

Transmedia Testimonio: Examining Undocumented Youth's Political Activism in the Digital Age

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Undocumented youth activists, otherwise known as DREAMers, have drawn attention for the ways they use and deploy new media in challenging anti-immigrant policies and making various claims to rights. In this article, I focus on “coming out” events wherein undocumented youth declare their undocumented legal status at protests and meetings and through social media, including digital videos, blogs, and podcasts. I refer to these events as forms of *transmedia testimonio* in which activists give accounts of their immigration experiences, reveal their legal status, and document their participation in civil disobedience. Through the concept of transmedia testimonio, I demonstrate how undocumented youth broaden the boundaries of public space beyond the confines of formal and state-sanctioned public spheres. By doing so, undocumented youth can use the testimonio to make claims to citizenship as new rights-bearing subjects, even if the state has not legitimized or recognized them as such. This article adds to the literature on how face-to-face activism interweaves with online activism, understanding media tactics from the vantage point of activists.

Keywords: activism, youth, undocumented immigrants, testimonio, transmedia organizing

Undocumented students' activism has been celebrated as the civil rights movement of our time (Perez, 2011).² Undocumented immigrant youth, commonly referred to as *DREAMers*, have adopted various protest strategies that draw vivid comparisons to the lunch-counter sit-ins and marches that characterized civil rights activism in the U.S. South, including staging civil disobedience, using confrontational tactics with authorities, and strategically deploying the narrative of the American Dream to

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² Critics have spoken out against this framing because it presumes that the issue of civil rights has been resolved.

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claim social and civil rights.³ Yet, while the civil rights movement is the benchmark against which other movements for social justice are often measured (Gladwell, 2010), undocumented youth have adapted these strategies within the context of networked communication, which merits renewed analysis.

In this article, I focus specifically on the coming-out event, wherein undocumented youth declare their undocumented legal status at protests and meetings and through social media, such as digital videos and podcasts.⁴ This strategy breaks with past strategies in immigrants' rights organizing in which activists would make their claims in more anonymous ways. The staging and transmission of the coming-out event primarily through social media has been used as a central strategy by youth-led social movement organizations. Coming out helps construct bonds of solidarity and collective identification while also mobilizing participants across geographies through networked communication. Through the concept of transmedia testimonio, this article emphasizes how the use of social media by undocumented students supplements on-the-ground organizing as part of an integrated social movement strategy.

I define *transmedia testimonio* as a personal narrative that represents a collective experience and that is shared across various media platforms.⁵ The concept draws from the theory and practice of *testimonio*, a form of auto-ethnography used by subaltern communities in Latin America to contest state power and abuse (Beverly, 2004; Yudice, 1991). The concept of transmedia testimonio captures how the coming-out event shared through various media platforms is not necessarily separate from other forms of activism. Rather, it forms part of a set of repertoires of contention that undocumented student organizations deploy. These organizations curate and stage transmedia testimonios to achieve various movement outcomes, including raised awareness and support for their direct action campaigns, personalization and humanization of the activists themselves, and documentation of the "truth" of arrest, immigrant detention, and deportation. These digital testimonios are used as a way for undocumented students to participate in counter public spaces where they can invent and circulate discourses and formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.⁶ By taking part and constructing these testimonios, these youth enact forms of political agency and contest their illegality. While participating in digital forms of testimonio is an effective way for individuals to connect to and construct a common identity with other movement participants, the transmedia testimonio is also deployed by youth-led grassroots organizations to produce counternarratives about their undocumented status and to provide meaning to seemingly disconnected and spontaneous instances of civil disobedience across the country. By examining the archives of transmedia testimonios, I illustrate how activists strategically use them to support their meticulously planned direct actions.

³ The term *DREAMer* is inspired by the legislation known as the DREAM Act, which is bipartisan legislation that would provide an opportunity for undocumented students with good moral character who have lived in the United States for a certain period to obtain legal status.

⁴ Coming out has been used widely by social movements that organize around queer bodies, including LGBTQ, fat positive, and disability community activists (Corbett, 1994; Kryola, 2005; LeBesco, 2004; Nelson, 2013; Saguy & Ward, 2011).

⁵ The concept of *narrative* as proposed by Labov and Waletzky (1997) is an account of a sequence of events in the order they occurred to make a point.

⁶ See Beltran (2015).

In Part 1 of this article, I expand on the current debates in the field, emphasizing the work of scholars that offers an ethnographic approach to the role of social media in social movements. In Part 2, I survey the emergence of DREAM activism in the context of increasing anti-immigrant and border-enforcement policies. In Part 3, I draw from specific case studies to illustrate the concept of transmedia testimonio. In the final section, I discuss the specific ways that youth-led organizations deploy the transmedia testimonio to unite disparate forms of direct action across the country under a common frame, which then makes these actions intelligible to a wider audience.

Part 1: The Role of Social Media in Collective Action

Canadian writer Malcolm Gladwell famously argued in a 2010 *New Yorker* article that digital activism is a type of “slacktivism” for a lazy generation and cannot compare to “real” civic actions such as protests and community volunteerism, which were most widely used by the civil rights movement and through which protesters took actual risks to engage in collective action. Similarly, Jodi Dean (2005) suggested that online engagement is a form of “communicative capitalism,” defined by a mode of communication that is depoliticizing, wherein people believe they are active by simply clicking on a button. Such “clicktivism” was described by Micah White (2010) as a passive model of activism, which uncritically embraces the ideology of marketing in which viral campaigns draw attention away from “genuinely radical movements.” Political passivity is the end result. Evhenyi Morozov warns that slacktivism is dangerous in that this is “feel good activism that has zero political or social impact” (2009, para. 2) but that simply creates an illusion of having a meaningful impact on the world without demanding anything more than joining a Facebook group.

Although these observations raise important questions—especially about the relationship between corporate and profit-driven commercial platforms and the maintenance of a healthy public sphere—there is evidence that, in fact, networked communication might provide unique opportunities for political participation, especially among youth. For example, Cohen, Kahne, Bowyer, Middaugh, and Rogowski (2012) argue that a new genre of politics has become increasingly more common today, especially among youth. They define this genre as “participatory politics,” which includes acts such as starting an online political group, circulating a blog about a political issue, or forwarding political videos to friends. Like traditional political groups, these acts address issues of public concern. The difference is that participatory acts are interactive and peer based and do not defer to elites or formal institutions. Instead, they are supported by digital or new media platforms that facilitate and amplify young people’s actions. In a 2012 national survey, Cohen (2012) found that 41% of youth participated in some form of online political engagement.

The positive outcomes of such studies are heralded by techno-optimists who proclaim a positive impact on democracy. Clay Shirky argues that “as more people adopt simple social tools, and as those tools allow increasingly rapid communication, the speed of group actions also increases” (2008, p. 161). The great benefit of this new wave of technologies is that it lowers transaction costs by reducing obstacles both to coordination and mobilization to collective action (Shirky, 2008). In an article published in *Foreign Affairs*, Shirky (2011) affirmed that “as the communication landscape gets denser, more complex, more

participatory, the networked population is gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action" (p. 29).

Unfortunately, techno-optimists have been criticized for overlooking the role that face-to-face organizing still plays. In his book *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism*, Paolo Gerbaudo (2012) warns against turning social media into a "fetish" of collective action, which refers to the tendency of mainstream media to endow social media with mystical qualities that serve only to obscure the work of the groups and organizers who actually use them. When this happens, Gerbaudo (2012) admonishes, the technovisionary discourse on social media reflects a neoliberal ideology incapable of understanding collective action except as the fleeting result of some sort of technological miracle that binds together egotistical individuals. It can also obscure the ways that social movement actors construct shared meanings, identities, and narratives (Johnston, 2009; Johnston & Klandermans, 1995; Polletta, 2009). Central to the transformation of contentious politics in the digital age is the increased role of personal action frames and digitally enabled action networks in which storytelling and personal narratives are particularly important for engaging a broader spectrum of the public (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Here is where social movement organizations come into play. Without activists willing to take the risk to share their stories and personal narratives, and without an organizational base to share their stories with, social media is rendered useless.

The emphasis on constructing shared meanings requires scholars to examine the local and institutional contexts in which social movement identities emerge. Here, I draw from Sasha Costanza-Chock's (2014) research on the immigrants' rights movement, Jeff Juris' (2012) work on Occupy, and Paolo Gerbaudo's (2012) analysis of contemporary activism. These scholars explore how face-to-face activism interweaves with online activism rather than whether new media use can or cannot predict mobilization. The redirecting of the question is more useful in understanding media tactics from the vantage point of activists.

In his analysis of Occupy in Boston, Juris (2012) underscores the importance of place-based activism. On a microlevel, he argues, place was important, as the occupations contested the sovereign power of the state to regulate and control the distribution of bodies in space. By appropriating and resignifying particular urban spaces such as public parks and squares as arenas for public assembly and democratic expression, Juris describes #Occupy encampments as "terrains of resistance."⁷ Juris cites the work of Marshall Ganz, who argued that the success of Occupiers succeeded by following a classic civil disobedience strategy: placing their bodies where they were not supposed to be. What is important here is that although social media might be a new technological platform, the actual repertoire of contention followed a history of direct action taken on by "urban squatters, indigenous communities, unemployed and landless workers, and direct-action activists" (Juris, 2012, p. 269). The most attention, however, was placed on the Occupy movement's accompanying slogan, "We are the 99 percent." It was one of the most celebrated examples of hashtag activism, prompting pundits to describe it as a social media movement (Fillion, 2014). In other words, the overemphasis on social media actually downplayed the importance of

⁷ This refers to both physical sites of contention involving myriad embodied spatial struggles with the police and symbolic sites of contention over the meaning of space.

on-the-ground organizing.

Paolo Gerbaudo avoids these pitfalls in his work. He argues that social media takes on the role of facilitation and coordination. Borrowing from the field of performance studies, Gerbaudo invokes the concept of a "choreography of assembly," which he defines as a process of symbolic construction of public space revolving around emotional "scene-setting" and "scripting" of participants' physical assembly (Gerbaudo, 2012). This practice is made visible in the use of social media to direct people toward specific protest events, to provide participants with suggestions and instructions about how to act, and to construct emotional narratives to sustain their coming together in public space. Gerbaudo's study challenges technodeterminist accounts that commonly frame a variety of contemporary social movements, including the immigrants' rights movement. During the mobilization of five million immigrant workers in the Gran Marchas of 2006—to oppose a draconian immigration bill passed by a Republican majority in the U.S. House of Representatives in December 2005—the headlines proclaimed that radio disc jockeys had played a leadership role in mobilizing the protests. Radio personalities such as DJ Eddie "El Piolin" Sotelo and El Cucuy, both of whom air regularly on a local channel in Los Angeles, became overnight celebrities. Alfonso Gonzales (2009), however, pointed to the sectors of community organizing work—including labor, church, and student groups, along with countless hours of meetings, conferences, press conferences, and lobbying and strategy sessions—that mobilized the largest mass protest in the United States. While the Spanish-language media, including television networks Univision, Telemundo, and Azteca America, provided a vital resource for disseminating the call for the mass mobilizations of 2006, the role of media needs to be understood within the context of decades of immigrants' rights organizing, the building of solidarity networks, and the emergence of a Latino public sphere.

In *Out of the Shadows, Into the Streets! Transmedia Organizing and the Immigrant Rights Movement*, Costanza-Chock (2014) offers a synthesis of local and place-based organizing and mediation in the immigrants' rights movement through a theory of transmedia organizing. Costanza-Chock articulates transmedia organizing as the creation of a narrative of social transformation across multiple media platforms involving the movement's base in participatory media making and linking attention directly to concrete opportunities for action. He argues that media activism and local organizing are not diametrically opposed. In fact, movement formations that use participatory media practices and engage their bases in media making may, in fact, be more effective. Whereas the end goal of corporate transmedia storytelling is to generate profits, transmedia organizing strengthens social movement identity, wins political and economic victories, and ultimately transforms the consciousness of broader publics. In other words, transmedia organizing is a strategy of contentious politics in which social movement actors aim to challenge and transform current relations of domination. In a recent exchange with Henry Jenkins (2015), Costanza-Chock was emphatic about moving beyond the platform-centric orientation of much work on the topic. In sum, this article starts by centering undocumented activists' political strategies and asking how activists use media to build the power of their movements.

Part 2: Theorizing Undocumented Youth Mediated Strategies through Transmedia Testimonio

In the context of anti-immigrant policies, immigrant youth have increasingly turned to social media tools to coordinate direct action, contest policies, and spread insider knowledge about the system of detention and deportation. On the morning that an electronic monitoring device was placed on his ankle, Matias Ramos, an undocumented youth and cofounder of United We Dream, turned to Twitter, posting a photo of himself and announcing that he had been given just two weeks to leave the country (Ramos, 2011). His story rapidly transmitted through a broad-based social media network connecting campus organizations, community groups, and allies, providing links to petitions and online donations. The attention on deportation by activists is a response to what scholars refer to as the “crimmigration” system, a term that alludes to the rapidly increasing criminalization of immigrant families (Stumpf, 2006). Since the 1980s, state policies have moved immigration into the realm of criminal law. In today’s regime, the threat of deportation has been invoked with unprecedented vigor (Kanstroom, 2007). The changing context of immigration policies represents a change in the structure of political opportunities for the immigrant rights movement as a whole. During the 2006 marches, students in particular emerged as immigrants’ rights leaders. The hope of passing the DREAM Act and the spirited opposition to draconian anti-immigrant legislation inspired the political participation and activism of undocumented youth in unprecedented numbers. Initially, student issues were not a prominent part of the immigrant rights movement’s broader agenda. Rather, many of the youth groups that were involved in the marches had to assert themselves and fight for inclusion. Whereas a sector of the organized immigrant rights movement focused on pursuing an electoral strategy—including voter and citizenship drives to increase Latino/a voter turnout in key states—undocumented youth emphasized civil disobedience as a strategy. Questioning the pace of change, national coalitions that emphasized direct action and youth leadership emerged.

A central part of these new strategies was the insistence on coming out as an act of political resistance. In an open letter published by undocumented youth activists in 2010, DREAMers refer to this exact strategy. They state,

while we have been caught in a paralyzing stranglehold of inactivity across the country, we were told that the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act, or CIRA, was still possible. Yet we continued to endure ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] raids . . . we stopped waiting . . . We organized ourselves and created our own strategy, used new tactics . . . At a moment when hope seemed scarce . . . We declared ourselves UNDOCUMENTED AND UNAFRAID! (Zamorano, N.D., Perez, J., Meza, N., Gutierrez, J. (2010, para. 4–5)⁸

Throughout 2009 and 2010, youth activists rallied around these coming-out events. Led by queer-identified activists who were also fighting for gay equality, undocumented youth organized sit-ins at

⁸ Two of the youth who crafted the letter were queer-identified and had participated in other forms of social justice organizing particularly around gay equality. For an analysis of intersectional organizing amongst LGBTQ youth in the immigrants’ rights movement, see also (Terriquez, 2015).

congressional offices, hunger strikes, marches, and symbolic graduations, while amplifying their voices through the sophisticated use of blogs, Facebook, YouTube, and other social media.⁹ Using the affordances of new media to facilitate communication, coordinate activities including civil disobedience, and launch public awareness campaigns, coming out of the shadows has been central to undocumented youth's digitally networked activism.¹⁰ By declaring themselves "undocumented and unafraid," youth contest the power of the law, which sustains itself through the silencing of migrants who live in the shadows. By revealing their undocumented status in narrative form, youth undermine the forms of silence that keep them in a state of perpetual fear.

The ways that undocumented youth organizations have strategically used these coming-out stories is captured in the concept of transmedia testimonio. Defined as a personal narrative shared through various media platforms in order to represent a collective experience, the transmedia testimonio offers a way to consider how social movements use transmedia organizing as a way to coordinate, mobilize, and build common identities. The concept synthesizes Costanza-Chock's (2010) theory of transmedia organizing which is based on the ways that social movement narratives are dispersed systematically across multiple media platforms, creating a distributed and participatory social movement world. Sharing stories through various social and digital media platforms has allowed activists to challenge and, at times, supplant mass media representations through more locally constructed and participatory forms of storytelling. Activists can share their personal stories, contributing to a bottom-up collective-action frame by sharing experiences of exclusion, stigma, marginality, invisibility, and injustice.

Thinking of these personal coming-out narratives as testimonios allows for an understanding of how youth organizations use these stories create opportunities for critical engagement in counterhegemonic practices. Within the Latin American tradition, the testimonio is a practice of bearing witness to atrocities committed by the state (Yudice, 1991). Traditionally, the testimonio was used to represent a certain reality that state violence and repression directly silenced or erased. It was thought of as representing the "small voice of history" (Guha, 2005, p. 304). Yet, testimonio transcends a simple autoethnography; rather, it is a form of political action. Beyond the affective dimensions of identity, the transmedia testimonio directly ties to collective action because "how one interprets the world also has to do with how one seeks, and is able, to change it" (Beverley, 2004, p. xvii). Performance is a key dimension of rights-claiming practices, in part because it allows activists to develop behaviors that demonstrate to the public how alternative visions of politics might work (Guidry & Sawyer, 2003).

In the Latin American tradition, testimonio might be understood as part of the agency of the subaltern and as a means to imagine new forms of engaging politics. Amid severe government and military repression in Latin America, for example, testimonios were important in ultimately changing the

⁹ For a discussion of how queer activists have impacted the immigrants' rights movement, please see Beltrán (2014).

¹⁰ Scholars generally distinguish between digitally networked action and traditional collective action based on a number of qualities, of which the high use of online social media as mobilization channels is central (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Cristancho & Anduiza, 2014).

"truth" of what happened through the testimonial archive and in testimonial performance (Stephen, 2013). Latin American social movements have relied heavily on oral testimonies used in marches and rallies, grassroots video productions, and on state-sponsored and commercial radio and TV stations (Stephen, 2013). They have also been used in more formal settings. For example, truth commissions in Bolivia, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Argentina have had very significant roles in rewriting national histories. Citing the work of Jelin and Kaufman, Stephen (2013) suggests that the courtroom itself becomes a platform for speaking, giving juridical recognition to the voices of victims while validating their right to speak both inside and outside of this legal setting. Through their participation on truth commissions, marginalized people who have been literally silent and invisible in officially sanctioned spaces of legality can assert their dignity while also becoming cognizant of their rights to speak and to be heard (Stephen, 2013).

Using the concept of testimonio, I seek to demonstrate how undocumented youth activists have used social media to create networks of consciousness-raising, resistance, and empowerment. I also use the notion of the transmedia testimonio to demonstrate how activists strategically use new media tools to mobilize, coordinate, and frame collective action. In the proceeding sections, I draw from a range of examples to illustrate these points.

Part 3: Framing the Fight Through Personal Narratives

The emergence of the use of transmedia testimonio as a central strategy coincided with the campaign to pass the DREAM Act as a stand-alone bill after it became clear that a comprehensive immigration reform package would be difficult to pass in the political climate of the time. In June 2009, the founders of DreamActivist.org, an online undocumented-youth advocacy network, helped organize the National DREAM Act Graduation in Washington, DC. They staged a symbolic ceremony on Capitol Hill in which undocumented students marched in graduation robes and tams to represent their educational goals and aspirations. On June 23, 2009, the national graduation, "Dream for America: National DREAM Act Graduation Day," brought networked communities such as DreamActivist.org together with more locally based and traditional undocumented-youth advocacy groups. The following is an excerpt from the DreamActivist.org blog describing the event:

With the Capitol Dome behind them, hundreds of youth from all over the country, along with education, faith, business, immigrant and civil rights leaders are expected to participate in a National Dream Graduation ceremony, hosted by the United We Dream Coalition (UWD). (Benion, 2009)

An interview with two of the organizers revealed that the event was the first time they actually met face-to-face after two years of organizing online. Teresa, from Texas, and Angel, from Florida, had first come into contact through an online discussion forum on the topic of the DREAM Act. Disappointed with the lack of resources they found online and in their local communities, Teresa and Angel established online friendships with other similarly situated undocumented students, which eventually led to the founding of www.DreamActivist.org. Three years from its inception, Dream Activist had grown to be a coalition of 30 local organizations, 10 regional media correspondents across the United States, and a new

media intern program using peer-to-peer mentorship to train future media activists. This was achieved by working almost exclusively online from the organizers' respective states. Reflecting the network's growing influence, Teresa was chosen to be a keynote speaker at the DREAM Act graduation, which gathered students, advocates, policy makers, and elected officials on Capitol Hill. For the first time in a public setting, Teresa shared her story and declared her undocumented status.

The day of action combined both in-person organizing and historical forms of congressional lobbying, followed by the staging of a symbolic graduation ceremony directly in front of the Senate. DreamActivist.org had served as an organizing hub for this simultaneous action. The participants were asked to post their Twitter updates with the hashtag #dreamact, giving a snowballed and networked feeling to the whole event. As it occurred, hundreds of videos, from both official Dream Activist accounts and participants, of the entire event were shared on Twitter and uploaded to YouTube and Vimeo. The event also had its own Facebook page.

Elina, a volunteer for DreamActivist.org, recalls that 30 mock graduations took place in Texas, Kentucky, Indiana, California, Arizona, Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts, Montana, New Jersey, New York, and North Carolina that same day in solidarity with the national DREAM graduation on Capitol Hill. She attributed the success of the mobilization to the media produced about the National DREAM Act Graduation. She stated,

For all the youth that could not be there in person we had to be aware and sensitive to that . . . so we made sure to help them feel part of the process by putting it on our blogs, sharing videos and helping spread the word about the local graduations taking place that day. What we didn't expect was how many solidarity graduations took place—people took it up on their own, organized, and used our site as a way to let others know about it. (Elina, personal communication, May 12, 2011)

Figure 1 shows a screenshot of videos uploaded to YouTube that day by users including DreamActivist.org that featured students from around the country dressed in graduation caps and gowns declaring their undocumented status in public.



Figure 1. YouTube.com video of DC DREAM Act National Graduation.

While coming-out events have been staged as part of rallies, sit-ins, organizing meetings, and campaigns, personal narratives have been shared in other less formal settings. In personal videos and podcasts, coming-out events enable undocumented youth to take part in a political act, express their agency, and push the boundaries of a historically exclusionary public sphere. In Chicago, the Illinois Youth Justice League (IYJL) organized the first National Coming Out of the Shadows Day in 2010, an event that continues each year, spearheaded by undocuqueer—or undocumented LGBTQI—activists, in particular.¹¹ Although the subjects of coming-out stories have shifted from students to entire families (Pallares, 2014), the purpose of the campaign is still to create spaces where undocumented people can testify to their experiences and come out of the shadows. Typically, the National Coming Out of the Shadows Day produces a range of diverse media texts in which youth come out as undocumented.

In a similar campaign hosted by DreamActivist.org in 2010, Mohammed produced and then uploaded a digital video to YouTube. The video begins in a conversational tone, “Hey you, I’m Mo from Dream Activist.” The audience sees only Mo in dim light in what seems to be a bedroom. A poster of *The Office*, a popular television series, is visible in the background. Mo continues by using what has become a norm in the coming-out repertoire: “My name is Mohammad and I am undocumented.” Mo also

¹¹ *Undocuqueer* is a term invented by undocumented youth who also identify as queer. The term appears in various media produced by youth including artist Julio Salgado, who has made the term ubiquitous on his social media. See <http://juliosalgadoart.bigcartel.com>.

wears a T-shirt that reads: "I am un-doc-u-mented." He goes on to discuss his parents' migration history, his disadvantages in pursuing higher education, and his path toward becoming an activist.

Toward the video's end, Mohammad reminds his audience that there is no need for a big press conference or large audience, but rather, coming out can be done effectively in the privacy of your own room with a camera. Mohammad's video was not created for a mainstream public; rather, the video speaks directly to other undocumented youth. As he explains, "We've been asking you guys to share, so I thought that I should do the same." There is a reciprocity and trust that shape the implicit norms between the author of the video and his intended audience. He refers to other undocumented youth who have already made videos, a practice consistent with other video-blogging communities (Burgess & Green, 2009). The video garnered roughly 2,000 views on YouTube and prompted responses from other users declaring their undocumented status. It is informal, conversational, and intimate, establishing a one-to-one relationship between Mohammad and other undocumented youth.

I traced the resulting online exchange on YouTube in which other individuals uploaded their responses to Mohammed. By sharing their stories through user-generated video and by using a social media platform, the subjects of the videos were able to use digital coming-out videos to connect with each other in a moment of shared community. The participatory online exchange connects undocumented youth, those whose vulnerable status particularly isolates them and hinders community building, through a network of solidarity. Gabriel, for example, was the subject of one of the video responses to Mohammed (DreamActivist, 2010). In the video, he explains, "As soon as you come out, it doesn't define you. By doing that, you're not settling . . . you're not hiding." Gabriel ends by encouraging others to join the movement: "My name is Gabriel, and I am undocumented, and I invite you to come out."

In addition to using the transmedia testimonio to expand the boundaries of an exclusionary public sphere, youth organizations use digital testimonios to reframe the issue of deportation and immigrant detention. Scholars argue that current immigration law targets an entire class of people mostly with noncriminal social characteristics, such as language spoken or physical appearance, that associate them with a particular immigration status (Menjívar, 2006). Although immigrants in uncertain legal statuses are the focus of these laws, such policies and practices also target their U.S.-born family members and documented immigrants (and other noncitizens). And importantly, whereas immigration law has moved toward a convergence with criminal law, there are now fewer (and more restrictive) avenues for immigrant legalization.¹² These parallel tracks have ensnared a population with uncertain legal statuses with very limited legal options and the omnipresent threat of deportation. The Obama administration has continued the Bush administration's high spending on immigration enforcement, which has climbed steadily from almost \$7.5 billion in 2002 to \$17 billion in 2010. President Obama has deported more immigrants than all previous administrations combined—the count now exceeds 2 million.¹³

Immigrant rights advocates responded to Obama's enforcement-first immigration policy in different ways. Some sectors of the movement have opted to support an Obama-Democratic Party

¹² For a thorough review of the literature on immigration enforcement, see Menjívar and Abrego, 2012.

¹³ For an analysis of President Obama's deportation record, see Golash and Boza, 2014.

consensus and play an active role in building Latino support for the president and his party. Although many in this camp criticize draconian immigration policies, they are usually willing to accept versions of comprehensive immigration reform that would streamline programs like 287(g) and Secure Communities.¹⁴ Undocumented youth have largely opposed this strategy and have emphasized the creation of an autonomous pole of political power.

In the face of increasing deportations, undocumented youth have used direct action and media activism to shine a spotlight on immigrant detention and deportation, which has otherwise remained hidden from public view. They have staged rallies and sit-ins at detention centers and ICE offices, publicly targeted banks that invest in private detention centers, and directly confronted the institutions that profit from the immigrant detention and deportation system (Grubert, 2015). Using Facebook and Twitter primarily, immigrant youth broadcast the stories of those who are in detention centers and fighting deportation orders.

In the face of mounting criticism of their more radical tactics, undocumented youth have used the transmedia testimonio to frame, coordinate, and raise funds for their efforts. In acts of civil disobedience from Georgia to California, youth have recorded testimonios to explain their reasons for risking deportation before participating in direct action. One can often follow the activists as they enter administrative offices or block roads and get handcuffed by police. For instance, Viridiana from North Carolina uploaded a video to YouTube on April 5, 2011 (Martinez, 2011). She begins her testimonio by declaring, "I am undocumented. If you're watching this video, I've been arrested." She follows with her migration story:

I am a human being whose dreams have been denied. For those wondering why I am putting my freedom on the line, and why would I risk deportation? Because I've had enough. My people have been criminalized for crossing borders seeking a better life while the industries that drove us here are not being held accountable. My community is under attack by laws that strip people of their humanity. Remaining in the shadows is no longer acceptable. Protesting, lobbying, and rallying are not enough anymore. If you're watching this and have not come out, it's time you come out and declare yourself undocumented and unafraid. (Martinez, 2011)

Viridiana's narrative shifts from an emphasis on her individual experience to one that highlights a collective struggle against state detention, surveillance, arrest, deportation, and violence. These virtual testimonios do not rely on the state or formal institutions or courtrooms. In Viridiana's case, along with hundreds of others, the transmedia testimonio can be produced with new media technology that affords them the publicity they would otherwise not have. In other words, social media functions to broaden the boundaries of public space beyond the confines of formal and state-sanctioned public spheres. By doing so,

¹⁴ The 287(g) program allows ICE to partner with local law enforcement agencies, effectively giving local police the powers of federal immigration agents. The Secure Communities program—in which the fingerprints from suspects arrested by local authorities are cross-checked with ICE—has resulted in tens of thousands of deportations.

undocumented youth have been able to use the testimonio to make claims to citizenship as new rights-bearing subjects, even if the state has not legitimized or recognized them as such.

Moreover, youth organizations use the transmedia testimonio as a way to reframe the issue of deportation through personal narratives. For instance, on October 12, 2011, five undocumented Latino youth wearing graduation caps staged a sit-in at the ICE offices in downtown Los Angeles. The sit-in was meant to urge the Obama administration to stop deporting undocumented youth. It simultaneously launched the national Education Not Deportation (END) Our Pain campaign, represented by the #not1more hashtag, undertaken by a network of immigrant youth organizations and allies demanding an immediate moratorium on deportations of youth eligible for the DREAM Act. Despite recent announcements from the Obama administration that it would ease up on noncriminal deportations, U.S. officials continue to deport undocumented immigrants at a record rate. Tony Ortuño, one of the participants in the Los Angeles sit-in, explained his reasons for risking arrest:

We . . . were hopeful that the recent announcements by President Obama would bring relief to DREAM Act-eligible youth . . . However . . . the numbers of undocumented youth who are incarcerated, shackled, and deported to countries they barely know continues to rise. (Arellano, 2011)

Since immigration enforcement is largely taken up by states, youth activists coordinate much of the civil disobedience actions at the local level. Although national organizations such as United We Dream provide some support, these actions are primarily organized through broad grassroots mobilization and campaigns. Because of the loose, nonhierarchical, decentralized character of undocumented youth social movement formations, social media and other forms of networked communication have played an important strategic role. In particular, the transmedia testimonio has been used to construct a common set of narratives through which disparate actions can be understood. My claim builds on Gerbaudo's notion of *choreography of assembly*, which is the "symbolic construction of public space" (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 5) and the physical *assembling* of a highly dispersed and individualized constituency. Rather than regard social movements as simply the result of absolute spontaneity and unrestrained participation, Gerbaudo argues that media activists enact forms of soft leadership—as choreographers—setting the scene and constructing an emotional space within which collective action can unfold.

In line with Gerbaudo's notion of choreography, the transmedia testimonio is used to construct a collective identity and a set of frames through which disparate actions can be understood (Snow & McAdam, 2000). The range of digital media tools has enabled undocumented immigrants to disseminate their stories through both oral testimony and nonverbal practices, such as videos, pictures, and memes. Several youth organizations have emerged to curate, broadcast, host, and archive the diverse range of transmedia testimonios produced by youth activists across the country. For example, the Dream Is Coming is a website focused primarily on supporting civil disobedience. The blog posts short video clips that feature youth narrating their stories and explaining their decisions to engage in civil disobedience in diverse locations such as Alabama, Georgia, New Jersey, and California. The opportunity to construct locally driven messaging is important to youth who often feel they have little control over how their stories and activism are framed by broadcast media, if shown at all.

As one culminating effect of these transmedia testimonios, the Dream Is Coming provides a common frame from which to understand local actions. In November 2011, for example, during the National Immigrant Youth Alliance's Week of Action, 15 undocumented youth and parents were arrested when they joined in protest against Alabama's HB56, one of the most harsh state immigration laws in the country.¹⁵ Two of those arrested, Jonathan Perez and Isaac Barrera, were transferred to a New Orleans detention center to await deportation after they entered a Border Patrol office in Mobile, Alabama, and told authorities they themselves were undocumented. To mobilize for their release, the National Immigrant Youth Alliance released a video clip—shot simply with a mobile phone—and documents the moment that these youth entered the Border Patrol facility and declared their undocumented status. Suddenly, the three-minute video is cut short by a dropped cell phone signal. Despite its informality, Dream Activist and NIYA circulated the video as a form of testimonio to share the reality of current deportation policies. The video ends with the message that Jonathan and Isaac were transferred to Basile Detention Center and that "the administration is lying to us when they tell us they're only deporting serious criminals" (DreamActivist, 2011 [YouTube video]). Supporters could then follow Isaac and Jonathan's journey in detention by following status updates on Twitter and other microblogs. They could also participate by signing and circulating an online petition.

Despite the criticism from gatekeeping institutions, immigrants' rights organizations, and immigrants' rights leaders, youth have continued to use civil disobedience as a de facto strategy while providing a common frame for disparate locally organized actions through their digital testimonios. For example, in 2014, nine undocumented youth voluntarily returned to Mexico in order to re-enter the United States and claim asylum. Initially known as the Dream 9, these young people were openly contesting U.S. refugee and asylum policy.¹⁶ The youth were taken into custody by authorities and, once detained, staged a hunger strike to draw attention to their cause.¹⁷ Backlash soon ensued, however, as immigrant rights leaders became critical of the risky strategy. In 2014, a number of critics, including long-standing immigrant rights advocate Rep. Luis Gutierrez criticized the youths' actions. Critics across media and more mainstream immigrant rights organizations deemed the actions radical, neither well planned nor well thought out (Ibanez, 2013). Yet youth used the transmedia testimonio to frame their actions as necessary in the face of increasing destruction of immigrant families, arrests, and racial profiling. On Twitter and Instagram, the hashtag #Bringthemhome served as a way for organizers to continuously connect to movement allies and supporters and to provide a counterframe to their critics.

Despite the criticism, the Dream 9 inspired a second protest action known as the Dream 30. The National Immigrant Youth Alliance curated various testimonios by uploading the personal stories of the

¹⁵ Among its key provisions, landlords were banned from renting homes to undocumented immigrants, schools had to check students' legal status, and police were required to arrest suspected immigration violators. Even giving unauthorized immigrants a ride became a crime.

¹⁶ The nine were eventually granted release from detention and will await a decision from a judge on their asylum petitions, a process that could take years.

¹⁷ A growing number of critics say their approach is counterproductive to their goals, if not outright dangerous. Even Luis Gutierrez, a congressman from Illinois who has been an outspoken supporter of efforts to overhaul immigration laws, said he disagreed with the Dream 9's tactics.

activists on YouTube. In one video, a 16-year-old girl points to Sheriff Joe Arpiao's raids of immigrants' homes in Arizona as the main reason for her family's self-deportation to Mexico. Using the hashtag #bringthemhome, these videos were shared widely across various social media networks and generated considerable discussion and debate amongst activists, advocates, and critics. Equally important, the #bringthemhome and #not1more social media campaigns have been used by undocumented youth to offer an alternative accounting of immigrants' collective experiences in the United States.

A byproduct of the use of transmedia testimonios is that networked groups such as the Dream Is Coming (DIC) and NIYA have come to occupy the position of formal political organizations, even though they do not have formal leadership and funding. Through the curation, production, and broadcasting of various media produced by undocumented youth, organizations like NIYA are able to disseminate information, frame disparate actions under a common message, and mobilize participants across geographic and legal barriers. On its website, the DIC posted the following message:

The Dream Is Coming, an undocumented youth initiative that organizes direct actions across the country, attributes the change to a growing frustration with merely electoral or legislative strategies. We are compelled by our frustration and the fierce urgency of our dreams . . . We have worked for years on a path to legalization. We are at a point in our movement where radical action has become necessary. (The Dream is Coming, 2012, para. 4)

Under this unifying framework of direct action, youth have defended their actions against increasingly critical voices. The Alabama action at the state courthouse and the Dreams 9 and 30 represent how networked activism functions to orchestrate and coordinate collective action. Yet I find that even more frequently, the transmedia testimonios enable these informal, networked organizations to frame disparate local actions and make them intelligible to a wider audience, while enabling marginalized actors to express claims to citizenship.

Conclusion

Perhaps feeling the pressure of immigrant youths' criticisms, President Obama announced in August 2012 that his administration would do a case-by-case review of deportations, allowing many undocumented immigrants without criminal records to apply for work permits (Morton, 2012). The announcement came on the heels of a summer in which undocumented youth tracked Obama as he gave speeches to largely Latino audiences in Puerto Rico, Texas, and Washington. On July, 20 undocumented youth—wearing bright red T-shirts that read, "Obama Deports DREAMers"—interrupted the president as he gave a speech to Latino advocates in Washington, countering Obama's message with their own. A few years later, on November 20, 2014, President Obama expanded Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) to certain undocumented parents of U.S. citizens and parents of lawful permanent residents (LPRs). The president also announced an expansion of the DACA program for youth who came to the United States as children. Under a directive from the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, these parents and youth may be granted a type of temporary permission to stay in the United States.

The response from the administration is a sign that, indeed, the political strategies of undocumented youth, including the use of social media, have had a profound impact on the policy landscape. However, the fact that no major comprehensive immigration reform package has been passed also reflects the more complex, ambiguous, and indeterminate effects of social movements on social change than my analysis in this article allows for. What I do claim in this article, however, is that the use of social media has enabled undocumented youth to express political agency through the construction and dissemination of personal narratives in which they defy the exclusionary forms of legal citizenship and its accompanying public sphere. These personal narratives are curated, staged, and disseminated by undocumented youth organizations as forms of transmedia testimonio, which I define as a personal narrative meant to represent a collective experience that is shared across media platforms. The affordances of social media enable youth activists to use the transmedia testimonio to coordinate and frame disparate actions under a common set of shared meanings and understandings while also challenging the boundaries of an exclusionary public sphere.

In my analysis, I emphasize the role of youth-led organizations in curating, disseminating, producing, and staging transmedia testimonios. In doing so, I stress how social media use must be understood as a complement to existing strategies of social movements and community organizing. Digital testimonios and other social media have been used to create a sense of collective identity among undocumented youth, which has become essential for the mobilization of a spatially dispersed group who encounter various obstacles to collective action. Through transmedia testimonios, these youth organizations have been able to contest and expand the limits of the public sphere by inserting youth voices and contesting elite-driven cues on public policy. Moreover, they have been vital to creating common signs, meanings, and shared narratives about immigrant rights, deportation, detention, criminalization, race, and citizenship among excluded communities.

The broader aim of the article is to present a more complex story of how youth adapt political strategies to a new media context. This case study of undocumented youth activism shows how marginal actors may exert agency within the limits of various structural inequalities. In this case, the media opportunity structure—the rise of networked media—provides new ways to engage in meaningful political action. Thus, while some may dismiss media activism as not “real” activism, this case study demonstrates how youth have integrated social media into a broad range of tactics. In doing so, they have challenged the boundaries of an exclusionary public sphere. Youth are using these blurred lines to recreate new political subjectivities and forms of political participation. By drawing on different cultural traditions of protest and leveraging the affordances of new media, these youth have found new ways to participate in and connect to forms of collective action. Given the effects of legal status on undocumented youths’ social marginalization, isolation, and capacity to participate by formal and institutional means, the transmedia testimonio has become an important mechanism that has enabled disenfranchised youth to make claims to citizenship. The effectiveness by which they have adapted the testimonio to a digital age indicates that the DREAMers have reimagined how social movements will interface with the public for years to come.

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