

❖ In Conversation with Alexandra Halkin

Verena Thomas— Interviewer

Independent documentary video producer Alexandra Halkin, has been producing documentaries for the last 25 years. In 1995, she started developing the Chiapas Media Project (CMP). This is a bi-national partnership that provides video and computer equipment and training for indigenous and campesino communities in Southern Mexico. Since 1998, the CMP has trained over 200 indigenous men and women in video production in Chiapas and Guerrero, Mexico. In 2004, Alexandra was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for her work with the CMP and to develop a new project, the Latin American Indigenous Video Initiative (LAIVI). In 2007, Alexandra was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship for the Indigenous Audiovisual Archive (IAA) in Oaxaca, Mexico. She spoke to Verena Thomas, a filmmaker who is currently setting up video production workshops in the highlands of Papua New Guinea.

Thomas: Can you tell us a little bit about how the Chiapas Media Project started and how you became involved in it?

Halkin: *When the Zapatistas had their uprising on January 1, 1994, they called on international civil society to come to Chiapas to bring them new skills, to teach them new things. And the Chiapas Media Project is one of those projects. In 1995 I was hired to do a documentary about a joint humanitarian aid caravan that was sponsored by an organisation in the United States and an organisation in Mexico that was going down to the Zapatista region. I had been interested for a while in the idea of transferring video technology to marginalised people so that they can tell their own stories. When I met the Zapatistas, I felt here was a group of people who clearly were very organised and interested in communication technology. They were also interested in communicating with the outside world. We talked to local Zapatista leaders. This was in 1995, one year after the uprising. Fundraising for Zapatista projects wasn't that easy in the United States because the mass media portrayed these people as armed guerrillas having a shoot-them-up with the Mexican military in the jungles of Chiapas. So what we did was to organise a youth cultural exchange project where we brought over youth from Chicago who worked in video, and indigenous youth from Mexico City and Oaxaca. We got a grant from the US Mexico fund for culture and that's basically how the project got started. Nobody had the expectation that this would become a big project; we were going to be working in all of the Zapatistas territory. It was more of an experiment. After the first set of workshops that we did, it was pretty clear this was something that they were interested in. They had a lot of ideas and we formalised the Chiapas media project. We started*

working in February of 1998. So this is actually our 10-year anniversary this year.

Thomas: How were those early workshops run? How were they structured and what were the difficulties in the early stages that you had to deal with?

Halkin: *From the beginning we decided that it was very important that other indigenous video-makers within Mexico did the workshops. It wasn't like bringing a bunch of people from the United States, who stayed a couple of weeks and then went home. We helped the communities to enter the network of indigenous video making in Mexico. Basically the workshops were organised by indigenous video-makers and non-indigenous video makers from Oaxaca who had been involved in collective video making for a number of years. In terms of difficulties, the main difficulty we had was how to get the gear into Mexico. It is very expensive to buy video equipment in Mexico. They are paying like 50 percent more than the US. So from the very beginning, we had to figure out a strategy how to bring gear in. And also the very beginning workshops were basically people who were authorities in the communities. They were there checking us out to make sure we weren't up to no good basically. In the beginning, Zapatistas were checking us out to make sure that we weren't infiltrators. So the majority of the people who were in the beginning workshops didn't really stay in the workshops. Although what we subsequently did with the project was built four regional media centres and three of the media centres. They are run by folks who were there from the very beginning. So there is continuity. The other difficulty was that at that time Chiapas was totally militarised, so there was like a number of army checkpoints and immigration checkpoints. It was very difficult to move around Chiapas, especially if you were not from there. Immigration was focusing on foreigners who were working with the Zapatistas. That was pretty difficult. But in general things went relatively smoothly considering the circumstances under which we were working.*

Thomas: What were your first methods of distributing the videos? Did you use the Internet? Was it more to strengthen the communication within the groups or was the main idea to get the videos out to the rest of the world?

Halkin: *I think it was a parallel process. When we began the project and we brought the gear down we said to the communities this is your gear you can do whatever you want with it. But we said to them if you don't make videos for international distribution it is going to be very hard for us to sustain the project. This is because funders are gonna need to see what they are doing. So the internal production really went side-by-side with the external production and there is much more internal production than external production. I mean they produce many videos that we as staff of the project never see. They are in their indigenous languages. Some of the videos that we distribute were made for internal use and we ask for permission to distribute them internationally. Some are made specifically for international distribution.*

Thomas: How do you feel about putting video on the Internet? Do you have any concerns about that?

Halkin: *We have a lot of concerns about maintaining the copyright and the integrity of the videos because the way that the videos are produced. They are produced collectively and a lot of the videos take a long time to be made. People need to see them and authorities need to decide if the videos are appropriate. It is a very laborious process that goes into making videos in the communities. Each shot is thought about. There is reasons why they make it that way. For us we don't want to put them — unless they are made for organisations such as Indymedia or something like that — we don't want to put those videos online because we don't want people using those images for their own work, using those images to make propaganda against the Zapatistas, or using them to misinform the general population. The other reason is because*

the videos are one of the main sources of income for the projects. We've been really concerned with economic sustainability. We found that video distribution, especially to universities where they pay institutional rates, is very helpful to sustain the project. It is important that the videos are not just free everywhere. It is really about maintaining the integrity of the images and the videos.

Thomas: After ten years now that you have been running the project, what have really for you been the benefits in the community, for individuals and for the Zapatistas?

Halkin: *I should say first of all that I am not running the project and that is really the way that the project is set up. It's a collective. There is no director or anything like that. In fact I am not in Chiapas very much anymore. I work mostly in Oaxaca and Guerrero now. I think in terms of how the communities have really benefited from this project. I think that you know and it's hard for me to say that, because I'm not them. But I just think their ability to have access to this technology, to understand this technology now and to be able to represent themselves, this is really significant. I think that depending on the outside world to tell your story is a very difficult thing. In fact it's rarely done well, especially if you don't speak the languages of these communities. What the project has been able to do is show people that normally wouldn't have contact with indigenous media. It is about indigenous media and what real self-representation means. It makes people think about how people represent themselves and what it means to have voice. I also think that it's helpful to people's understanding about the Zapatista movement. The way the mass media has portrayed them it's been really distorted. When people see these videos — that are primarily about their productive projects such as coffee-collectives and organic gardens and women's textiles co-operatives, water projects, etc — they get a much better understanding of what the Zapatistas are really asking for or how they want to live. I think this has really countered the misinformation, at least in the United States, about who the Zapatistas are.*

Thomas: You've been able to keep the project sustainable for now ten years. Is there anything you would hope for a better structure in support of community media or how community media could be better supported?

Halkin: *I think people get trained in technology. They have more access to information. They not so isolated anymore. It helps them to figure things out. For example the fact that the Zapatistas have access to the internet now, they can go online and they can search and they can get information about, for example, growing organic corn and what kind of plants are good to put next to those corn plants so that the bugs don't eat the corn. It opens people up to much more information that they normally wouldn't have. I also think self-representation is so important because the voices of these people are just not heard. It is not on television and in order to have real democratic discourse, to really live in a democratic space, everybody's voice needs to be heard. It can't just be the people who have the money and the political power. So I think these indigenous media projects are like a balance to that. I mean even though obviously they are not on television and you don't get anywhere near the distribution that Hollywood movies or network television gets, but I think there is more access to this information. People from the developed world can see these videos on the internet. New communication technology is all run by transnational corporations that are not really interested in transmitting indigenous voices. They are not some benevolent technology up there for the good of humankind. In fact, it is controlled by corporations that have their profit and political control. And they want to maintain that. This is something I've been saying for years. The left needs to get some rich lefties and let's put some satellite dishes up in space, let's start making our own video cameras, our own computers, our own servers, so that we have access to the*

internet. I am not a technology expert but I think that it is possible to do something like that so that we are not beholden to these corporate interests or government interests that at any time can just shut everything down. We've seen it in Burma, we've seen it in Tibet and we've seen it in Mexico, the government using the internet to repress people. So I think there really needs to be a much more frank discussion about this technology and the good and the bad that comes with it.

Thomas: You've just been to New Zealand. Have you been able to connect to people talking about your project and have you found similarities in Australia and NZ to have a platform to discuss with people?

Halkin: *Yes. I have met with a lot of indigenous people in Latin America, and I have met with Maori people in New Zealand, and I have met with Aboriginal people in Australia and yes I think a lot of the struggles are the same. It's universal. Obviously there are different local issues, but the general issues around access to land and protection of the environment and being able to maintain your cultures and your traditions, it's just across the board. I think people really relate to the videos that the Zapatistas make. I think that there is a connection.*