

**INTERNATIONAL  
PERSPECTIVES**

**FOCUS ON LATIN AMERICA AND  
BORDER CULTURE**

The Journal of the International Institute  
California State University, San Bernardino

Volume 2, Spring 2005

# Cultura Cyber: Commodifying Latina/o Nationalism and Rhetoric on the Internet

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The Internet is a significant technological advancement that has transformed the world by diminishing the physical space between global communities. While the Internet has not provided the panacea to global inequity or strife, it has created expressive space for dialogue and information exchange on issues as diverse as ownership, control, freedom, rights, and responsibilities. The Internet is a major conduit for information, delivering to places that were once inaccessible by traditional media outlets and technologies (Price, 2003). As the Internet revolution has come of age it is apparent that the potential for the transformation of cyberspace to a rapidly, responsive, socio-political expressive space has not reached its maximum potency. For better or worse the Internet has opened opportunities for commerce and socio-political interaction, but any gains are almost always measured against problems with access and information flow and control or other virtual problems such as the proliferation of cyber-hacking and commercial spam. The rise of global interconnectedness via the Internet is a concurrent phenomenon with the globalization of world economies and political relationships. Such a spread and development justifies academic investigation. Latin America has faced both challenges and opportunities with the rise of globalization and the spread of the Internet. Indeed as the technological capacity of the Internet develops and expands, partly driven by the same socio-economic and political forces of globalization, Latin American governments and non-governmental entities alike are focusing attention and resources on developing cyberspace.

This paper is an attempt to synthesize the developments in Latin American usage and presence on the Internet and in particular to examine some critical aspects of the relationships developing online between governmental and non-governmental agents. The forces shaping the Internet in Latin America are the same forces that influence Latin American identity, especially with a diaspora well anchored in the United States. Understanding representation and expression in Latin American identity, especially those socio-politically influenced factors, is necessary not only for understanding the phenomenon, but also for providing information to increase the knowledge and sophistication of media consumers in Latin America and the United States. For the sake of brevity this paper will

begin by examining several recent developments surrounding the Internet in Latin America. Secondly, an analysis of two unique cyberspace relationships, that of the Mexican government and the Zapatista rebels and the burgeoning relationship between American politicians and the Latina/o electorate in the United States, will be presented. Finally, a critical perspective showcasing a discussion on power and hegemony will conclude the paper. This last section endeavors to connect the issues of identity, representation, and expression in a way that underscores the importance of the Internet to Latin American and the Latin American Diaspora in the United States.

## Latin America and the Internet Revolution

Latin America is in a unique position at the start of the new millennium. While economic challenges have been omnipresent in the Southern Hemisphere, recent shocks in Argentina and Brazil have placed newfound attention and pressure on the respective leaders of Latin America to achieve stability. And while some of these economies are experiencing marginal rebounds, the risk of economic crisis is ever-present without "sustained expansion" (Hennigan, 2003, p. 7). The drive for stability highlights the nature of a globally interconnected economy, so much so that leaders outside of Latin America are concerned about the internal effects such economic downturns have on their own economies and the potential effect on migration from Latin America. Politically, recent elections have reaffirmed developing patterns of democratic engagement and practices consistent with civil society. In Mexico the election of Vicente Fox signaled a departure from almost seventy years of single party, political domination. The Mexican election showcased new reforms in voting process and procedure and perhaps most significantly showed how much power can be held by the sitting president and the effect that using or not using such power can have on the political process. Even in Venezuela, where the election of General Hugo Chavez followed an unsuccessful coup attempt by Chavez months before, the sense of mainstreaming the political process is becoming more and more concrete.

With the 2000 election of George W. Bush, it seemed that relations between the United States and Latin America, Mexico in particular, were about to receive a substantial boost. Unfortunately perhaps the most challenging factor for multilateral United States/Latin American relations was not driven by any regional crisis, but rather by the tragic events of September 11, 2001. Castaneda (2003) explains that the terrorist attacks have resulted in a "forgotten relationship" between the United States and Latin America which threatens to undermine progress made on economic reform and democratization (p. 68). Internally in Mexico, the effects of the relationship have been felt by the Fox administration with substantial losses experienced during the country's mid-term elections in 2003. Some have argued that the political capital spent by Fox on the

relationship with Bush played a major role in shifting votes and fueling anxiety on the part of voters in Mexico who saw a lack of progress on several economic and social policies (Half an Enchilada, 2003).

The subsequent rollback of relations between the United States and Latin America has influenced the evolution of limited space for discourse on previously significant agenda issues, unless there is a connection to homeland security for the United States. In shifting priorities, the United States has left many in Latin America concerned with both short term and long term plans for greater technological openness and interconnectivity between countries. Several issues have been spotlighted in recent months that indicate a strong proclivity on the part of Latin American leaders to develop a broad technical plan that would empower the spread of the Internet.

President Vicente Fox of Mexico strongly supports an initiative called E-Mexico, which is an attempt to create more cyberspace access for Mexican citizens and to diversify existing access. Perhaps taking a cue from the spread of telephony across Latin America at the end of the last millennium, Fox has conceived a plan to establish greater Internet access throughout Mexico (Markoff, 2002, p. 1). E-Mexico is unique for three reasons; first it is planned for all parts of the country through the use of government-owned space in buildings that formerly housed telegraph stations. These rural outposts would be part of a new educational outreach for Mexican citizens, especially the young who often have little to no access to education (Forgrieve, 2002, p. 3B). Secondly, E-Mexico is being developed with major technology companies such as Microsoft, suggesting that Mexican officials see the relationship as a potential foundation to access other technology sectors for economic development. Lastly, the era of nationalizing utilities and resource industries in Latin America is not too far removed from historical memory, suggesting that companies involved in E-Mexico and other technology ventures are seriously focused on developing the economies of Mexico and other Latin American countries. For certain this development is not altruistic, but it bodes well for the construction and maintenance of technology throughout Latin America. It also follows a pattern that has been brought to fruition with great success in other parts of the world.

Along the same lines the spread of open source code through Latin America suggests that governments are reconsidering their regulation of import-export controls that have long plagued the relationship between Latin America and technologically oriented businesses. Source code, the programming foundation and infrastructure of the digital world, is closely held by companies and licensed at fairly high prices, especially for programs that are popular and sell well. The ability to use and manipulate source code is a major step, because it determines how programs can be duplicated or modified. Source code represents some of the most important intellectual property that a technology company holds and to

see that companies are shifting to include Latin America in their pattern of distribution is an important improvement. Furthermore the availability of open source code indicates that non-governmental entities and private citizens are becoming more independent and free from government control to exchange and manipulate such technology. Issues related to how the shift of open source code affects the relationship between external businesses and the respective governments of Latin America involves several issues related to power and government power and will be discussed in the last section of this paper. As a final point, much of this interaction and intellectual development surrounding source code availability is a result of the interconnectedness that the Internet has helped bring about.

### **Identity and the Internet: Praxis**

The expansion of cyberspace is significant in Latin America, because it suggests more and more people are becoming technologically literate and those that are not necessarily so are still invested in information produced and disseminated through cyberspace. While issues related to cost of and availability of Internet access are tertiary to this paper, it is notable to see the shift downward in terms of prices for computing, even in Latin America. Furthermore, as noted earlier, governments and non-governmental organizations are seemingly committed to the idea of greater access and less control over the information produced and routed through the Internet.

The development and maintenance of expressive space via the Internet creates channels of communication between individuals and groups. The nature of the Internet is such that networks develop with information delivery that is not controlled or regulated in the same way that existing mass media works. The effort required by those that wish to have an Internet presence is minimal at best. Individuals can use the Internet for communication and interaction and groups can follow the same pattern by providing information for their members in cyberspace. The expense to developing a presence is minimal and growing cheaper as the Internet expands. Optimally, the Internet is open and navigation is left to the individual user or users. These networks or channels are not necessarily bi-directional and there is a chance that competing groups may just as likely be trying to commodify each other's expressive space.

Two examples to consider on this point of flow and use of expressive space online in Latin America and within the Latin American diaspora in the United States, are the relationships between the Mexican government and the rebels of the EZLN and the relationship between American politicians and the Latina/o electorate in the United States. These two examples are significant in their respective spheres, but also have significance in the way they highlight the creation and maintenance of Latin American identity.

Civil insurgency in Latin America has been a major element throughout the region's history. In Mexico the late 1990s saw the rise of the EZLN, a rebel force originating chiefly from the state of Chiapas in Southern Mexico. The EZLN rebels, or Zapatistas, launched a guerrilla insurgency against the government of then Mexican President Carlos Salinas demanding economic improvements for the impoverished state of Chiapas along with a call for major agrarian reforms for farmers in Mexico. Immediate government reaction came in the form of a swift, military retaliation. While the short-term strategy to deal with the Zapatistas seemed a suitable quick fix, the long-term presence of the Zapatistas and in particular the regional and global attention given to their de facto leader, Subcomandante Marcos, clearly suggests that Salinas' government and the subsequent government of Ernesto Zedillo failed to address or conversely quash the Zapatista presence. The government of Vicente Fox, faced with a string of failures from the previous presidential administrations, chose a different strategy for engaging the Zapatistas. Starting with campaign promises leading up to the 2000 Mexican election, Fox stressed the need to deal with the Zapatistas concerns directly and efficiently. Once elected, Fox even allowed the Zapatistas and their supporters to march on Mexico City all the way from the state of Chiapas (Klein, 2001, p. 20). Throughout the time the Fox administration has been in office the attitude toward the Zapatistas and Marcos has been geared toward engagement and awareness. However the way in which the respective parties have developed their cyberspace presence suggests that the government remains firmly in charge of deciding the direction and nature of increased relations.

First and foremost, the Office of the President of the Republic of Mexico has a very structured presence on the Internet via the official website. The site maintains news and information about President Fox including recent messages and speeches on matters of state, as well as news about the government and structural elements such as the president's agenda and links to other governmental entities. The site opens in a browser window displaying all of the information in Spanish. The government site is easily accessible by non-Spanish speakers through a translation link present on the homepage. The link takes a person to a section where they can choose to access a version of the site in English or French. By contrast the path to find an official Zapatista web presence is hardly easy to find. In fact searching for such a presence is likely to turn up plenty of web sites for the EZLN, but none officially designated as the portal for the organization or its leadership. Several pages have been constructed by the different support groups located throughout Mexico, as well as Zapatista units designated by their geographic presence in different Mexican states. Adding to this confusion are the different sites sponsored by those people interested in lending a virtual hand to the cause without necessarily having any connection whatsoever to the EZLN. The important distinction is that as the conflict between the Zapatistas and the Mexican government started, the Zapatistas very

much empowered the use of the Internet to spread their message and keep information flowing. It was in the beginning very much as Warf and Grimes suggest, a way for "activists in the Third World, [to use] the Internet [for] cheap access to sympathetic counterparts abroad, without the need to obtain an exit visa" (1997, p. 264).

While the difference in web presence is clearly noticeable, the content on the Mexican president's page certainly provides an even better example where the messages and intent of the web presence favors the government. Even when there is a connected site in cyberspace that has a legitimate connection to the EZLN, none have the depth or capacity for multi-media presence as does the Mexican president's web site. The site allows visitors to read speeches and memorandum from the president on the Zapatistas, their march to Mexico City, and their actions throughout the insurgency campaign. Additionally the site allows visitors to watch some speeches given by Fox through streaming audio and video. Furthermore the site provides many of the same opportunities for visitors who are not familiar with Spanish. The duplication of material that has been translated shows the methodical nature of the government's presentation.

The cyberspace discourse favors one side in this relationship and while an argument can be advanced that the Zapatistas are more concerned with internal, grassroots efforts to spread their message, it is clear that the Mexican government is dominating the domestic presentation of the group as well as the way in which the relationship is portrayed to those outside of Mexico. In fact the ability to provide information in French and English suggests that the Mexican government is very concerned with the way in which its internal politics are being received elsewhere. This is consistent with Brunn and Cottle's point that:

The selling of places through images and iconography on the World Wide Web is an electronic novelty for states that are brokering a position in the global commerce of ideas and products...audiences may be other states, world capitals, global and regional organizations. (1997, p. 240)

The interaction between the Mexican government and the Zapatistas represents an extreme situation and one anchored in animosity and tension. The second major example offered in this essay deals more with power realized and the attempts of mainstream politicians to outreach to a minority population. The 2000 campaign for the presidency of the United States will hold all manner of distinction in the annals of history, from the ballot crisis on Election Day to the unprecedented, judicial intervention by the United States Supreme Court. But the post-election furor may obscure another important issue of the campaign, the renewed focus on Latina/o political participation. New demographics that predict substantial growth in the Latina/o community in the United States, combined

with a newfound resurgence of Latina/o culture and social participation, put the whole Latina/o community in the national spotlight.

The 2000 presidential campaign in many ways has re-defined political outreach to the Latina/o community in the United States. The rhetorical approach taken during the campaign appears to be the first salvo in a protracted partisan struggle to gain renewed and consistent support and consistent voting from the Latina/o community. One particularly important distinction in the campaign process was the attention and effort paid to potential Latina/o voters through a variety of media. The demographic growth in the Latina/o community is important because it draws attention to the community and it is likely to boost the perception of importance from others at the social and political levels.

Al Gore, George W. Bush, and their respective parties used stump speeches, commercials, and web sites to reach out to Latina/os across the country. Campaigns often appeal to diversity, but in 2000 the use of the Spanish language in speeches increased focus on issues traditionally identified as Latina/o concerns, Latina/o celebrity endorsements or even the Latina/o accented platform parties at the national conventions, all signaled an important change. These elements of the campaign also shifted the frames used in the previous political drama related to Latina/o participation and inclusion. The web sites of both candidates featured video and audio of campaign ads in Spanish as well as message content aimed the Spanish-speaking Latina/o community. The messages were present in contrast to the years of Latina/o exclusion in terms of media products aimed at voters. The change in this approach is indicative of Warf and Grimes' analysis pointing to the Internet as a platform for "access to skills and resources that are not presenting local areas but are needed in local struggles, transcending scale limitations" (1997, p. 267).

### Conclusion

The nature of the Internet is very much technological, but because human input is required the range and depth of identity issues still tends to center around core issues of representation and social awareness. The consumption of identity is also driven by society and an interest to create and maintain expressive space for all. In Latin America this desire is no different and as the spread of the Latin American diaspora continues, the issues that dominate identity will also be grounded in representation and expression online. The governments of Latin America seem focused on opening space and in the case of Mexico, using that space to present a one-sided perspective on internal politics for domestic purposes and for an external representation. In the case of the United States, the Internet presence of politicians seems to be a crucial way to outreach to a large portion of the electorate and yet the same tendency exists as in Mexico to present an outreach effort that is distinct from the traditional, public outreach efforts.

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