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EDITED BY PHILIPP BUDKA & BIRGIT BRÄUCHLER

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CHAPTER 9

An Ayuujk ‘Media War’ over Water and Land

Mediatised Senses of Belonging between Mexico and the United States

Ingrid Kummels

A press conference was hurriedly convened on 6 June 2017, at the municipal building in San Pedro y San Pablo Ayutla, a Mexican village less than two hours by car from Oaxaca City, the state capital. The topic of the conference was the clash the previous day at a water source along the boundary between the villages of Ayutla and Tamazulapam del Espíritu Santo. Among the few press people in attendance were representatives of the communal radio station Jënpoj from a neighbouring village and the internet journal @desdelasnubes from Oaxaca City. On their way to the meeting, they passed the coffin of a young man from Ayutla, who had died in the clash. An eight-and-a-half-minute video projected at the press conference showed scenes from the front-line: a group from Ayutla fleeing the bullets of their persecutors and several of them – still bleeding from their wounds – escaping on the back of a pickup. Without further comment, the video displayed key images of the violent quarrel between members of the two village communities that belong to the same indigenous group, the Mixe or Ayuujk ja’ay.¹

After the screening, the journalists sensed that this particular agrarian dispute had taken a new dimension, notwithstanding that skirmishes over water and land are quite common in Oaxaca. Normally the general public barely takes any notice. Neighbouring villages frequently belong to the same ethnic group and quarrel over municipal boundaries and the

partitioning of natural resources. These conflicts are complex affairs and, in some cases, may hark back to the colonial period. At the same time, they are firmly embedded in the current situation of these villages, which for decades have expanded their economic basis from agriculture to other economic fields in larger regional, national and transnational settings. Besides, they persist because of discrepancies between the emic concept of community and the legal figure of the municipality imposed by the state (Romero Frizzi 2011: 68). In this particular case, digital means of communication became an integral part of the agrarian dispute: Ayutla's eyewitness video subsequently went viral, circulating on the websites of established national media and receiving over 250,000 clicks in total (see also Sumiala, Tikka and Valaskivi, this volume).

The novelty of the video triggered a similar media response from the opponent. Three days later, Tamazulapam also disseminated a nine-minute video on the web, although in a different, documentary-like style.² Instead of organising a press conference, Tamazulapam's municipal government chose to present its stance through this video, which begins with an image of the village emblem and a written statement in Spanish: 'The following video categorically rejects the accusation that Ayutla Mixe presented at the 6 June 2017 conference, in which it irresponsibly accuses Tamazulapam Mixe of an "ambush".' The video then focuses on a series of verbal exchanges that took place prior to the shooting. Scenes from several spontaneous mobile phone recordings are commented on with short texts, and are thus interpreted as evidence that the people of Ayutla intended to take Tamazulapam by surprise during its patron saint fiesta and that they also initiated the gunfight. The main injury documented is that of a Tamazulapam villager who is flown by helicopter to Oaxaca City after being shot. This video was likewise disseminated on the internet and received tens of thousands of hits.

Both videos were circulated via social media managed mainly by villagers and then were published on the websites of major regional and national newspapers and magazines. Diffusion through these two media circuits led to the agrarian dispute becoming the main news story in Oaxaca for the first two weeks of June. My Ayuujk interlocutors judged the public impact of both videos as a new form of mediatising the long-established agrarian disputes. They commented that for the first time, a 'media war' (*guerra mediática*) had broken out between their villages. By using this

term, they referred to the fact that waging a conflict was now closely connected to the self-fashioned media environments of these villages. Local media-makers use video cameras, mobile phones and their personal Facebook pages to engage in cultural activism, communal politics, commerce or a combination of these fields (Kummels 2017). Since villagers primarily rely on Facebook to socialise with relatives and friends living far away (Ramos Mancilla 2015: 226, 238), it has become crucial for opening media spaces in a geographical, practice-oriented and imagined sense at the level of the village, the region or beyond. In recent years, highly educated, technically adept young media actors – both men and women – have emerged as public intellectuals engaging in social media who can be characterised as ‘ethnic influencers’ (Kummels n.d.). For the first time, they intervened in the quarrel via social media or were pushed into doing so by the authorities in their respective village.

The term ‘influencer’ is typically used to designate ‘everyday, ordinary internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles’ (Abidin 2016: 3). They exert influence on consumer behaviour due to their strong presence and reputation in social media. In turn, I use ‘ethnic influencer’ for actors who use their narrative skills to influence followers in terms of cultural expressions and ideals considered characteristic of the ethnic group they identify with, in this case the Ayuujk ja’ay. Ayuujk ethnic influencers connect to diverse audiences. On the one hand, they have gained ground in the political sphere of the municipalities. On the other hand, their digital activism extends to nonethnic networks, such as those of academic circles and activists engaged in human, indigenous and gender rights. Justifying their ethnic interests via inalienable rights and a humanitarian cause enables them to disseminate narratives and images that appeal to a large audience (see also Adriaans, this volume).

It is precisely the role these emerging media actors play in medatising the skirmishes between Ayutla and Tamazulapam that this chapter explores. This approach seeks to overcome the popular image, according to which these disputes are perceived as solely a source of village disruption and deemed a relic of the rural areas of Mexico – an image that has been used to stereotype indigenous people in general and Oaxaca as the Mexican state with the highest percentage of this population in particular. Instead, I scrutinise the potential of these disputes for reconfiguring social, cultural

and political relations in the present. I argue that the current conflict actors still rely on traditional media to enforce territorial claims on village land that is intimately related to their communal way of life and politics. They formerly resorted to *lienzos*, colonial map-style paintings on canvas, to this end and on forms of ‘visual warfare’. These media have long historical roots and remain embedded in Mesoamerican community culture (Kummels 2017: 40). At the same time, this chapter examines how the once intra-indigenous conflicts have been decisively modified through the transnationalisation of Ayuujk villages and the new digital media strategies of many villagers. They now engage with wider audiences via social media by referring to larger issues such as gender equality, global human rights and Mexico’s narco-violence.

Since the 1990s, people from the Mixe region have migrated in large numbers to the United States. As a result of their illegalisation and immobilisation, they rely heavily on long-distance communication to maintain social relations across the restrictive international boundary and develop ‘mediatised’ senses of belonging. I use the word ‘mediatised’ to emphasise the way in which stakeholders actively engage in a wide range of media – from maps to social media – to mobilise community affectively (Kummels 2016) and from different vantage points that may oscillate between local, regional, national and transnational levels of belonging. A case in point is the community governance (also called *usos y costumbres*), the grassroots democratic system according to which both litigant villages are governed. Decisions are taken by those attending a general assembly and municipal authorities onsite in the respective village. However, in recent years, village governance has been mediatised, so that even from a distance, community members can regularly participate. Ethnic influencers have created popular Facebook pages such as ‘Asamblea Pueblo Tamazalupam Mixe’ and ‘Tukyo’m Ayuntamiento Ayutla Mixe’ on their own initiative. Since the younger generation of ‘digital natives’ often debate crucial village issues such as agrarian disputes on these pages, they have become a kind of supplemental, unofficial virtual assembly that rally audiences beyond the local populations transnationally. These digital fora do not simply represent or double the traditional general assemblies, but instead reconfigure them and the agrarian disputes, as will be illustrated below.

Studying the Interdependence of Media and Conflict

Analysing this concrete case at the interface of conflict and media requires an approach based on the anthropology of conflict. I follow the school of anthropologists who contend that conflicts are nothing extraordinary: they are a component of everyday life that can have both disruptive and cohesive effects on social actors and groups (see e.g. Eckert 2004). Despite the impression of chaos that quarrels convey, the actors who intervene in them pursue them in view of concrete motives such as honour, power and material profit; they strategically (re)structure disputes by planning their logistics (Elwert 1999: 87). Actors who develop procedures for waging disputes can tap their potential to strengthen the social cohesion of the group through ‘othering’ the enemy and may even extend their political power beyond one group (Chassen-López 2004: 444; Gledhill 2012). Media-makers who convey local information on conflicts via the internet to a global audience or quarrel via social media for publicity also expand their radius of influence in a calculating manner, i.e. for the end of identity politics (Bräuchler 2013; see also Pype, this volume).

From a media anthropology perspective, I examine how politics and conflict are currently mediatised in Ayuujk villages. Focusing on social media like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, I accompanied villagers who shaped the conflict in several places via their current media practices; that is, based on what they do and say in relation to media (e.g. Bräuchler and Postill 2010).³ The appraisal of this particular quarrel as a ‘media war’ indicates that digital media literacy and creativity have become basic knowledge resources in negotiating agrarian conflicts. This prompted me to assess the new position and influence that emerging young actors – who are keen to experiment, social media-savvy and also critical of the reliability of the contents of such media – might be performing for agrarian disputes. The concept of ‘mediatisation’ refers to the more longlasting transformation of sociocultural institutions that result from the media practices used to shape them (Hjarvard 2008: 114). Actors who follow battles that are portrayed audiovisually online develop a ‘sense of engagement’ with that ‘media event’ as ‘an ongoing and living event’ (Hine 2000: 67). I therefore argue that these media or web events have become just as meaningful for the course of an agrarian conflict as the offline events from which they derive. Viewers are affected by and reposition themselves in relation to these

mediatised battles of symbols and representations; that is, they become concerned with how battles are perceived by others (see Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2010: 4–5). But I also paid attention to the aspects of the agrarian conflict that were purposefully withheld from media diffusion. I contend that the comprehension of agrarian conflicts requires investigating both online and offline dimensions and the ways in which these practices are embedded in local settings and Ayuujk cultural forms (see Bräuchler 2013: 276).

Ayutla vs. Tamazulapam: Patterns and Media Innovations of Agrarian Disputes

Although the compact territory of the Mixe District is largely identified with the Ayuujk ja'ay as an ethnolinguistic group, the population's sense of belonging has long centred on the village, which the state recognises as an administrative unit or municipality. Ayutla is the seat of numerous institutions of the Oaxacan state and the most important administrative centre of the Mixe region. Since the Salesian mission has a stronghold there, most inhabitants profess Catholicism. Merchants, entrepreneurs and professionals, as well as the Spanish language, now dominate the village centre. Although Ayutla governs itself according to the communal *usos y costumbres* system (officially recognised by the Oaxaca state in 1995), a dissident faction favours Mexican party politics and the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which has held power for decades. Since the 1960s, Tamazulapam has prospered by engaging in the coffee trade, transportation facilities and construction business. In 1991, it challenged its neighbouring village's predominance by establishing its own market place. Both Tamazulapam and Ayutla have migrant diaspora communities in Mexican and U.S. cities that operate taco restaurant businesses. Migrants' incomes are an important source of the hometowns' development. Tamazulapam too has maintained self-government according to the communal *usos y costumbres* system and is deemed more traditional in relation to Ayuujk religious beliefs, language and culture than Ayutla.

Ayutla and Tamazulapam, as well as the neighbouring villages, have long engaged in agrarian disputes according to a pattern of an argument

‘among equals’. In other words, as municipalities they base their claims on communal land tenure, a legal form that requires them to provide evidence of historical occupation of the disputed terrain.⁴ Agrarian disputes have become their established way of negotiating municipal boundaries and power relations. The patterns of waging them include ritualised political manifestations, such as erecting landmarks and sacrificing poultry in defence of one’s territory (Kuroda 1993: 521–22). The state government largely recognises the autonomy of this internal procedure, since it only provides for intermediation between municipalities, whose task it is to convene reconciliation meetings and come to an understanding. On the other hand, this ‘passive role’ of the state is regularly questioned by the parties in conflict. Concerns that the state is actually pursuing its own interests or even conspiring with one party instead of mediating are often voiced.

By the 1990s, video had been appropriated in an innovative way for land disputes, such as the quarrel in which Tamazulapam and another neighbouring village, Tlahuitoltepec, engaged intensely between 1996 and 2000. Visualising land claims onsite was an important means of influencing the opponents’ perception. Inhabitants of both villages massively reshaped the landscape through communal *tequio*-work, which they invested in erecting cement boundary markers and clearing forest aisles as a borderline to assert their respective land claims. These measures were meant to cause ‘seeing that hurts’, as several of my interlocutors remarked, and can therefore be characterised as a form of ‘visual warfare’. The village taken by surprise respected these symbols on the ground as a partial victory of their opponents. Community media-makers from both villages used analogue video to record how the landscape was demarcated, thereby extending the ‘visual warfare’ on the ground (Kummels 2017: 183–84). However, the production of these videos was monitored by community governance and was used by municipal authorities exclusively for mobilising their own village’s population during their screening at the general assembly. The visual evidence was not disseminated to a broader nonindigenous audience, based on the assumption that they did not factor into the outcome of the conflict.

At first, the dispute between Ayutla and Tamazulapam over the water source followed this established pattern. Only recently have participants begun to embrace a nonindigenous audience to influence public opinion.

The dispute has gone through four phases – 2004, 2015, 2017 and 2019 – which I will sketch briefly. According to my interlocutors, new layers have been successively added to the original bone of contention: the water source. In 2004, the dispute escalated when specific amounts of water had been assigned to each village by Mexico's national water authority. After Ayutla claimed the source in its entirety, villagers from Tamazulapam occupied the land on which the water source is located. Ayutla retaliated by blocking Tamazulapam's road access to the state capital. When both parties, armed with rifles, occupied the water source, the Oaxacan state police and the Mexican federal army were sent in. Municipal authorities from both villages subsequently met for reconciliation, but only reached a temporary agreement to work towards solving the conflict in further negotiations.

When the conflict broke out again in 2015, a new situation prevailed. In 2007, the five-village alliance that Ayutla, Tamazulapam, Tlahuitoltepec, Tepantlali and Tepuxtepec had once formed based on a colonial land title from 1712 was dissolved. While most of the villages demarcated individual municipal boundaries, since a change in agrarian laws now provided for better access to government funds, only Ayutla and Tamazulapam found it impossible to demarcate a final section of the border, a mere two kilometres in length. There lies the water source, which for both parties has a material and immaterial value. The growing population, agricultural projects with greenhouses and tourism enterprises require water; there is also speculation that Coca Cola is interested in exploiting this same water source. Besides, next to it is a cave, a site of the traditional Ayuujk religion sacred to both villages, which for Tamazulapam had become inaccessible when Ayutla built a water tank that enclosed it. In 2014, after Ayutla had erected a second, larger water tank, appropriating the water in its entirety, the dispute was further exacerbated by the issue of how to apportion land along the two-kilometre tranche. Members of both villages living at the tranche have intermarried and passed on land to their descendants or sold land to a member of the other village. Tamazulapam and Ayutla relied on different lines of argument to enhance their claims. Ayutla traces back its boundary markers to a remote past as testified through oral testimonies. Tamazulapam, in contrast, argues on the basis of land that was and still is actually ploughed by community members called *trabajaderos*, as evidenced by ongoing agricultural use.

In 2015, the authorities of both villages first engaged in joint talks they accorded mutually, but Ayutla cancelled a decisive meeting in September 2015. As the conflict escalated, both villages began erecting boundary markers. But this time, people from Ayutla did not recognise the markers of their opponents and simply destroyed them. In October 2015, Tamazulapam began clearing a forest aisle and traced it in such a way as to include the water source in its municipal territory. On 13 October, people from both villages gathered in the conflict zone and verbally attacked each other; bullets were fired in the air. Both parties documented the episode extensively with the support of their respective local media-makers, whom officials had commissioned. Interestingly, they relied on commercial fiesta videographers who are normally criticised for capitalising on their films (Kummels 2017: 11). These recordings were still dealt with as internal material and were not circulated beyond the respective village. Nevertheless, beginning in 2015 a decisive change took place: mobile phone recordings of the conflict posted by anonymous ethnic influencers emerged on YouTube (e.g. IMAGINA Explosión Creativa 2015).

On 18 May 2017, villagers from Tamazulapam destroyed homes that Ayutla residents had built on municipal land claimed by Tamazulapam and cut off their water supply. This triggered a wave of violence and in face-to-face conversations, people would comment: 'We are at war.' More online videos of crucial conflict moments were disseminated on YouTube. Representatives of Ayutla, accompanied by the state police, came to inspect the zone of conflict on 5 June, the Whit Monday Tamazulapam celebrates its patron saint fiesta of Espíritu Santo. According to the Tamazulapam video described above, snipers from both villages fired at each other, while the Ayutla video suggests that all the assailants were from Tamazulapam and that they fired at unarmed Ayutla villagers, killing one and wounding six. On 5 June, four women from Ayutla were arrested (according to Tamazulapam) or kidnapped (according to Ayutla) by Tamazulapam officials and released the next day. On 18 July, the parties began to attend reconciliation meetings moderated by the Oaxacan General Ministry. Each village sent a delegation of thirteen municipal authorities accompanied by village lawyers and other academics. Although a truce had been agreed upon, at the end of August 2017, the inhabitants of Tamazulapam dynamited the water tanks after a federal court ordered the restoration of

Ayutla's water supply. Ayutla used a drone to record the opponent's activities and published the images on its municipal Facebook page.

In sum, media innovations have recurrently shaped agrarian disputes, and since 2015 a decisive change has taken place. Videoclips are now also produced and posted anonymously on social media to mobilise a wider audience. Ethnic influencers begin to factor in conflict dynamics.

Mediatising War in the Digital Era: Ethnic Influencers

I followed up on the media practices of Tamazulapam's transnational community in the aftermath of the recent skirmishes when I travelled to Los Angeles, Tamazulapam and Oaxaca City between July and October 2017. This was the most intensive period in the cyberwar. Most of my interlocutors from Tamazulapam's Los Angeles satellite community commented on the recent outbreak of the conflict by showing me scenes of the online videos described above, as well as the contents shared on popular Ayuujk Facebook pages. These web events became a defining moment and point of departure for political organisation offline. For the first time since 2004, the more than 400 people from Tamazulapam living in Los Angeles organised according to traditional community governance and began raising funds for their village of origin. This is noteworthy, considering that the majority of adults are undocumented due to their relatively late migration to the United States at the end of the 1990s, which basically inhibits the possibility of political organisation.

Several middle-aged members of Tamazulapam's satellite community commented on how scenes of the Ayutla video continued to make an unsettling impact on them and referred to the close-ups of people arguing and of the wounded from the opposing village. In general, they synthesised impressions based on the audiovisual material and texts posted by the competing parties as conforming to a single web event, which allowed them (and me as well) to relate to a common world of experience. One scene in the Ayutla video testifies to the imminent death of a man who had been shot in the forehead. The death of this young man of mixed Tamazulapam and Ayutla decent deeply disturbed them. In contrast to the impression conveyed by the Ayutla video, which clearly pinpoints people from

Tamazulapam as the culprits, some of my interlocutors interpreted this and other scenes in a way that was critical of the reliability of media representations. They based their doubts on personal experiences (such as decades ago when they participated in skirmishes with Tlahuitoltepec) and referred to the former ‘rules of the game’ of an agrarian conflict. This led them to rate both the Ayutla and Tamazulapam videos as propaganda tools intended to convince public opinion in general, and thus not trustworthy with regard to what actually happened. As to the death of the young man (which was not recorded), it was assumed that he was killed by a Tamazulapam sniper, although his death was seen as unintentional. According to ‘the rules of the game’, bullets are never fired at the unarmed, but in the air as a form of deterrence. His death was deplored for two reasons: first, out of empathy for the tragedy of the young man; and, second, because it unequivocally conveys the impression that people from Tamazulapam are ruthless. Nevertheless, since the video emphasises this negative image, ‘othering’ Tamazulapam and subjecting it to public shaming, people from this village living in Los Angeles actually made it a reference point for solidarity.

Socialising through Facebook also transcends transnational village circuits. In particular, young Ayuujk professionals – many of whom no longer reside in these villages – have created very popular Facebook pages. In times of peace, they engage in Ayuujk cultural politics and promote its spoken and written language, its visual arts and its political models of *comunalidad* or Ayuujk communitarianism.⁵ Some of these Facebook pages and Twitter accounts have become ‘virtual’ realms of experience in which Ayuujk creative people from diverse villages interact and also communicate with nonindigenous intellectuals in Mexican cities and beyond the country. Based on their status as public intellectuals in social media, these Facebook administrators can be characterised as ‘ethnic influencers’ (Kummels n.d.).

In the course of the intensification of the ‘media war’ or ‘cyberwar’ (a term that became popular in the context of neo-Zapatista uprising in Chiapas; see Froehling (1997)) in 2017, this young generation of professionals added a new dimension to the conflict by creating and responding to web events. Apart from the two main online videos, web events included the posting on 6 June 2017 of a televised interview with a woman from Ayutla who had summoned the PRI to help her municipality, a letter of solidarity with Ayutla signed by intellectuals from the Universidad

Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) and the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (UAM), the publication of documents of sometimes questionable authenticity, such as the notebook an Ayutla official had allegedly lost during the skirmish, and ‘newly discovered’ 1907 maps of the territories of Ayutla and Tamazulapam. Media actors from both villages intervened via several new cyberstrategies. The Asamblea Pueblo Tamazulapam Mixe Facebook page designed by an ethnic influencer from Tamazulapam was shut down at a crucial moment – the dissemination of the Tamazulapam video – after its administrator was denounced for having created a fake profile. Flaming, solidarity campaigns to mobilise civil society and the revelation of confidential documents discrediting their opponents were also employed as cyberstrategies. My interlocutors often spoke of victories attained as ‘he/she won on Facebook’, which means that waging a successful media war was ascribed to a regular online presence in combination with the texting and imaging abilities to attract and convince many followers. The younger ‘digital natives’ experienced online battles just as exciting and fulfilling (or in the opposite case as frustrating) as battles on the ground that rely on land occupation and control of roads to regionally expand commercial power.

I will now discuss how the parties developed such strategies based on a new and diverging perception of the audiences they deemed relevant for influencing the outcome of the agrarian dispute. Young media-makers from Ayutla were the first to design web events based on global human rights and gender discourses in combination with public activities to stir Mexican civil society into action. This was consistent with the preference of Ayutla’s municipality for solving the conflict beyond the regional level: with an appeal to the Mexican federal court in 2017 and through a petition to the United Nations in 2019 (see below). Tamazulapam actors, on the other hand, were critical of what they termed a ‘media circus’ (*circo mediático*), which they alleged Ayutla was staging for ‘people outside’. They insisted on bilateral negotiations and concentrated on establishing good terms with ‘people who know us’ – coethnics of the region who interact face to face, in commerce or at fiestas, the traditional means of forging alliances in compliance with regional economic and political interests.

However, regardless of these diverging stances, authorities from both municipalities in fact directed their ‘war’ propaganda to an outside audience. They (re-)created press departments when the dispute escalated in

October 2015 and ethnic influencers with persuasive Facebook pages as determined by the high number of followers – mainly intellectuals with university training – were integrated into community governance as official delegates. Initially they created Facebook pages as an alternative to the cultural and political activities common to their villages, but when conflict escalated the ethnic influencers were co-opted by the respective municipal authorities. This ‘roping in’, as insiders called it, of these media actors was remarkable, because some had been harshly criticised by the authorities for their deviations from the village’s ideal of grassroots democracy, since they created Facebook accounts now perceived as representative of the village without first seeking approval from its general assembly. It is even more remarkable that established communal media, which for decades had been conceptualised as the villages’ only assembly-based and legitimate media outlets, were not given this press relations role.⁶ Ethnic influencers took their liberty to produce web events according to their personal likings that included art, literature and music fads. As they began to actively express themselves behind the façade of Facebook pages and Twitter accounts representing their villages, municipal authorities tried to keep a tight rein on their media activities.

However, the ethnic influencers introduced a new angle by resorting to the academic knowledge they acquired and the networks they fostered with Mexican civil society. Contrary to what happened during previous agrarian disputes, arguments were now frequently based on international human, women’s and indigenous rights. Ayutla women who possess land at the disputed boundary rose to prominence on 31 May 2017 in relation to the following web event: at a press conference in Oaxaca City, their spokeswoman deplored Tamazulapam’s destruction of houses and crops, which she alleged had been specifically directed against women. At the subsequent press conference on 6 June, she emphasised the gender-based aggression by Tamazulapam, accusing it of ‘irrationality’ (Martínez 2017). These declarations were not only disseminated by established press outlets in Oaxaca, but also by national networks of women’s social movements such as the SemMéxico (Servicio Especial de la Mujer) website. On 27 June, a group of twenty-one intellectuals, including linguists and feminists from the UNAM and the UAM, declared their solidarity with Ayutla and accused the Oaxacan state government of ‘not having advised detention orders with regard to the depredation of the land of community members, in

their majority women' (La Jornada 2017, my translation). The orchestration of this web event was attributed to a particular academic activist from Ayutla who has become a public intellectual in Mexico and is perceived as a spokesperson of the Ayuujk people in general. The impact of the event was based on nonindigenous academics from highly respected universities clearly siding with Ayutla in an otherwise intra-indigenous conflict.

The 'Ayutla Mixe en Hermandad' Facebook page is an example of how an older medium, the *lienzo*, and traditional 'visual warfare' strategies were resignified through a social media event. In the past, both villages based their land claims on their individual painted copies of the same colonial *lienzo*, a map of communal land drawn on canvas. Each village had complemented its *lienzo* with written explanations to meet its own needs (Kummels 2017: 188). The Ayutla Facebook page reported the 'discovery' of maps of Ayutla and Tamazulapam dating from 1907 that supported Ayutla's claim to the contested water source as part of its 'ancestral territories'.⁷ The accompanying text in Spanish specified that 'we count on the support of expert anthropologists and historians who step by step gained insight into the heart of the current situation in our village'. The map of Ayutla was interpreted as its municipality including not merely the water source, but most of the Tamazulapam settlement known as Tierra Blanca. Moreover, the page claimed that international law allegedly favoured Ayutla, referring to the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention No. 169 (International Labour Organization 1989), which endorses indigenous people's rights of ownership and possession of lands they traditionally occupy, despite the fact that Tamazulapam could have used the same argument to substantiate its own claims. The wider audience the site addressed would probably not perceive this inconsistency. Thus, this Facebook page renewed the traditional medium of legitimating resource ownership by digitally publishing and interpreting a *lienzo*-like map. It translated traditional 'visual warfare' into terms that were culturally legible for the broader audience of the digital era.

Hence, 'weapons' such as university training and the expertise of anthropology, history and other disciplines played a vital role in waging a cyberwar. International human rights were redirected towards a purpose for which they had not been designed: intervillage and intra-ethnic conflict. New intra-social differentiations based on higher education, as well as shifts in the framework of cultural definition and political power, are not merely

additional layers to the conflict. All these layers are in fact enmeshed with the current dynamics of 'war' being handed over to a younger, university-trained generation that makes its own sense of it. For this reason, ethnic influencers who carry out verbal battles on their Facebook pages also discuss academic expertise and social networks as new defining elements of being Ayuujk. They are effective resources in extending control over water and land, and gaining political power within the confines of the municipality and beyond. Experts in Amerindian languages, sociologists, political scientists and lawyers have emerged in both municipalities in recent decades. In several instances, people specifically chose these degree programmes to advance municipal issues such as water and land claims.

At the same time, many conflict strategies on the ground were not dealt with in the realm of digital advocacy. This includes the reconciliation meetings moderated by the Oaxacan General Ministry, which began taking place in June 2017 and mounted up to sixty-two meetings over the next two years. The compromises reached at these meetings were documented in short minutes and were discussed by the municipal authorities of Ayutla and Tamazulapam with their respective general assemblies. These compromises ideally serve to pave the way for a larger agreement. However, in parallel to these negotiations, both villages first blockaded roads leading to Oaxaca City, imposing controls through armed municipal sentinels and affecting the entire Sierra Norte region for months. Gaining control of the roads is one of the traditional strategies to increase a village's commercial influence throughout the region. Yet, ethnic influencers did not address these issues online. Nor did they mention that each village intensely engaged in sacrificing poultry at its boundaries, since a broader audience has little comprehension of ritualised politics. Furthermore, they were silent about daily routines in both villages being substantially altered during the conflict, since municipal authorities imposed rigid requirements that community members participate in *tequio* work shifts and become part-time sentinels as well as contribute financially to the logistics of the agrarian dispute. Virtually none of this appears on video or on the internet, since ethnic influencers may not want to interfere in the reconciliation work of municipal authorities, although by omitting mention to their efforts, they may also bypass and override them. Nevertheless, both groups, which differ with regard to age, gender composition, education and professional background, now decisively influence the more general dynamics of

agrarian conflicts in the twenty-first century. Meanwhile, other stakeholders such as most village peasants either have less access to media technology or may choose to abstain from ‘media warfare’, measuring their actions carefully in view of having to face the consequences onsite.

Preliminary Conclusions in Light of the Conflict’s Latest Turnaround

In accordance with the ongoing character of the conflict, this chapter can only offer a provisional balance on how media and conflict are now mutually constituted in a longstanding agrarian dispute. When I revisited Oaxaca in February and March 2018, I was able to experience several outcomes of the cyberwar. The general assemblies of both villages had elected women (for the first time in Tamazulapam and the third time in Ayutla) to the highest municipal offices in 2018, in the expectation that these women would be capable of settling the dispute. At a reconciliation meeting in late August 2017, both villages came to an agreement on reconnecting the water. Nevertheless, Ayutla’s water supply was not restored in 2018.

The ‘media war’ was temporarily abandoned and to date (December 2019) people from Tamazulapam no longer appear to be participating in it. The public perceived an academic activist from Ayutla as the main actor behind events, particularly between March and May 2019. At the end of April 2019, she filed a complaint with the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, asserting that Ayutla’s human right to access water was being violated and accusing the Oaxacan state government of ‘negotiating with the aggressors’ (Flores 2019), that is, of siding with Tamazulapam. #AguaParaAyutlaYa became a trending topic. This line of argument was now supported by nonindigenous media actors like Mexican writer Emiliano Monge (2019), who alleged that due to their own interest in the water source, ‘armed groups related to drug trafficking’ had allied with Tamazulapam, which was a new version of the conflict. The original arguments that led to the dispute and its many layers were not mentioned in his article.

Unexpectedly, on 13 May 2019, the top regional news story was that the agrarian conflict had been solved. Oaxacan newspapers featured PRI state governor Alejandro Murat posing in the middle of municipal authorities from both villages, declaring that they had come to a final agreement and that the water supply would be reinstalled to both parties on equal terms. A two-minute video of this proclamation was broadly spread through the governor's Twitter account. However, in an official letter dated 15 May, Ayutla's municipal authorities denied that any agreement had been reached. In successive articles in Oaxacan newspapers, the many layers of the quarrel once again came to the fore: that is, that the fifty-fifty solution for water distribution was being rejected because the issue was intertwined with land claims of both villages along the two-kilometre tranche, causing the municipal authorities to intervene.

Despite the impression of chaos – or precisely because of it – I would like to offer a preliminary assessment of the lasting effects of this cyberwar on agrarian strife in light of the theories of the anthropology of conflict and media that were my starting point. Agrarian disputes have remained a component of everyday life. Although this has been elaborated on by conflict anthropologists, in the present case, this holds true even in the course of a generational change. New social media actors now address various audiences to mobilise mediatised senses of belonging, which for the first time transcend the level of the transnational village to include a nonindigenous audience and even nonindigenous conflict actors. Ethnic influencers have not only invested new resources such as their fluency with social media and knowledge of its wider private enterprise-based structure into their Facebook and Twitter accounts and the recruitment of followers; they have also paved the way for reconfiguring existing conflict strategies, such as maps and 'visual warfare' in digital spaces, while abandoning earlier 'rules of the game', which restricted frontline images to members of their respective villages. At the same time, because of the influence of these young media actors, consensual discourses on gender, human rights and narco-violence appeal affectively to a wider community to ally against the 'other'. 'Othering' the enemy online now includes novel 'elements of surprise' such as conflating the opponents of the neighbouring village with national villains, for example, the drug mafia and the PRI state government. Some ethnic influencers have been promoted to official community delegates in ongoing conflict negotiations.

Several new opportunities for conflict appeasement have opened up – or closed – in this context. Information and disinformation on the dispute now flow in a more accessible way to both the younger generation of social media users and an international audience. Opening up a media space for these quarrels allows anyone on social media to partake in a common world of experience that incorporates key Mesoamerican symbols such as maps in a way that not only represents but is also constitutive of a village's territory and conflict itself. However, this exchange via social media privileges the few villagers, mainly academics, who are able to influence national and international audiences due to their knowledge of global discourses on indigeneity that they have integrated into the logic of agrarian conflicts. In an initial phase, they were 'roped in' by municipal authorities, but subsequently they rushed ahead of the slower-paced decision-making processes of the villages' respective general assemblies. The strategy of disengaging from the 'media war' tends to give greater weight to the temporalities of face-to-face reconciliation meetings as well as of established communal media outlets.

Nevertheless, Oaxacan agrarian disputes are now waged with regard to mediatised senses of belonging by imagi(ni)ng and mobilising different vantage points via digital media practices. Multiscale 'warfare' is embedded by young social media actors in the *longue durée* of Mesoamerican media and community culture. At the same time, the current mediatised ways of highlighting water and land claims also increase the field of tension to which village governance and communal decision-making processes are exposed in times of transnationalism. Ending this agrarian conflict – which is what most of those involved are striving for – will depend on how the rationale and intricacies of on-the-ground conflict negotiations are made accessible to an extended audience. It will also depend on opening media spaces to a greater diversity of voices from the villages themselves.

Ingrid Kummels is Professor of Cultural and Social Anthropology at the Institute for Latin American Studies at Freie Universität Berlin. She has conducted long-term ethnographic research in Mexico, Cuba, Peru and the United States, focusing on transnational community building from the perspective of media and visual anthropology. On the topic of indigenous

people's use of media, she has published *Transborder Media Spaces: Ayuujk Videomaking between Mexico and the US* (Berghahn Books, 2017).

Notes

1. The Ayutla video was first posted 6 June 2017 on the website of Radio Jēnpoj as 'Version of the community of Ayutla Mixe on the situation of 5 June'; see Radio Comunitaria Ayuujk (2017).
2. The Tamazulapam video was first published on 9 June 2017 on YouTube by the anonymous BAjo El CIeLO MIxE (2017).
3. I studied these topics during my ethnographic research from 2015 to 2019, primarily in Tamazulapam and its satellite community in Los Angeles. My information on Ayutla stems from individual villagers living in Oaxaca City. This imbalance implies that I mainly followed media practices and mediated senses of belonging with regard to Tamazulapam. I have avoided naming or giving pseudonyms to my interlocutors since I am primarily concerned with analysing the agency of conflict actors in general.
4. More than 50 per cent of land possessions in the state of Oaxaca are recognised as communal (*bienes comunales*). Municipalities claiming *bienes comunales* may rely on a colonial land title or previous court decisions that defined municipal boundaries for justification (Moreno Derbez 2010: 9, 27).
5. The intellectuals who coined the notion of *comunalidad* in the 1980s engaged in village movements that relied on the then-novel technology of analogue video to revitalise Ayuujk and Zapotec culture. Floriberto Díaz from Tlahuitoltepec conceptualised *comunalidad* partly during the period of quarrel over land with Tamazulapam.
6. For example, the Ayutla communal radio station Konk' Anaa did not attend the municipality's press conference on 6 June. In the neighbouring village of Tlahuitoltepec, Radio Jēnpoj provided no further coverage after the onset of the dispute, since Tlahuitoltepec municipal authorities were anxious to avoid any involvement in the dispute.
7. The 1907 map is not an original land grant map. For the fundamental difficulties of determining municipal boundaries based on historical maps, see Romero Frizzi (2011: 74–76).

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