

SE VE, SE SIENTE: TRANSMEDIA MOBILIZATION IN THE
LOS ANGELES IMMIGRANT RIGHTS MOVEMENT

by

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A Dissertation Presented to the
FACULTY OF THE USC GRADUATE SCHOOL
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA
In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
(COMMUNICATION)

August 2010

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Christine Schweidler, my partner, best friend, true home,
and companion. I love you.

PREVIEW

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I could never have completed this dissertation without the love, help, and support of my partner, Christine Schweidler. She read and edited numerous proposals, drafts, and chapters, guided me past bouts of paralysis, and helped me sharpen and refine my arguments. In the remote mountains of Northern California, the crowded streets of Saigon, and on the shores of Southwestern México, somehow she always found a way to provide encouragement, reassurance, and perspective.

My parents, Carol Chock, Paul Mazzarella, Peter Costanza, and Barbara Zimbel, have always inspired me to dream of a better world and to find a way to reach for that dream. They all encouraged me to complete the Ph.D., and they were right. I am truly blessed to be able to count on all of them, and on my sisters and brother, Larissa, Kate, and Brian.

I am deeply grateful to the members of my dissertation committee. Manuel Castells helped me formulate the project and design the research, and provided valuable feedback on multiple drafts of each chapter. I have learned a great deal from him about how to develop and use theory within social movement research. Not least, I have benefited from his sense of humor and optimism in the face of too-often depressing data about the crises that humanity visits upon itself and planet Earth. Larry Gross has been a mentor and friend since we first met at the University of Pennsylvania, and has constantly encouraged me to grow as an engaged scholar. He has been impossibly generous with his time, and the dissertation owes a huge debt to his willingness to engage in ad-hoc meetings to discuss broad themes, minutiae, or really, anything under the sun. Steve Anderson inspired me to develop a practice of scholarly multimedia, and to do so even if it means forging ahead

while the University plays catch-up. When they finally do, it will be because of his tireless efforts to drag them into the 21st century.

Ivan Tcherepnin taught me how to listen to the universe, and first turned me on to the political economy of communication. Silke Roth introduced me to social movement studies, Dorothy Kidd gave me hope that scholars could stay committed to struggle, and Dee Dee Halleck inspired me with hand held visions. Shivaani Selvaraj showed me the power of organizing in community.

This project owes much to everyone who has been part of Indymedia, where I learned about *comunicación popular* and Free Software; to the campaign for Communication Rights in the Information Society, where I learned about the rich history of ICT activism; and to the visionaries of the Media Justice network, who kept me focused on how all of this can be part of a broader transformative vision.

USC Annenberg has been an amazing environment in which to work, learn, and grow. The faculty and doctoral student body - especially my cohort - is full of brilliant, supportive people. Thanks especially to Travers Scott, Deborah Hanan, Joyee Chatterjee, Jade Miller, Lauren Movius, Steven Rafferty, Don Waisanen, Drew Margolin, Cindy Shen, Helen Wang, Jae Eun Chung, and Shawna Kelly. Professor Sarah Banet-Weiser helped me at an early stage of this project and in the quals process, and helped me gain greater depth of theoretical understanding. Professor François Bar guided me, hopefully with some degree of success, towards conceptual precision. Jonathan Aronson created a richly interdisciplinary space at the Annenberg Center, where initial seeds of this project were planted. Holly Willis and everyone at the Institute for Multimedia Literacy created a wonderfully supportive space for my own praxis of digital media and scholarship. I am deeply grateful to Dean Ernest J. Wilson, who supported my work, made me approach my

research topic from new directions, and challenged me to think more broadly about the policy implications.

My ability to work on this dissertation was supported at different stages by research assistantships with Manuel Castells, Ernest J. Wilson, François Bar, Holly Willis, and Jonathan Aronson, as well as by grants from the HASTAC/MacArthur Foundation Digital Media and Learning Competition, the University of Southern California Graduate School Fellowship in Digital Scholarship, the Social Science Research Council Large Collaborative Grants program, and an Annenberg Center for Communication Graduate Fellowship.

Ana and Michael Prosetti helped with transcription.

I have to end with heartfelt thanks to all those in the movement community who shared valuable time, skills, insights, stories, and friendship with me during the last few years, starting with Virginia, Cristina, Cruz, Miguel, Consuelo, and everyone who participated in *El Proyecto de Radio / Radio Tijeras*. Thanks also to simmi gandi, Delia Herrera, Luz Elena Henao, Kimi Lee, and all the incredible organizers at the Garment Worker Center. Madelou Lourdes Gonzales, Manuel Mancía, Adolfo Cisneros, Crispín Jimenez, Marcos & Diana, Alma Luz, Ranferi, and all the community *corresponsales* of VozMob.net: may your stories travel far and wide to melt the icy hearts of the *anti-immigrantes*. I have no doubt it will happen, thanks to the tireless efforts of Amanda Garces, Natalie Arellano, Raul Añorve, Marlom Portillo, Neidi Dominguez, and the whole IDEPSCA extended family, who constantly fight for justice while always remaining grounded by love. Carmen Gonzales, Melissa Brough, Cara Wallis, Ben Stokes, François Bar, Mark Burdett, Veronica Paredes, Brenda Aguilera, Troy Gabrielson, and everyone else who has been part of VozMob, I feel privileged to have had the chance to try to develop a practice of community engaged research and action together with you. Danny

Park, Eileen Ma, and Joyce Yang at KIWA, thank you for sharing your space for the CineBang! screening series and for welcoming Chris and I into the KIWA community. Odilia and Berta at FIOB, and Max Mariscal and everyone from APPO-LA, keep the *tequio* strong. Social justice has never tasted better than *tamales y atole* outside the Mexican consulate.

As I prepare to defend this dissertation, the immigrant rights movement is mobilizing across the country against SB1070, a harsh new anti-immigrant law signed by Arizona Governor Jan Brewer. The Obama administration has signaled its opposition to the law, and indicated that it plans to introduce a new ‘comprehensive immigration reform’ bill into Congress in 2010, but the bill begins with massive spending for the deadly political theater of new border walls, expensive surveillance technologies, and more border patrol agents. I only hope that this research may prove useful in the long struggle for freedom of movement, justice for all human beings, and respect for the planet on which we live. *¡Si Se Puede!*

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ABSTRACT

This project examines transmedia mobilization in the immigrant rights movement in Los Angeles. Utilizing semi-structured interviews, participatory workshops, and rich media archives, this analysis provides an in-depth view of the communication strategies, tools, and skills used by immigrant workers, students, and movement allies of many different backgrounds who live, struggle, and organize in streets, homes, workplaces, and community centers throughout the city. The research employs Communication for Social Change methods to help movement actors articulate their media and technology goals, analyze their most important obstacles, and develop a stronger praxis of digital media literacy. The goal of this project is to understand the conditions under which social movements successfully use networked communication to strengthen movement identity, win political and economic victories, and transform consciousness. The key findings of this analysis suggest that effective use is possible when the media opportunity structure provides openings, movement formations engage in transmedia mobilization, the movement develops a praxis of digital media literacy, and movement formations shift from top-down structures of communicative practice to horizontal, participatory structures that include their social base. The project contributes to social movement theory and practice as well as to the political economy of communication.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“¡Se ve! ¡Se siente! ¡El pueblo esta presente!” (“You can see it, you can feel it, the people are here!”) The sound of thousands of voices chanting in unison booms and echoes down the canyon walls formed by office buildings, worn down hotels, garment sweatshops, and recently renovated lofts along Broadway in downtown Los Angeles. The date is May 1st, 2006, and millions of people from working class immigrant families, mostly Latino/a, are pouring into the streets at the peak of a mobilization wave that began in March and swept rapidly through towns and cities across the United States. The trigger for the mass mobilization was the draconian Sensenbrenner bill, H.R. 4437, a Republican proposal to Congress which would have criminalized 11 million undocumented people as well as those who work with them to provide education, health care, legal counsel, and other services. The movement’s demands soon expanded beyond stopping Sensenbrenner and grew to encompass an end to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids, fair and just immigration reform, and more broadly, respect, dignity, and recognition by Anglo society that immigrant workers are human beings.

Another chant begins to build: *“¡No somos cinco, no somos cien! ¡Prensa vendida, cuentenosenos bien!”* (“We aren’t five, we aren’t 100, sold-out press, count us well!”) The magnitude of the marches was unprecedented, and caught most sectors of the English language media by surprise. Major English language newspapers, TV, and radio networks, as well as blogs and online media, only belatedly acknowledged the sheer scale of the movement. Some of these outlets, in particular right-wing talk radio and Fox News, used the marches as an opportunity to launch xenophobic attacks against immigrant workers, filled with vitriolic language about “swarms” of “illegal aliens,” “anchor babies,” and

“diseased Mexicans.”¹ Lining the streets near City Hall, a forest of dishes and antennae bristle from the backs of TV network satellite trucks. As the crowd passes the Fox News truck, the *consigna* (chant) changes again, becoming simple and direct: “¡Mentirosos! ¡Mentirosos!” (“Liars! Liars!”)

For decades, modern social movements have aimed to capture media attention as a crucial component of their attempts to transform society. Those who marched over and over again during the spring of 2006 did so in large part to fight for increased visibility and voice in the political process, and they made explicit demands that the English language mass media accurately convey the movement’s size, message, and power. Yet during the last two decades, widespread changes in the communication system have deeply altered the relationship between social movements and the media. Following the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which eliminated national caps on media ownership and allowed a single company to own multiple stations in the same market, the broadcast industry was swept by a wave of consolidation.² Spanish-language radio and television stations, once localized to individual cities, built significant market share, attracted major corporate advertisers, and were largely integrated into national and transnational communication conglomerates.³ This process delinked Spanish broadcasters from local programming and advertisers, while simultaneously constructing new shared pan-Latino identities.⁴ In the 2006 mobilizations, Spanish language print, television, and radio stations participated directly in calling people to the streets, in a demonstration not only of the power of the Latino working class but also of the growing clout of commercial, ‘pan-Latino’ Spanish language media inside the United States. At the same time, the rise of social media, participatory journalism, and the

¹ Chavez, 2008; Huang, 2008

² McChesney, 1999

³ Albarran, 2007

⁴ Dávila, 2001

‘read/write web’⁵ provide new spaces for social movement actors to circulate their own struggles, and new real-time tactical tools for mobilization. Some movement actors, recognizing these changes and yet cognizant of the exclusion of large segments of their social base from the digital public sphere, are taking bold steps to expand their access to digital media tools and skills. They are also struggling to better integrate digital media into daily movement practices. Others, uncomfortable with the loss of message control, resist the opening of movement communication to a greater diversity of voices. This dissertation, based on three years of research and participation in the immigrant rights movement, explores these transformations in depth.

Genesis and goals of the project

The genesis of this project can be traced to the Southern side of an invisible line in the desert. At the Border Social Forum in Ciudad Juarez, México, between October 12th and 15th, 2006, almost one thousand activists and organizers from the U.S. and México gathered for three days to meet, share experiences, strategize, and build a stronger transnational activist network against the militarization of borders, for freedom of movement, and for immigrant rights.⁶ As a communication researcher and media activist with the Indymedia network,⁷ I connected with immigrant rights organizers who were enthusiastic about integrating new digital media tools and skills into their work. A few of these organizers were based in Los Angeles. After returning from the Forum, I became linked to the movement networks of which they were a part. Over the next few years, we worked together to help integrate digital media tools, skills, and strategies into the immigrant rights movement’s existing popular communication practices. This experience of

⁵ Gillmor, 2005

⁶ See <http://www.forosocialfronterizo.blogspot.com>

⁷ See www.indymedia.org

working hands-on within the movement provided the foundation for my understanding of the core issues addressed in this dissertation, and inspired me to undertake systematic research that might help movement participants, organizers, and scholars better understand the shifting relationship between the media system and social movements.

Both scholars and organizers recognize that media and communications have everywhere become increasingly central to social movement formation and activity.⁸ However, both scholarship and practice in this field have suffered from three basic shortcomings. First, most studies of social movements have focused exclusively on the mass media as the arena of public discourse, and tend to measure social movement outcomes by looking at articles in elite newspapers or sound bites in broadcast channels. Second, when scholars do turn their attention to social movements on the Internet, the spotlight on new communication technology often obscures the reality of everyday communication practices within social movements, which tend to be multimodal, cross-platform, and as we shall see, increasingly transmedia in nature. Third, the rise of the Internet as a key space for social movement activity cannot be fully theorized without sustained attention to persistent inequality in ICT access and digital media literacies. This project, then, aims to better understand the conditions under which social movements are able to effectively use networked communication to strengthen movement identity, win political and economic victories, and transform consciousness. It also examines the key barriers to realizing effective use. The site of research is Los Angeles, and the focus is the immigrant rights movement.

⁸ Downing, 2001; Gamson, 1995; Castells, 2007, 2009

Chapter overview

The following chapters are organized around the key concepts that emerged from interviews and action research within the immigrant rights movement. Chapter one, the introduction, provides an overview of my research approach, and chapter two describes the site, case and context of the research. Chapter three examines the *transformation of the media opportunity structure*. Chapter four looks more closely at *transmedia mobilization*. Chapter five unpacks the *praxis of digital media literacy*. Chapter six investigates the relationship between transmedia mobilization and *movement structure*. Each analytical chapter begins with a general theoretical framework, is developed with insights, examples, and case studies drawn from the immigrant rights movement in Los Angeles, and concludes with a summary of findings. Chapter three elaborates on the changing composition of the *media opportunity structure*⁹ as ethnic media gains power and reach while social media become an integral part of daily communication practices. Chapter four explores how social movement actors engage in transmedia storytelling¹⁰ across converged communication spaces shaped by the political economy of communication,¹¹ in practices that I call *transmedia mobilization*. Chapter five situates immigrant rights organizers' attempts to overcome persistent access inequality to digital media tools and skills among working class immigrants within a long view of the growth of literacy,¹² and connects the efforts of movement actors in L.A. to a larger *praxis of digital media literacy*. Chapter six employs the concept of *horizontalidad*,¹³ or horizontalism, to probe the relationship between transmedia mobilization and *movement structure*. The overarching theoretical framework is

⁹ Sampedro, 1997; Gamson, 1998; Ferree, 2002

¹⁰ Jenkins, 2003

¹¹ Mosco, 1996; Dyer-Witheford, 1999

¹² Williams, 1961

¹³ Sitrin, 2006

based on three larger bodies of work: social movement studies, the critical political economy of communication, and the social shaping of technology. The methodological approach is grounded in action research, specifically Communication for Social Change. I remain focused throughout on the core question: *under what conditions do social movements effectively use networked communication to strengthen movement identity, win political and economic victories, and transform consciousness?* Finally, the concluding chapter summarizes the research results and ends with a discussion of implications for the future of transmedia mobilization in the immigrant rights movement and beyond.

Research Approach

This study can be characterized as an action research investigation of the political economy of social movement media. This section posits the research questions, outlines the analytical framework, and notes the limitations of the research approach.

Research question

The primary research question addressed in this study is: *under what conditions do social movements effectively use networked communication to strengthen movement identity, win political and economic victories, and transform consciousness?* When I began this project, I worked from the following set of hypotheses about the preconditions for effective networked communication by social movements.

Effective use of networked communication for social movement outcomes is possible:

- *When the social base of the movement gains basic access to digital media tools and skills, and when these tools and skills become incorporated into daily life;*

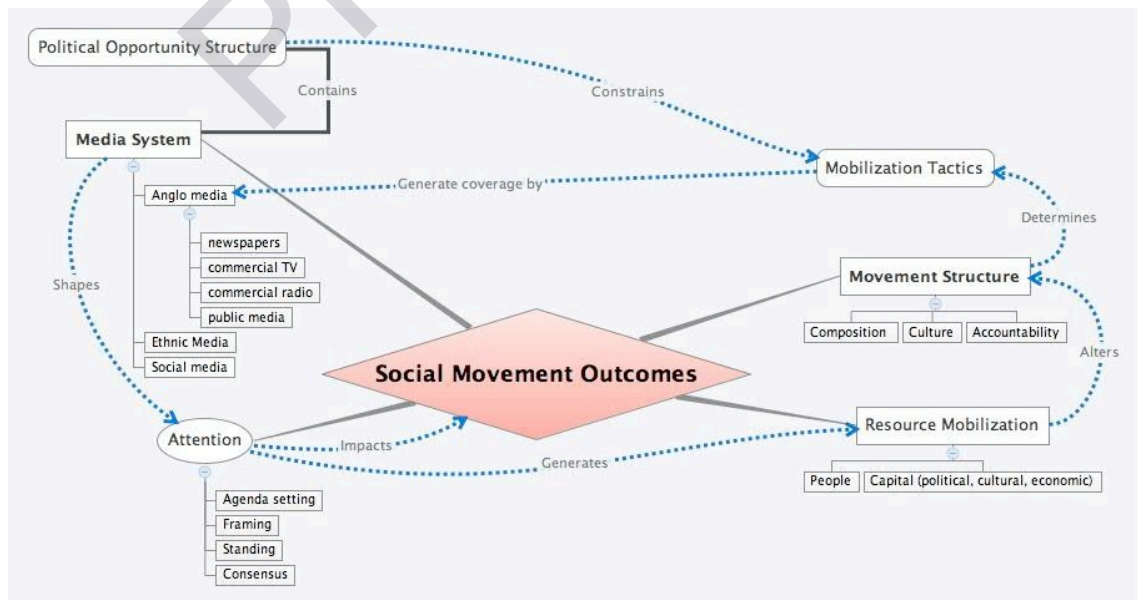
- *When movement actors develop a communication strategy that includes social media;*
- *When the movement adopts new tactics in the heat of crisis or mass mobilization;*
- *When the movement includes technology-literate activists who have specialized knowledge and skills;*
- *When the movement has access to sufficient resources;*
- *When movement actors shift from vertical communication practices (‘control the message’) to horizontal communication practices (‘engage in conversation’).*

The next section discusses the analytical framework.

Analytical Framework

The following figure presents my initial analytical model of the relationship between social movements and the media system:

Figure 1: Analytical model of social movements and media



In this model, social movements operate by mobilizing resources including people as well as political, cultural, and economic capital. Resource mobilization produces a movement that may be composed of various interested individuals, groups, organizations, institutions, and networks. The movement can be characterized by various forms of movement culture and by the existence of formal or informal accountability (governance) structures. The composition and culture of the movement heavily influence the mobilization tactics it deploys, during moments largely determined by the broader political opportunity structure. The primary goal of most mobilizations within this model is to put pressure on political decision makers through participation in the public sphere, which primarily means generating coverage in the mass media system. The media system may be theorized as more or less complex, especially as social media becomes more visible, but ultimately the goal is to create coverage in the most important newspapers and television channels, since this is the key to public attention and places pressure on decision makers. The broadcast media system generates attention, sets social and policy agendas, frames issues, and includes or excludes movement spokespeople by providing them with (or withholding) opportunities to speak, also called standing. Successful coverage by the media system thus produces social movement outcomes including political, cultural, and social change, and strengthens the movement since attention brings additional resources to the table. As we shall see, the dynamics of networked communication in the immigrant rights movement turn out to be somewhat different than this model would suggest.

In general, models that make strong predictive claims about social movement activity tend to find the ground beneath their feet washed away by the shifting sands of