

Women of the (Cyber) World: The Case of Mexican Feminist NGOs

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Mexican feminist non-governmental organisations use the internet as a means to gain support for the promotion of women's issues and to instigate political and social reform. This article examines the theoretical considerations of the use of alternative, radical, and citizens' media, in order to provide a broad view of their relationship to the functioning of various Mexican feminist NGOs. It also interprets and discusses the efforts of these groups to surpass territorial frontiers in order to establish a system of support and exchange at the global level in pursuit of a more gender-equitable society.

INTRODUCTION: MEXICAN FEMINISMS

This article will discuss the informational technology workings and implications of Mexican feminist non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that have chosen the internet as their operating space. Within those (cyber) spaces, the NGOs attempt to transcend territorial frontiers in order to create a system of support and exchange at the global level in pursuit of a more gender-equitable society. The current trend of using informational technology is likely to be the result of the evolution and crossing of mass media and communications with feminism in modern Mexico.

Feminism in Mexico has become increasingly visible throughout the decades. A series of events in the twentieth century has shaped feminist ideas and movements in Mexico. The year 1950 marks the beginning of a pivotal era in Mexican feminist thought, with writer Rosario Castellanos's thesis *Sobre cultura femenina* (*On Female Culture*). In it, she ponders the philosophical arguments of internationally renowned male thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Arthur Schopenhauer, and questions society's negation of the intellectual capabilities of women as a justifiable form of subjugation. This represents a major stride toward destabilising hegemonic society's rationale that women are inferior to men. Castellanos set a precedent for women in Mexico to ponder their situation in relation to men in society.

Another major turning point that opened a space for feminist voices in Mexico is the Tlatelolco massacre of 1968. During that year there were signs of political tension against the consolidation of power displayed by the government, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario

Institucional, PRI), which was founded in 1929 and held presidential rule until 2000. From July to October of 1968, students, teachers, and blue-collar workers held public demonstrations and circulated propaganda against the police and government for allegedly restricting freedom of protest. The government would not tolerate criticism of any kind, and the opposition was either bribed or made to conform, or publicly punished and used as an example of government intolerance of opposition or resistance. On October 2, 1968, during a peaceful rally at the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Nonoalco-Tlatelolco, the army and police surrounded and fired on thousands of protesters. The government aimed to cover up this incident, but one of the consequences of this tragedy is the literary response to the event and to the political, cultural, and economic climate in Mexico. Numerous authors, including several women writers, created new spaces of discursive power and of counter-hegemonic discourse in Mexico.

Among those discourses was the developing “second wave” feminism, inspired by women’s rights movements in the United States and Europe, where Mexican women sought the decriminalisation of abortion, and the criminalisation and penalisation of physical and mental abuse, including rape, of women. Although the PRI did not legalise abortion and did not drastically reduce abuse of women, at times the PRI seemed to promote women’s interests. For example, it was one of the first political parties in favour of establishing quotas within its political party, stating that at least thirty percent of the political party or cabinet would be comprised of women. The PRI also allowed for the establishment and growth, without censure, of various centres and publications for women’s studies.

Since university students, as in the Tlatelolco incident, have usually been at the forefront actively speaking against authority and venturing into new ideas, it is no surprise that these universities and colleges have developed some of the over 250 centres for women’s studies and organisations in Mexico. The major ones include the Programa Interdisciplinario de Estudios de la Mujer (PIEM) (Interdisciplinary Programme of Women’s Studies) in 1983 at the Colegio de México, Comunicación e Información de la Mujer (CIMAC) (Women’s Communication and Information) in 1988, Grupo de Información en Reproducción Elegida (GIRE) (Information Group on Productive Rights) in 1992, and Programa Universitario de Estudios de Género (PUEG) (University Programme of Gender Studies) at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. These programs and centres dedicate themselves to examining and questioning the roles of women in society and to providing information for and about women on both theoretical and practical levels. They are the women’s centres that represent feminist movements on the ground in Mexico. Although they may each have websites to state their goals and announce their presence, they carry out the bulk of their activities offline. They have a physical presence in Mexico, as they all have offices that one can visit to speak with representatives, and many of them have libraries

of materials of interest to women's rights that one may consult by appointment. These centres also take part in on the ground protests or meetings on behalf of women's right to free choice, better health care, and more economic, social, and political representation and participation. Each of them openly addresses and promotes the right to have an abortion and to use contraceptives, and supports the demand of better health care for women.

Apart from these programs, there have also been two major feminist magazines or journals established in Mexico. They best represent the two tendencies of feminist movements on the ground in Mexico. The magazine *Fem.* emerged in 1976 when a group of prominent women of diverse professions such as anthropology, journalism, education, and community activism decided to pool their perspectives on women's public and private life. The magazine is published monthly, is sold at a low price, and offers a substantial combination of popular examinations of social movements, grassroots organisations, women's literary efforts, and historical happenings. Many of the articles specifically address health concerns and common daily-life themes such as family, church, and work, from a feminist perspective. The articles are short and are written in accessible jargon-free language and are not specifically aimed at intellectual or professional readers. Hence, the magazine is not directed to women holding tertiary degrees or educated in feminist theory.

A second journal, *Debate Feminista* (Feminist Debate), appears on the other side of the gap between the economically and educationally privileged urban-academic reader and the non-academic reader. Mexican anthropologist Marta Lamas founded the journal in 1990. It is directed towards the upper class, is higher priced than *Fem.*, requires an advanced level of reading, is not published as frequently, and is heavily theory-oriented. The journal is published twice a year, costs about fifteen United States dollars per issue, consists of nearly 400 pages, is abundant in political theory from the Left, and has a readership comprised of political and academic classes. Lamas aspires to link intricately together academics, theories of feminism, and politics in order to serve and support one another. She criticises the "sterility" of studies that omit politics from their analyses and foresees the "mobilisation" of politics, theory, and academics as essential to combating traditional, restricting beliefs about sex and gender relationships in Mexico. The journal contains numerous translations of feminist theory from outside Mexico dating from the 1970s and beyond. The editor's resolution to embrace translations of international feminist theories can be seen as wishing to create the opportunity or vehicle by which professional academic women can exchange or debate ideas and partake in international discussions. This is not a forum for grass-roots movements or visible community action. The journal is, however, thought provoking and conveniently groups together articles on feminist thought for those in Mexico who wish to investigate or to keep up with international feminist debates.

These two journals reflect at least two distinct major tendencies of

Mexican feminism. One addresses health and reproductive issues along with other common life experiences of living as a woman in traditional patriarchal Mexican society; the other addresses more abstract and theoretical issues on a philosophical level. There is a clear relationship between these movements on the ground and the Mexican feminist NGOs in cyberspace. Networks which bridge these two tendencies by providing information from both movements emerged in the later 1990s, when Mexican feminist non-governmental organisations (NGOs) began to use new means of communication such as cyberspace. The NGOs serve as “networks,” meaning organisations wishing to link users to information of other organisations. They are not “movements” in and of themselves, although the information that circulates through the network is comprised of events and thoughts representative of various feminist movements (for instance academic vs. non-academic). Within the contexts of their networks, they actively promote the decentralisation of traditional national discourse and encourage more citizen participation with the goal of changing and modernising the politics of sex and gender in social, political, and cultural life in Mexico. They do not visibly promote any particular positions politically, other than the feminist position that women deserve equality with men in Mexican society in terms of health care, economic aid, employment, and respect. Examples of these organisations include Modemmujer (Modem Woman, www.modemmujer.org) and LaNeta (Truth, www.laneta.apc.org). The two organisations exist only in cyberspace, while groups on the ground may have webpages, but also have offices that the public is able to visit. Modemmujer and LaNeta combine the interests of a wide variety of on-the-ground organisations I mentioned earlier, because they electronically gather and archive many of the documents, events, and links of these centres, and streamline the information to make it conveniently accessible in one location. Modemmujer and LaNeta hope that the use of modern media disseminates to a global audience, information which supports gender equality and women’s rights: traditional monopolies of public opinion have been primarily controlled by an elite and have not supported extensive discussion of these issues.

MASS COMMUNICATIONS AND POLITICS

It is essential to examine the theoretical considerations of the use of alternative, radical, and citizens’ media, according to concepts of media and mass communications, in order to provide a broad view of their relationship to the functioning of various Mexican feminist NGOs. These groups have opted to use the internet as a mechanism and forum to gain support for the promotion of women’s issues and to instigate political and social reform. The activities of the Mexican feminist NGOs clearly exemplify theories of the use of media and international communications, such as those of John Downing (2001), Adolfo Dunayevich (2001), Clemencia Rodríguez (2001), and John Thompson (1995), as a significant radical and alternative instrument in questioning

and changing social codes and traditional national identities. Through an analysis of LaNeta—an association of progressive communications that provides infrastructure for the cybernetic operation of NGOs—and Modemmujer, one of the Mexican feminist NGOs affiliated with LaNeta, a complex relationship between media, culture, society, power, communication and reform within Mexico can be seen. The article will discuss efforts of these groups to surpass territorial frontiers in order to establish a system of support and exchange at the global level in pursuit of a more gender-equitable society. The analysis leads to the conclusion that although immediate or complete reform and modernisation may not be attained, the technological activities of the Mexican feminist non-governmental associations play an important active role toward diversification and the decentralisation of traditional national discourses.

It is possible to state that Mexican feminist NGOs employ the internet as a form of “radical media,” which, defined by John Downing, are “media, generally small-scale and in many different forms, that express an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities, and perspectives” (Downing 2001, v). Fitting that description, and considering cyberspace in its entirety, the presence of Mexican feminist NGOs is rather small-scale, and their activities on the internet take on many different forms, among them, e-mail, list-serves, electronic databases, websites, chats and electronic forums. As in Downing’s definition, these NGOs also express an alternative vision to hegemonic policies of male-dominated priorities and perspectives regarding health issues, economics, and political and social participation in Mexico. They publicise viewpoints, issues, information, and debates on sex and gender to which the government and patriarchal Mexican society traditionally have not given priority or space for dissemination, such as the legalisation of abortion, the promotion of birth control, and homosexual rights. However, the NGOs can only be considered as providing a counter-hegemonic voice inasmuch as they represent a feminist voice in Mexican society.

The concept of hegemony in Mexico often involves a discussion of patriarchal society’s expectations of women. The cult of *marianismo* (the cult of the Virgin Mary) reflects traditional society’s relationship with the Catholic Church, and it expects women to be religious, sexually inexperienced, devoted wives and mothers, abnegated, and self-sacrificing to the needs of others. It is what Mexican feminist and anthropologist Marta Lamas calls the myth of the “*madrecita santa*,” the myth of the “little saintly mother” (Lamas 1995). There has been considerable debate over if, how, and when the stereotypes of *marianismo* and *machismo* truly have impacted Mexican society. In addition to Mexican feminists such as Lamas, other Mexican intellectuals have also contributed greatly to the study of *machismo* and *marianismo*. For example, Roger Bartra, in *La jaula de la melancolía: identidad y metamorfosis del mexicano* (1987) and Octavio Paz, in *El laberinto de la soledad*

(1950), have discussed the negative psychological impact that these concepts have had on Mexican men and women, and have addressed them as significant factors in shaping people's identity within contemporary Mexican society. More recently, studies from outside Mexico, such as Stern (1995) and Gutmann (1996) have contested the conceptualisation of *marianismo* and *machismo*, arguing that gender relations are consensual and negotiated. Nevertheless, many feel that the impact of these gendered belief systems remains considerable.

Hegemonic practice, however, relates not only to gender but also to social class relations: sharp contrasts between the rich and poor continue to exist in Mexico. The majority of the country's population is categorised as economically poor and politically marginalised by the country's hegemony of the wealthy power-holding elite. The lack of proper economic aid, employment, and health care to help those who are underprivileged has been a serious issue for many years.

It can be argued that the NGO groups, in part, are complicit in hegemonic practices, since they are usually situated in Mexico City and are comprised of educated professionals of a privileged economic and social class who have access to, and who know how to use, the media. Most of the Mexican population is *mestizo*, a mix of European and indigenous ancestry. This ethnic group has had more access to university education and more opportunity for social and economic advancement, compared to indigenous groups in Mexico. It is likely that the groups involved in the feminist networks I discuss are privileged in class and racial terms, although they are indeed counter-hegemonic in the sense that they represent voices calling for equal treatment in society regardless of one's ethnicity, sex, or sexual orientation. The networks include news and articles on homosexual rights as well as briefings on demands of women of indigenous groups. These NGOs try to negotiate differences and to promote diversity, although I have not seen that they have had the indigenous speak for themselves. The coordinators, who are all *mestiza* or of European origin, are in positions of power obtained through the advantages of education and professional experience.

Moreover, these NGOs in cyberspace represent a type of "imagined community" as defined by Benedict Anderson (Anderson 1991). Although Anderson clearly writes of the "imagined community" as it pertains to nationhood, it is possible to extend the idea to Mexican feminist NGOs on the internet. The groups are "*imagined*" because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in their minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 1991, 6). Anderson spoke of print capitalism as a hegemonic tool that spurred the shaping of national identities. It is now electronic media in the hands of the privileged classes that aids the controlling group in shaping the direction of whichever movement they are dedicated to. In the case of Modemmujer, it is the women's movement. The group controlling the media

sets the boundaries of the group, and manipulates language and symbols to provoke emotion and to gather the interest and enthusiasm of its members. The consistent users of an internet NGO site may experience a sort of kinship or connection, as they are technologically linked together by probable common goals and information sharing. In most cases the non-governmental organisation forms a political community in the sense that it calls for societal reform on behalf of human rights. As Jean Franco notes, "the professionalization of NGOs channels political energies into controllable spaces" (Franco 1998, 15). Each group creates a professional electronic "space" for the union of its users' communication. The fact that the users do not necessarily gather in that (cyber) space at the same "time" is inconsequential since they still have equal access to the electronically updated and archived material via the database or website.

With most Mexican feminist internet NGOs, the sites they create are freely accessible to anyone who uses the internet. However, some organisations create bulletins and special announcements that they send via e-mail only to users who formally subscribe or register as part of this intranet. Most Mexican feminist NGOs offering information via the internet do so in the Spanish language, although a few groups also provide selected articles or documents in English. Indigenous languages are not considered, although as Mexico's National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Information indicates from a census taken in the year 2000, out of a population of 84,694,454 people in Mexico, indigenous dialects may be the sole languages of 1,002,236 citizens in the country (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática 2003). In the aforementioned instances, the organisations further seal the community through formation of those particular boundaries that lend to the group a feeling of what Anderson calls a "horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 1991, 7). The comradeship and community is therefore sometimes limited and is open mainly to those users who fall within those boundaries of language and registration.

The relationships between media, culture, society, communication and reform are complex and are not always certain. What remains clear, however, is that the NGOs are creating important forums for promoting women's issues traditionally not easily voiced or heard in patriarchal Mexican society and that they serve as warehouses that electronically store ideas. Throughout the twentieth century, the Catholic Church and the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) often served as obstacles to placing women's rights and reproductive rights, such as abortion rights and increased state financial assistance, as important items on the nation's agenda.

When political and religious institutions choose not to promote those rights, citizens must often assert their own voices of demand and representation into the public sphere. Clemencia Rodríguez speaks of alternative, participatory, and citizens' media which represent "live historical processes that immerse participants in continuous re-negotiations of their symbolic environ-

ments” (Rodríguez 2001, xi). She contends that alternative media not only provides one with the opportunity to create or re-codify one’s image, but that it also:

implies becoming one’s own storyteller, regaining one’s own voice; it implies reconstructing the self-portrait of one’s own community and one’s own culture . . . it implies taking one’s own languages out of their usual hiding places and throwing them out there, into the public sphere, and seeing how they do, how they defeat other languages, or how they are defeated by other languages . . . (Rodríguez 2001, 3)

Mexican feminist NGOs are manipulating their own symbolic languages to create certain images of what they envision as potentially a better society. The NGOs use the Spanish language not only to voice the demands of Mexican women who speak Spanish, but also to talk about women who speak other languages. This may be seen, however, as the Spanish language defeating indigenous languages or *mestizo* domination, for example, since the indigenous groups are not speaking directly for themselves.

The organisations form certain identities and seek members through the language and discourse that they create. This entails constructing particular images of, and speaking out against, the society and culture in which they live. These groups attempt to empower women with information on sex, gender, education, financial aid, and call for political, societal, and economic reform. The empowerment consists of providing a (cyber) space for women to visit where they can read information to which they may not otherwise have access. The NGOs hope that the information they provide will help women take the initiative to seek any financial, health, or informational assistance that they need or will inspire them to speak up for whatever they desire. Disseminating this information via cyberspace may seem like an insignificant and non-threatening activity; however, as Downing states, “everything depends on their content and context. What might abstractly seem a bland and low-key instance could, in a given context, be a wielding blow at some orthodoxy . . .” (Downing 2001, x). One must remember that, in Mexico, women’s rights and empowerment have been seen as threats to a traditional widespread *machista* attitude, which assumes female passivity. By its very nature, therefore, the dissemination of such information on behalf of women constitutes the public voicing of rights and demands from a traditionally subjugated group of citizens.

These subjugated groups of citizens, however, are not the sole users of the internet, which has been used globally for mainstream purposes as a form of mass media and communication. It is mass communication in the sense that John Thompson describes it: “the institutionalized production and generalized diffusion of symbolic goods via the fixation and transmission of information or symbolic content” (Thompson 1999, 15). It is mass media in the sense that “the products are available in principle to a plurality of recipients” (Thompson 1999, 13). What, then, is the importance of Mexican femi-

nist NGOs participating in mass media and communication? As they fall under the categories of radical, alternative, or citizens' media within communication, as discussed previously, the efforts and presence of NGOs act both vertically and horizontally. As subordinate groups, they aim their opposition or demands vertically toward the power structure; at the same time, they attempt to build support and solidarity horizontally amongst supporters of their cause (Downing 2001, xi).

While groups use the internet as an instrument of mass communication or mass culture to voice their demands, there exists scepticism within Mexico with regard to the relationship between mass culture and politics. The feminist activist Marta Lamas states "Mass culture may counter the puritanism of political and religious elites, but it directs people away from political activity. Pleasure, rather than politics, becomes the desired way to spend free time" (Lamas 1998, 21). In twenty-first century Mexico, as in most parts of the world, the internet has become not only an element of mass communication, but of mass culture as well, as people increasingly surf the internet from their places of employment and homes. Thus, the rise in the use of the internet does not necessarily coincide with a rise in political participation. If what Lamas states holds true, one can deduce that the average users of the internet are using it for pleasure and entertainment, not for political activity. One must not ignore, however, that the internet and e-mail in Mexico are indeed actively used for political purposes aimed against the status quo and ruling political parties. Sub-commander Marcos used e-mail and the internet to write and send messages from the impoverished indigenous area of Chiapas. In doing so, he publicly voiced and spread the Zapatista Army of National Liberation's (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, EZLN) political demands not only to Mexico but also to the world, and the EZLN's causes gained global public recognition by doing so. Other examples of using the internet for political purposes are the Mexican feminist NGOs in cyberspace, although they may not have yet received global recognition for doing so or for their agendas.

How can a NGO in cyberspace measure its level of success? This is difficult to measure, since "success" seems to be an amorphous matter. In its most basic state, success could simply mean that many people have visited the site of one of the networks, which merely means that the information was accessed, not necessarily read. An electronic counter is capable of registering the number of visitors to a site, a mailing list gives the names of specific subscribers to the information, and the messages distributed can be printed or electronically forwarded by users to other individuals or groups, and surveys may also be administered. In a more advanced state, success could signify that the networks have proof that the information they provide has concretely helped the visitors in their lives. However, it is extremely difficult to have concrete proof that the information provided on-line by the NGOs is benefiting or empowering individuals in the way in which it was intended. This issue

also refers back to the one raised previously of how much use or how much change this disseminated information is capable of bringing about if individuals do not read the information, take an ideological position on issues, and assert themselves politically. Moreover, if Mexican feminist NGOs are thought to belong to the realm of alternative or citizens' media, thus constituting a small portion of the mass communication of cyberspace, and their success cannot concretely and immediately be measured, how will this contribute to change in society? On-line groups sometimes have short life cycles, post information at irregular intervals, change the data source name (DSN) of their entries or Web addresses, and appear as isolated groups or sites. However, Rodríguez suggests, in order to measure any potential success, we must change our way of thinking or evaluating: "We study citizens' media with an eye for a straight line departing from point A . . . and heading toward point B . . . Instead, what we find is a multitude of small forces that surface and burst like bubbles in a swamp" (Rodríguez 2001, 22). She states that it is imperative to view the situation in that way, because those "bubbles" are a sign that "the swamp is alive" (Rodríguez 2001, 22). Downing agrees with changing our way of evaluating "success." He claims that it is crucial to look at the potential long-term effects instead of the immediate situation, since asking whether radical media have any impact at all would leave their state "perpetually teetering on the edge of conceptual emptiness" (Downing 2001, 30-31).

LANETA AND MODEMMUJER

Two of the "bubbles" in the swamp of Mexican feminist NGOs in cyberspace are LaNeta (Truth) and Modemmujer (Modem Woman). LaNeta, whose name is Mexican slang for "truth," was born in 1991 and has been available on the internet since 1993. It is part of an Association for Progressive Communications (APC) based in Mexico for non-governmental organisations in Mexico and thirty other countries, and it reports having 1,300 users. LaNeta serves as technical support for on-line information on human rights, finance and politics. LaNeta itself is not solely a feminist NGO, although it supports them. Its main function is to provide the infrastructure for various types of NGOs to operate in cyberspace. It supports not only Modemmujer, but also aids groups dedicated to promoting the protection of environment, art and culture, health, gender, indigenous rights, and democracy. The content is melded together on LaNeta's webpage (www.laneta.apc.org), where internet users have convenient, non-subscription access to current and to archival electronic articles on issues that LaNeta's affiliated groups represent. Many of the documents and articles are based on the political, social, and economic activities of human rights groups in Mexico. The grouping of the articles together on one website allows users to see that human rights groups are active on the ground in their pursuit of bringing about change in Mexico. The language of the page is for-

mal and is visually set up almost as if it were a newspaper, which lends an air of familiar “authority” to it. The website obviously contains more colours than a print newspaper, and it is interesting to note that the main colours of many parts of the webpage are pink, white, and purple. One may interpret these colours as representative of LaNeta’s support of women’s movements, or perhaps of marginalised groups in general.

Technical coordinator of LaNeta, Adolfo Dunayevich, declares that there are many advantages for a NGO to use the internet, such as: it saves time and resources; it is relatively cheap; it is easier to send or re-send texts without having to use paper or postage; it is possible to archive discussions and other materials; and it is possible to communicate with various recipients at one time (Dunayevich 2001). He also states that among the disadvantages are: having to train people to use the technology, the language of technology, cultural differences and attitudes toward technology, funding, and the presence of technology tending to be in large cities and not smaller towns (Dunayevich 2001). In an on-line interview with me, Erika Smith, of LaNeta, reinforced the fact that LaNeta has some difficulty in judging its success due to lack of concrete statistics about who is accessing the information or the information of its affiliated groups, what type of information has been the most beneficial to users, and so forth. Nevertheless, the organisation is enthusiastic about its internet presence and feels it is helping human rights groups disseminate their information to a broader audience by providing advanced technological support for them to be present and active in cyberspace.

The first known Mexican feminist NGO with a presence on the internet, Modemmujer (Modem Woman, www.modemmujer.org) seems to be one of the more recognised and prominent Mexican feminist NGOs in cyberspace. As later mentioned, it is run by a small group of professional men and women who are the central coordinators of the network, it is affiliated with LaNeta and has kept some statistics regarding its site. Established and run from Mexico City since 1994, it maintains relationships with approximately 1,500 women’s organisations, activists, and academics throughout the world. The importance of Modemmujer is its ability to electronically collect and archive the different voices and activities of on the ground feminist groups. If one goes to the website of on the ground women’s organisations, one usually finds information relating only to the specific interest of that group. For example, the website of GIRE (ww.gire.org.mx), a politically active group on the ground in favor of pro-choice, contains only information relating to the importance of pro-choice, the use of contraceptives, and the need to make responsible family-planning decisions. Modemmujer distinguishes itself by being multi-interest and representing causes lobbied by many Mexican feminist groups.

Modemmujer sends electronic “spots” bi-weekly to users on its mailing list. The spots contain calendars of events, announcements, documents such as theoretical analyses, opinion pieces, links to other organisations, and

reports, some of them in English, from the NGO and academic women's community worldwide. Among the themes that the aforementioned items embody are: violence against women, health, including sexual health and reproduction, political participation, women and culture, gender, urgent calls, news in the media, the book corner, economy and work, ecology, sexual diversity, ideologies, and international conferences. Although the current "spots" publicising new announcements and documents within those categories are e-mailed only to users in the intranet subscribed to Modemmujer's free mailing list, one is freely able to access the current and archived materials from the group's homepage.

After being on their list-serve and receiving the bi-weekly "spots" for over three years, I have found these bulletins to be well-organised, but rather repetitive and not very lively, although the coordinators attempt to create a sense of community between the coordinators and the users. Each spot is preceded by a message to the users of the list-serve from the general coordinator, Beatriz Cavazos. The tone and language of the message are informal and the message always ends with the coordinator sending "hugs" or similar sentiments to the users, as if we knew her. It appears that she addresses the users as a group of all females, although there may be male users. In Spanish, feminine nouns end in "a" and masculine nouns in "o." To address us as "users," she uses the word "usari@s." This can be interpreted in various ways. It is possible that the "@" is meant to signify "a," thus making us all female. However, the "@" can also be seen as a way of combining the "a" and "o," which would visually refer to both males and females. More simply, perhaps this designates us as modern, "cyber" users, as the "@" always appears in electronic addresses. The spots list articles that a user can request to have sent to his/her private email address. I tried this and it took over a week for the articles to be sent to my email. The delay may have been caused by the number of requests Modemmujer receives, or to staff shortages. In any case, there was a "delay," which indicates that although information is available through list-serve via the internet, technology is not always synonymous with speed.

I obtained an electronic copy of general information on Modemmujer, along with some general statistics from the organisation. According to this information, Modemmujer has attempted to track the profile of its population of users through electronic surveys usually administered when an individual or group registers to receive information from the Modemmujer electronic network. Not all users or individuals who consult the web-site are registered, and Modemmujer had established its mailing list prior to having a web-site, so it is difficult to track exactly how many people have used or consulted their information. Nevertheless, there is still some general sense of the user population from the statistics Modemmujer has tracked. The group reported that 53 percent of their users are in Mexico, 36 percent are in Latin America, 7 percent are in Europe, 2 percent are in the United States and 0.32

percent are in Africa. Eighty-eight percent of the users are women. Thirty-eight percent hold a Bachelor's degree and another forty-seven percent have a postgraduate or further degree. Twenty-two percent of the users belong to a NGO and approximately forty-six percent are individuals not affiliated with a NGO. The web-site was opened in 2001, after these statistics were provided. The group has not posted new statistics, although they may be forthcoming as another survey was recently re-administered to registered users. The statistics from surveys are not always reliable, however, as especially through electronic communication, one can pretend to be anyone one is not by providing false information.

From the statistics provided, nevertheless, it is plausible to deduce that although the group is attempting to network globally, its primary audience still resides at the national level. It would be interesting to see the distribution of the 53 percent of users within Mexico at the local level, as to whether they are from Mexico City or from other areas of the country. If the majority of the users are from Mexico City, the information they are disseminating may not be reaching the more rural areas of Mexico. From the statistics on education level provided, it would seem that the majority of users are located in cities where there are universities and a large number of professionals.

Those statistics do not imply women in rural areas of Mexico necessarily need the information provided by groups from Mexico City. Some of the information may not apply to them, and in some indigenous communities women are already highly active economically, socially, and demand political representation within their communities. There are many examples of this in the Huasteca, Oaxaca, and Chiapas indigenous regions of Mexico. According to Gretchen Peters (2003), Huasteca women, fed-up with men who spend money on alcohol and then come home drunk and abusive, have successfully urged the local government to enforce bans on the sale and consumption of alcohol within their small communities. With the phenomenon of migration of many male household members for familial economic reasons, "indigenous women have increasingly come to control the purse strings at home, assume new family and community roles, and thereby win a greater share of the power men traditionally monopolized" (Peters 2003). Indigenous women in Oaxaca are learning business and managerial skills because they are now involved in initiatives such as selling basic groceries and chicken farming (Peters 2003). Indigenous women in Chiapas insist that the Zapatista movement (EZLN) include demands for more freedoms and rights for women (Peters 2003). Hence, if indigenous women did not access the NGO sites, it could merely indicate a lack of exchange of information and ideas that would possibly mutually benefit different regions or ethnic groups at the national level. The indigenous seem to be more involved with on the ground community-based groups interwoven with regional/local politics and do not rely much, if at all, on the internet.

In addition to viewing the statistics in terms of ethnic groups, it is also important to examine them in terms of sex. Modemmujer not only reaches a female audience, but it also has a male audience of 12 percent which perhaps signifies that the group is promoting women's rights as human rights that should be supported by both sexes. The Modemmujer team itself also includes a male member in addition to its four female members. Although this may represent equal-opportunity employment or diversity in the workplace, one might argue that he is in a "typically" male position: managing technology. These few people managing the network are the central coordinators and are professionals who are primarily from communication fields. They have secured funds from prestigious international financial organisations such as the Ford and Mac Arthur Foundations. Those two particular organisations promote democratic values and human rights and have a presence in Mexico City. Hence they are networking with Modemmujer at the local, national, and transnational levels promoting women's rights.

In terms of why Modemmujer has chosen the internet as an operating space to promote those rights, they fall under the reasons previously stipulated by Dunayevich, such as the ease of disseminating and archiving of information and the saving of time and resources. However, one additional reason quoted in its web-site is Modemmujer having an objective of promoting women's use and appropriation of new technologies. It can be concluded that they view themselves as using alternative, radical, and citizens' media in mass media and communications. Most importantly, perhaps, is that Modemmujer claims to be a participatory medium in which individuals and groups from around the world are invited to contribute. At the same time as they vertically challenge patriarchal Mexican society with calls for equal treatment regardless of sex and gender, they are building horizontal networks of support, aid, and empowerment between individuals and other groups. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the small group of coordinators is still controlling what is and is not seen in their mailings and archives, and, therefore, there is still a type of hierarchical network between the group and its users.

The objectives of LaNeta and Modemmujer appear to coincide with those mentioned previously in the discussion of the appropriation of alternative, radical, and citizens' media in mass media and communications, to empower traditionally subordinated groups or individuals in society. They are each an example of a group that is:

enacting its citizenship by actively intervening and transforming the established mediascape . . . [T]hese media are contesting social codes, legitimized identities, and institutionalized social relations . . . [T]hese communication practices are empowering the community involved, to the point where these transformations and changes are possible.
(Rodríguez 2001, 20)

As previously stated, their success or failure will have to be judged when feminist issues are raised in the longer term in Mexico. In conclusion, it ap-

pears that, as Smith stated, the internet is not a perfect or solve-all solution for women's networking or communication needs, but internet technology is one of the key players in Mexican women's strategising for women's rights.

ABBREVIATIONS

APC	Association for Progressive Communications
CIMAC	Comunicación e Información de la Mujer (Women's Communication and Information)
DSN	data source name
EZLN	Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation's)
GIRE	Grupo de Información en Reproducción Elegida (Information Group on Productive Rights)
PIEM	Programa Interdisciplinario de Estudios de la Mujer (Interdisciplinary Programme of Women's Studies)
PRI	Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party)
PUEG	Programa Universitario de Estudios de Género (University Programme of Gender Studies)

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