



Project  
**MUSE**<sup>®</sup>

*Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.*

---


## **The Immigrant Rights Movement on the Net: Between “Web 2.0” and Comunicación Popular**

Sasha Costanza-Chock

American Quarterly, Volume 60, Number 3, September 2008,  
pp. 851-864 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: [10.1353/aq.0.0029](https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.0.0029)



 For additional information about this article  
<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/aq/summary/v060/60.3.costanza-chock.html>

# The Immigrant Rights Movement on the Net: Between “Web 2.0” and Comunicación Popular

*Sasha Costanza-Chock*



Figure 1.  
Graphic from noborderscamp.org.

*American Quarterly* readers probably don't need to be reminded that the militarization of borders and the expansion of the state apparatus of surveillance, raids, detentions, and deportations are key control mechanisms for capitalist white supremacist patriarchal power in the United States of America. The consolidation of Immigration and Naturalization Services into the Department of Homeland Security was followed post-9/11 by so-called Special Registration, then a new wave of detentions, deportations, and “rendering” of “suspected terrorists” to Guantánamo and other secret military prisons for indefinite detention and torture without trial. In 2006, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) increased the number of beds for detainees to 27,500, opened a new 500-bed detention center for families with children in Williamson County, Texas, and set a new agency record of

187,513 “Alien Removals.”<sup>1</sup> By the spring of 2006, it became politically feasible for the Republican House of Representatives to pass the infamous HR 4437, the proposed Sensenbrenner bill. Sensenbrenner would have criminalized the state of being an undocumented person and the act of providing shelter or aid to an undocumented person, making felons of millions of undocumented folks, their families and friends, and service workers, including clergy, social service workers, and educators.<sup>2</sup>

The response to Sensenbrenner was the largest wave of mass mobilizations in U.S. history. March, April, and May of 2006 saw major marches in every metropolis as well as in countless smaller cities and towns. Half a million people took to the streets in Chicago, a million in Los Angeles, hundreds of thousands more in New York, Houston, San Diego, Miami, Atlanta—the list could go on for pages. The surging strength of the migrant rights movement was built through the hard work of hundreds of organizations, including those that work to organize the base directly, those that function as regional or national coordinating hubs, those that intervene in policy debates, and the Spanish-language media that support them, including *locutores* [radio hosts], papers, and television channels. The rapid growth of this movement was reflected in the slogan “The sleeping giant is now awake!” and its power briefly caught the political class off guard. The Sensenbrenner bill died, crushed by the *gigante* of popular mobilization.

Quickly reorganizing, the state launched a new wave of ICE raids. Simultaneously there was an explosion of right-wing information warfare stretching from the mass base of talk radio up through the national news networks, spearheaded by racist, anti-immigrant talking heads on Fox News and by Lou Dobbs on CNN. The renewed attack from the Right came to a crescendo by May Day 2007. On the anniversary of the historic 2006 May Day marches, hundreds of thousands of people again took the streets across the country. This time, though, the LAPD prepared to deal what they hoped would be a crushing blow in downtown Los Angeles.

Macarthur Park, only a few city blocks to the west of L.A.’s main business district, was initially built in the 1880s as a white, middle-class vacation destination surrounded by luxury hotels. The area around the park became a working-class African American neighborhood during the 1960s, and once this transition took place, the city withdrew park maintenance resources. By the 1980s the park had gained a media reputation as a dangerous and violent place. In the 1990s the area was again transformed, this time into a working-class Latino neighborhood.<sup>3</sup> It is currently represented in the Anglo

press as a danger zone of “gangbangers,” drug dealers, sex workers, and general racialized urban chaos, and is especially infamous as an area where fake identification cards can be easily purchased. This portrayal of Macarthur Park persists despite the actual decline of violent crime in the area and the park’s present-day heavy use by Latino/a immigrant families, especially by children and teens on the soccer field, picnickers with food and blankets, and young lovers who relax under the park’s shade trees. On the afternoon of May Day 2007, Macarthur Park’s usual crowd of hundreds was multiplied tenfold as people streamed in for a post-march rally organized by the Multi-Ethnic Immigrant Worker Organizing Network (MIWON), a coalition that included the Garment Worker Center (GWC), Koreatown Immigrant Worker Alliance (KIWA), Pilipino Worker Center (PWC), Institute of Popular Education of Southern California (IDEPSCA), and the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA).

One moment, white-clad families, including many small children and elderly folks, were relaxing in the park with the bells of ice cream vendors ringing in the air and the smell of bacon-wrapped hot dogs wafting across the soccer field which had been transformed into a dance floor as bands performed from the MIWON sound truck. The next moment, people were screaming and running in a mass panic as around five hundred officers, many in full riot gear, used batons and rubber bullets to attack the peaceful crowd, injuring dozens and hospitalizing several. Members of the media, including Christina Gonzalez of Fox News affiliate KTTV 11, Pedro Sevcec of Telemundo, Patricia Nazario of KPCC, Ernesto Arce from KPFK, and reporters from L.A. Indymedia, were also attacked and injured by police.<sup>4</sup> The official line from LAPD chief William Bratton holds that there was a communication breakdown in the chain of command that led to a “...significant use of force while attempting to address the illegal and disruptive actions of 50 to 100 agitators who were not a part of the larger group of thousands of peaceful demonstrators.”<sup>5</sup> Longtime observers of the LAPD argue that by the time the riot squad was deployed on the edge of the park, the decision had already been made to clear the crowd by force. Regardless of whether the attack on the peaceful crowd and reporters was a breakdown of communication or a calculated tactic to instill fear, the result was the same: images of the brutal police riot filled TV screens in L.A. for days, sending a clear message that it was time for the *gigante* to sit down, shut up, and get back to work.

The repressive atmosphere continued to escalate nationwide for the rest of the summer of 2007. The spirit of Sensenbrenner was revived, if masked, in

# MAY 1ST CELEBRATION



**Multi-ethnic Immigrant Workers Organizing Network**

**Figure 2.**  
Graphic from MIWON flyer for May Day 2007.

the Secure Borders, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Reform Act of 2007 (S. 1348). This time, the bill was portrayed as a “compromise” but continued to focus on border militarization and policing: it included funding for 300 miles of vehicle barriers, 105 camera and radar towers, and 20,000 more Border Patrol agents, while simultaneously restructuring visa criterion around “high skill” workers for the so-called knowledge economy.<sup>6</sup> That bill fell apart by June, but at the time of this writing it is clear that border militarization will continue, detentions and deportations increase, and raids intensify, while there is little to no chance for meaningful legalization legislation, let alone amnesty. In July of 2007, three *billion* dollars in new “border security” funding was approved.<sup>7</sup> There has also been a complete, and completely unsurprising, failure of the mass media to discuss either the root causes of migration or the only per-



**Figure 3.**  
MacArthur Park May Day images posted  
to [la.indymedia.org](http://la.indymedia.org).

manent meaningful solution in an age of unrestricted cross-border capital flows: an open border policy.

English-language news channels (FOX and CNN) play key roles in the information war that swirls around migration and immigrant rights, alongside right-wing talk radio. Of course, Spanish language press, including nationally syndicated networks Telemundo and Univisión, as well as commercial radio stations, provide counterbalancing coverage of the movement. In fact, Spanish language commercial radio has not only covered protests, but played a significant role in announcing them and mobilizing people. This is widely known and reported on in the English-language press<sup>8</sup> and has recently been documented in a study by Carmen Gonzalez, who found in a survey that radio was in fact the key media used to inform people about the marches in Los Angeles (friends and family were the primary source of information, followed by radio).<sup>9</sup> A recent study by Graciela Orozco for the Social Science Research Council also analyzes the important mobilization role played by Radio Bilingue, a more than two decades old nonprofit network of Latino community radio stations with six affiliates in California and satellite distribution to over a hundred communities in the United States, Puerto Rico, and Mexico.<sup>10</sup>

However, in the rest of this review I want to focus not on radio but on the role of popular communication online, especially grassroots video activists, immigrant rights organizers, and everyday people participating in the mobilizations who later post video documentation to the Internet. My discussion of movement video online will be grounded in my own experience as an active videomaker within the Independent Media Center network ([www.indymedia.org](http://www.indymedia.org)), a transnational network of grassroots mediamakers that emerged out of the alterglobalization movement during and after the protests against the 1999 World Trade Organization ministerial in Seattle.<sup>11</sup>

### Online Video and Popular Communication

As audiences for traditional mass media (TV and newspapers especially) continue to shrink and fragment, the media industry is increasingly turning to new business models that either entirely or partially rely on capturing revenue from the monetization of user generated content and social networking labor.<sup>12</sup> Online video and social networking sites are big business (YouTube was famously acquired by Google for \$1.6 billion, kicking off the newest round of venture capital frenzy around online video), and they also replicate the structural inequalities of race, class, and gender present throughout the media industry as a whole, both in representation and employment practices.<sup>13</sup> Movement appropriation of commercial “social media” sites can certainly be an effective visibility strategy, but activists need to clearly understand what else their participation in these sites produces.

As a short aside, I’d like to clarify that “citizen journalism” is dead on arrival as an organizing concept for participatory reporting by noncitizens. Alternative media, grassroots media, community media, or *comunicación popular* are more useful framings for the immigrant rights movement.<sup>14</sup> This is not just a quibble over terminology: mass detentions, deportations, and police riots against peaceful crowds fail to ignite nationwide coverage and protest in part because of a deep lack of connection between “citizen journalists” and the immigrant rights movement. Just imagine the rage and mobilization if in 2006 more than 187,000 white antiwar activists had been detained, disappeared, and held in detention centers for months without trial. In some ways it’s simple: just like the “old media,” the “new media” is dominated by white, liberal, college-educated males.

Yet this observation doesn’t diminish the real importance of the Internet as an organizing tool in the current wave of immigrant rights activism, especially

by Latino youth. For example, students in L.A. Unified School District used MySpace and SMS (text messaging) to help communicate and coordinate walkouts that saw 20,000 to 40,000 students take the streets during the week following the March 25, 2006, marches.<sup>15</sup>

As has been widely documented, the Internet, especially the rise of social networking sites like MySpace and YouTube, has opened possibilities for movement appropriation, especially for *autorepresentación* [self-representation] via text, photos, videos, and audio.<sup>16</sup> This is true even as social networking sites are also spaces where users replicate gender, class, and race divisions (for example, see danah boyd on how Indian Orkut users have replicated the caste system and on the class division between MySpace and Facebook).<sup>17</sup> At the same time, in business-speak, “User Generated Content” means free cultural product for monetization and cross-licensing, “participation” means free user data to mine and sell to advertisers, and all user activity is subject to surveillance and censorship.

This latter thread was taken up by Dmytri Kleiner and Brian Wyrick in a recent article for *Mute* magazine titled “Infoenclosure 2.0,” in which they describe Web 2.0 as “a venture capitalist’s paradise where investors pocket the value produced by unpaid users, ride on the technical innovations of the free software movement, and kill off the decentralising potential of peer-to-peer production.”<sup>18</sup> In a similar vein, Andrew Lowenthal dissects the business model of Web 2.0 media darlings such as YouTube and MySpace:

One of the key business models for these “Web 2.0” start ups has been the basic idea of providing an infrastructure and technology for users and then selling those eyes to advertisers and the contributor community to a larger company—it happened with Flickr, YouTube, MySpace and more. There is a huge rush of companies trying to create the next big site to bring in the people and make their pot of gold. Users need to become far more savvy as to the imbalance in power that is being generated and who they are helping make millionaires.<sup>19</sup>

This is an important and necessary step toward critique and education around the extension of the media and cultural industries into the Internet. However, for many involved in social movement activity, surveillance and censorship are concerns that are at least as significant as (if not more than) the monetization and value extraction realized through content licensing and advertising revenue. For instance, immediately following the May Day police riot, several people quickly posted video clips to YouTube and MySpace, as well as to personal video blogs and to the Los Angeles Independent Media Center (<http://la.indymedia.org>).



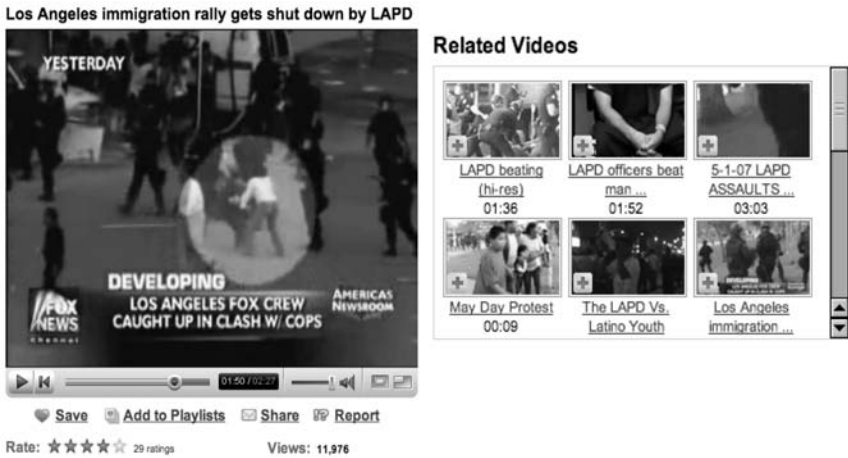


**Figure 4.** Walkout Warriors sticker, seen on a MySpace user's page.

During the first police commission hearing following May Day, LAPD Chief William Bratton publicly mentioned that police were reviewing all the police videos, the surveillance cameras from the park, and all the clips that had been posted to YouTube, in order to understand what took place and also to identify and track down those who resisted police violence.<sup>20</sup> Bratton's comments underscore the need for activists in the immigrant rights movement, as in all movements for social justice, to be aware of what may be done with the video they post online. In the immediate wake of the Macarthur Park police riot, Indymedia activists circulated this message via e-mail and posts to YouTube and MySpace, in English and Spanish:

Be careful with the video you submit. Several things to keep in mind:

1. Don't upload ANY video that shows people doing anything illegal. The police are watching all these videos, so don't put evidence in their hands.
2. If you have to include a clip of someone, say, fighting back against the police, in order to show police brutality, be sure to blur the face of that person.
3. If you put clips on YouTube, keep this in mind: (a) you are doing free labor for YouTube and allowing them to make money from ads off of your content; (b) YouTube will take your material down as soon as LAPD or the feds ask them to; (c) YouTube will give your IP address to the police, which allows them to track the video to the person who uploaded it (you).



**Figure 5.** Fox News coverage of Mayday 2007, reposted to YouTube, from youtube.com/watch?v=v7xO-GKmH2c.

So, YouTube may be a good way to get things seen, but it is NOT a safe or long-term solution for movement media. So what can you do?

Upload to noncommercial sites like archive.org, our-media.org, and indymedia.org (including video.indymedia.org). These sites won't make money off of you, and some of them (like Indymedia) won't track your IP address, won't take material down on request of the pigs, and will do everything they can to defend your rights to privacy and free speech if need be.

Don't hate the media—become the media!<sup>21</sup>

In other words, social movements need to both appropriate corporate Web 2.0 spaces and use them to circulate their struggles, while educating themselves about corporate appropriation of mediamaking and social networking labor, state surveillance of social network sites, and the ease of corporate or state censorship of material on such sites. At the same time, they need to help build and participate in the already existing autonomous infrastructure of communication. Meanwhile, independent mediamakers, tech activists, bloggers, and other alternative and popular communicators should think about how they can contribute to training and capacity building for community-based organizations that are currently marginalized in both mass media and online spaces. This means doing the hard work of power-sharing (in mediamaking practices, equipment and infrastructure access, funding access, and so on) with grassroots, poor-led, community-based, people of color, youth-led, and queer organizations.



Figure 6.  
Screenshot of la.indymedia.org  
coverage of Macarthur Park.

## Next Steps

This kind of analysis is already present among some movement organizations in the U.S. context, and is slowly gaining visibility. For example, during the U.S. Social Forum (USSF), a meeting of about 10,000 activists and organizers that took place in Atlanta in July of 2007, the Ida B. Wells Media Justice Center was planned with the explicit goals of partnering poor-led antipoverty organizations with media activists to share perspectives and skills, and work together on grassroots coverage.<sup>22</sup>

In terms of self-representation, on the one hand there is a need to continue pushing for better mass media coverage in both the English- and Spanish-language press, as well as to enter and utilize online corporate spaces that allow user-generated content; but there is also a need to develop a deeper critique of corporate media, which includes so-called Web 2.0. In the long run, more immigrant rights movement communication would ideally live on the back of a stronger autonomous communication infrastructure, using Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) in tandem with existing autonomous communication infrastructure, tools, and networks. To help achieve this goal, tech activists are busy enhancing the usability and functionality of FOSS and of activist-focused tools and nonprofit resources. There is a new generation of FOSS focused on the needs of media activists and social movement organizations,

**¡Gigante Despierta!** es una compilación en DVD de videos de las manifestaciones por los derechos de inmigrantes del año 2006. Tiene cortometrajes desde muchos lugares en todo el país.

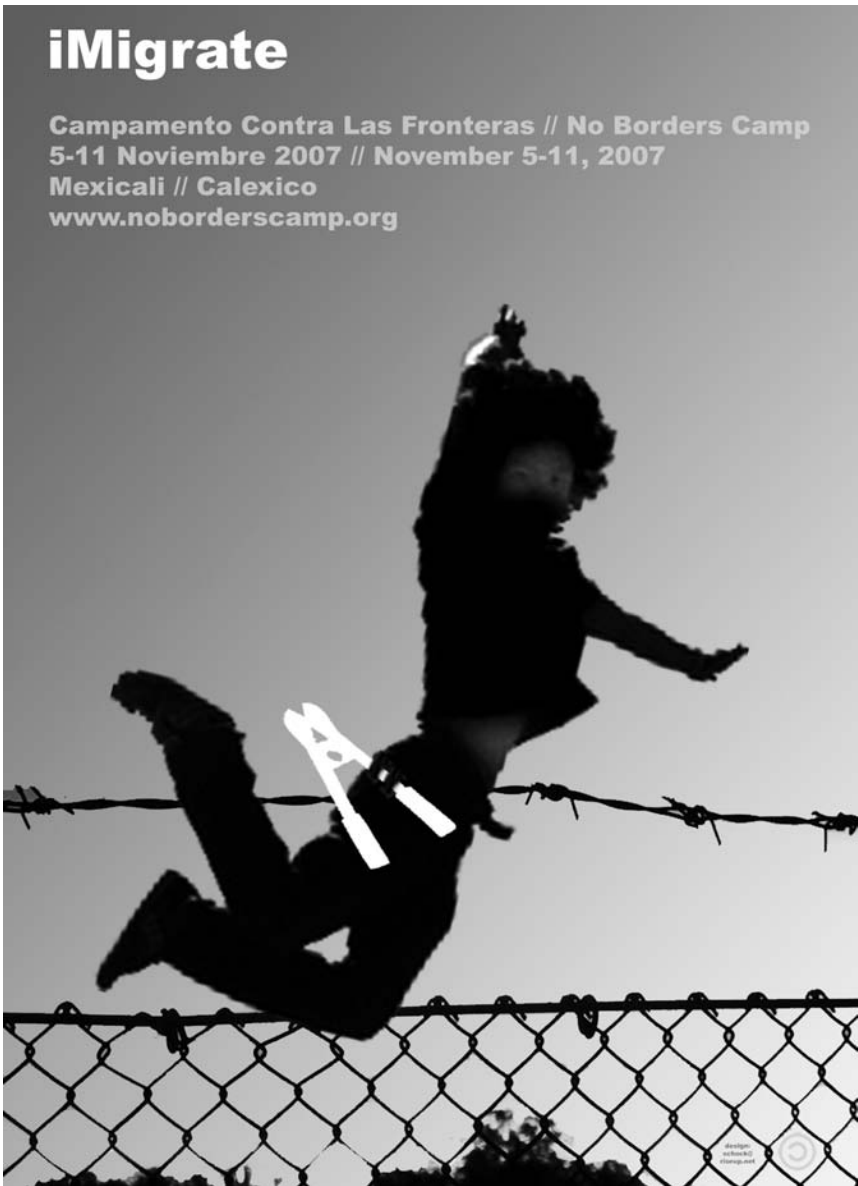
**Giant Awake!** is a DVD compilation of compelling short films from all around the country, due to hit the streets in the weeks before Mayday 2007.

Es una memoria colectiva y una herramienta para inspirar la acción para el primero de Mayo de 2007, cuando el Gigante va a levantar la voz de nuevo para decir: ¡Somos un pueblo, sin fronteras! ¡Aquí estamos, y no nos vamos!

It is a collective memory and a tool to inspire action this MayDay 2007, when the Giant will raise its voice again to say: we are one people, without borders. We are here, and we are here to stay!

para pedir copias del DVD:      DVD pre-orders available:  
[www.gigantedespierta.org](http://www.gigantedespierta.org)

Figure 7.  
Gigante Despierta poster, from [gigantedespierta.org](http://gigantedespierta.org).



**Figure 8.**  
iMigrate, by Shock, remixed by anonymous MySpace user.

from content management systems such as plumi (<http://plumi.org>) and filmforge (<http://filmforge.koumbit.net>), to content hosts such as the Internet Archive (<http://www.archive.org>), to decentralized content hosting such as indytorrents and v2v (<http://www.v2v.cc>), to application service providers such as civicspace (<http://www.civicspace.org>), to software for editing audio and video such as kino and audacity (<http://audacity.sourceforge.net>), and even entire FOSS operating systems tailored to activists and mediamakers, such as dyne:bolic (<http://www.dynebolic.org>).

One recent example of the mobilization of autonomous communication infrastructure in support of the immigrant rights movement is the *¡Gigante: Despierta!* project (full disclosure: this author participated in the project). This short film compilation was shot by independent videomakers across the country, gathered together using FOSS social bookmarking tool videobomb.org, coordinated online, cut in San Francisco and New York City, assembled in Los Angeles, and distributed around the country beginning in April 2007:

Pulling together short films from sixteen producers in different locations, the compilation was screened in community centers, universities, and independent cinemas nationwide in the weeks just before and after May Day 2007.

While many immigrant rights organizations have used offline popular communication as part of their organizing, most remain strapped for resources and lack capacity to bring popular communication online through autonomous (noncorporate, nonstate) tools and infrastructure. It is thus the responsibility of better-resourced tech activists, independent media makers, bloggers, and other communication activists to reach out to these organizations. Those tied to the “citizen journalist” label might want to publicly rethink their reasons for conceptually linking the right to speak in new communication spaces to legal membership in the nation-state. For their part, some immigrant rights organizations are already working hard to clarify their analysis of the cultural industries, both the mass media as well as the “new” online corporate spaces, and are developing a long-term strategy that doesn’t rely solely on the “free as in beer” offerings of so-called Web 2.0 firms. As these pieces come together, we will all benefit from the mash-up of the rich history, tools, and skills of *comunicación popular* with the autonomous Internet.

## Notes

1. ICE, "Fact Sheet: ICE Office of Detention and Removal," November 2, 2006, <http://www.ice.gov/pi/news/factsheets/dro110206.htm> (accessed August 20, 2007).
2. Immigrant Legal Resource Center, "Dangerous Immigration Legislation Pending in Congress," December 2005, [http://www.ilrc.org/resources/hr4437\\_general.pdf](http://www.ilrc.org/resources/hr4437_general.pdf) (accessed August 21, 2007).
3. Jason Byrne, personal communication with the author, September 23, 2007.
4. Amy Goodman, "L.A. Immigration Protest: The Police Were Relentless. They Were Merciless," May 4, 2007, <http://www.alternet.org/columnists/story/51454/?comments=view&cID=651184&pID=650213> (accessed August 25, 2007).
5. Bratton, William. May 2, 2007. Media Brief on Macarthur Park Disturbance, May 2, 2007 [http://lapdblog.typepad.com/lapd\\_blog/2007/05/chief\\_bratton\\_b.html](http://lapdblog.typepad.com/lapd_blog/2007/05/chief_bratton_b.html) (accessed July 10, 2008).
6. Nicole Gaouette, "Senate Gets Tougher on the Border," *Los Angeles Times*, May 24, 2007, A16.
7. S. A. Miller and Stephen Dinan, "Senate OKs \$3 Billion to Guard Border," *Washington Times*, July 27, 2007, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20070727/NATION/107270098/1001> (accessed September 1, 2007).
8. Mandalit Del Barco, "Spanish-Language DJ Turns Out the Crowds in LA," National Public Radio, April 12, 2006, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5337941> (accessed September 1, 2007).
9. Carmen Gonzalez, "Latino Mobilization: Emergent Latino Mobilization via Communication Networks" (unpublished seminar paper, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, 2006).
10. Graciela Orozco, *Understanding the May 1st Immigrant Rights Mobilizations* (New York City: Social Science Research Council/Media Hub, 2007), <http://mediaresearchhub.ssrc.org/grants/sponsored-projects/preliminary-report-on-qualitative-study-of-immigrant-latino-audiences> (accessed July 10, 2007). See also <http://www.radiobilingue.org/>.
11. For more on Indymedia, see Dorothy Kidd, "Indymedia.org: A New Communications Commons," in *Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice*, ed. M. Ayers (New York: Routledge, 2003), 47–69.
12. This is not a new process; see Tiziana Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy," *Social Text* 8.2 (2000): 33–58.
13. This is clear even to casual observers of the "new media" industry, but researchers need to better document these inequalities.
14. For example, see the internal debate over the "citizen's summit" parallel to the World Summit on the Information Society at <http://lists.ou.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind0510&L=ourmedia-l&F=PP&S=&P=5372> (accessed September 20, 2007).
15. Amy Goodman and Juan Gonzalez, "Students Protest Anti-Immigrant Bill," *WireTap*, March 29, 2006, <http://www.wiretapmag.org/immigration/34230/> (accessed July 24, 2007). See also Democracy Now transcript, <http://www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=06/03/29/154212#transcript> (accessed September 20, 2007).
16. Sasha Costanza-Chock, "Mapping the Repertoire of Electronic Contention," in *Representing Resistance: Media, Civil Disobedience, and the Global Justice Movement*, ed. Andrew Opel and Donnalyn Pompper (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood), 173–91; John Downing, *Radical Media: Rebellious Communication and Social Movements* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2001); Dorothy Kidd, "Indymedia.org: A New Communications Commons," in *Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice*, ed. M. Ayers (New York: Routledge, 2003), 47–69.
17. danah boyd, "Viewing American Class Divisions through Facebook and MySpace." Apophenia blog essay, June 24, 2007, <http://www.danah.org/papers/essays/ClassDivisions.html> (accessed September 1, 2007).
18. Dmytri Kleiner and Brian Wyrick, "InfoEnclosure 2.0," *Mute Magazine*, January 2007, <http://www.metamute.org/en/InfoEnclosure-2.0> (accessed August 24, 2007).
19. Andrew Lowenthal, "Free Media vs. Free Beer," March 2007, <http://www.transmission.cc/node/86> (accessed May 10, 2007).
20. Bratton, William. 2007. Testimony to Board of Police Commissioners, Regular Meeting, Tuesday, May 8, 2007, Parker Center, LA.
21. Personal communication, Indymedia Video Distribution Network mailing list, May 17, 2007.
22. Unfortunately, this space itself seems to have been pushed to the margins of the USSF. See <https://www.ussf2007.org/en/mjc> (accessed September 20, 2007).