Digital Popular Communication

Lessons on Information and Communication Technologies for Social Change from the Immigrant Rights Movement

BY SASHA COSTANZA-CHOCK

The spring of 2011 saw a wave of popular, democratic uprisings in countries across the Middle East and North Africa. Massive, mostly nonviolent protests toppled long-standing dictatorships in Tunisia and Egypt and created intense pressure for democratic reforms in Algeria, Syria, Jordan, Yemen, Bahrain, the Palestinian Territories, and beyond. Social media, especially Facebook and Twitter, were widely used by activists to document and circulate their stories of social struggle. Everyday people and citizen journalists produced rich feeds of photos, video, audio, and text from the streets that were picked up by satellite networks (especially Al Jazeera), remediated and amplified through global news flows, and broadcast back into the television sets of households across the region and around the world. The Arab Spring also generated a firestorm of discussion and debate about the role of social media in mass mobilization. Many heralded the liberatory power of networked information and communication technologies (ICTs), while others (such as magazine writer Malcolm Gladwell) argued that their role was overemphasized. Others (such as researcher and blogger Evgeny Morozov) pointed to the ways that authoritarian states are quickly learning how to use the net as a powerful tool to uncover, trace, and repress dissident networks.

The implications of the appropriation of corporate social media sites for democratic mass mobilization in the Middle East will surely be studied and debated for years to come. Yet many of the same scholars and commentators so keen to weigh in on these events have remained largely silent when it comes to exploring the ways that social movements in the United States have adopted and adapted social media as tools for organizing and political mobilization. This article opens a window onto some of the most innovative uses of ICTs for civic engagement and networked activism, as developed by the immigrant rights movement in the United States. After a brief overview of the context of this dynamic social movement, we discuss several specific examples, then consider the lessons they hold for the broader use of ICTs to strengthen civic engagement and democracy.

Immigrant Rights Movement

In the spring of 2006, the immigrant rights movement burst into national consciousness with the largest wave of mass marches and demonstrations in the history of the United States of America. Millions of people from working-class immigrant families, mostly Latino/a, took the streets in cities and towns across the country to protest against H.R. 4437 (the Sensenbrenner Bill). H.R. 4437 would have criminalized 11 million undocumented immigrants and included penalties for those who helped them. The movement's demands soon broadened to encompass an end to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids; a fair and just reform of federal immigration policy; and, more broadly, respect, dignity, and recognition by Anglo society that immigrant workers are human beings regardless of documentation status. Sensenbrenner was defeated, and much of the grassroots energy of the immigrant rights movement was incorporated into Barack Obama's 2008 electoral campaign, which even adopted an English-language translation of the immigrant rights movement's main slogan (¡Si Se Puede!/Yes We Can!).

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However, at the same time, right-wing talk radio, blogs, and cable news commentators fueled a nativist backlash, too often characterized by racist language. Anti-immigration groups took advantage of this climate to promote a series of state-level initiatives, such as Arizona's anti-immigration bill SB1070. The Obama administration failed to move comprehensive immigration reform forward but allocated increased resources to border militarization, implemented the "Secure Communities" program that requires local law enforcement to forward all fingerprints to be checked against a federal database (over objections by local police forces), and increased detention and deportation to historic heights of 300,000 to 400,000 people per year.

Despite the Challenges: Innovative ICT Use by the Immigrant Rights Movement

Given the political and socioeconomic context, the immigrant rights movement might seem an unlikely place to look for innovative ICT use. In addition to political marginality and invisibility, or outright hostility, from the mass media, working-class immigrant communities face extreme digital access inequality. We know from local, state, and national surveys that foreign-born, low-wage immigrant workers have less access to ICTs than any other demographic group. Scholars like Eszter Hargittai, an associate professor at Northwestern University, have documented the ways in which ICTs, like other technologies, tend to reproduce structural inequalities along intersecting lines of gender, class, race/ethnicity, age, and geography. Despite these challenges, the immigrant rights movement has developed a rich repertoire of tactics to use ICTs to engage immigrant communities and their allies, mobilize supporters, generate debate, raise funds, take direct action, and much more. This article focuses on three examples: the DREAM activist network, the Basta Dobbs campaign, and VozMob (Mobile Voices).

Undocumented and Unafraid: DREAM Activists' Networked Organizing

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in the year 2000, more than 2.5 million youth under the age of 18 were undocumented. Most of them were brought to the United States as children by their parents, either without documentation or on temporary visas that have since expired. In California, there are about 26,000 undocumented youth; nationwide, each year about 65,000 undocumented students graduate from U.S. high schools. Without access to federal or state financial aid, many are unable to go on to universities even if they are otherwise prepared to do so; they are also denied access to drivers' licenses and are not allowed to participate in the formal labor market. Over the last decade, undocumented students, along with their families, communities, and supporters, have organized an increasingly visible campaign to gain access to higher education, become eligible for drivers' licenses, achieve the right to work legally, and normalize their status as U.S. citizens.

In California, undocumented students have organized around several key legislative initiatives. Assembly Bill 540 (AB540), which became law in 2001, did not provide access to financial aid but did allow undocumented students to qualify to pay in-state tuition fees for the California university system. The federal Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act would authorize temporary legal residence for young people who were brought to the country without documents before they were fifteen. Under the DREAM Act, high school graduates would be allowed to apply for up to six years of legal residence. Those who graduate from a two-year college, complete at least two years of a four-year degree, or serve in the military for at least two years during this six-year time period would become eligible for permanent residence. After organizing for over a decade, by December 2010, DREAM activists managed to build a majority of bipartisan support for the DREAM Act in the Senate but fell five votes short of the sixty needed to overcome a filibuster. (As of this writing, the federal DREAM Act has been reintroduced as part of the strategy of the Obama 2012 campaign.)

The new generation of immigrant youth organizers that has grown up around the DREAM Act

has appropriated social media and other networked communication tools to build their movement, gain greater visibility, and push for the passage of the act and the ratification of state-level legislation across the country. They make extensive use of dedicated sites, blogs, social networking sites (initially MySpace and later Facebook), YouTube, Twitter, and text messaging (see http://www.dreamactivist.org, http://twitter.com/DREAMact). DREAM Act organizers are nearly all students: immigrants to the United States, but "digital natives." One student DREAM Act organizer I interviewed had this to say:

> With Underground Undergrads we actually have our own blog. We're constantly updating on the legislation, where it's at, what students are doing on other campuses, just immigration in general.

She described the origin of what is now a nationwide blogger network:

> That's a really interesting story. It actually was a small group of students that came together and realized the power of media, and felt like they could contribute to the DREAM Act and to issues of undocumented students through a blog. So they feature a lot of stories of students, they have YouTube videos and are updating people about the issue. It's also a place where they conduct polls, things like that. That started as something small but spread because this issue obviously affects a lot of students nationwide.

Underground Undergrads was created when an intern decided to put together a blog. (The group already had a student publication about undocumented students.) "We thought this would be a good way to update people but also to keep students that we talk to on a regular basis through high school presentations," says the organizer.

The DREAM Act students who participate in the Underground Undergrad blog network began as essentially a zero-budget, ad hoc project. Yet in comparison with some larger, better-resourced immigrant rights organizations that invest a great deal of resources, time, and energy in attempts to develop a top-down online public relations strategy, the visibility, size, and impact of the DREAM Act campaign has grown rapidly. This can be attributed

in large part not just to the natural technological skills of young people but to the Underground Undergrad's approach to digital media literacy and networked culture. DREAM Act organizers systematically share media making and communication skills across their network in both formal and informal workshops and online venues.

DREAM activists not only use standard online tools (blogs and social networking services) to organize but have also been at the leading edge of innovation in adapting cutting-edge digital tools to use in their struggle. For example, DREAM activists used popular live-streaming sites like Ustream and livestream.com to transmit, from their mobile phones, real-time streaming video of sit-ins in the offices of five U.S. senators in July 2010—the first time that sit-ins in a congressional office have ever been live-streamed to the Web. DREAM activists also adopt and remix media strategies from other social movements; for example, in 2010 they launched a nationwide campaign for visibility under the banner "undocumented and unafraid." Drawing from the media-savvy strategies and video vernaculars of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) movement, undocumented youth have begun to publicly declare their immigration status at events, protests, and across the social Web in YouTube videos, on Facebook, and via Twitter. (The cross-pollination of social media tactics from the LGBT movement is no accident: Many DREAM activists also identify with that movement.)

In the context of a broader conversation about how to use social media for civic engagement, one key aspect of DREAM Act online organizing is its participatory approach to digital culture. Rather than attempt to produce a homogenous message and convince others to disseminate it, DREAM activists appropriate commercial blogging and video platforms to create spaces for conversation by students across the country who occupy similar positions and share political goals. They focus on featuring the stories of other undocumented students and on sharing information about the legislative process across the network, and they use social media spaces to build a conversation, shared identity, and participatory strategy. In addition, the media strategy of DREAM activists is by no means an online-only phenomenon: rather, it is tightly linked to print publications,

appearances on Spanish-language commercial radio and television shows, and face-to-face presentations in high schools, at community centers, and in other spaces across the country.

Basta Dobbs: Presente.org's Cross-Platform Strategy

The importance of making and circulating social change media across platforms was also crucial to the success of Presente.org's Basta Dobbs campaign. In 2009, immigrant rights groups, Latino civil rights organizations, celebrities, and local community-based groups across the country came together in a national campaign to remove anti-immigrant commentator Lou Dobbs from CNN. The campaign was coordinated by Presente.org (at the time a project of Citizen Engagement Labs) and was designed to use sophisticated online organizing methods developed by MoveOn.org but applied to the Latino/a community. The Basta Dobbs campaign deployed a sophisticated transmedia strategy across the Web, mobile phones, and broadcast radio, and rapidly built a database of tens of thousands of e-mail addresses and phone numbers. Participants were encouraged to write and call network executives, and they did so by the thousands. The campaign ended in November 2009, when Lou Dobbs announced the early end of his CNN contract, and organizers declared a major victory.

One activist I interviewed emphasized that the campaign's success was largely due to the combination of broadcast radio with mobile and social media:

> The Basta Dobbs campaign was targeted at engaging Latino/a activists first, and the Latino/a community more broadly. Organizers appeared on Spanish-language radio and television, and asked listeners and viewers to sign up to the campaign by sending an SMS: They had a text messaging hub, through their Web site, so they wanted everybody to sign up on that. Jet Blue was offering $600 flights, and you could travel anywhere you wanted to in the country, so they took advantage of that and they did this country tour. And they went on all the radio spots, all the TV shows, and they were able to build up a list within a little over a month, maybe two months,

about a hundred thousand people to join Basta Dobbs.

The Basta Dobbs campaign illustrates the importance of the relationship between broadcast media and social media. It was only through a nationwide speaking tour, organized in partnership with local community-based organizations and broadcast by local radio stations, that Basta Dobbs organizers were able to quickly build a critical mass of hundreds of thousands of people willing to sign up to receive SMS (Short Message Service, or text messaging) action alerts for the campaign. SMS alerts not only called on people to sign petitions, call CNN headquarters, and write letters to the editor but also invited them to physical protests at CNN offices around the country. The campaign itself, because of the rapid growth of its SMS list, the high number of views on its professionally produced videos, and the real-world mobilizations coordinated by local grassroots groups augmented by SMS action alerts from the national campaign, quickly became a story that both Spanish-language and English-language mass media outlets were interested in covering.

Effective transmedia organizing thus built a narrative around the momentum of the movement itself, even while providing multiple points of connection to further engagement. In this case, people initially became aware of the Basta Dobbs campaign via local radio or SMS, later through social networking sites, and, once the campaign was growing, via mass media. The most effective use of ICTs for social change thus occurs in coordination with print and broadcast media and with real-world actions.

VozMob: Participatory Design to Appropriate Mobile Phones for Popular Communication

VozMob (short for *Voces Móviles*/Mobile Voices) is a community-based digital media project based

in Los Angeles. According to the project's mission statement (http://vozmob.net/en/about):

> Mobile Voices (VozMob) is a platform for immigrant and/or low-wage workers in Los Angeles to create stories about their lives and communities directly from cell phones. VozMob appropriates technology to create power in our communities and achieve greater participation in the digital public sphere.

VozMob.net features digital stories by day laborers, household workers, high school students, and other community correspondents. Stories range across a wide spectrum of genres, from documentation of mobilizations and political struggles, to cultural content such as poetry, painting, and music, to interviews with community members, to personal opinion and analysis. VozMob.net was built using the popular free and open source content management system Drupal, customized around content creation using phones that are most accessible to working-class communities: not smart phones with apps and data plans, but inexpensive, often prepaid, basic, and feature (camera) phones. Stories can be published via phone calls, text messages, and picture messages. Over the last two years, the project has been covered by local and national press (*La Opinion*, CNN, Telemundo), received a major grant from the MacArthur/HASTAC Digital Media and Learning Competition, and was recognized internationally with the 2010 United Nations World Summit Award for Mobile Content Related to Empowerment. VozMob was developed using participatory design and popular education methods, in a collaboration between the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism at the University of Southern California and the Institute of Popular Education of Southern California (IDEPSCA). IDEPSCA is a community-based nonprofit, founded in 1984, that works to create a more humane and democratic society by responding to the needs and problems of disenfranchised people through leadership development and educational programs based on the Popular Education methodology of Brazilian educator Paolo Freire. Currently, IDEPSCA is active in areas including education, economic development, health access, media justice and popular communication, and workers' rights. Among other programs, IDEPSCA has a contract with the City of Los Angeles to run multiple day labor centers at sites across

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the city, trains and certifies day laborers and household workers in environmentally sustainable gardening through the Native Green Gardening Coop, runs an early childhood education program called *Aprendamos*, and is an anchor organization for the National Domestic Workers Alliance. IDEPSCA also has a long history of supporting popular communication projects, including radio programs, short videos, and a newspaper called *Jornada XXII*, written by and for day laborers and household workers.

The group of workers that creates this newspaper is the same group that has been involved in the collaborative design of the VozMob platform over the last three years. They meet regularly on Tuesday evenings at IDEPSCA's main office, where they analyze and discuss stories from the mass media and from the VozMob site, develop shared knowledge, participate in site design, and create curriculum and training materials. For many, one of the most important reasons for participation in the project has been to fight the hate speech against immigrant workers that has been circulating widely online.

One community organizer at IDEPSCA says that the purpose of VozMob is to "empower them to share their story. To counter anti-immigrant voices. . . . When you Google day laborers, it comes out as if they are criminals. We want to be able to counter that. It's a political goal." The VozMob project has developed an intentional approach to digital media literacy that links it explicitly to struggles over representation, to community organizing, and to the long history of popular communication within social movements. In addition to the VozMob Web site, software, workshops, and curriculum, the project participants regularly produce research, reports, and reflections that document the difficult but rewarding process of popular education, technology appropriation, and collaborative work. Of course, participatory design can be a slow, complicated, and difficult process. Power inequalities between

different participating groups—software developers, university researchers, funders, and community-based organizations—cannot be erased by good intentions and often may produce tension, erode trust, undermine participatory processes, and generate difficult challenges. The project participants regularly produce research, reports, and reflections that document the difficult but rewarding process of popular education, technology appropriation, and collaborative design.

Maria de Lourdes González Reyes, one of the most active VozMob community correspondents and herself a household worker, has this to say about the project:

> We have done some of the work of modern storytellers sharing different stories of the common and community immigrant life, especially Hispanics. How do they work? How do they do it? How do they face challenges each day?

> Mobile Voices is a window of universal knowledge that connects the world of those who are silent with others who have the opportunity to introduce themselves to the cybernetic universe. The technological development that allows human stories to be told, stories of happiness for life, of each person's struggle as they cross borders for a better life, but stories that have remained silent due to historic conditions. These are human stories of daily struggles, but told with the certainty that tomorrow will be better, since today they work hard to demonstrate the invincible spirit to achieve a better life together.

Currently, VozMob is in the process of developing new affiliates—other community-based organizations from across Los Angeles and around the country that share similar missions and visions and that are interested in working with their own membership to develop critical digital media literacies through popular education and collaborative design.

Conclusions

As we have seen, some of the most innovative uses of ICTs for civic engagement and social change come not from professionals in the digital media industry or in government but from social movement participants, organizations, and networks. What are some of the key lessons to be learned from ICT use within the immigrant rights movement, lessons that might be applied more broadly by those who seek to harness communication technologies for social change?

Organic Innovation

The DREAM activists teach us that innovative ICT use for civic engagement can emerge organically from the context of community organizing. Social movement allies, funders, and city governments should support movement-led strategies of ICT adoption. Necessity is the mother of invention, and there is a great deal of digital innovation taking place at the grassroots. When it comes to effective appropriation of digital media for social change, rather than look to outside digital media professionals or "experts" for advice on how to use ICTs for civic engagement in marginalized communities, it may be more fruitful to begin by listening to voices from those communities themselves.

Cross-Platform Strategy

The Basta Dobbs campaign teaches us that the most successful use of ICTs for civic engagement takes place across multiple platforms. Cross-platform or transmedia strategy is thus much more important than looking for a killer app or silver ICT bullet to solve a community's information and communication needs. To generate widespread visibility and support for social change, it is necessary to circulate social change messages across the whole mediascape, including increasingly diverse print and broadcast media outlets (in this case, Spanish-language radio, print, and television), as well as across the social Web and via mobile phones. It also teaches us that all of these media platforms are most effective when connected to a real-world community that is willing to organize locally and participate in face-to-face actions.

Community-Driven Design

The VozMob project teaches us that new tools can be built and codesigned together with the communities that will be using them to organize, develop local leadership, and strengthen civic engagement. Community-based design may take more time and requires a great deal of investment in trust building between the various participants, but the payoff is

potentially great. Starting with a bright idea and trying to convince a community to adopt it often fails; including the community in the design process not only produces more useful tools, it is much more likely to result in community buy-in and ownership, and, ultimately, more capacity for civic engagement.

We should therefore actively seek ways to support codesign, or participatory design methods, in order to develop innovative tools and practices that can meet the needs of community-based organizations and those they work with. In addition, the VozMob process urges us to consider that wherever possible, tools and platforms for civic engagement should be built on free/open source software rather than in the closed silos of proprietary platforms. Using free and open source software connects ICTs for civic engagement to the worldwide network of free and open source software developers and ensures that tools can easily be extended, reused, and adapted to local circumstances. In a similar way, using creative commons licenses for digital social change content makes that content more easily accessible, more spreadable across the Web, and more likely to have an impact.

Security and Privacy

Finally, although we did not focus on this area in detail here, it is important to emphasize that privacy and security concerns about digital media and ICTs that apply to everyone are especially salient for immigrant communities that face a daily reality of repression, detention, and deportation. With state-by-state anti-immigration legislation and the Department of Homeland Security moving quickly to override local police department objections to the Secure Communities program, immigrant communities have good reason to be wary of the double-edged nature of using digital media for social movement activity. Geodata captured without user consent from mobile phones, personal digital traces left across social media sites, and the increasing capacity of powerful commercial and state actors to aggregate and analyze data about personal networks and political activity have the potential to harm all those who organize for structural change against powerful embedded interests.

Begin by Listening

ICTs and social media can be powerful tools for civic engagement, community organizing, and social justice. The surest path to the effective appropriation of these tools is to support grassroots innovators, connect social media to traditional print and broadcast strategies, and engage in community-driven design. Most important, we can begin by listening. In that spirit, consider the words of day laborer and VozMob community correspondent Manuel Mancia:

> Being a member of the VozMob project has been a very important experience for me since I have learned to develop my skills to transmit my ideas and points of view through the most immediate tool, in this case the cell phone; and helping to teach others a new form of community communication. Our focus will continue to be to create a positive and effective voice among our people so that we no longer live in silence. As for our future, it is very important, because using our mechanism, tools, and knowledge, we will reach every community in the world, involving youth and adults who want to be part of this new method of communication based on popular education.

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