Cyberactivism - A Virtual Ethnography of the Zapatistas

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Synopsis

The Internet has opened the possibilities for new spheres of research from various disciplines and approaches. This Master thesis is an attempt to explore parts of these spheres revealed by researching a phenomenon such as political activism performed in cyberspace. I have done this by adapting the ethnographic approach to the Internet, also defined as a virtual ethnography, to find interesting stories that would shed some particular light on cyberactivism in the age of the Information Society. The Zapatistas in Mexico have been used as a starting point for the ethnography as they are known as the social movement of the information age, constituted in and off the global communication network. The ethnographic approach to the Internet is not yet a fully established one. The methodological reflections have thus been an important part of the discussion of the thesis. The thesis is written within the academic field of STS (Science and Technology Studies) and Media Studies.

Key words: Cyberactivism, Online / offline, The Zapatistas, Virtual Ethnography, The Internet, researching cybertcultures
Table of contents

1 RESEARCHING CYBERCULTURES ................................................................. 7
  1.1 INTRODUCTION ....................................................................................... 7
  1.2 THE INFORMATION SOCIETY AND THE SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF ELECTRONIC
      TECHNOLOGIES .................................................................................. 8
  1.3 CYBERACTIVISM ................................................................................... 12
  1.4 THE ZAPATISTAS ................................................................................ 14
  1.5 RESEARCHING CYBERCULTURES ......................................................... 15
  1.6 VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHY ................................................................. 16
  1.7 AIM OF THE THESIS ........................................................................... 20

2 RESEARCH APPROACH ................................................................................. 22
  2.1 ENTERING THE FIELD ......................................................................... 22
  2.2 FIELD NOTES ....................................................................................... 23
  2.3 LOOKING FOR THE ZAPATISTAS ON THE INTERNET ......................... 23
  2.4 VARIETY ............................................................................................... 28
  2.5 FOLLOWING CONNECTIONS .............................................................. 33
  2.6 BECOMING A MEMBER .................................................................... 38
  2.7 TAKING A MORE ACTIVE ROLE .......................................................... 41
  2.8 BECOMING A CYBERACTIVIST? ......................................................... 44
  2.9 LEAVING THE FIELD .......................................................................... 47
  2.10 SUMMARY ........................................................................................... 48

3 CYBERACTIVISM ........................................................................................ 49
  3.1 IDENTIFYING CYBERACTIVISM ......................................................... 49
  3.2 ELABORATING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS ....................................... 51
  3.3 HOW THE ZAPATISTAS ARE PRESENT ON THE INTERNET .............. 52
  3.4 THE 1ZAPATISTA EMAIL GROUP ....................................................... 54
  3.5 CROSS-POSTING ................................................................................ 61
  3.6 PERSONAL ACTIVISM ....................................................................... 63
  3.7 KEY CHARACTERISTICS ..................................................................... 65
  3.8 A COMMUNITY? ................................................................................ 68
  3.9 WHY DO THEY PARTICIPATE IN SUCH ACTIVITIES IN CYBERSPACE? ................................................................................ 71
  3.10 ISSUES OF REPRESENTATION – VIRTUAL AND REAL ZAPATISTAS .... 74
  3.11 THE CONSTRUCTION OF TECHNOLOGY AMONG THE MEMBERS ....... 76
  3.12 THE MORE VIRTUAL THE MORE VIRTUAL ....................................... 76
  3.13 “ACTIVISM ACTIVISTS” .................................................................... 77
  3.14 SUMMARY AND MAIN FINDINGS .................................................... 77

4 REFLECTIONS ON VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHY ........................................... 80
  4.1 POSSIBILITIES AND CONSTRAINTS ..................................................... 80
  4.2 A PLEA FOR ONLINE ETHNOGRAPHY ............................................... 82
  4.3 CONNECTIVITY RATHER THAN SPACE ............................................. 82

5 CONCLUSION .............................................................................................. 85
1 Researching Cybercultures

1.1 Introduction

The topic for this Master thesis is broadly divided into two main issues; cyberactivism (activism performed in cyberspace) and ethnography as a tool and methodological entry point to study such a phenomenon. The focus has been to look at the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico and the adherents operating through the Internet to perform cyberactivism and furthermore whether ethnography can be considered as a valuable research approach for studying the Internet and cybercultures for this purpose. To do this I have adapted the ethnographic approach to study the Zapatistas on the Internet. The thesis is written within the field of media studies and science and technology studies emphasising the social and cultural dimensions by using the technology that the Internet offers. The thesis further attempts to emphasise the methodological implications by adopting ethnography to the Internet. It’s crucial though to stress that in spite of the heading, the thesis will not mainly focus on the Zapatistas but rather about Internet as a means for cyberactivism. The other focus will be on the ethnography as an angle of incidence for studying cybercultures. Nevertheless, the word Zapatistas and stories regarding the movement can be read many times through the thesis. After all this is the group I have been studying for some time now and the movement has been the entry gate to the field of virtual ethnography. In the case of the Zapatistas they are known as the social movement of the information age, constituted in and off the global communication network (Castells, 2001). This is why I considered them to be an interesting case for studying cyberactivism and using the virtual ethnography approach.

In the following in this first chapter I will state clearly and define the most important phenomena related to the ethnography performed with a focus on the Zapatista movement and
cyberactivism. In chapter 2 I will give a descriptive account for the process of the virtual ethnography. Chapter 3 will then be an analysis where I am trying to narrow the focus down to the cyberactivism culture which was my intention while I will reflect on my experiences of doing ethnography in chapter 4. The concluding chapter will sum up the findings and questioning whether this was an appropriate way or not of researching such a phenomenon in cyberspace due to the questions I wanted to research.

1.2 The Information Society and the social dimensions of electronic technologies

The Internet is the communication medium that allows for the first time communication of many to many, in chosen time in a global scale. (Castells, 2001:2) The latter point is not a new way of describing new media technologies though. In the 1960s, Canadian media theorist and communication Professor Marshall McLuhan coined the term global village to describe how instantaneous communication made possible by electronic technologies could unite the world on a global scale. (Holeton, 1998) This was a term that turned up in the 1960s and McLuhan was thinking more about TV than the possibility for today’s Internet and he didn’t have in mind that this global village was a very desirable destination for humans either. (Holeton, 1998:257) Nevertheless, the term global village has come to describe a sort of utopian ideal that combines the future and past when using modern technology, especially ICT.

The acknowledged Internet sociologist Manuel Castells, often seen as very optimistic in his views about the Internet, has also stated that media be it television, radio, newspapers or the Internet are the only political space that matters today and many more have claimed that the future of activism is moving towards on-line issues. (Cleaver: 1998, Van Dijk, 1999, Atton,
A common concept for civil society organisations using media and communication networks in their work for social justice is the awareness of the importance of mass media and communication networks for the objectives the organisations try to achieve. The mass media constitute an important battleground for activists since it is given that media attention guarantees vide visibility and is therefore characterised as the most effective forums for publishing the issues of significance. (Castells, 2001)

While talking about the period of time we now find ourselves, the Information society, many claim that the technologies (as the Internet) are having a transforming effect on the society. In a sense these visions can be qualified as deterministic in their views as they imply that the technology has determinate impacts or effects on our lives and upon society as a whole. These visions have a huge influence in debates about the relationship between technology and society. The STS perspective and STS studies though seek to investigate the relations between the technology and society as it within this field is seen as more complex than the deterministic view. (See for example Bijker, Hughes and Pinch, 1987)

The following are the three main ways in which relationships between technological changes are understood in popular debate and academic literature, the first is technological determinism describing how technologies emerge as if from nowhere and then proceed to transform the society into which they are diffused. A second perspective, which may be summed up as technology as neutral also claim that the technology is emerging from nowhere but in this perspective the implication is that people choose how they want to use it. The third perspective, constructivism, emphasises the origins and development of technology, demonstrating how people are involved in the creation of technical networks, not only in how they are subsequently used. (Henwood, Wyatt, Miller and Senker, 2000)
Whereas technological determinists claim that social change is being the result of technological change, social constructivism explains technologies as being actively shaped by different groups. The essence of the constructivist argument is that technologies are objects made by people. They cannot be seen as separated from but rather constituted political, economic and cultural processes. Furthermore, social constructivism sometimes regards the distinction between society and technology as an arbitrary one, if sometimes an analytical and practically distinction. There are three ways in which technologies can be said to be social constructions: Technologies are the material embodiment of the values and interests of particular social groups or classes. Cultural meanings of technologies are elements in language and in symbolic universes and the workings of technologies are the outcome of negotiations between individuals, groups and institutions. (Henwood, Wyatt, Miller and Senker, 2000)

As the relations between technology and society and their mutual influence are of such importance within the STS, Steve Woolgar’s theories as he accounts for in the “Virtual Society? Technology, Cyberbole, Reality” is used to better understand the interrelation between them. There is still a growth of new electronic information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the still existing technologies are going through transformations and changes which makes it relevant to further study the social dimensions of electronic technologies. (Woolgar, 2002:5) Woolgar further arguments with these words: Education, politics, medicine, arts, the law, music, entertainment, government, and business are just some of the many areas of life that might be affected if not wholly transformed by these technologies. (Woolgar, 2002:5) When Woolgar is coming to the conclusion after questioning why it is of importance to study the social dimensions of electronic technologies, he ends up
with five rules of virtuality which are of relevance due to my research. The five rules are therefore used as a contextual framework for my analysis in chapter three and they are the following: 1) *the uptake and use of new technologies depend crucially on local social context*, which underlines the importance of social context for use. 2) *The fears and risks associated with new technologies are unevenly socially distributed* which means that the views about the technology, the concerns and enthusiasm are unevenly socially distributed. With rule number 3) *Virtual technologies supplement rather than substitute for real activities*, he claims that there is a tendency that the new technology is a supplement rather than substitute for existing practices and forms of organisation. Rule 4) *the more virtual the more real* is an extension of rule number three claiming that the use of new virtual technologies can actually stimulate more of the corresponding “real” activity. Rule number 5) *the more global the more local* is the last one and treats the notion of globalisation and the death of distance.

These five rules seek to capture the ways in which the adoption of a positive scepticism can contribute to our understanding of the impact and potential of new electronic and communication technologies (Mason, Button, Lankshear and Coates, 2003). Among the five rules of virtuality that Woolgar stresses there are certainly some of them which are more of significance for the ethnography and I will use some of them more in depth in chapter 3 when analysing cyberactivism. Woolgar further presents the notion of counter-intuitive findings to underline the fact that a lot of the findings regarding new technologies are actually counter-intuitive, which means that the outcome of the technology is often not as expected. (Woolgar, 2002:21) This can both benefit the technology and our expectations to them and it is just working to underline the importance of the human and social dimensions of the new electronic technologies.
1.3 Cyberactivism

The Online version of the encyclopedia, defines Cyberactivism as *the process of using technology, generally the Internet, to participate in civil disobedience and to send a concentrated message to a large audience*. The presence of political activism on Internet defined as cyberactivism is small and large networks of wired activists that have been creating online petitions for developing public awareness (McCaughey & Ayers: 2003). Online activism raises new questions about political organizing and social change and takes many forms - including direct action, protests, efforts to change laws, educational groups, activists newspapers, cultural groups and activists’ bookstores. (McCaughey & Ayers, 2003)

The use of technology is not new to activists though, social movements activists have historically incorporated new technologies into their social change struggles. Whether newspapers, radio, tv or film, the activists have embraced new communications media to circulate information, make statements and raise consciousnesses. This is also the reality for the peasants and their adherents in Mexico which also broadcast their struggles using computer databases in addition to a guerilla radio and other forms of media (McCaughey & Ayers, 2003).

Vegh (2003) has classified different ways of performing online activism and claims that at first glance the types of Internet activism falls into three different general areas:

1) Awareness /advocacy, 2) organization /mobilisations, 3) action /reaction. The first category describes the public awareness achieved by accessing information that is relevant to the cause. Typically this might be the news and information that are provided by individuals and independent organisations, often focusing on events and issues not reported, underreported or
misreported in the mainstream mass media. The forms of obtaining information can include visiting relevant web sites or participate in different news groups. In the organisation/mobilisation category the Internet is used for mobilisation in three different ways. First, it can be used to call for offline action i.e. by distributed emails or a posted web page. Or, it can call for action which normally happens offline, but can be done more efficiently online. Thirdly, the Internet can be used to call for an online action that can only be carried out online i.e. spamming campaign, destroying the servers and so on. The action / reaction category covers online attacks committed by hackers.

Social movements use the Internet as an important forum to spread their message out to the world to gain support. The uprising in Chiapas has been defined as the first postmodern uprising since mass communication is described as their most important weapon. This will be dealt with in chapter three when describing my experiences of being member of such a support group, the mailing list 1Zapatista. Subcommandante Marcos is the ideological leader for the Zapatista guerilla and has to be understood as an organic intellectual and as a symbol for the liberty and the fight against the oppressors. The communication is the most important tool and information is the key to the Zapatistas struggle, indicated by the 2001 collection of Subcommandante Marcos writings, Our Word is Our Weapon. Despite the facts that it has become close to a cliché to argue that information and its grass roots distribution has been an important weapon for the Zapatistas this cliché remains a powerful and important political story of the information age. (Jordan & Taylor, 2004:93) Social movements organisations have employed the Internet to a high degree. Hundreds of social movements organisations network with each other by email lists. Many also have web pages and electronic bulletin boards or other conferencing spaces on the Internet where users can interact directly with each
other. For social movements, which typically have limited membership and financial resources the Internet is extremely important. (Leizerov, 2000:462)

1.4 The Zapatistas

In January 1994, immediately following the introduction of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), The Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) launched an armed rebellion in the Mexican state of Chiapas. Though the insurgents were few, and the rebellion was readily contained by the massive counter-assault by the Mexican army, the resulting publicity created a political storm that saw unprecedented concessions on the part of the government. (O’Brien, 2002) This resulted in extensive coverage in the media and the way in which the Zapatistas have been covered on the Internet has become a great and much used example of the use of Internet communication by Grassroots Movements, even without access to any sophisticated ICT. When referring to social movements through my thesis I will use the definition that has been proposed over the last decades that regard them as a form of collective action, a set of opinions and beliefs or as specific collectives. (Neidhardt & Rucht, 1991: 422-432) In their book, The Zapatistas Social Netwar in Mexico, Ronfeldt and Arguilla (1998) claim that it was because EZLN and their sympathisers used on-line networks as a means of mobilising networks of civil society movements that they became as powerful as they did. The struggle has been defined as the “first real Net War” (Cleaver: 1999, Castells: 2000, Ronfeldt & Arguilla: 1998, Vegh: 2003) The notion of such a Net War can be placed under the broader notion of the term Cyberactivism.
1.5 Researching cybercultures

As we still find ourselves in the early stages of thinking about what cyberspace means to us it is not clear what are the best methods to research cyberspace and cybercultures, this can lead to both positive and negative outcomes according to scholars like Bell (2001). Cyberspace was a term first coined by William Gibson in his fantasy novel *Neuromancer* to describe the world of computers and the world surrounding them. (Holeton, 1998). Further, cyberculture is defined as the culture that emerges from the use of computers for communication and entertainment and business. (WWW.Wordnet) The following is how Woolgar (2002) phrases it: The changes in the nature of ICT mediated communications raises a whole series of opportunities and questions about the appropriate unit of analysis, relationship between the researchers and their subjects, the whereabouts of field sites, the ethics of participating online and so on. (p. 34)

Bell further states “Perhaps more than any other research strategy, ethnography has come to occupy a central, yet controversial position in studies of cybercultures“. (Bell, 2001:194) He claims that there are serious methodological questions raised by the attempt to transplant ethnographic research into cyberspace that we need to explore. This is what I aim to explore as my second objective when using the ethnographic approach to study the Zapatistas and the adherents operating on the Internet. I need to underline that virtual ethnography is not a fully established approach but it is relied and based on the principles of ethnography in general. The approach is still under construction by scholars who want to try out the ethnographic principles on the Internet to see whether this is a potential way of transferring the same principles to the communities and culture we find there. The next part is therefore concerned with some important characteristics of the method.
1.6 Virtual Ethnography

Interest in science and technology on the part of social/cultural anthropologists has been growing steadily in recent years linked to the broader and growing field of science and technology studies (STS). (Escobar, 2000:60) Recently the impact of technologies such as television and radio on local notions of development and modernity and their effect on long standing social and cultural practices have been approached ethnographically. (Rheingold; Escobar, 2000:60) Ethnography has normally dealt with societies and communities in specific physically bounded places and there is a long tradition within anthropology to go to distant places to study isolated communities. This tendency reinforces the impression of a culture as something being bounded within a physical space. (Hine, 2000:58) In sociological ethnographic approaches the focus is different as the potential objects might be the school, the street or the swimming pool but the object is still a bounded physical location where the aim is to describe the things going on within the specific location. Scholars like Hine (2000) and Miller and Slater (2000) have suggested using the idea of ethnography as an inspiration for researching virtual culture. The approach is as I stressed above not fully etsablished but according to Miller and Slater (2000) there are a few common rules to be agreed on. They describe it as the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly in people’s daily life for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said and asking questions. Further they claim that the collection of whatever data are available for the issues that are in focus of the research is of importance. (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995:2) Or as the clear speech of Mason (1996) stressing Virtual ethnography is then simply an ethnography that treats the cyberspace as the ethnographic reality. There are different ways in approaching the research on the Internet i.e purely online studies and studies offline concerning patterns in Internet use etc. The combination of an offline and an online ethnography is also possible and considered interesting among scholars like Miller and Slater
who performed such a combination in their study of Trinidad in *The Internet – An Ethnographic Approach* (2000). In that case the research involved is using the Internet to establish contact and then visiting and interviewing the people in their physical context. A third option within ethnographic framework for researching the Internet is to do an offline observation with the aim of observing people in their use of the internet to understand the uses and practises of Internet in an everyday context. The direction of the ethnography I decided to do is a purely online approach that included being online and observe websites, email correspondence in a email group and online interviewing. The goal was to become a part of the virtual communities that I was studying to gain insight in their culture. I could also have gone to Mexico to study the real community for the Zapatistas, but this was never my intentions as I wasn’t interested in a particular geographical culture like Miller and Slater were, I was more interested in doing a study on cyberactivism and the methodological and substantial aspects surrounding the studies of the Internet. So both in the view of the objectives of my thesis and the practical issues due to time and money limitations the online approach was considered as the right approach. I did as Hine (2000) suggested in her first principle of virtual ethnography while saying that an ethnographer should have a (…) 

sustained presence in the field setting, combined with intensive engagement with the everyday life of the inhabitants of the field site, make for the special kind of knowledge we call ethnography. I then again also consider a pure online ethnography as a good approach in the sense of how most of the people interested in the case of the Zapatistas and cyberactivism will explore them through the Internet.

Since I used and relied on Virtual Ethnography as my research approach there was always some uncertainty about whether I could find pages that could serve as fruitful objects for studying. Such uncertainty is a big part of the approach and I will discuss the advantages and
disadvantages of this aspect in chapter 4 of the thesis. While ending this section of ethnography of cybercultures I will again use Hine’s (2000) important book “Virtual Ethnography” as a starting point, especially her principles of virtual ethnography that she derived from the benefits of the experiences of the ethnography she performed of the trial of the Louise Woodward case, in the US in 1997. As ethnography is strengthened by the lack of recipes for how to do, Hine’s book of virtual ethnography, and especially the principles, were a good guide for me along the way. Hopefully it might also serve as a good starting point before referring to the ethnography I performed. There are ten principles: (Hine 2000, 64-65)

1. The sustained presence of an ethnographer in the field setting, combined with intensive engagement with the everyday life of the inhabitants of the field site.

2. Interactive media provide a challenge and an opportunity for ethnography, by bringing into question the notion of a site of interaction. Cyberspace is not to be thought of as a space detached from any connections to real life.

3. The growth of mediated interaction renders it unnecessary for ethnography to be thought of as located in particular places or as multisided. The investigation of the making and remaking of space through mediated interactions is a major opportunity for the ethnographic approach.

4. As a consequence, the concept of the field site is brought into question. If culture and community are not self evidently located in place, then neither is ethnography.

5. Boundaries are not assumed a priori but explored through the course of the ethnography. The challenge of the virtual ethnography is to explore the making of boundaries and the making of connections, especially between the “virtual” and the “real.” Along with them goes the problem with knowing how to stop. Stopping the ethnography becomes a pragmatic decision.
6. Along with spatial dislocation comes temporal dislocation. Engagement with mediated contexts is interspread with interactions in other spheres and with other media. Virtual ethnography is interstitial.

7. Virtual ethnography is necessarily partial. A holistic description of any informant, location or culture is impossible to achieve.

8. Virtual ethnography involves intensive engagement with mediated interaction. This kind of interaction adds a new dimension to the exploration of the use of the medium in context. The ethnographer’s engagement with the medium is a valuable source of insight. Virtual ethnography can usefully draw on ethnographer as informant and embrace the reflexive dimension. The shaping of interactions with the informants by the technology is part of the ethnography, as are the ethnographer’s interaction’s with the technology.

9. New technologies of interaction make it possible both for informants to be absent and to render them present within the ethnography. In the same way, the ethnographer is both absent from and present with informants. All forms of interaction is ethnographically valid, not just the face to face. The shaping of the ethnographic object as it is made possible by the available technologies is the ethnography. This is ethnography in, of and through the virtual

10. Virtual ethnography is not only virtual in the sense of being disembodied. Virtuality also carries a connotation of not quite adequate for practical purposes even if not strictly the real thing. Virtual ethnography is adequate for the practical purpose of exploring the relations of mediated interaction, even if not quite the real thing in methodologically purist terms. It is an adaptive ethnography which sets out to suit itself to the conditions in which it finds itself.
1.7  **Aim of the Thesis**

Sometimes the starting point for research is a well-developed theory from which a set of hypotheses can be derived; such theories are rare in sociology and anthropology. Most ethnographic research has been concerned with the production of descriptions and explanations of particular phenomena. (Miller and Slater, 1995) Research always begins with some problems or set of issues referred to as foreshadowed problems (Malinovski, 1922: Miller and Slater, 1995:24) The ethnography which is described in my thesis takes as a starting point some presumptions about the importance of being on the Internet for the Zapatistas. From this foreshadowed problem I have formulated the following research questions:

**Key question:**

In what way does the Internet serve as a tool and as a network for activism and representation for Grassroots Movements?

**Sub questions:**

1. In what ways are the Zapatistas present on the Internet?
2. What does it mean to be on the Internet for the Zapatistas?
3. How is the on-line network built up and how does the communication flow?

As a starting point the aim of the thesis can be summarised in the following two objectives:

1) Discussing Virtual ethnography as a research approach based on my experiences

2) Examining Cyberactivism in general with the case of the Zapatistas used as an example of how to study cybercultures identified by the virtual ethnography.
My main idea and interest has been to study the Zapatistas and the Internet due to both a substantial and methodological interest. The thesis is therefore very much a methodological text where I aim to investigate whether ethnography can be a suitable approach to study my overall interest in cyberactivism. I will demonstrate the process through examples of how I searched for the topic on the Internet, how I navigated through all the information available and how I observed and participated in mediated conversation. The analysis of the collected data from the ethnography will be found in chapter. I will discuss the possible negative and positive outcomes which the approach brought in chapter 4. While I in chapter 5 attempt to make some concluding remarks.
2 Research approach

2.1 Entering the field

Internet is about networking, networks of people. Activism is also about networking, networks of people who share the same interest or concern and come together whether this is in a physical place or in cyberspace (Gurak and Logie, 2003). Christine Hine has claimed travel to play an important role within ethnography and further along with that travel comes the notion of translation. Since the virtual ethnographer now has visited a place that the reader has not it is of importance when the travel is over to bring an account of your experiences (Hine, 2000). With this in mind, this is what I attempt to do in the following section when trying to describe the whole process of being a part of the world of the Zapatistas and their activists on the Internet. Hammersley & Atkinson (1995) have stated that ethnography is defined as participating overly or covertly in peoples lives for an extended period of time. What is an extended period of time in this regard? Within the time frame I had available, approximately three months, I was on the Internet about every day, visiting the Internet sites I found interesting and lurking and participating in the mailing group 1Zapatista. I consider this was enough to make an impression of what was going on. I made field notes every day, some days more careful and exact than other days, I read through all the emails received each day, which could be as many as ten but normally between four and six, and I spent a lot of time just following the links given both in the emails I received and on the different web pages I visited. There was a huge amount of pages that could be visited and the whole process was clearly shaped by the choices I made on the way, especially since I hadn’t decided exactly what I was looking for before starting. This is also a crucial part of the ethnography and clearly both the strength and the challenging part of conducting a virtual ethnography; the huge source of information that never seems to stop and all the temptations and interesting
pages and hyperlinks which are coming up along the way. Nevertheless, this is also what makes it interesting and fascinating to take a part of.

2.2 Field notes

Field notes are the traditional way in ethnography for recording observational data. (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995) Hammersley and Atkinson claim that the field notes consist of relatively concrete descriptions of social processes and their contexts. What is noted and recorded will naturally depend on the foreshadowed research problems. The challenge of selecting comes and additional how to identify and develop what seems to be of interest and how to systematise the findings from the field notes. There will come into being some difficulties in selecting what is of importance and what is not and specially in adopting a wide focus. (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995)

2.3 Looking for the Zapatistas on the Internet

The first task for a virtual ethnographer is to work out what is going on on the Internet regarding the case that is to be studied. The first thing I did was mapping the information related to the Zapatista movement on the Internet. While doing this I had a feeling I had done this so many times before, but then more like a curious student trying to find out what to write my master thesis about. Clearly this was a long time before I reached the conclusion to do a virtual ethnography. At this early stage I had no clue what exactly to look for or to where my observations would led me. One thing I was sure about was that I should be using the Internet not just to read newspapers or write emails but rather with an eye of a researcher trying to gain material for my empirical data, which was very different. Questions that kept on popping up in my head all the time was how to actually do this in the right way to gain enough
information and more important; how to get the interesting information out of my navigation. The development of the ethnography became an exploratory process where all the findings and data collected led to another finding and added more and more understanding of what ethnography could actually mean in this context. First of all there was a question about how and where to find information, so I started out by searching on the Google search engine. I guess this is what most people do when they try to find information about a case, and since I had not planned what data I was searching for and collect this was the natural starting point. First I entered the Google.no, I always choose to search through the Norwegian site which I guess is in agreement to all the habits you get by using the Internet. I typed in “Zapatistas” in the area for searching words and got a lot of hits regarding the Zapatistas. After searching on the Norwegian pages I tried to search through the Dutch page. I did this since I was in The Netherlands at that time and because the Dutch page automatically came up when I started to type the address in the address line, due to earlier search. I also searched for the word “Zapatistas” on the Dutch version of Google. This ritual of searching was kept on doing the whole process to observe whether the activity was changing during the process, and to see whether I could find any new interesting pages. While doing this it was always the same pages that came up on the first page of hits. This never changed during the period of observation. Below I have pasted in the searching result after searching for the one word “Zapatistas” on the Google.no.
On the Norwegian page I got 329,000 hits by searching for “Zapatistas”.

The search took 0, 29 seconds. I also searched for the Zapatistas in documents in Norwegian.

There were 102 pages in Norwegian and the search took 0, 05 seconds. This might sound like very obvious and evident information but while continuing doing this throughout the process it turned out to be a powerful tool for observing all the new hits that actually came up later in the ethnography. This was especially evident when there were things going on regarding the Zapatista movement offline referred to in other mass media. I the middle of June, a month after doing my first search for the Zapatistas, I got 446,000 hits and in July I got 663,000 hits which was the double amount compared with the first search and obviously a good indicator of how much activity that went on the Internet, regarding the Zapatistas, within the short period of time I was observing. Much of the explanation regarding this activity and the reason
why it exploded in June was related to an uprising in Chiapas, Mexico defined as the Red Alert which went on for a couple of weeks. The situation was referred to as anxious and when the uprise went on in Chiapas in June 2005 I recognised a higher level of cases directly linked to the Chiapas in the press coverage in general and web sites existed shorter and were updated much more often. The decision to use a search engine was based in the thought of this as the most common way for users of the Internet to gain information. The use of commercial search engine is also accepted in scientific research despite the fact that they have certain limitations. (Thelwall, Barlow and Vann, n.d.) Google uses the page rank system, meaning that sites are assessed on relevance, authorativeness and number of links and its large database made an effective sample of relevant Zapatista web sites. (Thelwall, Barlow, and Vann, K, n.d.)

A great part of the research within that first period consisted of skimming through web pages. I skimmed through more or less everything I found on the first pages of search results given by the Google.no. The first days I kept myself busy mapping the pages and didn’t pay that much attention to the content or style of the pages as I just wanted to observe and experience the main impression of the pages you get while searching for the Zapatistas on the Internet. I also followed the tails in the Google search results which meant I kept on moving to the pages at the end of each of the page numbers for the searching results. One phenomenon I identified quickly was the differentiation among the pages in the beginning of the tail and the pages in the end of the tail. Among the last hits in the tail there was e.g. a larger amount of different nationalities presented among the pages. While the pages from the first search results were mostly in English (one in Spanish) I now found pages in French, Finnish, Chinese and a lot of sites and articles from Latin-America. What surprised me while searching was how many pages I found that were not about the Zapatistas. However, by reading through them it seemed like it is easy to relate the Zapatistas movement to all kinds of similar struggles or wars going

26
on in the world today. I learned that the Zapatistas are very much used as representatives for
glass root movements around the world. Hence, very much referred to in articles and the
similar. Since the war in Iraq was of current interest when the ethnography was carried out
this was among the cases I found the Zapatistas most related to.

A part of searching for the Zapatistas also included searching through different search
engines. I searched through other search engines than the Google to observe whether there
were any differences in the cases and Internet sites that would come up compared to the
Google searches I did. I tried out the searching machines of BBC and Yahoo. Funny though,
that I had to do the search for the BBC search machine through the Google.no. The articles
found on the BBC were of a slightly different character than those found on the Google. As I
discovered that the different search engines gave different search results when typing in the
same words like “Zapatistas” or “Cyberactivism” I decided it was a good idea to continue
doing this while doing the ethnography.
2.3.1.1 Search through the BBC search engine for the Zapatistas.

2.4 Variety

I recognised some variety within the pages. Most of them served as encyclopaedias with various information regarding the movement such as history, facts, and articles, but also pages that included possibilities for e.g. news groups and discussion boards. Like the page [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws) page pasted in below.
The Zapatistas

- **Life in the EZLN Zone**
  Accounts of how the rebellion is changing the way they live
- **Interviews with the EZLN**
  Interviews in English with both prominent and rank and file Zapatistas
- **Communiques from the EZLN**
  Almost all the communiques in English listed by the date they were released
- **Writings by Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos**
  The communiques and speeches from Marcos including his titles
- **The EZLN revolutionary laws**
  These were issued by the EZLN on day 1 (Jan 94) of the rebellion
- **Women and the EZLN**
  Communiques, interviews and articles on the women's struggle in the EZLN
- **Mujeres Zapatistas - Zapatista Women**
  A variety of materials and possibility of interaction around the struggles of women in Chiapas
- **About the Zapatista autonomous councils**
  How the Zapatista system of decision-making works
- **Zapatista Documents of the new Mexican Revolution**
  An on-line book of communiques and interviews covering the history and first six months of the conflict.
- **Dias de Abril**
  A Zapatista community that the Irish Mexico Group works with

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The Zapatistas: a rough guide

Emiliano Zapata

**About this Site & Book**

**Introduction**

**The Zapatista movement**

**Solidarity**

**Going to Chiapas**

**Contacts and resources**

**News & Updates**

*Screen dump of: http://www.chiapaslink.ukgateway.net/ch0.html*
The www.indigenouspeople.net/chiapas page pasted in above is another typical web page. These page are among those that can be characterised as an encyclopaedia page, including a virtual art gallery which was quite common as it seemed like the pictures and paintings and drawings had a central role on the pages, often original paintings from Chiapas made by local artists. Another thing I recognized at that early stage was the huge sources of web pages written regarding the Zapatistas that were not written by the Zapatistas themselves. This was interesting due to the fact that obviously there is someone else presenting the movement on the Internet. Or as it seems by looking and reading through the web pages that various
organisations consider themselves as parts of the Zapatista struggle by sympathising with the group. While claiming there are no pages made by the Zapatistas themselves this is due to the fact that the impression from reading the content of them and the rhetoric used. Many of the pages naturally contained names of the web owners and the authors contributing and from that point it was easy to see whether this was Mexicans or not. Nevertheless, much of the content and the histories referred to used “Us”, “Our fight” and so on. In other words there are others telling their stories from their angles in cyberspace. There were a lot of interesting cases and information that came up while skimming and reading through the pages. I didn’t plan what sort of pages I would take a closer look at, however I did this more or less by clicking on the links on the pages that seemed interesting and that I wanted to read and find out more about. Typical of this process was that I tended to choose the sites that had catchy headings and with the word Zapatista in it. I mostly spent the first days and weeks by reading the articles and information I had found so far concerning the Zapatista movement. It seemed like it would never stop so I just kept on by reading what I found most interesting after skimming through a lot of articles and web sites.

There were certainly a few pages coming up more often than others. This is probably due to the fact that these pages are more frequently linked to on the Internet than other pages containing information about the Zapatistas. While I was working and collecting information about the Zapatistas on the Internet the process was clearly influenced by the decisions I made. Some places were considered as interesting enough to stay for a while and a lot of these places tended to be those that were among the most frequently linked up to, especially for the phase of my research when everything was new to me. It made me create an impression of which web pages that was more important than others. Among the pages I constantly bumped into was Zapatistas in Cyberspace, Chiapas95, The Harry Cleaver articles, The Indy media
pages for Chiapas, (The Independent Media Center) and EZLN (the official Zapatista website). Since I was constantly linked to these pages I paid more attention to them as I recognised the titles, content, colours and pictures.

The Indy media Chiapas web page.

The Internet may also serve as a tool to provide information that tends to be suppressed by the more established media. This was the rationale for creating Indymedia (Indymadia.org) a leftishly oriented loose network of groups that now exists of dozens of countries. (Van der Donk, Loader, Nixon and Rucht, 2004) The pages are important when organising cyberactivism as it serves as networks of different nations and is powered by “open publishing software” that allows users both to upload materials and to offer commentaries on the stories, opinions and images provided by others. (Wright, 2004)

Just one of the pages that I visited was written in both Spanish and English. Many of the pages were written in English and some in Spanish, but then just one written in both
languages in one single website. This was of interest as it makes it possible for both Spanish and English-speaking people to visit the pages without taking into consideration any language barriers, which was not the case amongst most of the pages recognised so far. The communication aspect is of great importance clearly since the purpose for having the pages is to reach people with important messages which are the girder of the cyber activists. Since the language of the Zapatistas is Spanish I am actually surprised that most of the pages found are in English, furthermore this just supports the impression of who is making the pages and for whom they are made. From another side this also tells me that the Zapatistas are just as much an international issue not limited within the Mexican borders.

2.5 Following connections

Harry Cleaver, an academic and activist with a close interest in the Zapatistas and the author of many articles regarding the Zapatistas has written a lot of interesting and educating articles and has also participated in debates in cyberspace. Most of his work is available on-line and also easily accessible (which is of great importance when navigating the World Wide Web). The easily accessible information plays a great importance when selecting what to read and follow. I followed the links given to his pages because his name had been mentioned many times both in articles I had read, and on various web pages I had visited and he therefore caught my attention. Taking into consideration the huge source of information on the WWW I often followed tracks very occasionally notwithstanding many of the pages that I visited seemed to be those which had been linked up to by many other web pages and consequently got more of my attention. In the following I have pasted in some pictures of some of the web pages I regularly visited as I found them to be among the most important pages.
Above the web page, *The Zapatista Net page*, that contains a lot of information about the Zapatistas, such as history and the autonomy they are struggling for. By clicking on the different topics given I found information for instance regarding autonomy, the way it was written about testifies a high level of engagement due to the importance of autonomy for the Zapatistas and the issue was stressed on many of the web pages.

[http://www.actlab.utexas.edu/~zapatistas/](http://www.actlab.utexas.edu/~zapatistas/)
The screen dump above shows one of the web pages for one of the topics linked up from the front page and is a nice illustration of how the reader immediately is included as a part of the movement through the use of “You”. The creators of the web page include you as soon as you enter the page. This is a page where they invite for dialogue and participation and the rhetoric used tells me about pro Zapatistas adherents as a group that is seeking intellectual fellowship with the Zapatistas. The creators and the cyberactivists of the web pages also describe the Zapatistas as a hope rather than a Mexican army:

...The EZLN is no longer only the army with a majority of its member’s indigenous people who rose up in arms against the supreme government. The EZLN is, now and forever, a hope. And the hope, like the heart, is on the left side of the chest. We are now the product of all of you, of your word and of your nourishment.
Among those pages that give the impression of being created by the Zapatistas themselves is the EZLN web page. The page is characterised as the most important public organ on the Internet for the Zapatistas. (http://www.ezln.org/) Common for all the web pages was that by looking at the pages it was difficult, if not impossible, to observe and identify such as organisational structure and whether the Zapatistas are to be considered as a homogenous group, a movement, and so on. This made it a difficult target to study and was maybe the first indication of the difference between the traditional comprehensions of a social movement and movements operating in cyberspace. If I would have performed a classic ethnography offline of the group and not online the group it would have been more of a particular group situated both culturally and geographically. On the Internet there was much more diffuse and floating.
To get an impression of the group of how the Zapatistas look and not just how they are represented rhetorically on the Internet I searched for pictures both through Google and through the web pages. By looking at the picture above, from a meeting the Zapatistas were having in February 2003, I found a good example. Both because it shows how the members of the movement are wearing the black masks that is a characteristic feature of the group in the geographically bounded world and that this is also how the movements are transferring their identity into the cyberspace.
2.6 Becoming a member

As my intention for the ethnography was to find out more about cyberactivism in terms of the Zapatistas I reached a point in the process where I sensed I should be taking a more active part. The next phase in the ethnography was to search for places that could make this possible. While thinking of different solutions to manage this I realised that what seemed to be most easily accessible was to subscribe for a place that shared and discussed information about the Zapatistas. I had no clue about how to do this and I have to admit I actually also had difficulties to subscribe for such a list. First I used the Google.no search machine again hoping to find some different alternatives. I got a lot of hits here as well and thought it would be easy work to find a suitable group with a content I could find interesting. I tried to subscribe for four different discussion groups without being a member of any of them as they weren’t active anymore I understood as I didn’t receive any messages that confirmed that the subscription was succeeded. I therefore continued to search for groups I could join and by continuing searching for the words “discussion groups + Zapatistas”. I found the group named 1Zapatista and for the first time I managed to subscribe, for the 1Zapatistas group. The group is a mailing list, which is characterised by a list of email addresses identified by a single name such as the 1Zapatista group. When an email is sent to the mailing list the name is automatically forwarded to all the addresses in the list and it allows all members of the list to receive and reply to the message. This characteristic passes for discussion groups as well and it allows people to discuss and learn about common interests. [Online: http://www.webopedia.com] People must subscribe to a mailing list to post and receive messages and so did I. At first I had to get an e-mail account at the Yahoo as the group is a part of the Groups.Yahoo.com. The group is a Moderated news group which means it is a news group monitored by an individual (the moderator) or a group who has the authority to
block messages deemed inappropriate. Moderated news groups have fewer flams and less spam than un-moderated forums according to the online encyclopaedia.

[Online:http://www.webopedia.com]

I was now on my way to take my first steps into the real virtuality. I had never done this before, not even as a lurker. I started by following the instructions and the first thing I had to do then was to make a new e-mail account at Yahoo. I did this by following the links given by the 1Zapatista newsgroup. I have pasted in parts of the process of the subscription below:

![Front page of the 1Zapatista email group.](image-url)
The Yahoo groups

Then I got new instructions about how to send messages to the group and if the subscription was a mistake and I not wanted to join the group I had the opportunity to unsubscribe by sending a new e-mail to a new address. The first time I did this I found out that I had given my full name as the username for the email list. The more I thought of it the more stupid it looked to give away my right and full name. I decided that I would do it all over again to be somewhat more of a mysterious person not revealing my identity when no one else did it. I didn’t think of this until I entered the group but when I started to look at the messages I quickly found out that every other member solely used nicknames and initial letters. As this was the first time entering this kind of group it wasn’t anything I thought of, so I therefore changed it and did it all over again.
The 1Zapatista mailing list is a mailing list distributed by the Yahoo.com. It was founded August 22\textsuperscript{nd} in 2000 and has 968 members, the category they are operating under, among all the categories for the Yahoo lists, is \textit{Issues and Causes}. While doing my ethnography I received and saved all the postings from the 1Zapatista group from early May 2005 to the beginning of September 2005. A total of 402 postings were identified. Each message contains the name, most often a nickname of the author and a subject line with the theme of the posting, which made it possible to identify the discussions between the members, and also the categorisation of the postings was done partly on the basis of this information.

\textbf{2.7 Taking a more active role}

According to Hine a more active form of ethnographic approach engagement in the field also requires the ethnographer. It is not enough just to lurk or download archives, you also have to engage with participants. Lurking means to eavesdrop in a chat room or an online community. In most online communities this sort of behaviour is fully acceptable and sometimes also encouraged so that you will get an impression and overview of how the community operates before posting your own messages. However, some places, especially where the users discuss personal issues, lurking is not that accepted. Making this shift from an analysis of a passive discourse to being an active participant in its creation allows for a deeper sense of understanding of meaning creation. (Hine, 2000:23) This was my experience as well and after mere observing for quite a long time I took courage and started posting some messages to the group. If just the lurking part was new to me, then this was certainly far away from what I thought I would ever do as I am neither an experienced lurker within newsgroups nor an experienced participant. However, Hine (2000) further states, instead of being an invisible analyst, the ethnographer becomes visible and active within the field which is important for the purpose of interaction with the informants, for the analytical concept that can be tested.
with the influence of the informants and for the purpose of getting a richer picture and feeling of what it means to be a user. But then again, this argument only works for the active participants which is the minority of those following the newsgroups. This underlines the fact that it seems somewhat hard to get the full and right impression of a group and its members as the lurkers don’t answer the questions. This is also stressed by Mason (1996): Generally in a newsgroup all the postings is done by 10 percent of its members and this effects the surveys heavily, cause generally lurkers do not respond to them. While talking about lurkers and the fact that most of the people subscribing for a mailing list never post a message, this was also one of the questions I asked the group members, but then again it is difficult to say something about the lurkers in the 1Zapatista email group as they would not answer my questions anyway. Out of the seven answers I received, five of them had posted messages before, either in this group or another group.

After being a part of the 1Zapatista group and after the observations of the Internet in general it seemed like I was witnessing and slowly becoming a part of a more dynamic and broader movement that I actually thought I was. I had to find out more about why the Zapatista group I have managed to be a member of actually were distributing so much more information about other subjects than the Zapatista movement. The following is a description of the first posting to the group. I will pay more attention to the postings in the group in chapter three.

I started by posting a message after being a member of the group for approximately one and a half month and it frightened me a bit. It frightened me since after I had mapped the topic for the previous messages sent out, this would naturally be somewhat of a different character. I did not intend to come up with an article neither about the Zapatistas nor about the Bush administration. Not because I didn’t consider this as interesting but rather because I couldn’t
see what sort of contribution this would have been for my ethnography or the other members at that moment. I just needed some plain answers that could help me further analyse the field. When posting the message it had to go through the censorship by the mailing list’s Postmaster. The Postmaster is the person responsible for taking care of mail problems, answering questions and queries about users and other related things. This is the first message I posted;

Dear all fellow zapatista supporters!

I recently became a member of this 1Zapatista Group for the purpose of learning and get the latest news about the Zapatista people. So far it has been really interesting to read all the messages received but it seems though that the email list is just as concerned about other topics than the Zapatistas. I therefore miss some updated information about the situation for the zapatistas! What is the activity going on the Internet regarding the zapatistas at this moment? Is the Internet still an important tool for their struggle? Furthermore, if people have any good Internet pages regarding the zapatistas they will recommend I would really appreciate if you would share the information with me!

In solidarity,

trinipsa

The answer came eight days later containing information from the moderator of the group regarding my questions. In this email he stated clear that all the positions expressed in the messages sent to the group are supported by the Zapatistas (a full version of the email can be found in chapter 3)
2.8 Becoming a cyberactivist?

While being a member of the 1Zapatista email group I received a lot of information and postings of various forms of activism, both in cyberspace and offline. I decided I had to follow the actions that went on in cyberspace. The following text is taken from an email concerning the first action I joined.

This virtual sit-in is an attempt to disrupt the modes of communication and information dissemination that facilitate racist organizing. Over the next few weeks, the California Minutemen Border Patrol Auxiliary camp out in Campo, recommencing their summer long campaign of violence against Migrant people [16]. For this we will not stand – but SIT – IN – In conjunction with protests at the Minutemen camps [17], on their virtual domain – in the names of those who have died and will die as a result of their actions. The software we are using request files from the servers of the targeted websites that are not found – files like Justice, Freedom, and the names of those who have died crossing the border [18]. In effect you will see the error message – “files not found.” The sit-in will interfere with and slowdown the servers of these various groups and individuals – much like a physical sit-in slows down the movement of people in buildings or on streets. [19] More than 78,000 people sat with us in our first action against the Minutemen. As our target grows – so will the resistance.

The following part is a rendering of the first time I spent the day on being a cyberactivist. I got the information about the action that was supposed to be arranged as a virtual sit in from one of the postings sent to the group. I had some difficulties to participate the first day as I thought I didn’t manage to follow the guidance given from the Disturbance Theatre that arranged the action. Nevertheless, what I thought I didn’t manage yesterday I had managed
even so. I got assistance from a fellow student and together we went into the web pages that I was supposed to visit yesterday. When I visited the web pages I first believed that there was something wrong, but then I realised that they were only showing the breakdown of the web pages that were targeted in the virtual sit in. In the screen dump below this is shown with the frames marked “page not found” which illustrates how the action made the Minuteman web pages break down. This is actually the purpose of such a virtual sit in; the pages are supposed to be disturbed and naturally they looked a kind of disturbed as well.

Visited Saturday 28th of May.
We invite people from all over the world who oppose racist violence to join the Electronic Disturbance Theatre action on May 27th, 28th and 29th, 2005 to engage in a virtual sit-in on the MINUTE Men website during their “Unite to Fight” Summit.

Please Wait for about 40 Seconds for VR Sit-In to Start its Reloading and then just leave on.

Once it has STARTED you can just open another Browser Window and do anything else you need to do and LEAVE THE VR SIT-IN WINDOW IN THE BACKGROUND.

Click the change button to change your CONNECTION SPEED.

Frame 6: reload 102...

Fixed high speed line Change

[Help]

(http://www.thing.net/~rdom/ecd/SWARM2005/basta.htm, visited Saturday 28th and Sunday 29th of may)

Picture of the web page as it looked while the action went on. During the action it was possible to see pictures from the pages of the http://www.minuteman.com sites. This was basically how the action went on and it was enough just to open the page from the Disturbance Theatre and keep the window open for as long time you were sitting in front of your computer. When looking at the page during the action it was possible to see all the small pictures that were visible in the window blinking (see the picture above). With large numbers of pings targeted at one site, this is an automated replication of the blocking technique used for the virtual sit-in. If enough pings are generated the targeted site will slow down or collapse entirely (Jordan & Taylor, 2004:73). The Disturbance Theatre destroys the possibility for communication through the web pages of the Minutemen for a certain period of...

1 The minutemen are the people operating on the boarders between Mexico and USA trying to stop Mexican people immigrate to USA
time. By harming the pages they destroy the possibilities to communicate and to recruit new people to the Minutemen project. I’m aware of the fact that the action that went on was not an action that was actuated for the Zapatistas but that was actually the case with a lot of the issues of the email list which will be analysed more in depth in chapter three. Interesting though that while being a member of a Zapatista email list I suddenly became a cyberactivist myself performing activism for the anti Minutemen project. This is probably just in line with the intention of the group as the moderator stated it in the answer I received as it is very much possible to interlink the struggle of various groups or movements to the struggle of the Zapatistas. The Electronic Disturbance Theater has performed similar actions for the Zapatistas before and probably just uses their network to get participants for their action. They are a group of activists and artists engaged in practicing “electronic civil disobedience”. Their activism focuses on the coordination of selective direct action against Anti Zapatista entities, such as the Mexican and US governments, and financial institutions in Mexico City. (Vegh, 2001)

2.9 Leaving the field

My decision to leave the field was taken in July when I felt I had to give priority to work on the material I had collected so far and rather spend time writing my thesis. The analysis of the data was anyhow an on-going process throughout the observation instead of a distinct phase, like Hine claims should be the reality for all ethnographies. (Hine, 2000:82) While doing an ethnographic research it implies that you as a researcher are being in close contact and making relations to people and it’s therefore said to be difficult (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995) This was not the reality for me as I hadn’t established any such contact and I hadn’t made any close relations to anyone except from an increasing interest for the case of the Zapatistas and the adherents, and the feeling of getting more and more skilled within the technology of the
Internet which I wasn’t that well versed in from before. Even though I left the field the ethnographic research approach is not that clear in when to start analysing and when to stop the empirical collecting. The most usual is to do it parallel and notwithstanding I left I think I will stay even though as a citizen to read the messages.

2.10 Summary

In retrospect my virtual ethnography consisted of the following data collection activities:
The web pages that I observed, and the posted messages that I saved in an inbox offered by Yahoo groups as a data base like place for saving the messages. I asked for permission to ask some questions to the group and on the basis of the answer from the moderator emails interviews were carried out to find out how people subscribed to the list, how and why they were participating and whether they considered themselves as cyberactivists.
Notwithstanding, my field notes became my main data source when analysing my findings throughout the process. They became very valuable when trying to make an analysis and also my most important source. It made it possible to go back to read my impressions, thoughts and judgements just at the moment when things went on which again made it possible to see the strange aspect when the field started to become more familiar. It was simply my way into the everyday life of the environment. Another important aspect with the field notes was the pictures of the screen that were taken and saved in the diary. Snapshots were taken of the screen to save the non-verbal impressions of the pages. I didn’t organise the field notes or pictures in other ways than writing the day and date on the top of the page.
3 Cyberactivism

3.1 Identifying cyberactivism

In spite of my delight of having identified much of what I searched for, it is hard to give an account regarding cyberactivism based on my experiences from the ethnography as there is such a huge source to choose among. Hence, there are so many stories that could have been told. By questioning how to do this in best manner I will keep in mind the importance of using the experiences as I gained them through the process and what I considered to be of relevance and what caught my attention enough to stay in the different places to find out more while doing the ethnography. From that point of view I will emphasise some of the most relevant findings. The most basic question I had to ask myself when I was trying to analyse the material was how to tell a story that was actually larger than the web sites observed and the 1Zapatista email group. Whether the web pages and the email list are typical examples of cyberactivism or not, I don’t know, as I have just studied the one particular email group, the 1Zapatista email list, together with an overview of the web pages related to the Zapatistas. Consequently it will be difficult to make generalisations, except from those I experienced. Nevertheless, the detailed attention to some particular space of cyberactivism may yield some different light on the whole phenomenon of activism in the information society.

The previous chapter was an account of how I navigated and became part of different spaces in cyberspace with the starting point in searching for the Zapatistas on the Internet. It was based on my field notes from my personal experiences, and despite it is a short version of my field notes it is quite a literal rendering of how I performed and experienced the process. It started with my first steps into the cyberspace of the Zapatistas and ended up in the point when I started to make interviews with members of the group.
The aim of this chapter is to focus more on the direct cyberactivism as I observed, identified and engaged with it. In this chapter I will focus on the cyberactivism observed both on the web pages and the activism in the news group that became the next phase in the research as they were considered as the most interesting destinations. Hence, I will discuss and try to analyse the most characteristic findings as they appeared. The initial task in analysing qualitative data is to find some concepts that help to make sense of what is going on in the scenes documented by the data (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995:209). I will use some of Woolgar’s five rules for virtuality and some of Hine’s ten principles for a virtual ethnography as described in chapter 1 as the contextual framework to see whether their point of view is suitable for my ethnography. I have chosen the rules and principles that have got something to offer my ethnography and therefore could be useful for my discussion. As a first step it is therefore feasible to state clearly that according to my ethnography performed there was a lot of activity going on in cyberspace regarding the Zapatistas and the cyberactivism that I searched for.

While looking back at the definition of cyberactivism stated in the first chapter we saw that it was defined as a form of collective action, a set of opinions and beliefs or as specific collectives (Neidhardt & Rucht, 1991: 422- 432). Users have a tendency to twist new technology to fulfil their interests or desires, so also the social movements of all kinds that took advantages of the flexibility of the net to voice their views and to link up across the country and across the globe. (Castells, 2001:54) So also with the Zapatistas and their supporters who seem to use the technology of the Internet to a great extent as there is certainly a whole lot of activity going on out there regarding the movement.
3.2 Elaborating the research questions

Based on the foreshadowed problem formulated in chapter 1 I had these research questions as a starting point: *In what way does the Internet serve as a tool and as a network for activism and representation for Grassroots Movements?* And the additional sub questions:

1. *In what ways are the Zapatistas present on the Internet?*
2. *What does it mean to be on the Internet for the Zapatistas?*
3. *How is the on-line network built up and how does the communication flow?*

After the ethnography went along it became clear to me that my original research questions in general were adequate. They worked as a starting point to guide me towards interesting destination and stories. Nevertheless, I had to do some reformulations as a result of the information available after the virtual ethnography was carried out. This only agrees with the whole ideal of the open research approach within ethnography:

*Over time the research problem needs to be developed or transformed, and eventually its scope is clarified and delimited, and its internal structure explored. In this sense, it is frequently inquired that one discovers what the research is really about; and not uncommonly it turns out to be about something rather different from the initial foreshadowed research problem.*

*(Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995:206).*

The last question about the online network and how it is built up could serve as material for a whole new master thesis in itself as studies of network is very complex. I therefore chose only to create an overview of the online network concerning the Zapatista movement in this thesis. Through the ethnography I found it difficult to identify how it is actually built up but I might
state clearly that the network consists both of the important activists in cyberspace making and maintaining the web pages and those participating in actions and posters to email lists. Naturally a huge and important part of the network is the activists geographically bounded in Chiapas and these two spheres are naturally strongly interlinked. By following the connections motivated by the original research questions I chose to stay in the email list for quite a long time and due to that stay I naturally became interested in the cyberactivists and chose to focus more about the cyberactivists as they are the ones that make the Zapatistas present on the Internet which again becomes an extension of research question number one. Moreover, the online / offline issues were not what I had figured would interest me to that great extent until I started. The research moved towards issues like the relation between offline and online and who is actually representing who. Nevertheless, I attempt to answer some of the questions above as well.

### 3.3 How the Zapatistas are present on the Internet

From my observations the Zapatistas are present on the Internet due to discussion lists, news groups, email lists and various web pages concerning the Zapatista movement. I intend to give a general account of the web pages and the email list 1Zapatistas as they became my primary sources of information. From the observations of the web pages they can mainly be summarised as information and encyclopaedia pages that seek to inform the reader about the Zapatistas, their struggle and history. There were also pages that included possibilities for news groups or discussion boards, hence seeking to build relations combined with the information share. Many of the pages in the latter group were indeed not active anymore which is a good indicator of how dependable the issues studied in cyberspace are on issues off line and in the daily news in general. Since the Zapatistas had its glory days on the Internet in the 1990’s this was clearly reflected in how many pages which were still operative. Many of
the pages do not only focus on the Zapatistas but rather the more overall cluster of the world problems so to say. The web pages reflect a wish to inform and engage people for certain changes in the society and the globe. I identified hyperlinks to other social movements and NGOs than the Zapatista movement. Nevertheless, most of the web pages are linking to other web pages of the Zapatistas. Generally the pages that I found do not encourage many-to-many communication but rather it is one- to – many - communication. I couldn’t fine many sites with the possibilities for chatting or debate but as mentioned above I got the impression that there had been a lot of pages like that some years ago. This was further underlined when I was trying to subscribe for potential discussion groups or email lists as it at first glance seemed to be more than the ones that were operative. This again is just emphasising the transitoriness of the Internet and gives a good indicator of the uncertainty of doing an online ethnography and how hard it is to decide what to study or not beforehand, as you will never have the possibility to actually know this in advance. I did a very passive form of studying the web sites where I didn’t take any contact with the creators. In spite of this the websites were an interesting starting point as they contained a lot of information of the Zapatista movement, some insight in how they are organised, what they stand for and the issues they stress. I also noticed that most of the pages, probably as many of them were not operative anymore, didn’t directly encourage people to engage in actions and similar, therefore it was hard to notice whether the web pages were used as means for action in its own but clearly they served as sources for information and in that sense also can be described as a from of cyberactivism. In spite of their existence in cyberspace, the main impression was that the pages had not been updated the last years. Nevertheless, I learned a lot while observing the hyperlinkings and I also got an overview of some of the network functions. To sum it up, if my intention was to study exclusively the Zapatista movement and not to focus on the cyberactivism I would have paid more attention to the pages, but as stated clearly earlier my intention was rather to use the
Zapatistas as an entry gate to the cyberactivism and in this case I felt that the email group would give me more insight in how cyber activists actually work and to gain some more insight about the phenomenon as it appeared while being a member.

3.4 The 1Zapatista Email Group

It was challenging to study the web pages that served as information and encyclopedia pages about the Zapatistas as the pages were very static forms of websites. One example is the interesting page www.actlab.utexas that during my research period didn’t change that much. Within the mailing list I discovered a more dynamic form than I had expected. This point is also stressed by Hine (2000) as she claims that news groups are seen as more interactive in its forms. In contrast to news groups the WWW seems to be a collection of largely static texts. (Hine, 2000:52) This directed me towards considering the list to be a fruitful object worth looking closer at as I came in the middle of the crux taking into consideration the direct access to a specific place in cyberspace, sharing knowledge and information about the Zapatistas. In the specific of the emergence of the Zapatistas as a social movement and the related web pages and email list I now had the basis for exploring how the use of Internet became important for a group of people. As I described in the previous chapter I started by mapping the information I found of the Zapatistas on the Internet. By a coincidence (among many coincidences while doing the ethnography) I joined the mailing list 1Zapatista. What now had become a quite normal part of my weekday was then quite overwhelming and a new experience and to go back to that feeling, this is what I wrote in my field notes:

After struggling and searching and searching for the Zapatistas on the Internet for weeks now, it suddenly feels like I’m becoming a part of the real virtuality of the movement, this is exciting and I hope this is a track I can follow!
Ergo, after just a short period of time I considered the news group to be a suitable way to get an overview of the activists engaged in the Zapatistas, operating in cyberspace. This combined with the important aspect that I had the possibility to save all the emails I received made it a good place to stay for a while. I worked for some time to get insight in the group, i.e. to map the content in the emails received, whether there was a pattern in the content, who posted messages, at what times and similar. While trying to categorise all the messages I discovered that there were certainly a few people being more active than others. Among the 402 postings there were 39 different people behind the posted messages, out of these 11 of them posted just once, while four of the members were the most active ones posting messages every day or every second day. Obviously there is a large group of the members who are only reading the messages, but we can’t deny that they are nevertheless an audience for the discussions but further exploration could also be required to learn more about the non posters.

In the following I have done a selection of some of the emails to give a sense of what kind of messages that were posted as they are so typical. I was quite surprised at the content in the first emails received as they were what I will consider as highly academic while I had thought it would be more of a commonplace mailing list where the discussions where supposed to be more of a public character. I consider myself as a newcomer to these particular spaces on the Internet. Hence, my view of this world is as from an outsider. To give an idea of how it was being a part of the mailing list and to give a picture of the different members of the groups and the differences in use and content I will start by the welcoming from the moderator as he stresses the thought and wishes for the group:

This is a serious discussion group. Flames, rudeness, off topic items, pranks, and foolishness in general will not be tolerated.

Regards, Moderator, 1zapatista
Examples of postings to the group: (All the grammar and spelling are kept as in the original postings)

Subject: Genetically modified corn study reveals health damage and cover-up

The information brought out in the article reveals a lot of important things that should be taken into account regarding a whole range of issues. One that it is obvious the European regulators are practically at the beck and call of Monsanto and other companies like it, such that one cannot imagine what else it might be besides corruption that allows them to so cavalierly cast aside the health and safety of the population by approving foods that are going to cause horrible, widespread health problems.

The attitude displayed by these same health authorities in this case goes a long way to explaining how they have participated in spinning the report linking aspartame to cancer which recently came out, wherein they predicate everything first with a lot of industry disclaimers before going on to give any details about the report itself – as if the fact that the study revealed a connection between aspartame and cancer is not the story – the denials of aspartame manufacturers is!

**************
http://www.newswithviews.com/Smith/jeffrey7.htm
GENETICALLY MODIFIED CORN STUDY REVEALS HEALTH DAMAGE & COVER-UP

The posting was received together with a long article regarding the topic and my first thought when I received this mail one of the first days after I had subscribed for the group was more or less help. I thought I had become a member of a group concerned about the Zapatistas and not genetically modified corn, after all the Zapatistas were my entry point and what I was supposed to use as my source. But as a consequence this became the start of the discovery of a movement that differed from the normal comprehension of NGOs, in terms of a group of people gathered together in a common interest in a specific issue. Nevertheless, this made it a frustrating but interesting space to study.
Callout to LA Artists!
All visual, literary, audio, film, music, and performance artists...

Join us to discuss and organize creative strategies toward Peace & Social Justice. We must prepare for the global day of action; set to take place on Saturday, Sept. 24th.

When: Saturday, Sept. 3rd
Where: Pershing Square, Los Angeles
Time: 12:00 pm

Pershing Square is located at 532 S. Olive St., LA 90013
(between 5th, 6th, Hill, and Olive St.)
Entrances are located on 5th, 6th, and Olive St.
Call 213.473.5557 for daily parking fees.
Metro Redline: Exit Pershing Square Station
www.mta.net 1.800.COMMUTE

www.mission-texas.com
We need your help!
Please click below and send your email today!

http://www.mission-texas.com/index_files/page0008.htm

Please forward this email to your associates! A few clicks can make such a HUGE difference!

Mobilisation!

The postings above are also very representative in its kind as the 1Zapatista email group was also very much used for asking for mobilisation in one or another way, both for online actions and for offline actions.

Relating the Zapatistas to the topics in mass media in general and the fluctuating topics in the postings, the war in Iraq was certainly among the
most frequent. This adds further evidence to the observation made from the web pages and what I wrote in chapter two about the Zapatistas as a group easy adoptable to other struggles in the world.

Subject>128,000 Iraqis have been killed since the U.S. invasion began in March 2003.

http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article9460.htm

NEWS YOU WON’T FIND ON CNN
Iraqi civilian casualties
By UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL

07/12/05 “UPI” -- BAGHDAD–An Iraqi humanitarian organization is reporting that 128,000 Iraqis have been killed since the U.S. invasion began in March 2003.

Mafkarat al-Islam reported that chairman of the ‘Iraqiyun humanitarian organization in Baghdad, Dr. Hatim al-’Alwani, said that the toll includes everyone who has been killed since that time, adding that 55 percent of those killed have been women and children aged 12 and under.

‘Iraqiyun obtained data from relatives and families of the deceased, as well as from Iraqi hospitals in all the country’s provinces. The 128,000 figure only includes those whose relatives have been informed of their deaths and does not include those who were abducted, assassinated or simply disappeared.

Among the posted messages in certain periods there was a lot of information from a woman called Irlandesa. She was the only one identified that purely sent messages about the Zapatistas. She obviously had some strong connections to the community as all the postings were directly translations of the statements of the Zapatistas. This was especially showable in the end of June under the uprising in Chiapas, The Red Alert:
To the People of Mexico:
To the Peoples of the World:

Brothers and Sisters:

As of today, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation has declared, throughout all rebel territory, a

GENERAL RED ALERT

Based on this, we are informing you:
First – That at this time the closure is being carried out of the Caracoles and the Good Government Offices which are located in the zapatista communities of Oventik, La Realidad, Morelia and Roberto Barrios, as well as all the headquarters of the authorities of the different Rebel Zapatista Autonomous Municipalities.

Second – That also being carried out is the evacuation of the members of the different Good Government Juntas and the autonomous authorities, in order to place them in shelter. Now, and for an indefinite time period, they will be carrying out their work in a clandestine and nomadic manner. Both the projects as well as the autonomous government will continue functioning, although under different circumstances than they have been up until now.

Democracy!
Liberty!
Justice!

From the Mountains of the Mexican Southeast.
By the Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee - General Command of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation.

Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos
Mexico, in the sixth month of the year 2005.

The email group reflected much of what was going on concerning topics in mass media in general and especially in those cases where it was easy to establish a leftist point of view.

After the bombing on the Underground in London in July 2005 this message was posted:

Subject> zapatista email group] Unanswered questions in London bombings (fwd)

“Blair’s rush to attribute the bombings to Islamic terrorists was not supported by the statements at the time of London police or any other investigative agencies, or any verified evidence. Nor has any evidence been made public as of this writing to justify the prime minister’s assertion. On the contrary, several officials at the time had questioned the authenticity of the claim of responsibility posted on the Internet...

“He said that technical data from London Underground disproved the previous reports, which placed the times of the bomb explosions further apart. Police now believe there was a team of at least four bombers using commercial high explosives with sophisticated timing devices...

“Stratfor wrote on July 7, ‘Contrary to original claims that Israel was warned “minutes before” the first attack, unconfirmed rumours in intelligence circles indicate that the Israeli government actually warned London of the attacks”“a couple of days” previous. Israel has apparently given other warnings about possible attacks that turned out to be aborted operations. The British government did not want to disrupt the G8 summit in Gleneagles, Scotland, or call off visits by foreign dignitaries to London, hoping this would be another false alarm.
’The British government sat on this information for days and failed to respond. Though the Israeli government is playing along publicly, it may not stay quiet for long. This is sure to apply pressure on Blair very soon for his failure to deter this major terrorist attack.’...

“The Met has 31,000 police in total, but the 1,500 sent to Edinburgh will have included many of its specialists in counter-terrorism operations. As a result, security in London may have been diluted.”

3.5 Cross-posting

Another aspect recognised within the group was the high level of cross-postings. Cross-posting is a popular practice among newsgroup posters and given the open nature of the medium it is possible for a user to post a message to multiple news groups or other parts of the Internet at the same time. (Mitra, 2000: 680) I asked one of the members I had identified as a cross-poster why she did this and got this answer:

\^{Why cross-posting?}

_Sometimes you find the message of such an importance and relevance that you would like more than just one newsgroup to read it ☺_

This is of big relevance for the group as this was identified for most of the postings which did not directly concern the Zapatistas. This proof that the members of the 1Zapatista email group are members of more than just this specific list and that the email group consider various topics of being of interest, despite the fact that they have a different main focus. Also confirmed by the moderator of the group:

_The positions expressed in the messages that our members send to the group are almost without exception supported by the zapatistas. They are opposed to globalism, neoliberalism, corporations, war, and fascism and they are aligned with those who also oppose these things. This group has evolved_
into
a very good list for keeping up with general information from the left, and
some of the more astute and prolific posters here are here because I
invited
them for that purpose.

Most information from the EZLN is in Spanish. They do not arrange for much
of their communiques to be translated, but when they do, we get them right
away, directly from the translator.

Bryant "Eduardo" Holman

group owner
Above shows an example of a posting from one of the members of the 1Zapatista group, out of this posting it seems like it is sent to both individuals and other news groups or mailing lists. There has been a tremendous growth in cross-boarder networks among nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), one of the most significant is the hundreds that mobilised against NAFTA during the 1990s and those who gathered in Seattle to protest the secrecy of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 1999. (Cleaver 1998; Garrido & Halavais, 2003:167) Such cross-national networks do not only bypass national government policymakers but often work directly against their policies, particularly the so-called neoliberal reforms. (Garrido & Halavais, 2003) The issues of cross posting and cross linking is making the Zapatistas virtual community more fluid and indicate a group which is not bounded to concerns about the Zapatistas but also a lot of other concerns.

3.6 Personal activism

Exchanging experiences and giving advice was also a part of the mailing lists and included people asking for advice e.g. regarding travelling to Chiapas in Mexico as the one that follows:

hello

im just wondering if we can do some volunter work in chiapas cause im going to travell there and even for a good cause is it dangerous to travell there?in chiapas

best regards
Most of such requests and similar ones was answered quickly with the basis in other members own experiences:

Hello Lucia,
I went 3 years ago and is not dangerous at all. Nothing to worry about. I stayed in Oventic for 2 weeks and Emiliano Zapata for over 3 weeks. Susana

While someone received positive answers others got more harsh response like the question and response in the following:

> I wonder if anyone here knows how you could get a package or letter down to 
> El Sup.
> 
> Know where to point me?

The reply:

I think that is as rather naive thought. You are not going to succeed. You can, however, write to one of the websites that is published by FZLN. Irlandesa has posted the links here before. Search the archive.

And others again started to create friendship as this exchange demonstrates:

- >From: Chickity11 Arias
  > >Reply-To: izapatista@yahoogroups.com
  > >To: izapatista@yahoogroups.com
  > >Subject: Re: [zapatista email group] i would like to help.
  > >Date: Sat, 18 Jun 2005 11:55:28 -0700 (PDT)
  > >
  > >hey thanks for wanting to help me out.sorry but I’m kinda rusty with
  > >spanish still.can you do me a favor and by helping me out in my
>tell> me everything you know about comandante ester and comandante marcos. thanks. chat later
> cyline
>

- Hector Castillo wrote:
  > Of course i can, im fascinated with zapata's history, i even have a tattoo
  > of him on my back, i'll get in touch with you later, so you can have more information about him.
  > bye

>Hey Cyline, thanks for writing back, well, my english is like 70% good, i'll do what i can. If you want to know about all the zapatista movement, check out the web page. Is www.fzln.org.mx, and since we are getting to know each other, my band blog page is www.latienditadedonpp.tk, im the lead singer.
>see you later
>hector

3.7 Key characteristics

The sample is unlikely to be representative for all the users and members of the 1Zapatista mailing group but hopefully enough to say something about attitudes and experiences within the group as they are the cyberactivists I have engaged with. An examination of the emails posted during the period attests the dominance of articles with a typical leftish point of view in their topic and at the same time members maintained that there is still a place for exchanges of more personal character. Briefly summed up the typical content in the emails was 1) people asking for help, advice or contribution for e.g. information regarding the Zapatistas and people asking for participation in demonstrations both in the real and virtual world. 2)
Translated information directly from Mexico and Chiapas which was especially recognised within the Red Alert period. 3) Topics concerning the issues from the daily press in general with a typical leftist movement point of view (good examples are issues concerning the London bombing in July 2005 and the hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in September 2005).

It seems like the group is connected by adherents that are geographically isolated from each other in real life, they are bounding through the technology and the spaces offered in cyberspace. Most of the postings had no direct link to each other and it seemed like they were sent out regardless time and space except from the postings directly linked to offline issues that had recently happened such as the bombings in London and the Hurricane in New Orleans and when members asked directly for advice. Basic characteristics such as age, gender, nationalities were invisible and stayed invisible throughout the ethnography. Issues of nationality were rarely discussed, but most of the members mentioning their identity did this to explain the they were ashamed of being Americans, and within the group there was some sort of an instant war against the US and consequently anti Bush campaigns like extract from the following posting is a good example of:

Friday, September 2nd, 2005

Dear Mr. Bush:

Any idea where all our helicopters are? It's Day 5 of Hurricane Katrina and thousands remain stranded in New Orleans and need to be airlifted. Where on earth could you have misplaced all our military choppers? Do you need help finding them? I once lost my car in a Sears parking lot. Man, was that a drag.

Also, any idea where all our national guard soldiers are? We could really use them right now for the type of thing they signed up to do like helping with national disasters. How come they weren't there to begin with?
I especially like how, the day after the hurricane, instead of flying to Louisiana, you flew to San Diego to party with your business peeps. Don't let people criticize you for this -- after all, the hurricane was over and what the heck could you do, put your finger in the dike?

No, Mr. Bush, you just stay the course. It's not your fault that 30 percent of New Orleans lives in poverty or that tens of thousands had no transportation to get out of town. C'mon, they're black! I mean, it's not like this happened to Kennebunkport. Can you imagine leaving white people on their roofs for five days? Don't make me laugh! Race has nothing -- NOTHING -- to do with this!

You hang in there, Mr. Bush. Just try to find a few of our Army helicopters and send them there. Pretend the people of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast are near Tikrit.

Yours,

Michael Moore
MMFlint@aol.com
www.MichaelMoore.com

The cyberactivism I observed in the 1Zapatista email group demands time due to the extent and content in the postings and one of my informants told me he used two hours in the morning to do research for the articles he planned to write, and then he spent much of the time at work to write on the articles and then finishing them in the afternoon and evening. The moderator of the group also stressed this when he told me he had hired people to write articles within different categories that were in line with the focus of the group. In that case it is not just on the grass root level you find the cyberactivists as it seems like many of the most active posters are to be more advanced. In terms of the 1Zapatista email group it seems like the emails are sent with the purpose of communication, information and mobilisation, although it cannot be proved that these emails and the information shared have any real impact for the Zapatistas offline movement.
Group interactions are obviously becoming more and more popular for different purposes and so also for the cyberactivists as cyberspace is a space for sharing the same interests and engagement with other activists in different locations in the real world. Various scholars come up with different forms of cyberactivism based on how internetworked movements operate (Langman & Morris, 2003). Internetworked movements are operating through various types of cyberactivism which are a combination of two factors: first, it is a type of social action in regards to the net either “through the net” (the net as a tool) or “in the net” (the net as a social space or site of contestation). And second, as a type of social sphere (economic, cultural, and political). Examples of the first type of the cyberactivism, the activism through the net is seen in internetworking, capital and information flows and alternative media. And the cyberactivism in the net is seen as in direct cyberactivism i.e. hactivism or the construction and contesting of the Internet and in online communities. Hence, I have both looked at the cyberactivism “in the net” when I observed the 1Zapatista email group that used Internet as a space for community building. And the cyberactivism “through the net” was observed by visiting various web pages that are used to spreading information about the Zapatistas.

3.8 A community?

In the analysis so far I have shown that the internet is not just a technology but a communication medium. Unlike other types of media the Internet not only allows for passive reception of information but also active engagement in social activities in its own kind. (Sypher and Collins, 2001:193) We can use the Internet to interactively communicate with each other, regardless of any arguments about the quality of the interaction. This was clearly confirmed when observing and participating in the email group. The Internet itself refers to a whole slew of mechanisms by which we can gain access to information or communicate with
others and the communitarian culture shaped its social forms, processes, and uses. (Castells, 2001:53)

Along the way while reading, posting and saving all the messages I was wondering whether the group could be considered as a community. There have been many discussions of what can be described as a community or not, and specially communities within cyberspace. I will not give an account or discuss whether the 1Zapatista group can be described and treated as a "real" community or not, and due to the definition of Howard Rheingold and his book "Virtual community” where he defines virtual communities as social aggregation that emerge from the Internet when enough people carry on public discussion long enough and with sufficient human feelings to forms webs of personal relationship (Rheingold, 1993) I could clearly define the email group as if it was. Notwithstanding there are no doubts that the virtual world has some different characterisations from the physical as we can’t come around the fact that all the communication is mediated and passes through communication channels.

Nevertheless, the two worlds share a lot of essential qualities. Real world and virtual communities are inhabited by the same people with underlying interests; needs and motivation are common to both environments. An Internet activist such as Rheingold (1993) has further claimed clustering of individuals on the Internet as to be virtual communities and furthermore that interaction online could reinvigorate feelings of community among people by drawing on shared interests and common concerns that transcend culture, time and space.

When I claim the 1Zapatista group to be a community I do this in terms of a group that have occupied a place in cyberspace were the main mission is to share knowledge and information. Despite the fact that members of the list seem to have subscribed for the list for different purposes and agendas one of my main observations while doing this ethnography is that the Internet technology is helping to create new connections and places between people thus they
have different reason for doing this. Furthermore I will claim that I was studying people participating as if it was a “real” place created by the spaces. As the notion of what is to be defined as a community is changing along the way while developing and exploring new technologies one thing remains constant, the notion that a community requires interaction and involve people. (Mitra, 2000:677) Mitra (2000) further stresses the issue communities in cyberspace in this way

*With the growth of computer-mediated communication (CMC), particularly from use of the Internet, a new set of possibilities for communication and nation have emerged. Unlike the distributed system of mass communication, with a central agency producing the media messages, the computer system could be used as a more democratic apparatus where access is broadly distributed and brings with it the option of interaction, offering new possibilities of community formation.*

(Mitra, 2000: 677)

Social theorists like Baumann, Castells and Mc.Luhan have indicated that this is the “Age of Community”, an age that is dominated by the need to belong to something that is bigger than the individuality. The trend is moving towards some sort of community seeking for different purposes. That holds for the cyberactivists as well as cyberactivism puts itself into broader trends in cyberspace and the creation of cybercultures.

Before and in the process while doing the ethnography I clearly read a lot of literature regarding the topics concerning cyberactivism and the ethnography evidently confirmed some of the things read in the literature. While most of the scholars like Castells, McCaughey and
Ayers, Van de Donk are looking at the big patterns and the big worlds of cyberactivism the ethnographic approach is clearly a valuable one when studying smaller worlds and the people who are actually operating within this bigger picture. The ethnography of the Zapatistas in regard to cyberactivism confirmed some of the things written in the literature such as how fuzzy and fluid these movements are. Movement’s operating in cyberspace are very often seen as movements without any clear boundaries and in sum that makes social movements to moving targets, difficult to observe. (See for example Van de Donk, Loader and Rucht, 2004, Castells, 2001)

3.9 Why do they participate in such activities in Cyberspace?

The need to learn the culture of those we are studying is most obvious in the case of societies other than our own, here we don’t know why people do what they do and we do not even know what they are doing (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). This also holds for virtual ethnography and since the 1Zapatista group became a destination for quite a long time I naturally became curious about the other members. Questions concerning what they thought of being part of this community and why they had become members and further, do the members consider themselves as cyberactivists? Thus I introduced myself and my project to the group and asked for permission to ask the members some questions regarding their membership in the group and their interest in the case of the Zapatistas.

Dear all fellow Zapatista supporters!

I am a master student in a program called European Studies of Science, Technology and Society and I am writing my final thesis about cyberactivism with the special focus on the Zapatistas and the use of Internet. I have been a member of the 1Zapaptista group for some
months now with the purpose of learning, observing and participating in a forum that shares my interests in the situation and lives for the Zapatistas. My research interests and what I am doing is called a virtual ethnography which means that I am trying to map and find out everything that is possible about the Zapatistas on the Internet.

It would really be a big help for me if you would contribute to my research by answering a few questions regarding the topic. It won't take a long time and the answers can be as long as you want. If you choose to answer the questions you will of course stay anonymous. The answers will be used as material for the part of my thesis where I try to map why and how people are participating in such mailing lists on the Internet.

Thanks in advance!

Best regards
Trine

The response to the email was quite moderate. In fact I got just one answer, from a girl that had never posted a message before. Nevertheless she considered herself as a cyberactivist:

i don't post but i lurk respectfully
and read and keep up with red alerts, and possible mobilization by the mexican government, so i consider myself a cyberwatchdog for the zapatistas.

This is interesting enough as it supports the impression of how important the lurkers are as the quiet audience. This lack of response is fairly typical within newsgroups in request for research assistance (Hine, 2000:78). Baym (1995) suggests that response rates to surveys posted to online newsgroups is generally low, as people feel no obligation and have no incentive to respond. (Hine, 2000:79) I still wanted to get some answers regarding my interest so I sent out a reminder and was relieved when I got four more answers. Out of these four informants all of them considered themselves as cyberactivists; three of them were not active in any social movements in their real life while the two others were also involved in social movement activities in the real world. One of the girls that answered my questions did so in a
very careful and accomplished way, as if she was really interested in the subject and in answering the questions. As she was also to be considered as some kind of an average user that had posted a few times since she became a member, I decided to contact her again to ask some more detailed questions. I sent her an email and conducted an interview. After a few days she answered my questions and emphasised another important aspect of being member of such an activist mailing list:

*The list is very important... thanks to 1Zapatista I can keep in touch with my roots, I’m mexican american born in California but raised to have a bicultural mentality or bifocal view because I lived on the border and know the difference between us and them, I as an american citizen can cross the border freely and use the cheap goods, whereas, people can’t cross easily from mexico and are inspected like animals.*

She is the only one explicitly mentioning cultural background and nationality as reasons for why she is a member. Another of my informants used the following words to describe why she thought the group was important:

*The zapatista cuase is dear to all who hate this facist capitalist system we live under in thev U.S AND Mexico. Supporting them in this group is all i can accomplish as of yet. they are a beacon of light to all who want change in america.*

Many discussions concerning the Internet is emphasising the abolition of distance. (Miller and Slater, 2000) I cannot omit the distance aspect in regard to the 1Zapatista email group either as it seemed to play an important role within here as well. Like for this woman who stressed it in this way;

- Duh... instant communication, you don't have to “be there” to mobilize.
3.10 Issues of representation – Virtual and Real Zapatistas

In her principle number two Hine (2000) claims that cyberspace is not to be thought of as a space detached from any connections to real life and face to face interaction and Woolgar shares the same view while claiming the more virtual the more real. With this in mind it is worth taking a look at issues of representation in regard to the real and virtual activists of the Zapatistas. Some of the members actually strongly identified themselves as Zapatistas despite the fact that they had never been in Mexico but their struggle was used as a symbol for the overall struggle in the world, like the posting below:

*I have not been there myself although I very much want to go someday. Like those of you who have posted here, I also believe that what is going on in Chiapas is symbolic of the global struggle. In my heart I am Zapatista, and I wish that Subcomandante Marcos could be President of the USA. How much better all of these current USA issues would be handled!*

This posting raises further questions of representation such as who is representing who if those who are talking in English and have never been to Chiapas consider themselves as Zapatistas? Actually this mail is lending some further evidence to my point that cyberactivism is very much unlike the traditional NGO activism which is more grounded in specific themes than the cyberactivism which is more fluid and hybrid. An extended version of research question number two would be to ask not just how the Zapatistas are present on the Internet but also who is representing who? For the cyberactivists it seemed like the Zapatistas had become some sort of a symbol representing the better world so to speak.

As an extension of the issues of the real and virtual Zapatistas it is of importance to underline the fact that it has actually been the reality that others have been presenting the Zapatistas since the first days they appeared on the Internet. (Cleaver, 1998) This was also my own impression after all the websites I visited as there weren’t that many pages made and written
by the people of the Zapatistas themselves. This was easily shown in the names of the authors of the pages and the language used (often English written pages). While the traditional ethnography normally was based on the oral speech the ethnography adapted to the Internet is relying on the written text. In this regard the language issues and writing and reading skills have to be taken into considerations. Virtual communities and virtual culture exists within bulletin boards conference groups, mailing lists, MUDs and so on and they are all communicated textually. (Wilson, 2000) The fact that most of the web pages I observed and additional the email group are using and relying on the written English also sheds light on the fact that there are divisions between the offline movement e.g. when the language used are written English, the real Zapatistas are automatically excluded as cyber Zapatistas.

Among the web pages I observed only one page that passed itself for being carried out by the real Zapatistas (The WWW.EZLN web page). The same holds for the email group as it was impossible to observe anyone as real Zapatistas. I could not recognise any people going on Internet trying to get in touch with other Zapatistas but many times I recognised people that sympathised with the Zapatistas and their struggle or even identified themselves as Zapatistas and searched the mailing list to get in contact with people sharing the same interests. Some scholars claim that the Zapatistas have played no direct role in the proliferation of the use of the Internet. Rather their efforts toward the building of the networks of support in cyberspace were initiated and maintained by others and particularly those in the western world that support the Zapatista struggle (Cleaver, 1998 in Garrido and Halavais, 2003:168). Consequently the real Zaptistas are present on the Internet solely due to the cyberactivists.
3.11 The construction of technology among the members

The data revealed from the ethnography of the cyberactivism and the Zapatistas show that the 1Zapatista members twist the technology to which the cyberspace offers them as activists a new space for political activism. All of my informants also stated clear that if it wasn’t for this space they would never have been able to perform any activism. Hence, the members’ use of the technology as an action tool has been influenced by their support for the Zapatistas.

3.12 The more virtual the more virtual

We are able to navigate in the digital ground time and the spaces in cyberspace are transforming the perception and communication that makes us able to participate in the global contemporary time. In spite of this it does not mean that everyone is included in this company. According to Woolgar’s five rules for reality he claims in rule number five that the more virtual the more real while my virtual ethnography showed some different light on the cyberculture of the cyberactivists. While he claimed in rule four *The more virtual the more real* in the sense of the “virtual” technologies are stimulating the “real” activities, it seems that in my case it is rather the more virtual the more virtual in two senses: 1) the virtual Zapatistas space is not connected to the real Zapatistas as the real Zapatistas are not a part of the virtual community. Hence, the virtual community only serves as a community for the activists. 2) the virtual activity is generating more virtual activity as the virtual activity is enacted by the virtual community. This again sheds light over Woolgar’s rule number five claiming *the more global the more local*, in the sense that it is neither the more global the more local. As the polar contrasts between virtual and real is of such great importance within studies of cybercultures I consider this to be of relevance while discussing the virtual activism as well. Nevertheless, the issues going on in the virtual world is an extension of, and with the
basis in, the happenings going on in the real world. This was clearly shown when the uprising, The Red Alert, went on in Chiapas Mexico in June as it surely aggregated more activity on the Internet. Nevertheless that doesn’t demand that the virtual activities are always bounded and grounded in the activities going on in the offline world.

3.13 “Activism Activists”

Most of the members that were actively participating in the email group (in the sense of posting messages) were sending out messages about what seemed to be their key issues. I would describe them as activists of activism as most of the issues did not concern the Zapatistas but rather a whole range of diversified issues. The content in the emails was very much issue-oriented but not Zapatista oriented. That does not mean that the activists are not interested or identified as pro Zapatistas as there is obviously a collective solidarity that exists among the members of the group as they have subscribed for the group in the first place. Nevertheless, I had a feeling that the members have done this for different purposes as the content of the postings was that varying. Among the most active posters I will claim that cyberactivism is characterised as more or less a lifestyle due to the extent and content in the postings.

3.14 Summary and main findings

The research has demonstrated that information and communication technologies have linked the Pro Zapatistas more strongly together in the virtual activism despite the real Zapatistas is not participating. The incorporation of technology to share information and perform activism among the Pro Zapatistas are not new and there are obviously a huge network of activists working to support the Zapatistas in Chiapas. This is shown both by the huge source of Pro
Zapatista web pages and the 1Zapatista email group. The electronic network of activism is performed by others than the “real” Zapatistas which is stressed in the literature as well and which my ethnography gave further evidence to. (See for example Cleaver, 1998) The various cyberactivist tactics ranged from posting emails to mobilisation of artists for peace to the more experimental such as staging virtual sit ins and hacking into web pages. Nevertheless these forms of cyberactivities are not very revolutionary and probably quite common forms of performing cyberactivism. Additional it is obviously different what counts as activism for the activists. Some of the informants stated that just by subscribing and lurking in the email list would qualify for cyberactivism while others participated and posted heavily as their way of being cyberactivists. In terms of the 1Zapatista email group it seems like the emails sent out is with the purpose of communication, information and mobilisation. Although it can’t be proved that these emails and the information shared has any impact for the offline Zapatistas movement it certainly has an impact for those being members of the email list. There is no doubt that the emails are an effective tool for the activists as they are such a large group geographically dispersed around the world. Members of the 1Zapatista group who share a particular thematic interest are able to network, brainstorm and then mobilise without being incurred of long distance travel.

Another observation revealed from the ethnography is that the virtual worlds and communities created by the Pro Zapatistas makes a move away from the classical description a of social movement. While the traditional social movement are seen as a particular group of people that are gathered around a specific theme, the Zapatistas movement in cyberspace were much more fluid. Many of the members in the group seemed to be more concerned about their own key issues and not the Zapatistas. Hence, the mailing list was used as a place for distribution and consequently the activism was more fluid, more hybrid and broader then first
expected. In turn this can raise some new questions whether cyberspace is expanding and reconstituting traditional theme specific NGO activism.
4 Reflections on virtual ethnography

4.1 Possibilities and Constraints

The purpose of this chapter is to think through and analyse the possibilities and constraints of researching certain cybercultures through a virtual ethnography. Hence, I will raise some questions regarding the practice on research on and in cyberspace based on my own experiences. As I stated clearly in the first chapter, virtual ethnography is not yet a fully established method, neither is the academic field of STS which opens the possibilities of still shaping the field and to find new possible angles for the research. I will start to describe the main challenges and difficulties and stress the positive outcomes based on my ethnographic approach to the Internet.

The frustration when things go wrong is vital to all ethnographic learning experiences. Many of the specific problems from conducting a study of the Internet and the strengths and possibilities by doing this are just the same as conducting ethnographic studies in offline environments. But clearly new challenges and opportunities are also introduced in online research contexts. (Bell, 2001:203) In that case online researching is shaping the debates around method and methodology. The practical problems of commonplace aspects such as how to get online and how to subscribe for discussion groups is an experimental integrated part of understanding the participants’ lives online. (Hine, 2000) This also reflects my experiences while using the ethnographic approach to the Internet. Aspects such as the facilities available in the Multimedia room at the University Library in Maastricht brought focus to the issues of access to computers and the Internet facilities as the computers very often were occupied. Such things as computers that broke down and misunderstandings due to
the instructions given for virtual sit ins are also aspects that have to be taken into consideration, and that made me get insight in the participants’ lives. The main challenges in doing the ethnography were where to actually start and it continued with how to sort out and classify issues of interest. The sense of insecurity was also an overall matter of significance. To highlight the insecurity I felt while struggling with this issues I have pasted in parts of the communication I had with my supervisor, this email is sent approximately four weeks before the deadline: *How to systematize my findings? The structure – HELP!!* I show this to underline some of the difficulties with ethnographic research in general. There is no natural structure as there is in most other theses, as this is impossible within ethnography. And with Hine’s words *there are no sets of rules to follow in order to conduct the perfect ethnography, and defining the fundamental components of the ethnographic approach is unhelpful.* (Hine, 2000:65) Partly my struggling had to do with my material as I had so much of it including masses of fieldnotes and heaps of emails. This ended up in a chaos that was rooted in the overall question of what was the story I wanted to tell. I have to add though that a good thing about doing research of and on the Internet is exactly the possibility to collect a lot of material and to save it precisely as it was when I visited the pages. The same accounts for the written texts as in the emails I received. I had the possibility to keep all my material as it was when I observed and engaged with it, but this also makes it problematic in the sense of actually having too much of it. And then again, how can you ever be sure that you have enough material, and when is the right time to stop observing and collecting? I really felt that everything was a real mess along the way, I thought my findings were too broad and I had great problems in systematising them.
4.2 A plea for online ethnography

When evaluating the ethnography and discussing the methodological issues it’s crucial to point out that many of the scholars are claiming that to get the full picture of the objects you are studying it is necessary to include offline ethnography as well. Among others this is stated by Hine (2000), Miller and Slater (2000) and Bell (2001). I do not agree that if your intention is just to study particular Internet cultures, as in my case the study of Internet activists that it is necessary to include the offline research. It would have been rather strange to do a study of the Zapatistas offline in my case. My intended goal was to research how cyberactivism is performed on behalf of the Zapatistas and I rather think I would have lost something important if I would have gone there. I would have lost the feeling of being a cyberactivist and it wouldn’t have added valuable aspects for this thesis. Also the aspect of meeting some of the cyberactivists face to face was out of question and I did not even think of it as a possibility. This would have added nothing to the cyberactivist perspective that I wanted to research and neither to the virtual ethnography approach.

4.3 Connectivity rather than space

Now ethnography is one of the methodologies that are more and more frequently employed in the research of the Internet. (Park, 2000) The application of ethnography to Internet research is appropriate in that ethnography in itself is on the move from the geographically defined field to the more mopping fluid network, which well characterises the challenges that the Internet as a communication medium bears. (Wittel, 2000 in Park, 2004) Hine argues that connectivity rather than a space is a useful notion for describing the ethnographic field of the Internet. (Hine, 2000:45) The process of my ethnography revealed that objects are found through travelling and through following connections rather than in one place. It is impossible to tell what this will be beforehand. As Strathern (2002) writes about ethnography and
ethnographic research: it has its own search engine in the form of a question: What connections are going to be useful? This is due to the fact that you cannot tell in advance and more strongly, it puts one into the situation of not wanting to tell in advance. This is also descriptive for the first stages of my research as it was impossible to tell what sort of findings that would be useful and where they would further lead me. All the destinations chosen were based on my interest to further exploration and as Hine (2000) describes it in her seventh principle for virtual ethnography: virtual ethnography is necessarily partial. A holistic description of any informant, location or culture is impossible to achieve. Our accounts can be based on ideas of strategic relevance rather than faithful representations of objective realities (Hine, 2000:65). Consequently the data presented and the story told in this thesis is based on my experiences and my destinations, which were impossible to decide beforehand. Strathern further claims that ethnography throws up the unplanned and unpredictable which is quite suitable for the development of my process as well: It was a period in the process that was characterised by a tendency of desperation due to whether my findings were sufficient enough and what stories could be told. This might have got something to do with the massive amount of information as one finding led to another and new tracks were followed. Thus I felt revealed when I could sit down with one concrete place. As the group 1Zapatista was more of a constant place it was also easier to adopt the principles of ethnography to cyberspace.

Since ethnography traditionally has been the method of the anthropology the long distance travel to a strange place has been of great importance. However the experience of the stranger is not limited to those moving to live in a different society. (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995) My account as a stranger in cyberspace shows that the travel into these different places in cyberspace can also be qualified and treated as strange places. Since the issue of “going there”, e.g. to a decided destination, has been the main task for the ethnographer, the virtual
ethnographer is more like a traveller without a destination. The present ethnographer claims the ethnography as a wandering where I sometimes found places interesting enough to stay for a while. The use of travel in this regard will naturally demand a broader and redefined notion of the travel. Following the argument of the online travel to different hyperlinks which may lead to further ethnographic subjects is a valuable way to gain a relational and contextual understanding. (Park, 2000) As Burnett so well describes it: *You travel by looking, by reading, by imaging and imagining.* (In Hine, 2000:45)
5 Conclusion

I do not intend to determine whether this ethnography is “good” or “bad” but I will rather ask whether the ethnography made me get insight in the phenomenon I wanted to research, the Zapatistas in relation to cyberactivism and whether the virtual ethnography was a valuable means to that end.

By describing in detail what it can mean to be a cyberactivist and what cyberactivists actually do I have tried to shed some particular light on cyberactivism based on the findings from the ethnography. This led me to further reveal some new issues and stories that are complicating and broadening the big stories and patterns of cybercultures normally referred to in the literature. (See for example Donk & Loader, 2004, Castells, 2001) E.g. the intriguing relationship between offline and online which led to the question of who is actually representing who in the relation between the online activists and the offline activities? The virtual activities are also enacting new virtual activities. The Zapatistas as a movement present on the Internet are a very fluid and hybrid phenomenon which throw some light of cyberactivism as more unlike the traditional movements’ activism offline.

The incorporation of new media and communication technology, such as the Internet, for the Pro Zapatista activists is not new and there are clearly many evidences of how important this has been for the Zapatistas. The ethnography recognised different ways the Zapatistas are present on the Internet as the tools in the cyberactivism arsenal are varied consisting among others of a high level of issue related web pages, discussion groups, email lists, actions and demonstrations. Being present on the Internet means a lot both for the real Zapatistas offline as they get a lot of publicity and support and thus don’t have to fight their struggle in
isolation, and also for the Zapatistas adherents in cyberspace as they are gathered around the Zapatistas as an issue they find meaningful to support without “being there”. Despite the fact that the activists observed in the email group 1Zapatista often post emails concerning other topics than the Zapatistas they obviously perform a Pro Zapatista cyberactivist activity by subscribing for an email group concerning the Zapatistas. They clearly show a solidary action and interest in the case of the Zapatistas. Some of the members though can best be described as “activism activists” which was shown in the high level of different key issues posted in the mails.

The issue of “going there” is something completely different in a world characterised of connectivity rather than space. It is different not just in terms of my activity and feelings as a researcher but also in the meaning it had for the understanding of the cybercultures. It is the journey and not the destination that is of importance. Actually the issue of going there was not only of importance for me as an ethnographer but was also something stressed by the informants as an important reason for being cyberactivists.

In the present thesis I have performed, discussed and argued for adopting the ethnographic approach to the Internet. I will suggest a move from what makes the spaces in cyberspace so special or different that such an approach cannot be adopted. A lot of the discussion regarding the virtual ethnography is concerned with the limitations of merely using an online approach (see for example Miller & Slater, 2000 and Hine, 2000). Consequently, as a concluding remark, I would rather claim the many possibilities when adapting the ethnographic approach to the Internet. My ethnography has shown that it was possible to gain a lot of information due to my research interest. Furthermore, the ethnographic approach to the Internet makes it possible to get insight in the spaces that creates the small worlds and cultures in cyberspace.
This again makes it possible to treat cyberspace as a real world and not the world apart. As Hine stresses: *Cyberspace is not to be thought of as a space detached from any connections to real life and face to face interactions. It has rich and complex connections with the contexts in which it is used.* (Hine, 2000:64) In addition, a virtual ethnography is an excellent way of getting deeper insight in a research process and for that case I would surely recommend others to such a study as well.
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