

CHAPTER ONE

Connected

Reach into your pocket or bag and pull out your cell phone—if it isn't already in your hand.

Ask yourself: What was my life like before I got connected?

Ask yourself three more questions:

Has this little box changed how I think, or what I do, or who I am?

What is a cell phone *for*, anyway?

Should everybody have one?

Mobile technologies are transforming the lives of people around the world, and they are reshaping countless aspects of human behavior, often in unpredictable ways.

Sometimes it's easy to forget that 2.5 billion people—one-third of the planet's population—don't have cell phones yet. Many of those living in rural, remote regions want mobile service, but they can't have it for reasons that have to do with geography, politics, or economics.

That will almost certainly change over time. In fact, it's already changing, as telecom companies aggressively expand

their markets, and as people demand the right to broadband access—what some call the freedom to connect.

This is the story of how one village achieved that freedom.

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During the summer and autumn of 2013, dozens of news reports recounted how a Mexican pueblo launched its own do-it-yourself cell phone network. The people of Talea de Castro, population twenty-four hundred, created an autonomous “mini-telecom company,” the first of its kind in the world, without any help from the government or private companies.¹ They built the network after Mexico’s telecommunications giants refused to provide mobile service to people in the region, claiming that it would be too expensive to connect Talea to their cellular phone grids. It was a fascinating David and Goliath story that pitted Mexico’s largest corporation—América Móvil, which is owned by billionaire Carlos Slim—against indigenous villagers, many of whom were subsistence maize farmers with little formal education.

The reports made a deep impression on me in ways that I still do not fully comprehend. For you see, I spent more than two years of my life in Talea de Castro, living and working as a cultural anthropologist in the 1990s. Gradually, I lost contact with people there.

Reading about Talea’s cell phone network inspired me to learn more about the changes that had swept the pueblo since my last visit more than a decade ago. How was it that, for a brief time, the villagers became international celebrities, profiled by *USA Today*, *Agence France-Presse*, *BBC News*, *Wired* magazine, and many other media outlets? I was determined to find out how the people of this face-to-face community managed to wire themselves into the twenty-first century in such an audacious and

dramatic way—how, despite their geographic remoteness, they became ever more connected to the rest of the world through the wondrous but unpredictably powerful magic of mobile technology. This book is about how villagers made it happen—and how digital technologies are altering their lives in dramatic ways. Talea’s fight to get connected is an object lesson in how ordinary people can use technology to forcefully assert their right to live in a globalized world, on their own terms.

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But this book is about more than just a pueblo’s quest to get connected through cellular access. Talea’s triumph was not what news reports might lead one to believe—not even remotely. The “do-it-yourself” cell phone network was only made possible after an imaginative group of townspeople undertook years of intense contact and consultation with a colorful cast of characters: a team of scruffy young activists affiliated with two up-and-coming non-governmental organizations, or NGOs; a politically sophisticated lawyer specializing in telecommunications regulation; an internationally renowned culture jamming artist; a small band of wily European hackers; and elected officials from dozens of other Oaxacan pueblos. Most of these people shared a commitment to the idea of access as a human right—that is, internet and mobile phone access.² As I got into the story, the plot grew increasingly complex and, at times, bewildering. Without giving away too much of the ending, let me say at the outset that Talea’s community-based cell phone network did *not* live happily ever after, as media reports implied. Even before it came into being, there were internal struggles and external pressures that threatened its development. As we shall see later, these conflicts never quite disappeared, and others emerged over time.

In writing this book, I was often tempted to describe the pueblo's cell phone network as an example of how an underdog community fought big business and big government and won. David Graeber has a point when he says that we anthropologists sometimes slip into a kind of populism: "It means you that you must demonstrate that the people you are studying, the little guys, are successfully resisting some form of power or globalizing influence imposed on them from above."³ But that would be an inaccurate interpretation of what actually happened. It is certainly true that the villagers successfully created the maverick network as an attempt to challenge mammoth telecommunications companies while slipping through the federal government's regulatory loopholes. However, in the end, the villagers compromised with these powerful entities by allowing a transnational mobile service provider to do business in the pueblo. Taleans more or less reached a consensus corresponding to a maxim they have long used to guide them out of conflictive situations: "a bad compromise is better than a good fight."⁴

Despite this, it would be wrong to think of the autonomous cell phone network as an abject failure. Instead, we might hold up the pueblo's homegrown system as a short-lived example of revolutionary action: "collective action which rejects, and therefore confronts, some form of power or domination and in doing so, reconstitutes social relations.... Revolutionary action does not necessarily have to aim to topple governments.... And history shows us that the continual accumulation of such acts can change (almost) anything."⁵

Even though Taleans started abandoning the network they had built just months earlier, they had paved the way for other pueblos that wanted cell phone service and had no other options.⁶ The enduring legacy of the village's autonomous telecom exper-

iment includes a cooperative organization of community cell phone networks representing nearly seventy pueblos across several different regions in Oaxaca—not only the northern sierra of which Talea is a part, but also the Mixe Alta, the Mixteca, and the Oaxaca Valley. What is more, as locally based cell phone networks and technologies improve, it seems possible that at some point in the near future, Talea's people might once again return to a homegrown system.

THE PUEBLO

Before going any further, it is worth discussing a bit more about Talea and the region that surrounds it. People who have never lived in a face-to-face pueblo sometimes assume that all such places are more or less alike. That is certainly not the case. Oaxaca is in many ways defined by its variegated cultural mosaic: the state has 570 municipalities (each of which typically includes several affiliated villages known as *agencias*) and is home to more than seventeen ethnolinguistic groups, most of which can be further subdivided by dialect.

Talea is located in a part of north central Oaxaca called the Rincón, literally corner, a place that is hemmed in by mountains on all sides (see figure 1). Even within the Rincón, a relatively small region of the state that includes people who share a mutually intelligible form of the Zapotec language, there is a staggering variety of differences between neighboring villages—in terms of clothing, settlement patterns, farming practices, religious beliefs, and worldviews. There are significant similarities shared between communities—for example, a reliance upon corn and beans as staple foods—but there are also many distinctions that delineate cultural boundaries. The words of Laura



Figure 1. Talea de Castro and its surrounding lands. Photo by the author.

Nader, the first cultural anthropologist to study the Rincón, are still relevant, though intervillage differences are often more subtle today:

It is not their similarity that is striking, but their diversity. The women from Lachichina wear red waistbands and their wrap-around skirt is brown and white striped, with the blouse (*huipil*) tucked inside. The women from Yaviche wear all white with a black waistband. The women from the farthest pueblo to the north, Yobego, still wear a long white huipil over the wrap-around skirt, with gay colors covering the side seams. . . . Taller men with blue eyes come from Tanetze, the shortest of the men come from Yobego, and the men with white shirts and black serge trousers have at one time worked in the cities . . .⁷

Among the things differentiating Talea from other Rincón communities is the fact that its townspeople generally have a tolerant attitude toward those visiting from faraway places. Over the years that sentiment has made it relatively easy for outsiders—teachers, physicians, agronomists, anthropologists, photojournal-

ists, and staff from nongovernmental organizations or NGOs—to spend months or even years there as guests.⁸

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I first visited Talea in 1994, drawn by the possibility of conducting doctoral research there. It seemed like a promising site to investigate the impact of unfettered capitalism in an out of the way place. Like thousands of other Mexican pueblos, Talea was undergoing rapid changes in the wake of aggressive *laissez-faire* policies aimed at further integrating the country into the global economic system by lowering tariffs on many products, including maize—Oaxaca’s most important food crop. These changes culminated in the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA, in 1994. As a consequence, many rural Mexicans migrated to the United States because they found it difficult to earn a living. When US and Canadian farmers began exporting cheap, heavily subsidized corn, they inadvertently destroyed the livelihoods of millions of small farmers across the Mexican countryside.

Despite the cataclysmic impact of these policies, many Taleans redoubled their efforts and continued farming the land, cultivating a combination of maize and coffee, a cash crop that grows well in the Rincón’s lush tropical climate. After several months, I began working and living with a campesino family that cultivated land in distant fields outside the village. It would be foolish to claim that my adoptive family or hundreds more like them were consciously resisting corporate capitalism. Instead, they were hedging their bets, perhaps anticipating that the system would be unstable over the long run (which, it turns out, it was). Many families had learned from their experience as coffee farmers that international commodity markets are inherently unpredictable,

sometimes volatile. Campesinos sometimes told me, “you can eat maize, but you can’t eat coffee.”⁹ Given the circumstances, it made practical sense to keep growing corn and beans, crops that had helped people in the Rincón maintain a relatively high level of food security, a degree of economic self-sufficiency, and limited political autonomy, at least locally.

The more I learned about the pueblo’s cell phone network, the more I realized that investigating the topic would mean focusing on a group of Taleans that was strikingly different from the campesinos with whom I had spent time during the 1990s. The cell phone network was orchestrated by relatively young villagers (in their late twenties and early thirties) who had relatively high levels of formal education and had spent part of their lives in Oaxaca City or other urban areas. They tended to come from influential families and typically did not spend much time in the fields surrounding the village. Like many other pueblos in Oaxaca, Talea is home to people who have had wildly divergent life experiences: a welder who learned his trade during a long stint in East Los Angeles lives next door to several campesino families whose members almost never leave the pueblo; a college-educated couple returns to the village from Mexico City to raise their children in a safer, quieter environment; a school teacher from Veracruz and the son of a Talean merchant fall in love, get married, and decide to make their home in the pueblo.

Soon I began wondering whether there was something special or even unique about Talea that might account for its spectacular technological feat. Why, of all the hemisphere’s municipalities and settlements, did *this* particular community undertake such a daunting project? Was there something peculiar to the village—perhaps its history or culture or its diverse population—that might help explain its accomplishment? As I explored these

questions, it became clear to me that the community cell phone network depended upon several fortuitous factors: the Rincón's legacy of fiercely autonomous villages, ensconced within a state known for its citizens' independent mindedness; the pueblo's deep-rooted custom of cautiously accepting outsiders, foreign ideas, and tools and technologies; an attitude shared by many villagers that may be described as hardheaded pragmatism; and a decades-old pattern of emigration, particularly to the United States.

I also was curious about *how* Taleans were using their cell phones—and eventually, smartphones and social media (see figure 2). This led to a series of questions, some of which reflect the social complexity and heterogeneity of the villagers. Which Taleans use cell phones, in what ways, and for what reasons? For instance, how do campesinos use cell phones as compared to say, merchants, *mototaxi* (tuk-tuk) drivers, or schoolteachers? Is text messaging more common than voice calling? How do junior high students from well-to-do families use these technologies compared to, say, elderly widows, or Taleans who live abroad? To what degree do villagers use cell phones as video games, photo albums, cameras, personal planners, music playback devices, or a means of accessing Facebook, WhatsApp, or YouTube? And what about the dark side of mobile technologies—for example, their tendency to keep users surfing the web or bouncing between social media sites for hours at a time?

Many Taleans often intended to use mobile technologies to stay connected—but not in the superficial way suggested by Facebook's top executives, who naively emphasize that their mission is quite simply to make the world more open and connected. Villagers have indeed used cell phones and social media to facilitate communication, as their ancestors did sixty years