

Chiapas Media Project

For many people who live in the developed world use of video cameras, VCR's, TV's, and computers is a daily occurrence. But when one speaks with indigenous peoples about access to this same technology they say it is only a dream. For centuries indigenous people and their cultures have been represented by people from the outside. Recently over the past few years there has been an effort to get new communication technology into the hands of indigenous people so that they can represent themselves, with their own words and images. This is what the Chiapas Media Project (CMP) is attempting to do in Southern Mexico. The CMP is a bi-national collaboration that provides video and computer equipment and training to indigenous communities in Chiapas and Guerrero, Mexico.

The CMP began as a result of conversations with autonomous Zapatista communities who were requesting access to video and computer technology. The Zapatista's or Zapatista Army of National Liberation, are an indigenous movement made of up Tzotzil, Chol, Tojolabal, Mum and Tzeltal Mayan Indians.

They became known to the world via the internet on January 1, 1994 when they staged an armed uprising and took over six towns in Chiapas demanding that indigenous rights be recognized in the Mexican constitution. Another demand was the formation of indigenous controlled TV and radio throughout Mexico.

The Zapatista's are the most documented indigenous movement in the history of the world with hundreds of videos, films, web-sites, and books created by people from the outside. The CMP has provided these same indigenous communities with the technology and training to tell their own stories from their own perspectives.

Since the first workshops in 1998, the CMP has supplied 54 video cameras to 47 indigenous communities in Chiapas. Close to 200 indigenous youth have been trained in basic camera usage. There are 20 advanced video makers who have been with the project since the beginning who produce the videos that the CMP distributes worldwide. These video makers now teach all the introductory production and post-production courses in their regions in their native languages. The CMP has a media center in the town of San Cristobal de las Casas which has a non-linear editing system, off-line S-VHS editing system, video library and video archive.

The indigenous video productions are often quite different than what has been produced about them. Since their primary identity is as farmers- 'campesinos', many of their videos are about working in agricultural collectives. There have also produced videos about their new autonomous education system, fair trade organic coffee, non-violent resistance against the military occupation of their communities etc. These videos have been presented at film and video festivals, museums, and universities throughout the world.

The CMP is now working with the advanced video makers to create an economic infrastructure so that the project can continue when the staff is no longer there. The CMP is producing videos for NGO's and setting up a video archive where outside producers can purchase footage for their productions. This project is becoming incorporated into the autonomous process that these indigenous communities are constructing. This model of professional training and development of economic self-sufficiency will enable long term support of the project by the communities. It creates the possibility for on-going self-representation because these tools are now controlled by indigenous people.

In the summer of 2001 the CMP will begin a series of video workshops in indigenous communities in the 'montaña' region of Guerrero. Over the next few years the CMP plans to expand it's work throughout Mexico and other parts of Latin America providing indigenous communities with the tools and training so their views can be heard and they can represent themselves on their own terms.

by Alexandra Halkin/Director Chiapas Media Project

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