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Despite brutal military defeats since first appearing on 1 January 1994, the day the North American Free Trade Agreement took force, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, or EZLN, a group of mainly indigenous, poor rural people are waging a worldwide information war with unparalleled success.

The Zapatista movement can mobilise hundreds of thousands of people using the internet. This month streets were lined to support a march from jungle strongholds in Chiapas to the Zocalo, the main square in the Mexico City stormed by Emiliano Zapata 90 years ago. The crowds were swelled by thousands of international supporters including human rights ambassador Danielle Mitterand, Nobel-Prize winning author Jos  Saramago from Portugal, and Jos  Bove the French anti-multinational activist.

Using the 'Net they have organised this and numerous other protests around the world. In February '97 demonstrations were held simultaneously at 29 Mexican consulates across the United States. In February '98 rebel supporters hacked into a Mexican government Web site and plastered it with pictures of their group's namesake, Emiliano Zapata. Recently they used the Internet to temporarily shut down the multilateral agreement on investment negotiations.

Handling shortwave and VHF signals, phone lines, walkie-talkies, and computers the Zapatistas communicate their message of resistance, and report on military attacks, disseminating information quickly, eluding surveillance, interception, and jamming efforts by the Mexican military. Using low-frequency transmissions that cross oceans and continents, their shortwave radio enables people to hear information that is censored by the state and giant TV networks such as Mexican Televisa.

One Chiapas programme transmits at 6,975 kHz, at a signal beyond 300,000 watts - a strength too powerful for the Mexican army to jam. Two other broadcast frequencies, 15,050 kHz and 21,460 kHz, can also be heard well into Mexico and around the world. President Vicente Fox, an ex-Coca Cola executive, was snubbed by Marcos who wouldn't meet him at the Presidential Palace.

Showing just as much media know-how as the President, Marcos accused Fox of trivialising the indigenous cause and trying to turn a serious movement into a hollow prime-time event. The Zapatistas are struggling for constitutional rights and autonomy for the country's 10 million indigenous people, 10% of the Mexican population, who speak more than 150 languages between them.

Link: "Zapatistas in cyberspace" is a guide to some of the hundreds of Zapatista resources on the 'Net. See: <http://www.eco.utexas.edu/Homepages/Faculty/Cleaver/zapsincyber.html>

Forthcoming Congress debates include: the Internet and Peace Making; the Role of Community Radio in Peace Making; the Democratic Potential of New Technologies; Indigenous Communities, Communications, and the Globalisation of Poverty.