

Organizing MySpace: Youth Walkouts, Pleasure, Politics, and New Media

By K. Wayne Yang

While the major urban centers around the country were flooded by millions of protesters demanding immigrant rights in March 2006, the San Francisco Bay Area remained relatively quiet. A coalition of organizers, including Centro Legal de la Raza, Deporten A La Migra, and the Bay Area Immigrant Rights Coalition mobilized a one-week hunger strike, creating media visibility and political pressure despite their smaller numbers. Approximately 30 strike organizers and 15 *huelgalistas de hambre* camped on the concrete in front of the Federal Building in San Francisco, and operated as a condensing point for a series of small actions, including several marches and rallies, none of which exceeded a few hundred people.

On the morning of March 27th, the organizers broke camp and prepared to march to U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein's office to demand changes to the bill¹ being constructed by her senate committee. Unlike the millions of marchers in Los Angeles, and hundreds of thousands in San Jose the previous weekends, the San Franciscans who had rallied hundreds of thousands to protest the war in Iraq initiated little activity around immigration

K. Wayne Yang is a professor in the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, California.

Organizing MySpace

policy. Perhaps the mainstream media had successfully convinced the Bay Area's liberal White population that immigrant rights were a Latino issue.

In fact, the massive marches around the country were unprecedented both in their size, but also in their composition as largely working-class, nonpartisan, Brown people. Neither law enforcement nor organizers expected a mass mobilization. It was a quiet Monday morning on March 27th, with Homeland Security officers nearly outnumbering organizers. Local police expected a turnout so small that they were already informing organizers that they would restrict the march to the city sidewalks. Around 11 am, a collective cry went up on the east side of the camp, as a band of youth waving flags and carrying pickets arrived at the camp. Within minutes, another cheer went up at the west side of the camp, as another group arrived. "The students are here!" an organizer told me.

Soon, teenagers had flooded the Federal Plaza, and the tall downtown buildings became an echo chamber of cheering and chanting as groups of high school students converged on the camp. Eventually, 3,000 to 5,000 people closed down Market Street, the main thoroughfare through downtown San Francisco, to rally in front of Senator Feinstein's office. A few hours later, Feinstein announced in committee that she opposed the most repressive aspects of the proposed legislation that would criminalize service providers and family members of undocumented immigrants.

Youth played a large role in organizing for immigrant rights in cities throughout the country, but in San Francisco they became the critical mass necessary for a significant mobilization. This article explores the nature of *fast organizing* among youth made possible through the advent of new media, particularly instantaneous text messaging and virtual communities formed in cyberspace. However, this study affords an analysis of not just new media, but of the contemporary terrain of youth organizing and popular culture.

Problem Statement

Analyzing effective youth actions is critical for developing a postmodern theory of social change, as such actions reveal both the potential of new media and of youth agency. Specifically, effective youth actions should inform our thinking around the democratizing power of youth popular culture, and the theorization of power itself. Youth popular culture is frequently equated with popular media, and disparaged by critics as dominated and debilitating (e.g., Hirsch, 1987). Without direct observation of the *effective* use of power and the *development* of critical resistance through youth popular culture, any study runs the risk of reifying pre-disposed essentializations of power and culture.

Power is similarly philosophized to be a corrupting and abusive force, by both canonized philosophers and critical theorists alike (e.g., Foucault, 1970). The most famous common-sense articulation of this view is perhaps John Dalberg-Acton's pronouncement, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." These negative idealizations of the popular and the powerful have little relevance to

the material struggle for human rights confronted by urban youth, and by colonized people in general. By analyzing the material struggle of youth engaged in new media, rather than formulating an abstract cultural critique of youth popular forms, this study opens itself to learning about struggle and media tools simultaneously. In other words, this study has findings not just about new media, but also about youth organizing in general.

The debate between the empowering promise and the disempowering impact of new media is not new, dating back to at least the advent of mass print media. On one hand critical theorists dating back to the Frankfurt School have warned about the dangerous homogenizing influence of new media technologies that were, in large part, controlled by the corporate “culture industries” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1999). On the other hand contemporary theorists have envisioned new media spaces as sites of engagement and empowerment where ordinary members of the population can become sophisticated cultural producers (Kress, 2003; Knobel & Lankshear, 2002). However one chooses to assess the current moment, it is difficult to deny that the availability of authorship of new media to poor, Black and Brown youth at the hand-held, instantaneous level is completely unprecedented in history, taking the form of text messaging, phone calls, chat rooms and MySpace personal web pages.

Many scholars, policymakers, and journalists speak of the “digital divide” (Hull, 2003) whereby poor and working-class urban youth of color have limited access to the electronic world compared to their affluent teenage counterparts in other communities. However, the concept of digital divide thus articulated assumes that inclusion results in equal citizenship. In the case of the world of the Internet and text messaging, democracy is an oft-touted ideal in wiring poor communities of color. In many ways, the Internet is the postmodern version of the public square of Rome, wherein (white, male, propertied, Roman) citizens could dialogue about a variety of sociopolitical issues.

However, when we consider critiques of the Enlightenment ideal of the public sphere (Rosaldo, 1997), we see that although such spaces were historically significant in the development of democracy, they were not in fact democratic. “One must consider categories that are visibly inscribed on the body, such as gender and race, and their consequences for full democratic participation” (Rosaldo, 1997, p.29). In a public sphere that emphasizes sameness as a standard for equal citizenship, persons so marked by difference are not afforded the equal speaking rights. We can see the expansion of digital media as the creation of “urban spaces where people may form face-to-face civil societies in sites of public gathering” (p.28). These digital societies can reproduce the same racist relations that suppress the subjectivities of poor people and people of color. Therefore, democracy is not a property of the space itself, but rather the space is a possible arena for democratic struggle. This possibility is facilitated by the space only when the oppressed subject can take over the public sphere for the articulation of an anti-colonial consciousness (Fanon, 1963).

In Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, Prospero teaches English to Caliban, whom he then proceeds to make his slave. Rather than using the oppressor’s language to become a

Organizing MySpace

better servant, Caliban exploits it to curse his master and to expose his own debasement. He famously comments, “You taught me language and my profit on’t is... I know how to curse! The red plague rid you, For teaching me your language.”

Bridging the digital divide reveals a deeper divide, in which poor, urban, immigrant youth are not full citizens of society. Like Caliban, marginalized youth often appropriate their newfound digital literacies to curse the state of inequality. Specifically, youth create subaltern public spheres, so-called subcultures, through such media as MySpace and text messaging. So framed, the “digital divide” is therefore an *ideological divide* and should refer to the antagonistic ideologies surrounding the purposes of new media. On one hand, charitable educators and government agencies seek to increase access to the information highway in order to produce compliant citizens for a global economy. On the other hand, youth subvert these resources to become counter-citizens, indulging in pleasure, resisting the “civilizing” project of education, and in some cases, organizing for the disruption of that very global economy.

Digital technologies also impact the very character of organizing methods, mobilization, leadership, and ideology. It has changed the character of time, producing a new phenomenon of *fast organizing*, and the character of space, allowing virtual vis-à-vis interactions. Decentralized networks keep leadership and ideology diffuse, at least until moments of ideological consolidation. The new time-spaces have serious implications for how we conceptualize social movement building, to be discussed in this article.

Methods

Although this particular article focuses on the March 2006 student walkouts for immigrant rights in the San Francisco Bay Area, it is part of a larger ethnographic study of youth popular culture, and the impact of pedagogy on emerging social movements that I conducted for over two years at East Oakland Community High School (EOC). The time period of this study includes (1) the year preceding the student walkouts, (2) the student walkouts themselves, and (3) the transformation and politicization of MySpace and text messaging in the months following the walkout. Data include videotape and audiotape of daily interactions, records of electronic texts such as MySpace and text messages, fieldnotes, and interviews.

I began my ethnographic study in 2004 with no inkling that students would organize around immigrant rights in 2006, nor that they would employ MySpace and text messaging to do so. Rather, I was following the rise of MySpace usage and text messaging among students at EOC. MySpace was created in July 2003 as a social networking service, and few East Oakland students had access to it initially. By July 2005, shortly after its purchase by Rupert Murdoch for \$580 M, over half of EOC students reported having their own MySpace account. During this same time, the youth began to use text messaging in cell phones, especially when MetroPCS introduced unlimited minutes. Notoriously poor service earned Metro phones the diminutive, “Ghettros.” The Ghetto and MySpace took on a new

social significance in March 2006, when EOC youth used these tools to organize their entire student body in a matter of 48 hours to become the largest youth group in the San Francisco march. Suddenly, my longitudinal study of new media was punctuated by an exceptional youth organizing event.

The main informants for this study were EOC youth whose new media practices I followed over the course of 18 months both inside and outside the classroom. After the walkouts, I also interviewed youth from other schools, as well as several adults who were involved in the marches, hunger strike, and general organizing. Some of these interviews were conducted in focal groups with a protocol to encourage conversation among the interviewees. All the quoted data in this article are based on interview transcripts, as opposed to recorded speech in everyday settings.

The hunger strike will not be a topic of analysis in this article. However, it is important to highlight that I was a hunger striker, as well as a teacher and co-founder of East Oakland Community High School. These roles not only allowed me an intense level of access to informants, unfolding events, and perspectives—they also placed me in a position to influence the phenomena being observed. I have analyzed this positioning extensively in other writings, under the framework of the “complicit researcher” for those of us who “operate in the borderland between intervention and ethnography” (Yang, 2004, p. 72). Compared to fly-on-the-wall observers, “the participation of the complicit researcher is deliberately partisan and becomes increasingly instrumental over time. At its core, the complicit researcher is a theoretical device for investigating the activist intervention of researchers in activities intended to disrupt social and cultural reproduction” (p. 73).

Certainly, my presence on the hunger strike as a well-known adult educator provided youth another personal connection to the march, but immigrant rights were already a highly personalized issue; the legislative deliberations in congress directly threatened youth, their families, and their friends. Nonetheless, the youth action in this case was largely outside of my arena of influence. As one of the hunger strikers, I was incapacitated after a week without food. Moreover, I was cynical that youth could successfully mobilize so quickly, and actually tried to discourage a few of the students when rumors of a walkout began to circulate. I remember being amazed by the student numbers. The youth in this study were remarkably self-directed, with no formal structures provided by schooling, and only indirect guidance by adults. In other words, this is not a study of a formal, adult-sponsored youth organization, but of an organic youth movement.

Brief History of Text Messaging and MySpace

Back in the days when I was a teenager/
Before I had status and before I had a pager

As Q-Tip penned these words, he was marking the height of alternative hip-hop (Chang, 2005) and of pagers, and the imminent decline of both from the youth popular

Organizing MySpace

arena. Arguably, the first hand-held electronic texting device was the pager. In the late 1980s up to the mid- to late 1990s, these “beepers” were the communication device of choice for urban teens in the United States. Pagers became part of urban apparel, as status symbols, as fashion accessories, and as communication devices. For this reason, their communicative power was simultaneously made possible and limited by their luxury status within a culture of pleasure. We can see this clearly if we contrast pagers for teenagers with those for medical professionals: one is for confabulatory pleasure and the other for urgent professional summons. The pleasures of paging were rooted in making conversation, not communiqués. However, it is precisely this popularity through pleasure that gives text messaging its organizing potential. Pager popularity created youth channels of mass communication and therefore the possibility of mass mobilization relatively outside of the purview of the state, supervising adults, or corporate media.

The first “text” messages were sent by an elaborate “pager code,”² revealing the sophisticated nature of organic youth media literacy. However, network speeds were slow. Pagers only supported person-to-person messages rather than group announcements. Paging required a telephone in addition to a paging device. Messages were not durable and could not be circulated. Unlike alphabetic print literacy, where printing presses facilitated the widespread dissemination of elaborated texts to establish national identities (Anderson, 1983), there were no such pager-code manifestos to establish collective youth identity and ideologies. Cell phones replaced pagers a decade later, bolstering the youth network with direct, two-way communication. However, it was not the cell phone, but the advent of the Short Message Service (SMS), commonly known as “text messaging” that provided the power of mass creation, distribution and consumption of texts in hand-held electronic form. Texts had group readership: one device could send the same message to multiple people. Texts were durable: one could forward an exact text along chains of recipients. Youth often “texted” during class, setting in motion a popular circuit of underground communication.

Ciro³ (Counselor & Raza Film Teacher): *Whenever a teacher says, in class, “Don’t pass notes,” [text messages are] the new modern notes. It’s the new modern form of communication.*

Texting technology increased the possibility of cell phones as organizing tools. I sent my first text message in 2006, which immediately earned me informal subscriptions to several youth-produced and distributed text publications, i.e., “chain letters.”

Ezra (EOC student, text message journalist⁴): *Oh [thumbing an imaginary cell phone in his hand] You are my best friend. Send to 5 other people who are your best friend. See how many you get.*

Although obnoxious, chain letters represented the first mass-produced text messages. They forged circulations of readership that hinted at the possibility of mass organizing through hand-held media. One may have never expected the *written word*

K. Wayne Yang

to re-emerge in cell phones, an otherwise oral medium of communication. In fact, various writers have foretold the end of alphabetic literacy in a multimedia world, but the passing of notes and chain letters help explain the enduring power of print. These electronic notes act as quickly producible, transmissible, and *reproducible* documents for mass networks of other teens. This is a natural transition to another form of print-based, yet multi-media interaction among youth: MySpace.

MySpace is an online community that lets you meet your friends' friends.
—from myspace.com: a place for friends, retrieved 9/8/2006

Tank, a student at EOC whose Internet practices I observed over the course of one year, began using MySpace in 2004⁵ at his previous high school. He became an avid MySpace user just as the trend began. Like many youth, he discovered MySpace in the unofficial world that students create within official school hours. He first learned about it in computer class while the teacher was lecturing about “all that boring ass stuff.”

Tank: *I just seen like my friend, they rockers, they be on MySpace. I said, “What’s that?” And they said, “Oh it’s a website and you can meet friends all over.”*

He signed up in the school library, during another class. He learned how to post a personal profile, photos, videos, and stories. Most importantly, he learned how to meet friends. During an interview with Tank, I watched him scroll through photos of his 414 MySpace friends.

Tank: *I got my sister. My cousin. Myra. My other cousin cousin. My niece-no, nephew niece. My cousin. One of my best friends. My friend friend friend. Ex-girlfriend. Friend. Laura. My homegirl. Betty. And my homegirl. And then, I think it’s Joe? I don’t—I don’t remember. Then Ciro. Then Reyes.*

For someone who has never accessed the multimedia world of MySpace, it is a difficult phenomenon to describe in words alone. Superficially, it appears to be merely a collection of individual websites. A user constructs a web-based personality through a range of simple on-line tools: photos, videos, music, and writing. Without training in html code or website design, one can create, update, and modify an interactive page with videos and chats and blogs. It is the ability to exchange these sociocultural artifacts that makes MySpace a public square, a virtual flea market of personalities and fantasies. Often referred to as a “social networking service” (MySpace, 2006), MySpace allows users to share photos, music, videos, personal profiles, stories, and *friends*.

It is not the website that gives MySpace its life, but rather, the regularity that users meet with friends online. Like Tank, many youth spend several hours per day interacting with their friends. Some have described it as replacing other forms of communication, turning “MySpace” into a verb (Anderson, 2006).

Youth 1: *You don’t have to call someone if you can MySpace them.*

Youth 2: *It’s kind of like a better version of an answering machine.*

Organizing MySpace

Youth 3: *People don't even pick up the telephone anymore because they're plugged into their computer.*⁶

MySpace in 2004 was completely out of the purview of Oakland Unified School District. When Tank transferred to EOC in 2005, MySpace had grown so much in popularity that most students had personal homepages. The school district began to block the website, sparking a battle between students and the district's technology department. As quickly as the district could block access, students found new methods of logging on through proxy websites that bypassed administrative filters.⁷ The district's response was to liberally block so many websites that often teachers and administrators could not access their email at work. The U.S. press catapulted Pope John XXIII Regional High School to national attention for threatening students with suspension if they accessed MySpace even from the privacy of their own homes (Bruno, 2005). School district bans, if ineffective in deterring MySpace activity, were markers of its popularity and its subversive possibilities. The digital world is "divided," not by access to computing technology, but by conflicting ideologies about youth literacy. These antagonistic ideologies suggest that youth cyberspace is not a benign extension of the public square; rather, it a counter-cultural forum from which social dissent may emerge.

By July of 2006, MySpace had topped the charts several times as the most popular U.S. website ("MySpace gains," 2006), even above Internet giants Yahoo and Google. Because of its regular use by youth, MySpace had become a reliable form of mass communication, and therefore a potential tool for organizing and mass mobilization.

Ciro: *They started getting the word out on MySpace. "Hey there's a walkout, there's a walkout, there's a walkout!" And other students who have a cell phone, like Marta and other students who are like, texting each other like, "Hey check this out. We're not going to go to school."*

In March 2006, this potential was realized as youth walked out of classrooms throughout the country. Text messaging and MySpace had created the infrastructural possibility for fingertip, instantaneous organizing.

Findings: Simultaneity, Spontaneity, and Space

One practical and theoretical preoccupation with mass mobilizations is whether they are merely "crisis behavior," that is the "simple aggregation of atomized individuals, facilitated by the diffusion of a generalized belief" (Melucci, 1980, p. 201), or whether they can evolve into sustainable social movements. Ultimately, lasting impact depends on whether organic mobilizations can develop into political movements that reshape the state (Castells, 1983). In the age of fast organizing, we may be witnessing the convergence of crisis behavior with more durable political effort and ideological synthesis. Fast organizing is markedly enhanced by the character of digital technologies and their impact on organizing, which I will discuss along

three problematics: the matter of simultaneity, the matter of spontaneity, and the matter of space.

Modern youth organizing breaks from the traditional strikes organized through unions or vanguard groups with hierarchical structure. By contrast, youth organizing is diffuse and non-hierarchical. This is a critically important area of investigation for social theory, as traditional Marxism has failed to adequately anticipate the sources and methods of social movement. As Melucci (1980) articulated over 25 years ago, “Centering [Marxism’s] investigation on the logic of the system, it has underestimated the processes by which collective action emerges, as well as the internal articulation of social movements (mobilization, organization, leadership, ideology)” (p. 199). In the case of youth organizing, it is not a counter-capitalist ideology that drives mobilization, nor political parties, nor revolutionary organizations, nor a strong central leadership structure. Nonetheless, the masses of youth who converge on city centers for immigrant rights or other issues not only provide condensing opportunities in space and time for traditional organizing and ideological formation, they also announce the possibility of simultaneous and spontaneous popular uprising—the critical ingredient for the San Francisco march.

Simultaneity

Wayne: *Who was sending out the MySpace message?*

Tank: *Like all student—Hella people from, hella students from San Jose, Hayward, Oakland, and Richmond.*

Youth mobilization can teach us about how simultaneity through new media facilitates mass uprising. The principle of simultaneity is twofold: first, communication is simultaneous. A single youth is able to broadcast important information to dozens of others via text messaging: where to be, when, who will be there, the location of police, estimations of numbers, updates on unfolding events. Simultaneously, any number of other youth can be transmitting the same or similar messages. Second, effort is simultaneous, whereby groups of youth operate independently towards the same goal, coordinated only through the coincidence of thousands of communicative murmurings throughout overlapping social networks.

The democratic nature of simultaneous effort is important to highlight. When I first began interviews surrounding the walkouts, my intent was to find a key youth leader to narrate her/his organizing strategy. Repeatedly, this line of inquiry was stymied by the sheer democracy of effort. There was no clear single leader in the student strikes, nor was there a vanguard youth organization. When interviewed, youth would point to a variety of organizers and communicators. Those organizers would point to yet another group of youth or even cross-referenced one another. These chains and webs of communication provided an organic structure that was non-hierarchical and diffuse. Therefore, simultaneity in communication and effort, thousands of youth texting and moving, is what created the overnight mass mobilization.

Organizing MySpace

A *collective unconscious* is created by this network of simultaneity. Youth begin to actively imagine self and like-others, interrupting the dominant discourses of the individual and the alien other. This network develops a self-awareness through the common imagination that other “youth like me” are undertaking the identical activity of texting and moving. This self-and-other imagination leads to action, in defiance of generally held positions that new media inherently leads to passivity, either through the psychological influence of mesmerizing images, or through the individual distractions of pleasure (Rosen, 2004). In fact, it is the imagination of a collective will that moves the masses. I use the term *collective unconscious* because in many ways the public collective message is still dormant, not fully explicated as a single manifesto or some other form of group utterance. Rather, the collective unconscious is the composite of thousands of individual messages among networks of youth—like synapses firing in the background of a collective cortex. It is what James Scott (1990) might call a “hidden transcript,” an informal, not quite public, discourse of resistance.

Internationally, the most patent example of the awakening of the collective unconscious was perhaps the youth uprising in France that literally set Paris on fire. In November of 2005, mostly Black and Brown youth—the children of immigrants from former French colonies—took to the streets, lighting thousands of cars on fire, marching upon the city centers from their suburban ghettos. The protests were catalyzed by the electrocution of two youth of North African descent who were hiding from the police, but the overall climate was one of outrage over the extreme inequities between people of color and the European French, between immigrant communities and full citizens. The youth communicated and organized through web pages and text messaging (Moore & Williams, 2005), establishing their intellectual presence through these new media as well as their physical presence on the streets.

Diffuse organizing faces three dangers: the first is unclear messaging through the “operator effect” whereby messages mutate as they are passed along; the second is police surveillance and rapid state repression; and the third is the leadership vacuum through which a youth mobilization can be hijacked. Fast organizing has somewhat addressed the first two dangers. Instantaneous messaging encourages information to stay relatively tight and consistent, spreading through networks with little corruption in a virtually unmonitorable and completely youth-accessible communication system. Despite new espionage techniques by police and Homeland Security, the evolution of new media may outdistance efforts at surveillance. Youth vernacular also makes communication less subject to adult eavesdropping. Most importantly, the mobilization strategies of youth are geared towards mass movement, not secret gatherings, and are spread through public bulletins, not secret communiqués.

The third danger of the leadership vacuum is more serious. In San Francisco, this vacuum was filled by the adult organizers of the hunger strike. Following the strike however, youth organizers became increasingly impatient with the lack of recognition of formal youth leaders, and the dismissal of a youth platform that integrated the issues of immigrant rights with high school testing with the prison industrial

complex. Youth mobilization is based on the achievement of popular consensus around a specific issue. Of course, such consensus is subject to takeover and manipulation. This risk of being channeled to another's intentions is significant, and should be considered by youth organizers and those who work in solidarity with them. The lack of formal political leadership in fast organizing is perhaps the most significant shortcoming and the most pressing prospect in youth social movement building.

The Illusion of Spontaneity

Youth fast organizing has been mistaken for ephemeral and spontaneous activity, rather than the outcomes of intentional and continuous organizing. Technology has made its largest impact in this area: diffuse organizing is no longer the result of "diffusion," but rather of lightning speed communications. In this respect, spontaneity is an illusion generated by fast-technology, and can mask deeper structures of organized behavior as well as explicit group ideology.

By one narrative, the eruption of youth walkouts was sudden, overnight, spontaneous, and thereby temporary and reactive rather than sustainable and strategic. There is truth to this narrative, as youth crowded the streets in front of their schools, or demonstrated in front of school administration buildings. Arguably, these were "hangouts" rather than "walkouts." A study of such relatively organic and spontaneous eruptions of youth protest might reveal the anarchy of fast organizing, and relatively unsophisticated power analysis by young protesters.

However, this study chooses to focus on a counter-narrative to the youth hangout, by which certain student groups were highly mobilized, strategically rather than philosophically nonviolent, and capable of becoming the moral backbone for a well-articulated political platform that transcended the immediate crisis of the anti-immigrant legislation. EOC youth were already organized around the issues of high school testing, military recruitment, prison construction and police brutality. They pursued a diverse repertoire of strategies, including popular education, networking with organized groups, and smaller mobilizations for the last two years. By focusing on this counter-narrative, this study contains insights on the preconditions for effective organizing. Youth organizers for the mass mobilizations engaged in planning, coordination, and ideological synthesis long before the immigrant rights marches were even in their consciousness.

In this respect, spontaneity is an illusion generated by fast organizing; it is the outcome of preparation and a chance, catalyzing event. Specifically, there are two forms of preparation: informal and formal education. The informal is taught through everyday culture, through youth media and peer interaction. Increasingly, youth acquire communication skills through this informal dimension of education.

Jacinta (adult mentor): *How did you think about that? How did you think about using text messages?*

Organizing MySpace

Marta (youth, one of the walkout organizers): *Like what?*

Jacinta: *Like why not just talk to them, why text messages?*

Marta: *Because that's the way that some of the students be using the phone, just text message.*

In the case of text messaging, youth had already developed these skills through the informal social space of teen electronic conversations. On average, students reported 30 minutes to an hour of texting every day. This hyper-investment in the text message domain developed both individual literate skills and collective social infrastructure. "That's the way... students be using the phone." To Marta, this circuit for organizing was obvious because the community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) of text messaging already existed.

Ciro: *And what I found really impressive is that teachers didn't give them those tools. It wasn't something that the school really talked about a lot. It's that they were so creative enough, to use technology to mobilize.*

Formal preparation is that which youth may (or more often, may not) receive through the guidance of adults. School is one major institution for the guidance or misguidance of youth in becoming organized and critically literate of their world. For the most part, schools do not prepare youth with the necessary skills for collective agency, preferring to focus on individualistic skill development and achievement. Preparation and mis-preparation are dual outcomes of formal education. In this respect, EOC was quite unusual. Ciro had a MySpace virtual classroom as part of his Raza History Through Film class. As part of this class, a group of students had seen *Walkout*, a film about the 1968 East Los Angeles student actions against unequal education, just a month prior to their own action. They even met Edward James Almos, the film's director. One student hosted a screening of the film at her house. Some students attributed their tactics to this film. Furthermore, every student took a course on community organizing in the 10th grade, which although largely theoretical, had instilled some basic principles of effective organizing practices.

Jacinta: *What did you say in the text message?*

Marta: *Walkout Walkout.*

Jacinta: *Did you explain, like why?*

Marta: *We also put where we were gonna meet.*

It may seem like an insignificant detail to include a meeting point for a walkout, but it is the distinguishing feature between a walkout and a hangout. Several students reported receiving text messages from friends at other schools to simply leave classes, with no organized destination. Other aspects of youth organizing included calling upon adult allies; some students had solicited letters from supporting teachers to show law enforcement, as police had the right to detain students who were skipping school. The letters had no legal teeth, but they served to deter most police

K. Wayne Yang

officers from arresting students on their way to San Francisco. This level of detailed planning explained the sheer degree of mobilization of the EOC students—only 10 students remained at school, and all but a few traveled the distance to the march in San Francisco, a two-hour roundtrip that cost nearly \$9 per student. Reportedly, a few high school campuses had large student turnouts that were supported by formal organizations, such as *Youth Together* and *Organize Da Bay*. The EOC student mobilization was set apart from other schools in its mobilization of a total student body without support from a formal youth organization.

Heightening the appearance of spontaneity in the youth actions was the slow reaction time of many organized adult groups. Youth were habituated to the tools of mass communication through the cultures of pleasure that derive from MySpace and text messaging. By contrast, the same technologies of instantaneous communication were available, indeed more affordable to professional adult organizations, but their popularization through daily use was nonexistent. It is instructive to compare the mechanisms of new media youth organizing with adult-based media organizing.

The huge immigrant rights marches in Los Angeles have been attributed to a handful of Spanish-language radio personalities and television anchors (Flaccus, 2006). Most notable may have been Eddie “Piolín” Sotelo, whose radio show was syndicated in 20 cities. He himself had immigrated and lived without papers until 1996. Similar to youth organizing, the adult uprising was the result of months of ideological synthesis through media, in this case, radio. A daily audience, united not by media alone, but by a culture of pleasure, provided the possibilities for organizing through radio. Therefore, when marches were called, a responsive constituency could be contacted instantly through a well-oiled infrastructure of communication. In many ways, tuning in to El Piolín was like a daily rehearsal of a people’s emergency broadcast system.

However, the media differences between youth SMS organizing and radio organizing are not just incidental. The character of the media actually shaped the character of organizing. Text messaging, a system of mass communication developed through daily rehearsal, is based in diffuse networking, as opposed to emanating from a hub as in the case of radio. Its technology cost is born across the users, rather than by a radio station and its advertisers. It is inherently more democratic in media production, as any user can send the message. It is more interactive, allowing for thousands of simultaneous dialogues between members of the network, as opposed to phoning into the radio by single callers. It is also instantaneous and unscheduled, unlike radio which requires complex scheduling, set times, rehearsals and recordings. In this respect, radio takes time to produce but is instantly broadcasted; whereas text messaging is both instantly produced and instantly broadcasted. Furthermore, text messaging networks are fluid and overlapping, whereas radio audiences can tune into only a single station at a time.

Therefore, the character of traditional radio suggests a different reason why many immigrant rights marches were predominantly Latino. Perhaps immigrant rights were not a Latino-specific issue; rather, the ideological urgency of these issues

Organizing MySpace

was created in popular cultural channels that were Latino-specific. (The ideological synthesis in the preceding months did not occur in the Asian popular media, for example.) By contrast, youth channels of communication through text messaging are not necessarily ethnically based. A given youth might simultaneously participate in multiple networks that cross schools, cities, racial groups, and rival neighborhoods. Furthermore, messages can travel across networks that bridge several degrees of separation. It is no accident then, that youth groups were more ethnically diverse than their adult counterparts. In fact, the EOC students were the largest multiracial contingent of African-Americans and Latinos in the San Francisco march.

The difference between radio and text messaging reveals the relative advantages between fast organizing and traditional media. Greater ideological synthesis and more disciplined mobilizations took place via a stronger, more centralized medium of radio and formal organizing. Arguably, the radio broadcasts also catalyzed the spontaneous mass mobilization of youth. For a sustainable political movement, some centralization and formalization of political leaders seems necessary. This leads us to the final portion of this article, the creation of virtual spaces where youth can sustain political dialogue and carry out formal organizing projects.

Transforming Space and Self

A popular belief about Brutalist architecture—the massive concrete structures of the 1960s and 1970s—is that certain college dormitories designed in the 1970s were built to deter student organizing. Small or nonexistent common spaces are separated by narrow hallways, eliminating large areas for congregating. The tunnel-like architecture creates a warren of residential units. From a different viewpoint, the rise in these gray monoliths in the urban landscape has also been analyzed as a populist movement to house ordinary working-class people. The debates about the social significance of Brutalism are many, and I do not intend to weigh in on them.

What has always puzzled me, though, is the lack of analysis of the architectures that have facilitated social uprising. Were these spaces in fact designed to promote organized resistance? Or was this an unintended consequence, a subversion of space, a transformation of an otherwise apolitical architecture by its population? Effective organizing always intersects with the possibilities and constraints provided by space. “New social movements,” according to Melucci (1980), struggle “not only for the reappropriation of the material structure of production,” but also “for the reappropriation of time, of space, and of relationship in the individual’s daily existence” (p. 219). Architects of space, including virtual space, may find that youth organizing is an unintended consequence of their design.

The particularities of each geography of resistance influence the constraints, possibilities, tone and texture of activism. Virtual space, MySpace in particular, is a complex terrain of decentralized nodes and webs. Much the same way that beauty salons and barber shops have been recognized as powerful spaces for community organizing because of their role as legitimate centers of interaction in the African-American community (Jacobs-Huey, 1997; Ling, 2006), MySpace has become a

virtual street corner for teen gatherings. Perhaps this seems like another obvious postmodern mapping of the physical world onto the virtual. However, beyond the virtual aspects of organizing space are its material and cultural aspects. MySpace is free of cost, and free from adult supervision. But most importantly, it is a space of pleasure.

MySpace is often maligned for its appeal to the lowest common denominator of the human experience: sex. Any newsroom search for articles on MySpace will reveal hundreds of commentaries about on-line predators and the sexual activity of minors. Yet MySpace's organizing potential lies in the very social networks that result from *communities of pleasure*, that is, social groups whose members congregate around recreational activities rather than explicit political ideology. The MySpace explosion is not the result of a political movement by youth, but rather by the availability of on-line chatting, of voyeurism, of sexual tension, of masquerading, of secret lives. This point was not missed by youth who were active in MySpace; each one reported signing up to meet people, and to create their own social domain away from the scrutiny of schools and family.

The impact of pleasure as a key motive for social organizing is often lacking in the analysis of popular cultural forms. This pleasure in popular forms is the basis for its denigration in the minds of cultural conservatives and political leftists alike (e.g. Adorno & Horkheimer, 1999; Hirsch, 1987). The preference for "consciousness" in new media is ironically acritical and superficial, and could be labeled as idealistic thinking. I use the term "idealistic" not to suggest naiveté or optimism for social change, but rather to reference the philosophical disposition that things, ideas, politics have pure or ideal forms, drawing from its original meaning from the Greek idealists. Idealistic thinking suggests that the struggle for liberation should look a certain way—should engage the politics of representation from a mature political correctness, that youth organizing should be anti-sexist as well as anti-racist, and a Marxist class consciousness should emerge that is fundamentally unitary, that pleasure should be subordinated to the utilitarian communication of leftwing politics.⁸

Social movements have proven this perspective wrong time and again, that class consciousness is frequently divisive (Gramsci, 2000) and racist (Berlet & Lyons, 2000), that anti-supremacist movements can be ethnocentric and chauvinist (Brown, 1992), and that violence is symptom and antidote to the colonial relation (Fanon, 1963). The purity of liberal thought is another perversion of a Western world grappling with its own imperial status, oppressor role, and unprecedented wealth and privilege. At their root, the idealisms of the Western democracy are luxuries of a world of comfort—so that even liberation is comfortable and clean—and have little relevance to the struggles of colonized people. Mignolo (2000) refers to this "colonial difference" as the inappropriate application of Western leftist politics to de-colonizing politics in the colonial world. The colonized's embrace of race, gender, class, nationalism, and violence are not the same "-isms" of Western domination, and exist in defiance of privileged Western enlightenment thought. This study would add "pleasure" to this list of postcolonial defiances to Western liberal

Organizing MySpace

idealism; that pleasure is a key colonial difference in effective cultural spaces of resistance. Youth organizing through new media is no different.

A topic for further study is how spaces of pleasure become transformed into spaces of resistance, and in the process, selves are remade from objects and consumers of pleasure into political actors. The evolution of Tank's website, and the advent of journalistic "hood reports" via text messaging give a glimpse into this process.

Tank described his original MySpace website as an expression of his affiliation with the gang life represented by *Norte*, the color red, and the number fourteen.

Tank: *First, when I got it, my background was black and red.*

Although not "pleasure" in the traditional sense, social recognition and public image motivated Tank to construct a webpage and social identity rooted in hood pride.

Tank: *A lot of Norteño pictures, saying "fuck the scraps," "187 SSL". I used to put 187⁹ on [name of youth and rival clique]. He was the one—he was trying to kill me. He was the only one who knew where I lived.*

Wayne: *They actually came and shot up your house, right?*

Tank: *Yeah.*

Tank began changing his MySpace website, as a precursor to getting out of the gang life. In a sense, the ease of re-writing his digital self allowed Tank an entry point into the more difficult task of transforming his whole self.

Tank: *I changed my background, my page, until I stopped gangbanging. And I was getting into a lot of things like revolutionaries, all that, like Zapatistas, the Brown Berets... Like one side's, like, the poem of Corky Gonzalez, "I am Joaquin."*

His webpage was green with flashing pixels, opening with the poem by Corky Gonzalez. He had a Salvadorian flag for his personal photo, alongside the quote, "We start to MOVE. La Raza! Mejicano! Español! Latino! Hispano! Chicano! or whatever I call myself, I look the same I feel the same I cry and Sing the same." Tank's re-construction of his website is both a transformation of a commercialized space of pleasure, and a transformation of self.

Tank: *If people want to, like other friends, they wanna see, like, like what's my background now... "Oh, does this fool bang, or not?" They just go back and they can see the poem. Or "is this one gonna bang?" Like, they see what I like to do now. Like protesting for immigration.*

At the time of this interview, Tank had begun recruiting other youth to start a Brown Beret chapter in Oakland, translating gang organizing into community organizing.

MySpace complements the temporal immediacy of text messaging with a virtual time-space that exists beyond the moment of communicative utterance. That is, virtual space provides otherwise un-propriated youth with a durable, malleable site of identity formation, social organization, and collective memory. Under crisis behavior, mass mobilization ends with a return to separate realms of existence; in

K. Wayne Yang

this case, youth returned from the walkouts and regrouped in virtual space. That radicalizing moment of protest and crisis was preceded and succeeded by durable changes in ideology and social organizing—as remembered and lived through MySpace. These low-rent organizing halls and offices in virtual space can facilitate political activity, even formal political parties, that could mature into transformative urban movements.

Text messaging, chain letters and chats, can also provide space for, and be subject to transformation. Ezra, an African-American student at EOC, negotiated a range of identities from comedian to social critic, from mama’s boy to vulgar poet, from sleepy student to vocal leader. In the spring of 2006, he began texting extensive “hood reports” of local news through the chain letter circuit. The following was one such message, transmitted as a four-part text, which meant that the total report exceeded the maximum length for a single SMS message.

*Dis is yo boy Ez wit a hood report:oakland is at 52 in da homicide charts last year
we wasnt nowhere at dis point but still we were on da charts dis can*

*stop and dis can change.It can start by solvin yo problems like da people we r and
not da savages dey potray us to b we are all tryin to make it out and*

*Ince we do we foget where we cum frm why not get wut we get and share it so we
dnt hav to kill or fite ova sumthin we can share we got weapns but we r ai*

*min at da wrng people dis message is made to save lives,self awareness and save
our people frm extinction.”LAST OF A DYING BREED.” Send to everyone*

The messages were labeled as sent at 7:53 a.m. May 23. Ezra had sent this text first thing in the morning, before school.

Amiwu, an African-American student who spoke before the entire student body about her family’s immigrant experience from Nigeria, added a signature line to all her text messages: “**Emancipate Yoself 4rm Mental Slavery**.” This was quite a change from her email name, which read: nellyzgurl14ever. Nelly was the St. Louis rap phenomenon, known for a time for wearing a Band-aid on his face, for the pop album, *Hot in herre*, and track by the same name. Like all youth, Amiwu navigated a complicated world of identities in order to survive the violence of ghetto institutions, and these acts of critical literacy, of reshaping an unjust world through words, were also acts of self-naming and humanization.

The act of transformation is simultaneously external and internal. As one acts upon the world, one also acts upon the self (Freire, 1970). Youth of color in the ghettos of America are precluded from circuits of citizenry within mainstream civil society. The colonial act of providing access to these spaces for youth is not democratic. Rather, it is the decolonizing act, the seizing of these spaces, their subversion, and their transformation that embodies the democratizing struggle of youth for their worlds and their identities. In organizing their spaces of pleasure, youth enact two transformations: material transformation of the institutions and social policies that control the flows of capital, and transforming the representations

Organizing MySpace

of self to others through the discursive arena of new media. To prepare, to stand alongside, and at some point, to get out of the way of these insurgent organizers, are our tasks as educators.

Ciro: *How did it feel when you were rollin hella deep and then when you took over the streets? How did that feel, organized, and it was mostly students?*

Myra (student): *That felt hella good—, like my— I even got chills, [touches her arm] cause I felt hella good. I was like, damn, we hella deep. You feel me? So it was like, that felt like— that was a good feeling*

Ciro: *Could the cops stop you?*

Myra: *No.*

Ciro: *Could anybody stop you?*

Myra: *No.*

Ciro: *So what did you learn from that day about the power of the youth?*

Myra: *That we're too strong, you feel me? We a lot of people. They can't, you know... We could take over them anytime.*

Myra's words capture the hope of her generation, and echo those of each generation of dispossessed youth. They signal an awakening from the stupor of the alienated individual to a new vision of solidarity. In radicalizing moments of mass mobilization, youth like Myra become aware of their personal power within the collective—an intuitive understanding of the material conditions, cultural congruities, and implicit ideologies that empower even the smallest nodes of solidarity in a larger nexus of youth culture. The organizing systems are latent, saturating the new technologies of pleasure, and as Myra points out, the next mobilization can happen anytime.

Notes

¹ The committee was debating a bill by Senator Arlen Specter that designated all undocumented immigrants as aggravated felons. Furthermore, Specter's bill allowed for the indefinite detention of non-citizens, and criminalized day-labor centers, churches, health clinics and all others who serve, help or work with undocumented immigrants. The House of Representatives had already passed a version of the bill on December 16, 2005, as H.R. 4437 (BAIRC, 2006).

² Pagers only displayed numbers, but youth developed combinations of numerals to communicate alphabetic messages. Often, pagers had to be flipped upside down to read the message; for example the letter "h" corresponds to an upside down "4" and "E" to an upside down "3" (Cho, 2004).

³ Names of students and teachers are pseudonyms.

⁴ Ezra was the author of a series of "hood reports" that he broadcasted via text messaging.

⁵ MySpace was created in July 2003. It rose exponentially in popularity, marked by its

purchase by Rupert Murdoch for \$580 M in July 2005.

⁶ These quotes are not ethnographic data, but excerpts from a news article (Anderson, 2006).

⁷ Some popular proxies included handsoffmycomputer.com and shadowbrowser.com.

⁸ Some notable exceptions to this kind of idealism are the works of Robin D.G. Kelley (1996), and Ernest Morrell and Jeff Duncan-Andrade (2002).

⁹ 187 is the police code for homicide, and is a vernacular term for murder.

References

- Adorno, T., & Horkheimer, M. (1999). The culture industry: Enlightenment as mass deception. In S. During (Ed.), *The cultural studies reader* (31-41). New York: Routledge.
- Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism*. New York: Verso.
- Anderson, H. (2006, Jan 21). The MySpace case. *The Daily News*. Retrieved November 16, 2006, from http://www.tdn.com/articles/2006/01/22/top_story/news01.prt
- Bay Area Immigrant Rights Coalition [BAIRC]. (2006, March 17). Hunger strike at U.S. Federal Building in San Francisco. [press release].
- Berlet, C., & Lyons, M. (2000). *Right-wing populism in America: Too close for comfort*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Brown, E. (1992). *A taste of power: A Black woman's story*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Bruno, L. (2005, Oct 20). Blogging ban provokes a debate over cyberspace. *Daily Record*.
- Castells, M. (1983). *The city and the grassroots: A cross-cultural theory of urban social movements*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Chang, J. (2005). *Can't stop won't stop: A history of the hip-hop generation*. New York: Picador.
- Cho, A. (2004, Dec 22). Pager code. Retrieved November 16, 2006, from Urban Dictionary Web site: <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=pager+code>
- Fanon, F. (1963). *The wretched of the earth* (C. Farrington, Trans.). New York: Grove.
- Flaccus, G. (2006, Mar 29). Spanish-language media credited on pro-immigrant rallies: Radio, TV hosts pushed for large, peaceful protests. *The Boston Globe*.
- Foucault, M. (1970). *The order of things: An archaeology of the human sciences*. New York: Pantheon.
- Gramsci, A. (2000). In D. Forgacs (Ed.), *The Antonio Gramsci reader: Selected writings 1916-1935*. New York: New York University Press.
- Hirsch, E. D. Jr. (1987). *Cultural literacy: What every American needs to know*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Hull, G. (2003). AT LAST: Youth culture and digital media: New literacies for new times. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 38(2), 229-233.
- Jacobs-Huey, L. (1998). We are just like doctors, we heal sick hair: Professional and cultural discourse of hair and identity in a Black hair care seminar. In M. Chalasani, J. Grocer, & P. Haney (Eds.), *SALSA V: Proceedings of the 5th Annual Symposium about Language and Society-Austin*, TLF 39 (213-223). Austin, TX: Texas Linguistics Forum.
- Knobel, M., & Lankshear, C. (2002). Critical cyberliteracies: What young people can teach us about reading and writing the world. Keynote address delivered to the National Council of Teachers of English Assembly for Research.
- Kress, G. (2003). *Literacy and multimodality: A theoretical framework. Literacy in the new media age* (35-60). New York: Routledge.

Organizing MySpace

- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ling, P. (2006). Schools and scholars: Social capital, resource mobilization and origins of the civil rights movement. *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 19(2), 202-204.
- Melucci, A. (1980). The new social movements: A theoretical approach. *Social Science Information*, 19, 199-226.
- Mignolo, W. (2000). *Local histories/global designs: Coloniality, subaltern knowledges, and border thinking*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Moore, M., & Williams, D. (2005, Nov 10). France's youth battles also waged on the web: Via internet, violence is incited, debated, tracked. *Washington Post*.
- MySpace gains top ranking of US web sites. (2006, July 11). *Reuters*. Retrieved November 16, 2006, from <http://www.rojo.com/story/ImjxtciCkR1FtS9c>
- MySpace. (2006) MySpace. Retrieved November 16, 2006 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.myspace.com>
- Q Tip. (1991). Excursions. On *Low end theory*. New York: Jive Records.
- Rosaldo, R. (1997). Cultural citizenship, inequality, and multiculturalism. In W. V. Flores & R. Benmayor (Eds.), *Latino cultural citizenship: Claiming identity, space, and rights* (27-38). Boston: Beacon Press.
- Rosen, C. (2004, Dec 7). Fast-forward to passivity: There are risks hidden inside TiVo's illusion of control. *Los Angeles Times*.
- Scott, J. C. (1990). *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Wikipedia (n.d.). MySpace. Retrieved September 8, 2006, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/My_space
- Yang, K. W. (2004). *Taking over: The struggle to transform an urban school system*. Unpublished dissertation. University of California, Berkeley.