

Reference: O'Donnell, Susan (1996), "Human Rights on the Net," Amnesty International Irish Section Newsletter 84, page 13.

Human Rights on the Net

It is often recalled that the Internet began as a small computer network set up by the US defense department, and that it was designed to survive a nuclear attack. The fact that the military establishment continues to rely on computer networks to do its work is, however, sometimes disregarded.

Computers and computer networks allow the military and police to place "subversives" under intense surveillance. In Mexico, for instance, where Amnesty International found that human rights are violated with impunity, the state uses information technologies extensively to crack down on resistance activities.

The manufacture of computers has also been linked to the curtailing of human rights in many parts of the world. The electronics industry has been key to the development of the new global economy. In countries such as Mexico, electronics and computer industries have been installed in free trade zones, areas which offer advantages to industries such as restrictions or total suspension of workers' political and social rights, no minimum wages, no trade unionism, no strikes, and exemption from social security payments.

Increasingly, however, information technologies are being used to fight these abuses. A notable example is the use of the Internet by activists organising against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and for the struggle for democracy in Chiapas, Mexico.

At the time of its implementation, NAFTA was the focus of intense opposition by a broad coalition of grassroots groups in the three countries of North America – Canada, the US and Mexico – who believed (correctly, as it turned out) that the agreement would increase the exploitation of workers in all three countries.

On January 1, 1994, NAFTA implementation day, the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) rose up in Chiapas, Mexico in resistance to the expropriation and enclosure of lands. The EZLN called NAFTA a "death sentence" to the Indigenous population in Mexico.

A striking aspect of the sequence of events set in motion by the Zapatista uprising was how quickly the news of the struggle circulated and international support was mobilized. Documents and information were quickly diffused to anyone interested in the uprising, primarily using the pattern of Internet links already established by the anti-NAFTA coalition.

For instance, the Internet mailing list technology, which allows the automatic exchange of e-mail among those with an Internet e-mail address, has been an important solidarity tool. At the height of the struggle, the mailing list Chiapas-l was circulating more than 100 messages per week among more than 700 subscribers around the world.

Many e-mail messages circulating on this mailing list are not written specifically for the Internet but have been previously published in alternative or mainstream publications. However, circulation on the global computer network gives this news a much wider readership.

At one point during the Chiapas struggle, an article about a Chase Manhattan Bank report calling for the "elimination of the Zapatistas" to improve Mexico's financial prospects was published in an American alternative magazine with limited circulation. After the article was posted on the Internet, however, the situation changed dramatically – the story received press coverage in Mexico, the US, and Europe, and during the resulting international furore, the Chase Manhattan Bank was forced to fire the author of the report.

Chiapas-l circulates the communiques issued by the Zapatista leadership. These communiques are published originally in a Mexico City daily newspaper but would have little circulation outside Mexico if not for Chiapas-l and its related Internet sites. The rapid global diffusion of these EZLN communiques on the Internet has kept strategic communications from the Zapatistas outside the control of the Mexican state, forcing the Mexican government to respond to the issues in the international arena.

When the Mexican military cracked down on the rebel army in early 1995, the Internet was used to organise an international protest targeting the Mexican president. When 17 rural activists were murdered in Guerrero, Mexico in June, 1995, readers of the news on the Internet were able to follow developments that led to the governor of Guerrero state being found guilty of organising the massacre.

It is clear that the Internet will continue to grow in importance for progressive work. However it is equally certain that information technologies globally will remain firmly in the hands of the elite for the foreseeable future.

For instance, the number of people connected to the Internet in Mexico has trebled in the past year but represents less than half of one percent of the country's population. The Mexican military, on the other hand, is abundantly supplied with the latest information technology, courtesy of the US military.

Given this imbalance, the challenge for human rights activists everywhere is to use the limited information technologies at their disposal in increasingly strategic and creative ways to highlight and fight human rights abuses around the world.