

SWINE FLU, DRUG WARS, AND RIOTS:
MEDIA AND TOURISM IN OAXACA, MEXICO

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how travelers evaluate and process mass media news stories about local events. Thanks to its colonial architecture, white sand beaches, and indigenous history, the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca receives millions of foreign and domestic visitors each year. Between 2006 and through 2009 Oaxaca has received a great deal of negative international media coverage, including stories of street riots, drug violence, and the fall out of the H1N1 flu virus. The overall impact of these unfavorable reports, and the resulting decline in the local tourism industry, has been predictable and severe.

This thesis is based on anthropological research that I conducted in Oaxaca during June and July, 2009. I interviewed 26 American tourists about issues related to mass-media, personal travel experiences, and the interplay between international news coverage of local events and trip destination selection and planning. My research suggests that interviewees generally approach these media stories unfavorably and with a hefty sense of skepticism. Their reactions may reflect a wider trend in American society whereby mainstream and commercial mass media sources are viewed as increasingly untrustworthy or inaccurate

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

After about 45 minutes, the bus pulled off the two-lane highway into the parking lot a small town gas station. The surrounding settlement looked mostly like the half-dozen or so we had passed on our way to Tlascalula, Mexico. Without saying a word the driver simply got off and started helping new passengers load their packages on to the roof of the bus. A man of about 50 had a dozen burlap sacks of produce that the driver hoisted up with a rope. A few people got off and headed toward the service station looking for restrooms. I started to wonder how long the ride to Tlascalula, my destination, lasted. The weekly itinerant market there is the largest in the state of Oaxaca. Locals and guidebooks had informed me that vendors travel from miles around each Sunday to hawk a vast array of goods including fresh produce, DVDs, live animals, saddles, ox yokes, plows, blue jeans, cookware, textiles, and wood carvings.

The colorful handcrafted textiles and intricate wood carvings attracted tourists to the market which, in turn, brought me as a researcher. I had come to interview tourists about their rationales for traveling to Oaxaca. Lacking Cancún's nightlife, the Yucatán's famous ruins (with the notable exception of Monte Alban) or Mexico City's cosmopolitanism, Oaxaca still draws considerable numbers international travelers. Recent events over the past three years, including street riots and a flu epidemic, have not portrayed Oaxaca in the most favorable light as a tourism destination.

So that Sunday morning I had left Oaxaca City, taking a bus from the second-class terminal east of town for 12 pesos (about \$1) for Tlascalula. I had read that the ride lasted a little less than an hour.

Gazing out the bus windows I saw a scene similar to many towns of the region, a small but lively street life. The streets were filled with pedestrians. An assortment of stores was visible, including the Tlascalula Pharmacy. I asked the rider next to me, who confirmed that this was, indeed, the town of Tlascalula. Feeling rather foolish, I disembarked and started walking toward the main street. A few blocks off the highway the road was closed to cars and jammed with tables, stalls, and people. Above it all, plastic tarps had been hung to create a colorful canopy of shade for the market business. This was the start of my fieldwork in June 2009.

Thesis Overview

In an effort to contribute to anthropological understanding of the varied dimensions of tourism in Oaxaca, my thesis examines tourist decision making and the impact of commercial mass media news on travelers' perceptions of this region. Data was gathered in Oaxaca during June and July 2009. Primarily, the information presented herein is based on interviews I conducted with American tourists during a six week ethnographic field session. This period of research took place under the auspices of a field school affiliated with San Diego State University (SDSU). My thesis highlights the influence of news reports about Oaxaca on destination selection, the authoritative

position that the media holds, and, conversely, tourist attitudes about news media sources.

The main objective of my thesis is to explore tourist motivations for visiting Oaxaca, in light of the sometimes negative portrayals encountered in the mass media suggesting that the area was unsafe. Oaxaca is primarily a domestic tourism destination, receiving over three million Mexican tourists annually (SECTUR 2009). International tourists number less than 300,000 visitors per year, about 6.5% of total travelers to the region. Since 2006, several events, discussed in detail later on, have attracted widespread negative media coverage, leading to a decline in the number of both international and domestic tourists.

Oaxaca, specifically, and Mexico, in general, have largely been portrayed as unsafe destinations by American mass media outlets over recent years. The predictable result of this coverage has been a steady decline in local tourism. According to the Secretary of Tourism, between 2005 and 2006 international tourist arrivals in Oaxaca City declined by 26% (SECTUR 2009). Coverage concerning the so-called “drug war” noted that “Mexican tourism...Hurt by Violence” (Lacy 2009). Unquestionably, the outbreak of the H1N1 flu virus has also had a major impact on Oaxacan tourism. Reports found local restaurants so empty that some even permanently closed their doors (Llana 2009). One American expatriate I met in Oaxaca said, “Out on the street, there were no tourists. I mean none. Everything was empty.” This situation improved little during my first two weeks in Oaxaca in June 2009. However, as my field session progressed, tourists began to reappear in the town’s

streets and markets. This development proved fortuitous for me, allowing me to better conduct my research and interviews. Notably, the reappearance of foreign visitors in Oaxaca also raised questions about how the tourists I met reached the decision that the region was now safe for travel. Put another way, what information influenced their decision in travel planning when many others decided Mexico was unsafe place to visit?

A Brief History of Oaxaca

Oaxaca, the 5th largest state in Mexico, has over 3.5 million inhabitants, 35% of whom speak an indigenous language (Standish 2009). As such, Oaxaca has more indigenous language speakers than any other state in Mexico. The actual percentage of native peoples, however, may be much higher:

Recent government surveys have taken the ability to speak an indigenous language as the sole criterion for classifying people as Indian, though the reality is that, for practical purposes, being Indian is a matter of whether one sees oneself or is seen by others as such; it is a question of how deeply one embraces indigenous cultural habits or how far one has assimilated into the dominant Hispanic culture” (Standish 2009:275)

The indigenous citizens of Oaxaca remain a critical component of tourism in the state.

Indians are used extensively to promote tourism to Oaxaca; the crafts they produce are much sought after by tourists, and the largest tourism event in Oaxaca, Guelaguetza, features traditional dances. This history and culture was the main focus of tourists I interviewed, something I discuss in greater detail later in this thesis.

The popular tourist ruins of Monte Albán, attracting 437,000 tourists a year (SECTUR 2008), began construction around 1500 B.C. as a capital of the Zapotec people (Knight 2002). Monte Albán, with a peak population of 25,000 was a ceremonial and political power until slightly before 900 A.D. (Knight 2002). The area that is today

Oaxaca also saw the flourishing of Mixtec and Toltec people, and invasion by the Aztecs in the 1400s (Coe 1994).

The colonial period began with the Spanish arrival in the area in 1521. The colonial economy was based primarily on a dye called cochineal (Coerver et al 2004). Mexico gained independence from Spain in 1821, and Oaxaca was granted statehood in 1824.

The colonial legacy of Oaxaca has shaped the current form of tourism in the state. The colonial architecture of the state, particularly the capital, remains a major draw for tourists. The resiliency of this colonial style is a result of poverty and marginalization in Oaxaca (Murphy and Stepick).

Today, 40% of Oaxaca's economy is derived from livestock, agriculture, and fishing, with an equal percent coming from the tourism and service industry (Standish 2009). The remaining 20% comes primarily from mining, construction, and industry. With such a significant proportion of economic revenue coming from tourism, any potential negative impact is very important to the citizens of Oaxaca.

Media

Media is a term in wide use within scholarly circles and central to this thesis. The term applies equally to news, journalism, reportage, travel brochures, guide books, TV programs, and marketing materials. However, for this thesis I prefer a more narrow definition for media. I did not seek to examine marketing and public relations (PR) material or media used to entice tourists and their money to any given destination. Rather, I examine what Jay Rosen calls "the press," "public journalism," "civic

journalism,” or perhaps most fitting “media of the public sphere” (1999). He sees the press’s job as “inform(ing) people about what goes on in their name and their midst” (1999:19). Accordingly, my use of the term media refers to information culled from “traditional sources such as newspapers, television, and the radio” (Mooney 2009).

I am examining a medium of mass communication called media; “we think of media principally as media of communication: press, radio, television” (McLuhan 1994: xiv). Media, as such, is based on its consumption by a wide audience. Noted media critic Neil Postman sees media as “public discourse” (1986:16). It is noted that this discourse may be public, but it is also highly commercial (Starr 2004). Terms such as commercial media or communications media can also be found. Others define media by what it is not; particularly, in view of recent technological advances. The traditional media is “a broadcast media model” versus a newer “participatory media model” (Palfrey and Gasser 2008:264). This new media is more than just the Internet, though that is certainly the foundation on which it is built. Traditional media accessed over the Web is not the new model with which many are familiar. Rather, it reflects the creation and rise of “Web 2.0” that can truly be considered a participatory shift (Mooney 2009). Reading online news feeds from searches engines is simply a new delivery style of relevant material. Web 2.0 refers to the creation of information such as uploading posts, pictures, video, and commentary and not just information consumption.

In the context of this thesis I focus on traditional media. When asked about media in interviews, tourists referred to news stories from commercial mass media outlets. While many foreign visitors to Oaxaca used the Internet to read these news

stories, the reports are still traditional media, and not participatory Web 2.0. For the sake of brevity, I refer to this traditional mass communication commercial news media in this work simply as 'media,' 'news,' or 'coverage.'

Research Orientation

As an anthropology student, I approach this research on tourism from a social science perspective. While the same information can be, and often is, examined from alternative scholarly perspectives, especially in hospitality studies, such approaches are mainly centered on market perspectives. Such studies ultimately aim to increase tourist arrivals and host revenue. Alternatively, a social science project like this one aims to understand tourism and its various impacts and implications without preference to travel locale. I have sought to understand why recent American tourists made the decision to travel to Oaxaca amid negative news coverage about the region. As an ethnographically based study, my aim is not to positively or negatively impact local tourism marketing or public relations, but, rather, to understand these tourists and why they came to Oaxaca.

Research Questions and Hypothesis

The decline in tourist arrivals to Oaxaca since 2006 has occurred concomitant with concerns that Mexico is now unsafe for travel. This situation raises several relevant research questions. Among other things, why do some foreign and domestic tourists still go to Oaxaca given events and their coverage in the media? Are they ignorant of the potentially dangerous situation on the ground reported by some news

outlets? If not, do they feel that the danger is exaggerated or less severe than what has been suggested, or are they simply aware of the dangers but still traveling to Oaxaca as “thrill seekers?”

It is my contention that those tourists who went to Oaxaca during or just after these events are essentially experienced travelers. These individuals feel that they do not follow common travel paths to popular or trendy destinations in the tourism world. I maintain that recent travelers to Oaxaca do not really follow mainstream media coverage and, therefore, their destination selection is minimally influenced by these reports. Furthermore, I believe that the interviewed tourists demonstrate a form of agency by seeking information through various non-traditional media sources. By non-traditional, I refer to independent media such as, blogs, and personal contacts. By choosing what information they access or utilize, these travelers demonstrate some degree of autonomy that sets them apart from other tourists.

Travel decision making is a complex process that lacks uniformity. Destination image or how a place is perceived or imagined is a major factor in travel planning (Chon 1990; Gartner 1993; Gunn 1988). Some individuals deliberate extensively about where to travel, while others plan their trips more impulsively. Arguably, most fit into this continuum somewhere between these two extremes. Peter Bjork and Therese Jansson (2008) demonstrate that travel is not a process where one decision is made – to travel or not. Rather, numerous sub-decisions are reached such as where to visit, when to depart, what to do, and how to travel. Destination selection can also be based on numerous sources of information (Hyounggon and Richardson 2003; Iwashita 2003;

Pan and Ryan 2007). News programming exerts a powerful influence on destination image and, therefore, ultimately destination selection (Gunn 1988). That said, my research did not reveal studies that include inquires about how tourists evaluate this information, particularly news coverage, when making travel decisions.

Methodology

In this thesis, I utilize both qualitative and quantitative data. The primary foundation of my thesis is 26 formal interviews and numerous casual conversations I conducted with American tourists in Oaxaca. While this sample size is unquestionably small, limited as it was by my short time in the area, it does offer a glimpse at American tourist attitudes and behavior in Oaxaca. Although I characterize this work as more qualitative than quantitative in nature, empirical information provides a framework around which I have constructed this thesis, especially statistical data from the Mexican Secretary of Tourism (SECTUR). Other quantitative data was garnered from a growing body of anthropological literature on tourism, travel industry data on tourism growth and potential, and analysis of news and media reporting on recent regional events. All things considered, this thesis is grounded mainly in the ethnographic field research that I conducted in Oaxaca in 2009, with supplemental quantitative information coming from these other varied sources.

As noted, I conducted my fieldwork in Oaxaca under the auspices of an ethnographic methods field school affiliated with SDSU. The six week program is administered by cultural anthropologist Dr. Ramona Pérez, who both conducted her

dissertation research in Oaxaca and has worked in the state for the past 15 years. Dr. Pérez oversees the ethnographic field school every summer. The field school schedule includes prearranged structured work from Monday through Wednesday (which I discuss in more detail in the Background section) and classroom time on Thursdays evenings. Given this structure, I conducted interviews and visited common tourist attractions on Thursday mornings and Fridays through Sundays. My interview sites include the Tlascalula Market, which is only open on Sundays, the archaeological ruins of Monte Alban and Mitla, the Santa Domingo Church, and Oaxaca City's central plaza. Besides the Tlascalula Market, I would visit the other locales at various times and days, so as not to miss when they are most frequented by tourists. The formal interviews are based on a convenience sampling technique whereby American tourists were interviewed in English. My survey questionnaire (see Appendix A) consists of 13 mostly open-ended questions about the tourists' travel experiences and exposure to media concerning Oaxaca. The questionnaire's design and formulation includes input from both Dr. Pérez and Dr. Elayne Zorn from the University of Central Florida (UCF).

In conducting the interviews I found that scribbling furiously as people spoke was an ineffective manner for establishing sufficient rapport with tourists. After some experimentation during interviews, I found a better approach involved me asking interview subjects memorized questions and jotting down notes on the questionnaire's margin. If someone said something particularly noteworthy, I would write the quote out in full for direct citation in the thesis. Otherwise, I tried to maintain a conversational interview approach, which I found generated more honest and candid answers. After

each interview, which typically lasted no more than 35 minutes, I sat down and wrote a more complete response, based on my short notes and memory.

With numerous hours between interviews, and to help break up the monotony of standing around for eight hours, I often explored those areas frequented by tourists. Those spots included market stalls, churches, historic buildings, art shops, textile distributors, English language bookstores, museums, and plazas. In these settings, I frequently encountered Americans and other foreigners enjoying their vacations. Such meetings afforded me opportunities to not only interview tourists, but also to see how they interact with locals. These encounters helped me understand tourist motivations for visiting Oaxaca, almost as much as the rationales provided in the interviews. They also allowed me to surreptitiously observe something akin to uncontrived tourist behavior. Such data gathering techniques are important as they shaped my view of tourists in a predominantly positive way. I was never embarrassed to be an American while traveling in Oaxaca, nor did I ever encounter any evidence suggesting that Oaxacans were uncomfortable, exploited, or mistreated by international tourists.

Media Events

I discuss three recent news events within the context of this thesis that have variously impacted tourist perceptions of Oaxaca and Mexico. I suggest that these events are primary factors in the decline in tourist arrivals from 2006 to 2009. While the global economic crisis has had an effect on tourism worldwide, this downturn has been minimal in Mexico compared to the impact of H1N1, drug violence, and hurricanes

(Papatheodorou, et al 2010; Ritchie, et al 2009). The largest drop in tourism began before the global recession. Thanks to a favorable exchange rate and close proximity to the US, Mexico has seen more visitors than during past economic hardships.

Teachers' Strike

The protests of 2006 in Oaxaca have been called by numerous names. Both tourists and locals often refer to these demonstrations as “the teachers’ strike” or “the teacher protest.” However, these labels do not accurately reflect the grassroots movement that gave rise to the demonstrations, nor the aims of most of its participants. In May 2006, members from Section 22 of the Teachers’ Union in Oaxaca went on strike, as they had done each of the previous 25 years, seeking increases in educational spending and salary (Roig-Franzia 2006). The governmental reaction to this demonstration proved to be much different from the official responses of previous years. Within a few weeks, Governor Ulises Ruíz Ortiz, who many accused of corruption and stealing the election in 2004 (Davies 2007), sent riot police with tear gas and batons to quell the protests. The outrage over such heavy handed tactics against a peaceful and common protest led to 50,000 marchers demanding Ruiz’ resignation (McKinley 2006).

On June 14, 2006, police raided a protester’s encampment full of women and children, firing bullets and spraying tear gas. Police also destroyed a radio station sympathetic to the protesters. Between June 14 and December 4, 2006, 304 protesters were arrested (Davies 2007), all under Ruiz’ direction.

The protest quickly transformed from a teachers' strike into a wider social action committee with the formation of the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO by their Spanish initials) on June 17, 2006 (Davies 2007). Notably, this group resembled the traditional governance forms of many towns called *usos y costumbres* (uses and customs) (Davies 2007). The purpose of the coalition was to address widespread frustration of the Ruiz administration, seek his removal, and create a public space for airing citizens' social and economic concerns.

While the barricades were down, APPO controlled the city for seven months before being ousted. The economic implications of these protests for Oaxaca were significant. With dozens killed in the unrest (Bly 2006), tourism declined by 26% according to official sources (SECTUR 2009). Although rooted in a teachers' strike, the protest quickly morphed into a broader social movement, addressing many social grievances such as greater political representation. The violence, civil unrest, raids, and killings all took place after the movement had shifted away from the initial teacher's strike by Section 22 of the teacher's union. If anything, the strike had coalesced into a full social movement, largely divorced from the teachers' original protest. As such, I subsequently refer to the events as the protests, or the protest of 2006, without reference to the teachers.

Drug Violence

In 2007, President Felipe Calderón stated that Mexico would no longer tolerate drug cartels running areas of the county. Rather than simply hollow rhetoric, he initiated a major crackdown on drug production and distribution that has resulted in a massive

escalation of violence and fear. Numerous police, civilians, military personal, and cartel members have died violently or been arrested in the process. Such bloodshed has naturally received extensive and often sensationalized media coverage. Although the violence has occurred almost exclusively along the border regions, American media only occasionally make such geographic distinctions. To be clear, drug violence has not been an issue in Oaxaca. All too often, however, headlines proclaim Mexico's violence without more nuanced reportage. The United States State Department has also issued several travel warnings in reaction to this escalating violence (State Department 2010). The global media has seemingly yet to achieve consensus on what these related events should be collectively called. 'Drug Violence' or 'Drug War' was most commonly used in the conversations I had with tourists. I use both terms interchangeably over subsequent sections.

H1N1: Swine Flu

Considering that my research came closely on the heels of the April 2009 H1N1 outbreak in Oaxaca, news coverage of this event and its impacts on local tourism is given particular consideration in this thesis. Adela María Gutiérrez, a resident of Oaxaca, became the first reported H1N1 fatality in Mexico (Lacey and Malkin 2009). News and fear spread quickly across Oaxaca and elsewhere after her death. *The New York Times* ran nine articles on H1N1 on May 1, 2009, declaring in one headline, "Risk Unclear, Some Fliers Grow Skittish Over Travel" (Higgins 2009). Arguably, in regards to flights to Mexico, it was not "some fliers" who were skittish, as the headline stated, but most. The story went on to report that travel to the country was "close to zero"

(ibid). By May 2009, H1N1 had spread to 12 US states, while Mexico had 260 confirmed cases and 12 deaths.

In April 2009, as news of the flu strain mushroomed, contention arose over what it should be called. An Israeli deputy health minister, who wanted to keep Jews from having to say “swine,” called the virus “the Mexican Flu” (Bradsher 2009) much to the consternation of Mexican officials. One Mexican ambassador claimed that the virus did not originate in Mexico but was brought into the country from elsewhere. US Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack noted that the virus was not a food-borne illness, thus, linking it to food products would be inaccurate. Pork producers presumably agreed with his assessment of the situation.

Debate about what to officially call the flu strain notwithstanding, the term ‘swine flu’ gained popularity with the press. While I used the term in my interviews, I acknowledge that this label is inaccurate. With no direct link between pigs and this virus, the scientific community is now pretty much settled on the label H1N1 when describing this illness. As such, I use the term H1N1 within the context of this thesis, excluding direct quotes reported in the media or when the term was used by interviewed tourists.

Background to the Research

While that Sunday in June represented the first day of my thesis research in Tlascalula, it was not my first day in the field. I had gone to Oaxaca with Dr. Pérez as part of the ethnographic methods field school which ran for six weeks from June 15 to July 24, 2009. All of the enrolled students rented apartments in the capital and handled

meals on their own. I was the only participant not from SDSU. I had met Dr. Pérez during a Fall 2008 guest lecture at UCF. During this time she invited me to attend her field school. Nearly all of the students in Oaxaca were Master's students except for one undergraduate and most spoke Spanish fluently. In fact, three were native speakers. Four of the students, me included, did not speak Spanish very well. The class of 13 students was divided into two research groups. The first group of eight students conducted archival work and oral histories in San Pablo Huixtipepec and Santa Maria Atzompa, two small communities outside Oaxaca City.

The annual field school is grounded in applied anthropology, as it always seeks to assist communities with projects the locals deem important. In 2009, both communities asked that students help preserve municipal documents. The students organized documents such as marriage and death certificates, court records, and land claims so that they could be more accessible. Digital pictures of the documents were captured with a high resolution camera to be downloaded on to the municipality's websites, for future access to locals. The oral histories gathered with community members are based on open ended and non-structured interviews exploring issues that residents feel are important. These materials will also be accessible to the community at some point. While this was not my primary research group, I did participate somewhat with the archival program, photographing and organizing documents. I also spent several days exploring and photographing the town of Atzompa for their municipal website. Future community projects for Dr. Pérez's students include a virtual tour of Atzompa to increase tourist interest.

Dr. Pérez's other students participated in a local nutritional program and home stay in Zimatlán, Oaxaca. We worked with Centeotl, a local non-governmental organization (NGO), focused on helping communities in various capacities (www.centeotl.org). Their program is affiliated with the Grameen Foundation network and entails local development projects, education and training, and microcredit lending. The lending program is directed exclusively toward females since men commonly have access to more traditional lending services such as banks.

As part of their educational and training outreach, Centeotl oversees a program advocating amaranth cultivation among community members. Amaranth is a cereal grain with high-protein seeds that commands a high market price, requires much less water, fertilizer, and other inputs, and can potentially represent an economic boon to the community. Besides distributing free amaranth seeds to workshop participants, Centeotl oversees an amaranth processing facility in Zimatlán that packages and markets commercial products such as breakfast cereals, cereal bars, and cookies. Centeotl's goal in seed distribution is to encourage community members to pursue commercial amaranth cultivation and then sell their produce to the local factory as a source of revenue.

Amaranth can also be consumed as a grain food source for the people growing it, since factory processing is only needed for the commercial market such as packaging. Not one of Dr. Pérez's students was familiar with amaranth before going to Oaxaca. Centeotl spent several days explaining the crop to us, showing us their factory

operations, and accompanying us to fields under cultivation so that we could become more familiar with the plant.

My group was primarily concerned with conducting nutritional and educational outreach among women in local microcredit cooperatives. Working with us in this capacity were two assistants who had completed the field school during the previous year. With their input, our team developed two training workshops that highlighted amaranth's benefits, discussed general nutrition, and identified those foods that can potentially mitigate the impact of lead poisoning which is a common problem in the area related to the production of local cookware (Pérez 2003).

For the duration of the field school, we lived with local families in and around Zimatlán during the work week. Since each household included a female family member affiliated with one of the microcredit cooperatives, we were able to experience and better understand the lives of the people with whom we worked. This living arrangement also allowed students to conduct two separate interviews with their sponsoring families about domestic cooking practices, eating habits and diet for Dr. Pérez and a SDSU student. These interviews focused on the use of lead ceramics, calorie intake and sources, food costs, labor divisions, and health and wellness concepts. We also collected family recipes for dishes that were both common preparations and 'special' meals. The recipes included information about ingredients, costs, and preparation and will be examined to see what items could be added, without a cost increase, to improve their nutritional value.

The home-stay also afforded team members numerous personal interactions with host families. The Galván family, with whom I stayed, maintains a *milpa* (traditional corn plot) near their home. I went with them to clean weeds, gather corn, and cut grass for their goats. I also spent many early mornings with Señora Galván taking the corn kernels that she soaked overnight to the mill. Once processed, we flattened them with a metal press to make tortillas. Señora Galván would cook the tortillas on an outdoor wood-fired griddle. I would chop wood and make sure the fire stayed hot by feeding it a steady supply of wood and corn cobs. That a man would go to the mill, or that an American could chop wood, was a constant source of amusement for the Galváns. Thanks to its personal nature, the home-stay was certainly the high point of the field school program for me.

Although staying with the Galván family and working with Centeotl was not directly related to my thesis research, I believe the experience was invaluable for my fieldwork. Specifically, it allowed me to witness firsthand numerous community activities such as the rodeo and livestock market that I would not have known about otherwise. Spending time with the Galváns also allowed me discover the various issues that they face. From migration and jobs, to politics and the school system, family members talked with me constantly about daily life in Zimatlán, Oaxaca, and Mexico. While the Galváns are not directly involved with tourism, so many families like them are. Staying with them reminded me that tourism is more than a manifestation of globalization, economic endeavor, fundamental shift in cultural discourses, or some other type of

academic abstraction. It is instead the livelihood through which many local families support themselves.

CHAPTER TWO: ANTHROPOLOGY AND TOURISM

Several current aspects of tourism make it an engaging topic for anthropological consideration. Tourism has become a common tool for economic growth and market expansion in various international development schemes. Various types of tourism - eco, nature based, and community – are now used to address numerous social and ecological issues that affect developing societies (World Tourism Organization 2004, 2002). Targeting the specific problems of communities, tourism is often seen as a viable way of alleviating poverty, protecting environments, and fostering infrastructure programs (Thomlinson and Getz 1996).

Tourism is also representative of broader socio-cultural issues. Dean MacCannell finds “modern society to be intimately linked in diverse ways to modern mass leisure, especially to international tourism and sightseeing” (1999:3). The scale of international tourism and this “mass leisure” makes it critical for anthropological examination. In 2002, 700 million people traveled internationally as tourists (World Tourism Organization 2004). These travelers spent some \$475 billion dollars on their vacations. By 2020, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) expects that the number of tourists to double, reaching 1.4 billion. A concomitant increase in tourist spending would total almost \$1 trillion annually. Arguably, tourism represents the largest movement of people, capital, and services in world history (Stronza 2000). Tellingly, 80% of international tourist travel originates from the world’s 20 richest countries. Just five of these nations; the United States, Germany, Japan, France, and the United Kingdom comprise 50% of the world’s tourist (Gmelch 2010:4).

According to Sharon Gmelch (2010), the social sciences became interested in tourism as a sociocultural phenomenon in the 1970s. This burgeoning interest coincided with the rise of mass tourism. Valene Smith's publication of *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism* (1977) is considered the first serious anthropological research on international tourism (Wallace 2005). Her work also delineated the now common expressions of 'hosts' to describe those locals in tourist settings and 'guests' as tourists. According to Malcolm Crick (1995), anthropologists were heretofore largely uninterested in tourism as they had a hard time defining themselves from other outsiders, such as tourists, in a field setting. In many ways, it seems that tourists were too much like anthropologists, and the anthropologists did not care to be associated with tourism and tourists. Given this stance, it is probably not surprising that initially the field was highly critical of tourism and the impacts and changes it brought to bear on local communities (Douglass and Lacy 2005).

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s the anthropological subfield of tourism studies grew rapidly. Today, tourism sessions are common at almost all major anthropological meetings (Wallace 2005). Due to tourism's impact and the nature of anthropology, it seems almost inevitable that intersections between those domains would happen. Tourism not only represents perhaps the largest movement of money and people in world history (Greenwood 1989), it is also one of the largest global economic sectors (Honey 1999). Tourism likewise represents more cultural interaction between participants than other global economic endeavors, including trade (Van den Berghe 1994). Amanda Stronza (2000) builds on these sentiments, arguing that tourism entails

a unique form of market integration for three primary reasons: (1) interactions between hosts and guests “involve more than the simple exchange of money for goods” (2000:19); (2) tourism relies on the maintenance of tradition rather than its destruction; and, (3) that the market is brought to the community.

One area not examined by anthropologists is the influence of mass media on tourism, specifically, how news media affects tourists’ destination selection. Hospitality and industry studies have examined the media’s impact on tourism, but this research tends to focus primarily on marketing materials (Hahm 2004, Iwashita 2003). Studies on destination image began in the 1970s and continue to dominate published tourism research (Pike 2007). Many scholars examine representations to tourists, through promotional materials like brochures, travelogues, postcards, advertisements, magazines, literature, and movies (Mercille 2005). John Gammack notes that “destination awareness is conveyed largely through various media” (2005:1148). However, ‘media’ is again used to denote a host of forms including news stories, magazines, movies, advertisements, and marketing tools. In this thesis, I examine news stories from the commercial mass media exclusively.

Tourism is, as noted above, not without its share of detractors within anthropology. Some argue that tourism will decimate local cultures, problematically leading to a commodification of indigenous traditions and customs (Bruner 1987; Greenwood 1989; Mansperger 1995). Equally, concerns have emerged about the depletion of local resources and habitats through the impact of tourism (De Groot 1983; Giannecchini 1993). Negative tourist behavior has been highlighted by numerous

researchers as problematic (Abbink 2010; Little 2004). This is true especially when linked to issues of authenticity such as locals demanding payment for access or rights to privacy and recreating dances and ceremonies for money. Many tourists interpret this behavior as evidence that locals, who are often desperately poor, have become in some ways too materialistic or inhospitable (Abbink 2004).

Walter Little (2004) provides a colorful and sad anecdote involving an overly aggressive tourist during his research in Guatemala. While talking with some Maya vendors he had befriended, a tourist began photographing their traditionally attired children, including Little's daughter. As the kids became visibly uncomfortable, Little asked the woman in English to stop snapping pictures. She asserted that it was her right to photograph children in a public place and tried to physically maneuver around Little to do so. He responded by pulling out his own camera and aggressively photographing the woman. Apparently, this conveyed his message that such blatant and intrusive behavior is unacceptable and the woman left.

My own research experience in Oaxaca and travels elsewhere, indicate that Little's anecdote is likely an anomaly and not necessarily representative of most tourist behavior. I saw no one take aggressively taking pictures in Oaxaca or attempt to "stage" locals for the camera. Outsiders, including myself, certainly took pictures of indigenous people and places. However, these instances always involved wide angle shots and respectful distances, at least to my standard, of photographing subjects. Similarly, I did not see any Oaxacans objecting to being photographed, although that does not mean they were entirely comfortable.

Most of the local Catholic churches have bilingual signs to remind tourists that these venues are places of worship and not museums. They asked that visitors be respectful and not use flash photography. During my six weeks in Oaxaca I never saw tourists break any of the church rules or otherwise be disrespectful to churches or religious proceedings. Tourists always took off their hats, spoke quietly, maintained their children, and stayed in the back if mass was being performed. While exploring markets, I never heard a tourist (who I would often surreptitiously follow around at a respectful distance) expect vendors to speak or transact in English. Even if their language skills were less than adequate, tourists always tried to converse with locals in Spanish.

On Tourists and Travelers

The word “tourist” invites its share of contention in both academic and non-academic articles. In both the literature and among those I interviewed, tourist is not always a straightforward label (Gmelch 2010). Few seem happy with the tourist tag. As Evelyn Waugh said, “the tourist is the other fellow” (cited in Lippard 2000:2). Writer Paul Fussell disdains the current state of affairs saying, “I am assuming that travel is now impossible and that tourism is all we have left” (cited in Krotz 1997:183). Such sentiments seem to come from those Westerners who feel they are “culturally sensitive” when traveling overseas, preferring the nomenclature “traveler” rather than “tourist” (Waterhouse 1989). Since many Americans are embarrassed by their fellow citizens

abroad, they are often “eager to disassociate” themselves from labels like tourist. (Gmelch 2010:3).

Such sentiments do not necessarily argue that there are no differences between tourists, especially in style and manner of travel, but rather that these classifications are so individualized that they can go on endlessly. Suffice it to say, these classifications remain so thoroughly generalized that they do not offer much in terms of understanding of tourism and travel.

Edward M. Bruner, addressing the ethnic dimensions of tourism, has similarly found that “the differentiations we [in the West] make between types of travelers, between black brothers and white oppressors, between Europeans and Americans, are merged by the Ghanaians into a single inclusive category: we are all *obruni* [foreigners]” (2010: 352). Arguably, such distinctions between travelers and tourists are not really made amongst locals at any foreign destination. While there may be more socially responsible modes of travel, the best foreigners for most vendors are the ones that buy something, no matter how they might prefer to be classified. Some foreigners that I met in Oaxaca categorically stated they were not tourists. However, this seemed based more on their personal feelings than any tangible difference relative to other foreigners. They were not more fluent in Spanish, and they participated in the same ‘tourist’ activities as other visitors. Tamale, necklace, and drink vendors at Tlascalula or Monte Alban did not seem to care about these classifications when they plied their wares for sale. Items were offered to all of us who were clearly visitors. Those Westerners who declined to purchase anything were passed over with seemingly little thought.

I agree with Sallie Tisdale (1995) that distinctions between tourists and travelers are not based on quantifiable differences, but rather represent snobbish lines in the sand. Such linguistic argument only serves, as Larry Krotz notes, “to pick a fight where none should happen” (1997:183). Such divisions can proliferate to the extreme without serving a meaningful purpose for classification.

Eric Weiner (2010), a well known travel writer, also finds the distinction between travelers and tourists “a lie. The fact is we are all tourists.” His analysis, like mine, is based on the shared commonality of the activities and consequences of tourism. And this, he says, is not a bad thing: “A culture is worth more alive than dead.” Outside interest, and more importantly money, help sustain people financially around the world. Dean MacCannell defines tourists as “sightseers....in search of experience” (1999:1). Tourist or traveler, every outsider I met in Oaxaca was certainly there for an experience as MacCannell states. I use the terms tourist and traveler here interchangeably as I see little meaningful distinction.

Tourism in Mexico and Oaxaca

Tourism is Mexico’s third largest income source, producing \$10.8 billion in 2008 and accounting for 8.5% of the previous year’s total GDP (Market Overview 2009). In 2008, Mexico received 22.6 million foreign visitors, making the nation the eighth most popular global destination for foreign tourists. The country had previously held the number seven position, but slipped a spot in 2006. This is up from 1998 when 19.8 million visitors arrived, spending \$7.9 billion (Clancy 2001). In 2009’s first quarter,

tourist arrivals grew 7.5% over the previous quarter (Market Overview 2009). Tourism has obviously emerged as an important component of the Mexican economy.

The Mexican government has embraced tourism revenue with great enthusiasm. Officials have intentionally pursued tourism promotion for many years (Berger 2006). Tourism as an economic development strategy did not come to Mexico by chance. The state has played an integral role in promoting this sector, spending some \$20 million to promote the tourism industry in 1990 (Cooper Alarcon 1997).

In order to attract economic inflows from abroad, Mexico has used indigenous populations and the country's ethnic history, as backdrop for tourist consumption. This is especially true in Oaxaca which has the country's greatest ethnic diversity compared to other states (Norget 2006). Throughout the nation's history, "the sale of a holiday in Mexico... relies in its embodiment of both modernity and antiquity" (Berger 2006: 91). Indians and peasants alike are not presented as real people, but rather stereotypes living a staged fantasy presented for tourists. Tour company's brochures often demonstrate the "colorful, exotic, and pristine" nature of Latin Americans, while American travelers are shown as "omniscient, sophisticated, and invisible" (Casella 1999: 187).

The Oaxacan government has promoted the indigenous Guelaguetza community celebrations in order to attract foreign tourists (Norget 2006). Guelaguetza is a folk dance festival that highlights local traditions. The state government has institutionalized this formerly small scale festival, building an arena and extensively marketing the event, which is held during the last two weeks of July. The goal is ostensibly to connect rural

communities with tourism revenue. Government efforts have been unsuccessful to date. Popular community dance celebrations, in contrast to the state sponsored Guelaguetza, have sprung up in many local neighborhoods. These more “authentic” fiestas have gained popularity among tourists as well.

For community residents throughout Mexico, the intrusion of outsiders is not always welcome (Cano and Mysyk 2004). Crafts have been used to promote tourism in Oaxaca and provide income for rural people who are often poor and lack other marketable skills (Chibnik 2003; Pérez 2003). However, “poor market knowledge, a lack of managerial skills, and inadequate investment capital to challenge wealthy merchants” continue to limit the beneficial effects of Oaxacan tourism and craft production (Cohen 2001: 383).

While some researchers find fault with the state and its attempts to promote this type of work (Torres 2003; Holo 2004), this is not really a universally held position (Nash 2000). Some communities that were not promoted have seen no tourism and, thus, no income opportunities (Feinberg 2006). In those areas of Mexico where economic development has lagged, such as Oaxaca, many still hope that tourism will provide the motivation and funding for new infrastructural expansion (Murphy and Stepick 1991).

Such efforts do not always unfold as expected. In Oaxaca City, I was told by a resident that the state government had spent a considerable sum of money installing Wi-Fi in the main square. He glanced around the plaza and asked, “see any locals with laptops?” A general critique of tourism is that the benefits are often more positively felt by visitors than locals. Much infrastructural development in Mexico, such as roads and

bridges, are designed to target tourists with any positive impact on locals representing a secondary outcome (Cruz 2003).

The showcase of Mexican tourism is Cancún. Located on the Yucatán Peninsula, tourism development in Cancún has been wildly successful by any economic standard. The Mexican government has sought to promote tourism in the Yucatán since the 1960s (Torres 2003). In the following decade, officials began Cancún's development vastly altering this town of 200 (Cruz 2003). Cancún, with three million annual visitors, has transformed the Yucatán into something other than Mexican space. The area around Cancún has become a place based on the "matrix of American consumption patterns and interest" (Torres and Momsen 2006:69). One official stated that Cancún had pulled in \$10 billion dollars in four years (Brown 1999). However, this national monetary gain has translated to little social or economic benefits for locals. Rather than low impact tourism development compatible with local lifestyles, residents have increasingly had to shape their lives around Cancún's tourism industry (Cruz 2003). Cancún is designed to remove tourists from Mexican daily life, placing them in a bubble where socioeconomic problems do not directly impinge upon their vacations (Torres and Momsen 2006). Cancún is focused on tourist revenue and not targeted towards disenfranchised segments of society and their economic empowerment.

Cancún conforms to Mexico's image as a sun, sea, and sand destination. Resorts are designed specifically to isolate foreign tourists from the "real Mexico" (Cothran and Cothran 1998). Tourists can feel relatively safe from the crime and

unpleasantness such as poverty, substandard housing, and the lack of economic options for locals they might otherwise face.

Tourists in Oaxaca

The tourists I met in Oaxaca were purposefully trying to subvert the stereotype of insulated resort travelers. They expressed a strong disdain for the famed resorts of Mexico – Cancún, Acapulco, Cabo San Lucas – and the types of leisure activities that occur there. They did not want American food or highly structured activities in a place where all the employees speak English. Instead, I often heard tourists speak of the joy of seeing Mexicans going about their everyday lives in the markets, restaurants, or shops. They relished practicing their Spanish with local speakers. Based on these encounters, the tourists to Oaxaca are in many ways fundamentally different in their approach to travel compared to resort travelers. Essentially, I would classify the tourists I met in Oaxaca as more cultural tourists, which I discuss in more detail later. A universally expressed desire conveyed during my interviews was a wish to experience the culture and daily life of everyday Oaxacans.

Oaxaca also derives significant revenue from tourism, which is critical given the state's persistent level poverty. With average local income standing at \$8 US dollars (USD) per day (Norget 2006), tourism has emerged as the primary livelihood for many Oaxacans. It is hoped that increased tourism will expand local revenue and corresponding average income levels.

The potential of this approach certainly exists based on my ethnographic research. Of the 26 tourists that I interviewed, 57% spent between \$2,000 and \$3,000

USD on their trips, 11% spent between \$3,100 and \$5,000, and the rest were unsure or declined to answer. Tourism revenue for 2009 is expected to have dropped 30% due mainly to the impact of the H1N1 flu (Xinhua News 2009). In May 2009, tourism arrivals in Mexico decreased 50% overall, with cruise ships seeing a staggering 95% decrease in ports of call to Mexico (Associated Press 2009).

Authenticity

Given Oaxaca's importance as a cultural tourism destination, a discussion of authenticity is certainly appropriate. Arthur D. Murphy and Alex Stepick (1991) demonstrate that many tourists are drawn to Oaxaca for its traditional culture and indigenous people. However, they find that these aspects of Oaxacan society persist within a framework of extreme poverty. Building on this, Ronda Brulotte sees "outsiders pour into the region seeking [a] culture unblemished by industry and new technology" (2009:467). Apparently, as I earlier noted about Oaxaca City's central square, tourists desire these authenticities while still expecting certain amenities like wireless Internet access.

Notions of authenticity are problematic. Paul Bohannon and Dirk van der Elst (1999) note that the underlying meanings and motivations for the production of cultural goods may change over time but they remain cultural products created for specific reasons. Kristen Norget sees tourism as a "threat" to traditional community practices (2006:269). Michael Chibnik's work among Zapotec wood carvers in Oaxaca illustrates the largely flexible nature of authenticity and tradition (2003). Developed within the last

generation, wood carving does not have an ancient origin in Oaxaca; at least, not in relation to current styles. The popular carved animal figurines Chibnik mentions are found throughout the state at venues frequented by tourists. I often watched travelers haggle with vendors over carved items in market places and street stalls. Some tourists would request carvings featuring specific animals, colors, or styles. The carvings are very beautiful with vivid colors and striking designs. That the carvings are of relatively recent development did not stop me from appreciating or purchasing them. Many tourists, however, do not seem to agree. All the tourists I spoke with mentioned the “traditional” nature of the carvings. Chibnik also finds that tourists think of the carvings as old in design and their styles as grounded in antiquity. Vicki, a 46 year old nurse from Kentucky I interviewed, referred to the figurines and said she loved Oaxaca for its “authentic indigenous art.”

Such pursuits of authenticity in touristic experiences represent an essentialized view of culture. This idea does not really take into consideration the dynamic nature of cultures and culture change. If tourists take the approach that “authentic things” are those now used by the people producing them, then ancient static designs are far less authentic than contemporary innovations.

CHAPTER THREE: DATA AND ANALYSIS

This thesis draws on several data sources, including 26 formal interviews that I conducted with American tourists in Oaxaca between June and July of 2009. I decided to interview American tourists exclusively for several reasons. First, the majority of international tourists to Oaxaca are American (SECTUR 2009). Any tourism decline based on negative US media reports carries a greater impact than other areas of Mexico or Latin America. This impact is also critical as international travelers spend more money than domestic Mexican travelers. Second, on a more pragmatic level, I do not read any language with great fluency other than English. Thus, I cannot properly evaluate media stories on Oaxaca in other languages such as German or French. I also understand Spanish far better than I speak it. As such, interviewing locals in their native tongue would be problematic. Third, I hoped that perceived notions of national solidarity vis-à-vis me and American tourists might encourage them to open up to me about their travel experiences.

The decision to primarily speak with tourists in general, as opposed to locals, was also based on a specific rationale. Little (2004) claims that anthropologists studying tourism often focus their work more on tourists, ignoring the locals in the marketplace. While this may be true of Little's field site in Guatemala, the same cannot be said of Oaxaca. Ronda Brulotte, researching ethnicity and tourism, found that "among the many cultural anthropologists currently conducting research throughout Oaxaca, there is an unmistakable preference for working in an identifiably indigenous community" (2009:463). I would add that this preference persists not just at the

community level, but also on more individual ones. Tourists are discussed but not often interviewed by anthropologists and other socioeconomic researchers. Julian Mercille, discussing destination research, finds there has been a lack of focus on the tourists, noting that social science studies “have documented how destinations are portrayed in various materials, but neglected to assess tourists’ actual perceptions” (2005:1041). Even those researchers that do talk to tourists about individual perceptions and experiences still spend more time with locals.

I agree that local experience is a worthwhile subject for anthropological inquiry: indeed, it is the foundation of much anthropological fieldwork. However, tourism is a field comprised of multiple stakeholders where locals are one and tourists are another. Sharon Gmelch (citing Stronza 2001) notes, “Research on tourism has focused on two themes: its origins and impacts. When examining origins, the focus has been on the reasons people travel and what determines where they go” (2004:7). The influence of the commercial mass media that I examine in this thesis does not unilaterally determine where tourists go but rather informs that choice. Susan Frohlick and Julia Harrison claim that “ethnographic research with tourists....is imperative if we want to meaningfully expand our understanding of the tourist experience” (2008:5). My decision to spend time interviewing and interacting with American tourists is an attempt to supplement this aspect of Oaxacan tourism studies.

I would classify the tourists I interviewed in Oaxaca as cultural tourists. Based on their statements about individual experiences, motivations for traveling to Oaxaca, and aspects of their trips that they found most notable, I argue that these visitors chose

Oaxaca as a tourist destination primarily because of its local culture. Their modes of travel, such as not utilizing cruise ships or packaged tour companies, maximized their exposure to Oaxacan traditions and customs.

Statistical data gathered from the Secretary of Tourism Office in Oaxaca City provides vital information about the number of tourists that visit Oaxaca, where they travel, and what places tourists visit. Such data helps provide a relevant framework for many of the more personal and reflective conversations that I had with tourists and others on the street.

American news reports related to Oaxaca and Mexico are obviously very important to this study. Many of the print sources come from the New York Times, which Paul Farmer calls “our national paper of record” (2004:52). Online search engines such as Google and Yahoo are also useful in gathering news stories from a wide variety of sources. Key word searches are used to target the three news events previously mentioned.

Interviews and Analysis

The interviews I conducted took place in Oaxaca City, at Tlascalula’s weekly market, and the Monte Alban archaeological site. It should be noted that I visited several other archaeological ruins, weekly markets, and local points of interest to speak with tourists. Early on it became clear that these locations were not very productive as visitor flow varied widely. Thus, I focused my efforts on the three aforementioned areas.

Interviews ranged in duration from 20 minutes to two hours, with the average somewhere around 35 minutes. Interview subjects were selected based on a non-random convenience sample. My methodology was to simply approach tourists and ask their permission to interview them. I spent considerable time in these tourist areas and basically approached every non-local I saw. Of course, I ended up approaching many Europeans who seemed rather perplexed by me.

I would approach a potential interview subject and ask if he or she was from the US. If they responded in the affirmative, my standard introduction was: "I'm a grad student doing research on tourism and tourists in Oaxaca, and I'd love to hear about your experiences here, if you have a few minutes." I was turned down about 40% of the time. Tourists were often very cordial in declining, citing a tight schedule with their tour guide or group leader, or a need to meet traveling companions. Some chatted a moment or two, asked what I was doing, expressed an opinion on a subject and left.

Other potential interviewees seemed offended by my introduction, informing me they were not tourists and therefore could not help me. Aiming to maximize my research data, I was enthusiastic and asked if they lived in Oaxaca, and that I was sure they had some valuable insights if they would share them with me. Sadly, this approach never worked, and I was always unable to determine if they were residents or simply objected to being called tourists.

In the hope of becoming more inclusive, I did later change my introduction to say that I was studying "travel and travelers," instead of "tourism and tourists." My earlier discussion on the classification of visitors was not something I was able to discuss with

those who declined to talk to me. Nevertheless, most tourists appeared happy to talk with me, often interested in my research, what I was finding, or hoping that I could point them in the direction of a good restaurant.

I did not gather last names of informants. This was for two reasons: 1) people were often clearly uncomfortable at first when I approached them, so I did not ask for surnames, and 2) to protect the identity of the individuals, despite the low risk of potential harm this study presented to them.

With so much negative news coverage about Oaxaca and Mexico since 2006, especially in the spring of 2009 with the H1N1 outbreak, it would seem surprising to find tourists in Oaxaca at all. Why do these people seem to ignore potential harm and travel to a region represented in the media as so unsafe? It is important to note that plain ignorance was not a factor, thus undermining my initial hypothesis. All the respondents had heard of both H1N1 and the drug violence that racked parts of Mexico. Half had heard of the 2006 protests. Of those familiar with the protests, 30%, or 4 respondents, had followed it closely in the media. Three had been to Oaxaca before and, thus, took a greater interest in Oaxacan events due to a perceived personal connection. The fourth, Ben, was a college student interested in social movements. Ben not only followed the story, it was the reason he came to Oaxaca, in order to learn more about the protests.

Regarding Mexican drug violence, seven respondents, or 26.9%, followed it closely in the news. Four had serious safety concerns, while three did not. Some tourists expressed amusement that anyone would link Oaxaca with drugs violence. Andrea, a 34 year old Chicago teacher, said, "all that's on the border." Cynthia, a

Baltimore artist and onetime Oaxacan resident, laughed that “Americans know so little about geography.” Following media reports was not a problem for tourists I met in Oaxaca.

Unsurprisingly, the most common and familiar interview topic was the H1N1 flu. Half of respondents took some form of preventative action regarding their trip and flu concerns. Five people, 19% of my total interviews, delayed their trip to Oaxaca after the outbreak. Four others contacted their physician or health department, three brought Tamiflu, an anti-viral medication prescribed to treat the flu (including the two physicians I met), and one specifically avoided the Mexico City airport. Only one respondent (at 70, the oldest person I interviewed) said she had not followed recent media coverage about Oaxaca or Mexico in the news. She had heard of both H1N1 and the drug wars, but was not deeply familiar with either topic. She expressed greater concern that a tropical storm had been off the coast the week before she came. Traveling with a friend, she had relinquished control of decision making and decided to simply enjoy the trip.

During the interviewing process, I was struck by the general attitude of my respondents towards the media. Among the tourists I interviewed, the majority were highly dismissive of the US news media. Some were even hostile toward the industry. I had expected to find tourists who were largely unfamiliar with recent events in Oaxaca; however, this was not the case. Joyce, a 45 year old Baltimore physician, commented, “Swine Flu was overblown in the media. Utter nonsense!” Nensi, a librarian from California, agreed, “Swine flu was blown all out of proportion. Media makes too much

out of things.” More bluntly I was told, “The media is full of shit and never has facts straight”, from Michelle, a 23 year old art student from Boca Raton, Florida. Her direct assessment seemed extremely commonplace.

As mentioned, most tourists were familiar enough with world geography to understand which regions of Mexico might warrant more safety concerns. Abby, a 22-year-old student from Texas, said “I feel safer here than I would in northern cities [of Mexico].” When I asked what stories individuals followed in the media, and how they had affected their trip, many times I got an eye-roll or sigh and was told the stories had no effect. Terry, a 50-year-old teacher from California, was traveling with a group in which one member had a phone stolen in Oaxaca City the previous day. Summing up the common sentiment of his travel group, he commented, “You can get your pocket picked in Chicago, but they [the media] don’t mention that.” Carol, a 49-year-old teacher from California, was even able to joke about media perceptions of Mexico: “my son and I said we’ll either get killed by drug lords or swine flu.” Judging by her decision to travel to Oaxaca, and her laughter, these risks were not something she greatly feared.

Perceptions that the media fails to accurately portray events is not unique to these tourists. In fact, they seem to fit into a larger trend within American society that feel information and accuracy is not the primary goal of the news. In 2005, the Pew Research Center for People and the Press found that 75% of people believe that the press cares more about attracting a large audience than informing the public (Pew Research Center 2005). Similarly, 46% of Americans do not have confidence that the media accurately portrays H1N1 and its effects. An additional 36% are only somewhat

confident in the media's coverage of this ailment. A scant 17% trust media coverage of this matter (Pew Research Center 2009).

The media extensively covered the H1N1 outbreak in 2009. Between April 27 and May 3, 2009, H1N1 "took up 31% of the newshole" (Pew Research Center 2009). People certainly took note of this coverage, with a reported 39% of news consumers during that period following H1N1 more closely than any other story (ibid). For all of 2009, H1N1 was the third most covered story dealing with Hispanic issues (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2010).

One explanation for people's disregard of H1N1's potential risks or political violence can be easily dispelled. It was not for lack of understating, nor that the reporting had been beyond tourist's comprehension. Every person I interviewed was either a college graduate or college student. It is doubtful that they simply did not understand what was presented in the mainstream media.

It may seem that there were indications that this mistrust of H1N1 coverage was fueled by other media reports. Mark Feldstein, a journalism professor and former network correspondent, said the media was "doing too much to scare people" (Kurtz 2009). But Feldstein continued by saying that we did not really know the extent of the H1N1 risk. Not taking a firm position on the matter was a typical of criticism over coverage. Ben Goldacre, a British doctor who writes in the popular press on medical issues, noted that much of the media coverage had a theater like quality. He also went on to seemingly hedge his bet, by saying the media was not saying anything incorrectly

(Mackey 2009). Goldacre also was asked to appear on television in England and say other media outlets were hyping the issue.

There were also indications that H1N1 coverage served purposes other than public interest. Republicans in Congress were criticized for deleting \$870 million for flu preparedness from the 2009 US economic stimulus bill. It is little wonder that tourists do not find a clear message in the H1N1 news coverage. A 2009 article in the *Journal of Public Health* notes that the “World Health Organization has been, if anything, cautious in its upgrading of phases” of H1N1. However, the paper largely questions if public health has lost credibility and public trust. The authors note that “many members of the public will confuse genuine warnings of risks to public health, such as the emergence of influenza in Mexico, with what they perceive as cynical attempts to create fear about imaginary terrorist plots” (McKee and Coker 2009:464). In fact, network news did exactly that, with FOX News questioning if H1N1 was a bioterrorism plot (Leo 2009).

Even social-media became a major outlet for H1N1 discussion. Almost 2% of Twitter messages concerned H1N1 in the outbreak’s first month. Postings on the Internet for H1N1 were 10 times greater than those about salmonella and peanut butter contamination concerns the previous winter.

The Pew Center also noted that the level of “current fears are similar to those seen in 2007 about exposure to a drug-resistant staph infection that was in the news” (2009). This may indicate that these repeated media stories concerning various health issues and fears led to an apathetic population. Media critics Bill Kovach and Tom

Rosenstiel (2001) have stated that what is needed is more informed reporting, that weighs information with an in-depth understanding of topics, rather than the current abstract notion of “balance.”

In the 2009 Pew Center study, women were more likely to be concerned than men about H1N1. Among tourists I met, concern was more balanced between men and women. The Pew study notes that adults over 40 were more knowledgeable about H1N1 than those under 40. Again, my research tends to contradict this assertion, with age level not being indicative of knowledge. On these 2 points however, it should be noted that my sample size was significantly smaller than that of the Pew Center. Larger trends can be hard to ascertain from such a limited number. Interestingly, the Pew study finds that there was little relationship between knowledge of H1N1 and fears about exposure to the virus. Unsurprisingly, my research correlates with this finding. However, as it was conducted in Oaxaca two months after the outbreak, it is doubtful that I would have found someone who was really that fearful of infection.

People interviewed in the Pew study also have a great deal of faith in the US government’s ability to properly handle the outbreak. Sixty-five percent are either somewhat or very confident in the government. In the same study only 53% were confident or somewhat confident in the media. The report notes, “people are less confident in the media’s ability to accurately report on the swine flu” than on the government to deal with the outbreak effectively (2005). Tourists in Oaxaca did not express any opinion on the US government, but often expressed confidence in the Mexican government. Several people noted that the government had taken

preventative steps like closing schools to contain the spread of infection. One tourist fatalistically shrugged, “What can you do? If you’re going to get sick, you’re going to get sick.”

As my interviews were conducted in Oaxaca, it is, on one level, unsurprising that those tourists I met were ultimately unconvinced by negative media coverage about the region. However, such a situation still does not address why they chose Oaxaca. A lack of faith in media notwithstanding, the decision still had to be reached that whatever experiences awaited in Oaxaca, they were worth the trouble of the journey and any hardships that might be encountered, however slim that chance. As most of the tourists I met had taken some steps toward ensuring personal protection and health, they acknowledged some possibility for privation.

That which overrode any lingering concerns for personal safety in Oaxaca was, unquestionably, a desire to experience local culture and traditions. When I asked tourists why they chose Oaxaca as a destination their answer were extremely similar in this way. Many people noted the history, people, and art. Textile and art shopping were popular pursuits. Andrea, a 30 year old teacher from Chicago, said “I heard Oaxaca had a spirit of creativity, but it’s even more so than I thought. It’s like a center for arts and culture.”

For many, the people of Oaxaca were both a draw and the most notable aspect of their visit. Ralph, a 61 year old physician from South Carolina, said, “Oaxaca is very real. Authentic. The people are wonderful. It’s a family oriented society, you feel safe with kids around. The way it should be – family first.” He went on that people were

respectful to the female family members in his group. That had not always been his experience when traveling in Latin America. Friendliness was also noted by Pat, a 55 year old homemaker from California, who said locals on the streets of Oaxaca were always ask her if she needed directions. Pat had several friends who had been to Oaxaca and spoke highly of the experience. This was also a common refrain among tourists; the experience of friends often encouraged tourists to visit Oaxaca for themselves. Kelly, a 33 year old artist and professor from Colorado, said “The women here are strong. Beautiful indigenous ancestry. Women are the workers. They’re walking around working, men are just sitting. It’s like this in India – times a hundred.”

Others noted the draw of local cuisine, including the much praised *mole*, a sauce served on meat with rice. Nick, a 33 year old marketing consultant from Chicago, said, “Chef Rick Bayless has done more to popularize authentic Mexican culture and cuisine than most, I think. I love *mole*, it’s why I came. I love Mexico, it’s the best place.” Other tourists who had visited other regions of Mexico said the food of Oaxaca was unique, and made their visited much more fun.

Final Thoughts on Media

My purpose in this section has not been to argue the validity of the position tourists take relative to H1N1 in Oaxaca; that is, whether or not the virus is a serious risk to public health or the media has hyped the danger. Rather, I argue that the tourists I met in Oaxaca are part of a larger trend in American society who views media outlets with certain levels of skepticism and mistrust.

News outlets have an “imperative to emphasize negative or unusual events” *vis-à-vis* tourism and tourist destinations (Gammack 2005:1149). None of this is meant to imply that risk is not a major issue in travel. Serena Volo notes that “among factors influencing demand at the tourist destination area, safety and security, broadly conceived, are the most significant” (2007:83). Volo also addresses risk for tourists, saying that they “require clear, concise, and effectively communicated information so they can exercise informed decisions about their travel” (2007:84). However, how will tourists evaluate that information? “Media often fails to adequately communicate to their audience, or they exaggerate the magnitude of events” (Volo 2007:86). This situation creates tourists who are not only uninformed of risk, but also mistrustful of media should they be presented with an accurate portrayal of danger in a given area.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

My hypothesis that tourists in Oaxaca have not followed the available negative news stories was proven in many ways incorrect. While a limited number did not bother to follow news, most tourists did follow mainstream media sources on stories about Oaxaca or Mexico. That said, they placed little or no value on these stories, and clearly it did not affect their destination decision. Probably of greater interest are my findings suggesting that many travelers were outright hostile toward mainstream media, similar to much of American society in this regard. A common sentiment expressed among interviewed tourists is that media sources uncritically sensationalize events for ratings and are not reflective of the actual importance or threat these events represent. Many tourists told me that the media was not really talking about what was going on at the local level. Thus, I would strongly recommend that the state should work to inform potential tourists about local events. Oaxaca's tourism website never mentioned any of these events. In such a vacuum of information, tourists are left to sources of information that may not be accurate.

The feeling that the news media is somehow conspiratorial about specific societies and people, especially those marginalized by stronger economic or political groups, was also commonly expressed during my interviews. Joan, a 61 year old retiree from Tucson, said the US government had "conspired" to not report what was "really going on down here." She felt they had also overblown H1N1 and the drug war purposefully. As to what reason the US government did this, she could not be clear, only saying, "they don't want people to know."

This raises the question: Why do people follow news that they do feel is in accurate? While my research questions did not specifically focus on this area, some insights can be gained from the data I collected. Many tourists used mainstream media as a starting point from which they can pursue more in-depth information, whether online or through personal contacts. Many respondents also seemed proud that they perceived American media as having low quality. As such, it would seem that these individuals access this information to confirm previously held positions. Individuals engage the news, not just passively receiving it, in a very critical manner.

Putting oneself in harm's way for leisure may seem foolish. However, from the outset of this research I did not, nor now do I now, believe that tourists to Oaxaca consider themselves to be in danger. I found that all of these people appeared rational and made their travel decisions based on what they felt was sound information. However, they utilized a more diverse array of information and resources than I initially anticipated. Certainly, there are tourists who pursue thrills through 'danger tourism'. However, the tourists I met in Oaxaca were not only uninterested in putting themselves in harm's way, they all agreed that there was no danger in Oaxaca. Tourists came to Oaxaca for Oaxaca, disregarding the sensationalized media coverage of danger, not in pursuit of that danger. I would say that Oaxaca needs to focus on marketing to these tourists, but the state seems already aware of the draw indigenous citizens exert on tourists.

That said, many tourists who reported not generally caring about media representations still took steps to ensure their own personal safety and comfort. Three

respondents brought Tamiflu, and many said they brought along over-the-counter medications such as Pepto-Bismol, Tylenol, and Imodium. Thus, while interviewed tourists had little regard for mainstream media coverage, they were not without logic or precautions. Yet, overall, more tourists expressed concern about local traffic and highway safety than any of the news media events on which I focused.

Many respondents learned about Oaxaca from personal sources including friends, family, co-workers, and other travelers. Some became aware of Oaxaca through documentary films, or books on crafts, art, or cooking. Almost all of the tourists with whom I spoke used numerous information sources to learn about their destination including print, television, and Web pages. Many specifically addressed the use of the Web for accessing information, planning, and booking their trips.

Rick Steves, the well known travel writer of Europe, sees “travel as a political act” (which is also the name of one of his books). “We travel”, notes Steves, “to have enlightening experiences, to meet inspirational people, to be stimulated, to learn, and to grow” (2009: vii). The tourists I met in Oaxaca, and the views that they hold on media, seemingly reflect larger trends within American society. However, they also represent a shift in the way we travel. The tourists I met seek a contextualized cultural experience. Put another way, they desire a travel experience that illuminates the interconnectedness of today’s increasingly globalized world that we inhabit.

However, this contextualized experience is not always an easy one to face. The poverty of the region was more than some tourists had expected. Teresa, a 43 year old teacher from Colorado, said, “The culture is very different here. There is a lot of graffiti

on the buildings. It looks really run down.” Michelle, a 45 year old financier from Los Angeles, felt that people in poorer areas were darker skinned and smaller in stature, while people in wealthier areas were lighter skinned and taller. This was based on the lacking availability of nutritious foods, she felt. Michelle and others also noted the children begging and peddling wares in open cafes. While Michelle sympathized with these youth, she also wished the restaurant workers would make them go away. “I just feel bad for them,” she said. She did not, however, give them money. Pat and Steve, a couple from California, marveled at the litter and garbage in public places and wondered, “Don’t we [meaning tourists in general] spend enough money to clean this place up?”

The strongest reaction was from Ben, a 22 year old economics student from Philadelphia. He had come to Oaxaca to conduct an independent project on private money lenders, which he hoped would help him get accepted into graduate school. A self-described “hardcore capitalist and free market advocate”, he noted that Mexico had embraced many of the economic changes advocated by the international community, but still had an extremely high level of poverty and inequality. While Ben was not sure why this was, and admitted poverty should have decreased in the region based on the steps already taken, he ultimately declared that the Mexican government must be doing something wrong. That he could not see how Mexico and Oaxaca could end the poverty, and that his education in economics had not supplied him with an understanding why this persisted, seemed to bother him a great deal. In the end, he simply felt that needed more economic growth.

Economic growth based on tourism is very possible for Oaxaca. The state is already significantly positioned as a primary tourism destination for national and international tourists. During their visits, 80% of the tourists that I met were only traveling in Oaxaca. Some had chosen to include destinations beyond the state. Two tourists were going to Puebla (a neighboring state), another two to Mexico City, and one to Chiapas. About 90% were focused specifically on traveling in Oaxaca. That Oaxaca was the primary destination for those I interviewed reinforces notions that the area is not simply a stopover to other places. More than just a few tourists travel to Mexico specifically to see Oaxaca. These “Oaxacan Tourists,” visitors targeting Oaxaca specifically, are not those just killing time between other destinations. This specialized segment of the tourism market should encourage the state to specifically target the Oaxacan Tourists and increase international arrivals. This concept is important since international tourists spend more money than domestic tourists from other parts of Mexico (van den Berghe 1994). As international tourists comprise only 15% of the incoming visitors to Oaxaca, a great deal of economic growth remains a viable possibility (SECTUR 2009).

However, it is not just more growth in tourism that Oaxaca needs. As noted, 40% of the economy in Oaxaca is related to tourism. Even before the decline in tourism started in 2006 the state has remained in a persistent state of poverty. As such, it is hard to argue that tourism has been a boon to many of the residents of Oaxaca, or that greater revenue would suddenly find its way into the hands of those residents.

Why tourism revenue, or revenue in general, does not impact the lives of the majority of Oaxacans is a difficult issue to tackle. A number of the Oaxacans I met placed the blame squarely on corruption among elected officials. This, they felt, was responsible for many of the economic difficulties that people face. According to many, the money needed to develop a better infrastructure, and therefore build a more diversified economy, is available. However, the money is embezzled or goes missing and the current situation of marginalization continues. I was assured this is found at level of government. How this situation could be changed, if such corruption is so common place, I something I do not know. Other Oaxacans felt that NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) and other international trading and competition had let to more poverty, not less. Despite that, the general feeling was not that other nations were to blame for the country's problems. Rather, the belief persists that Mexico has the resources to help themselves, but fails to utilize them properly. As such, my other major policy recommendation would be for the government to examine ways that more citizens, especially those in the most critical financial need, could benefit from tourism revenue.

APPENDIX: TOURISM QUESTIONNAIRE

Tourism Questionnaire: Oaxaca, Mexico. Summer 2009

Name: Age: Gender: Nationality: Occupation: Spanish?

Traveling with:

1. What kind of trip is this? (On a guided tour, independent travel, business trip, school trip, research trip)?
2. In the last 2 years how many times have you traveled internationally and where?
3. Have been to Mexico or Oaxaca before? When and for how long?
4. How long are you in Oaxaca?
5. Was Oaxaca your primary destination?
6. Where else have/are you traveling on this trip?
7. What are your impressions of Mexico?
8. Were the people you have met what you expected?
9. Oaxaca has been in the news media a lot lately for a variety of reasons. Had you heard any of these stories prior to planning your visit here? Which ones?
10. Did you specifically follow any of those media stories about Oaxaca? Which? How did these affect your trip?
11. What made you choose Oaxaca as a destination?
12. Do you feel safe in Oaxaca? In Mexico?
13. Can I ask what range your trip will cost?
 - a. Less than \$3000
 - b. \$3100 to \$5000
 - c. \$5100 to \$7000
 - d. More than \$7000

Additional Comments?

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