

Indigenous video-making is essentially about taking a Western tool used to promote Western values and to market products, and transforming it into one of many strategic elements that will strengthen native values and maintain the dynamism that keeps any culture alive. Public control over media production is necessary for a well functioning democracy. The project that we propose to engage in during the summer of 2007 is the outfitting of a media lab in a town in Southern Mexico, and the implementation of a curriculum of technical communication training and theory.

In Mexico, as in many Latin American nations, there remains to this day a large population of indigenous residents—descendants of the original inhabitants prior to European settlement. Contemporary indigenous groups often need to adopt elements of the dominant culture to survive. For example, Spanish has become so necessary in Mexico, many native languages have less than a hundred living speakers, and others have become completely extinct. Today, schools that teach in local languages are the exception. Many children get their first and most lasting impression of mainstream life through the popular media. Television especially reinforces a slew of colonially based racial stereotypes. In my experience, indigenous video-makers' main complaint about television is that it convinces young people of a false reality where the heroes are all well-dressed, Spanish-speaking, light-skinned mestizos (of European decent). Native appropriation of media technologies conceived in the "developed world" and often used by outsiders to represent indigenous peoples has the potential to significantly shift the power dynamic in the current social and political paradigm in Mexico.

Maricruz Cabrera is a Zapotec Indian from Santo Domingo Petapa, an indigenous village of 7,300 on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec about six hours from the capital of the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca. I met her in July 2006, where she was presenting a video called "Basura en el Pueblo" at the 8th international CLACPI¹ Film Festival. Maricruz created the video after attending a workshop called "Ojos Diversos" (Diverse Perspectives) in Juchitán, Oaxaca in 2005, organized by "Ojo de Agua". Her video was made to draw community attention to problems of local waste mismanagement. Maricruz started a youth group in her town after attending this workshop, recognizing that youth organizing was something that Santo Domingo lacked. Should we be awarded this grant, Maricruz and I will establish a media center in Santo Domingo and build the youth group into a cadre of media educated activists able to plan, shoot, edit, screen and otherwise distribute videos and other media about social topics relevant to their own lives. The youth group is the primary target in Santo Domingo, but workshops will be available for any community members interested in learning what we have to offer. Maricruz has secured a location for the workshops and storage of the equipment: a cultural center built by youths. The local government of Santo Domingo is very excited about the prospect of this initiative.

Our initial goal is to teach a core constituency to utilize media tools to discover and affirm strengths and make their cultural lives visible. We will encourage youth to adopt a heightened social consciousness, attempting to develop alternatives to the marginalizing influences on young indigenous people. Taking advantage of the tightly networked projects going on in Oaxaca currently, our contact with other media centers and "Ojo de Agua" (explained below) will provide ample opportunity for collaboration and joint-support for community communication campaigns (radio, video, flyers, murals etc...). A portion of this grant will potentially pay for screening the newly created videos and films in Santo Domingo and other communities as well as at universities and government agencies. Distribution is very important because while the process of making media itself can be very empowering, sharing ideas and perspectives is the ultimate goal of this project. The uniqueness of our project comes from the extended duration (three initial months of training), and that it will be run by, and primarily for, youth.

Three potential video projects under development examine the illegal logging around Santo Domingo; a call for respect of women in the home as well as at work, and an explanation of her rights and health (especially important for a town of mostly women); and the history and festivals of Santo

¹ CLACPI: Latin American Coordinator for Indigenous Film and Communication.

Domingo, which will necessitate regular meetings and interviews with the elders' council of the village. The council is more than willing to participate in this conversation, which will effectively pass their knowledge along to future generations. In the words of one elder, "the spoken word escapes, but the written (or recorded) word does not".

Through this seed project, we hope to continue to develop a grass roots methodology aimed at media education and distribution. Clear and concise records of our progress will allow for a solid understanding of our strengths and facets of the project that we can improve. By September 2007, we will have trained members of Santo Domingo to make videos and other media, established local, national and perhaps international flows of communication, and members will have begun producing independent examples of true democratic empowerment aimed at education and self-definition.

Current Activities and Organizations Addressing the Issues:

The longevity of this project is not contingent on this grant alone. Various NGOs and independent media activists in Oaxaca are continually attempting to develop more nodes like this one to integrate media production positively into the lives of indigenous Mexican groups. These organizations and individuals stand to gain from a functioning project in Santo Domingo and so they have offered their knowledge and energy to help us reach our objectives. I have letters of solidarity and support from the directors of two of these highly successful NGOs.

Since 1998, Promedios has provided video equipment, computers and media education to Zapatista communities in Chiapas, the southernmost state in Mexico, bordering Oaxaca to the East. The Zapatistas have defended indigenous rights peacefully for the last twelve years in Mexico and feel that it is beneficial to their organization to represent themselves and their struggle. Besides over twenty videos that they have made working with Promedios, the Zapatistas also have a radio station called 'Insurgent Radio: The Voice of Those Without Voice' that can be heard all over Mexico and on the Internet.²

"Ojo de Agua Comunicación" (ODA), based in Oaxaca City, also runs video-making workshops with indigenous groups in the south of the country. Their name means 'eye of water' or spring, which alludes to water springing as knowledge and wisdom from Mother Earth, and at the same time is a metaphor for the eye. During the current popular movement in Oaxaca that has drifted in and out of international attention these last nine months, ODA has worked with local organizations and human rights groups acting as a public media outlet. The benefits of well-networked communication are apparent after observing how the popular movement in Oaxaca has grown through collaboration with groups like ODA.

Last fall I founded my university's only film making club and since then I have trained over thirty people in camera use and over twenty in basic non-linear editing with equipment provided by the University's IT department. I've produced two films about indigenous media in Southern Mexico, which have won awards at two film festivals in the Boston area. I've received professional training as well as spent much of my own time experimenting with the software that we will be teaching with this summer. Through spending over five months of the last two years in Mexico interning with both "The Chiapas Media Project (CMP)/Promedios" and "Ojo de Agua", I have become aware of and sensitized to the issues regarding indigenous media making in Mexico and both organizations' theory and methodology.

This project has the potential to direct resources to a population in need of them. This proposal has been developed by Maricruz in her meetings with the youth group, and myself, with help from members of the two NGOs listed above. It is clear to us that while change must come from within, there is only so much that a community can do alone in the current social context of Mexico. Certain resources need to come from outside, and we see the Katherine Wasserman Davis Project for Peace Grant as the perfect source of funding, as our objectives and ideology align so closely with those of the donor.

Budget

² <http://www.radioinsurgente.org/>