federal Army's justification of a third direct military offensive against the EZLN, since constant calls for peace and dialogue would keep the Federal Army from attacking a group that was proposing to negotiate peacefully rather than waging war on peace. Thereby they ensured the continuity of the movement, while national and international pressure on the government brought the direct actions of the Mexican Federal Army to a halt. Using this strategy, the EZLN began to shape its discourses to increase credibility, formerly limited, so that it would no longer be considered a *guerrilla* group. Instead it would be seen as a social movement with strong international support.⁸⁰

The Zapatistas used the Internet and urged media to focus international attention on their grievances, arouse support, and forge solidarity, helping to bring about a settlement. Setting aside violence was important. But by turning to language as a key tool of strategic communication, the Zapatistas rebranded themselves and circumvented the might of the Mexican military with an effective communication campaign. Between 1994 and 1998, they put the Mexican government on the defensive as the country evolved from an authoritarian to a more open system.⁸¹

Without being prepared for this, the Zapatistas were the first non-state group to use the internet extensively to publicise their claims, seek sympathisers, and pressure the government not only to negotiate but also to disrupt ongoing military campaigns. The use of communications has become the most effective weapon of the EZLN, and the internet has become its space of greatest resonance due to the possibility of reaching other countries and continents by creating and mobilising networks of support.⁸²

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80 Farwell, *Persuasion and Power*, p. 70.

81 Ibid.

82 Franchi, 'O Movimento Zapatista'.

The emergence of the Internet in the early 1990s coincided perfectly with the rise of the EZLN. The Zapatistas utilized the fledgling technology to take their local news to the international stage and their survival was more than likely tied to this ability to communicate with a global audience.⁸³

This alignment of a popularised internet with the EZLN's internal character and set of well-written communications (to win over important and distinct audiences) are important aspects that may explain the success and longevity of the movement.

Conclusion

The EZLN can be considered the first instance of insurgents using the internet as a space to disseminate critical communications and help an armed movement achieve its political objectives. After February 1995 the virtual *guerrilla* campaign became the central thrust of the movement. Two points demonstrate the use of communications as a weapon. Direct actions supplemented by the publication of reports against and denunciations of the Mexican Government and Army; and the promotion of cyber-activism through committees spread over several countries, rippling across national and international communities. The information structure used by the Zapatistas—namely radio broadcasts, videos, telecommunications, and especially the internet—was vital to the success of two aspects of the movement: their transformation from a *guerrilla* group into a national social movement; and their change of strategy from direct military confrontation to narrative construction and communications as the central element with which to confront the Mexican nation state.

Finally, to understand how, in that context, a minority indigenous group could reverse its position of kinetic inferiority to become an actor with the power to influence the politics and economy of its country using international pressure, it is necessary to compare the potential impact of the technological structure available to that group from the 1990s onward, following the creation of *La Neta*, an alternative computer network linking Chiapas to Mexico with the support of NGOs and the Catholic Church.⁸⁴

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⁸³ Burgess, 'People of the Sun', p. 7.

⁸⁴ Castells, *The Information Age*, Vol. II, p. 83.

Three main factors led to the success of the strategic communications employed by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation. First, access to a technological structure that provided the space to construct and disseminate their own version of the facts, free of censorship. In *La Neta* and later on the internet, the EZLN managed to bypass media outlets biased towards the government and access larger national and international audiences. Although the struggle for hearts and minds is nothing new, the effective use of the internet by a non-state actor was new in the 1990s.

Second, identifying key actors to act as bridge-builders between the movement and its supporters; in fact, the EZLN had some indigenous leaders and one council (CCRI-EZLN). But Subcomandante Marcos was more than just a solitary leader, more than a spokesman, he was *the* bridge-builder. Marcos signed the majority of documents at the outset of the struggle. With each threatened attack, he managed to effect strategic retreats while countering the government with communications.⁸⁵ His ability to write and disseminate communications to inform and influence audiences was impressive.

Finally, the modification of EZLN's strategy brought about a transformation in the main theatre of operations. The crucial element in this transformation was the exchange of assault rifles and military confrontation in the jungle for messages spread on the net targeting Mexico's citizens. The power of the Zapatistas to disseminate their ideas and gain support across social classes came as a surprise to the Mexican Army and to the government, who were inadequately prepared for this new cyber battlefield—the new *locus* for disseminating information and ideals, for creating identity and spreading *zapatismo* across the globe. Twenty-five years later Zapatism does not find itself stuck in the past: its support network remains on duty and on-line.

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85 Ibid.

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