

The Use of Social Media as a Tool for Collaborative Research on the U.S.-Mexico Border

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Introduction

For several decades, pundits and critics have predicted the end of borders, envisioning a globalized world that ushers in a new era of collaboration and cooperation (Friedman 2005). Despite these proclamations and significant advancements in communication technology, as well as the explosion of social media, we have not seen significantly greater collaboration, even between partners as close as those along the U.S.-Mexico border. This is especially true in academic research. Perhaps communication technologies have taken more time to be fully integrated into the often age-restricted fields of academia. Maybe the very nature of academic collaboration needs far greater contact than is provided through online and technological resources. Whatever the cause, intense debates in recent years about the safety of working in northern Mexico have complicated research efforts and created a huge divide between Mexican and U.S. colleagues, as many institutions have banned official travel to Mexico.

We hope to take this opportunity to discuss the new opportunities that communication technologies and social media offer to academic research projects. This paper will outline our strategies to disseminate our research, provide new opportunities to expand the audience for our work, and make our findings more relevant to people looking for change. While it is still too early to analyze the results of this approach, our efforts are based on scholars' attempts to more directly engage with groups struggling for social change (Hale 2008). We will discuss this idea more fully in the second half of the paper, after we have discussed our methodology and research questions, as well as how they relate to the local contexts within which we are working.

The escalation of drug violence along the border has increased the need for communication technology in research as some people are now increasingly restricted from travelling into zones where they once freely collaborated. Through our recent collaborative experiences, not only across the border but also from east to west in Mexico, we have had to deal with numerous challenges and have relied on technology to help manage complicated and difficult research. While our use of communication technology is far from cutting edge, this paper focuses on the interplay between technology, communication, and collaboration in a context of border

second section presents an overview of the social media technologies we are trying to implement and what we have learned in the process. The third section examines the potential of these communication technologies for future border research and the expansion of activist academic frameworks as a way to increase the impact of research and challenge power relations.

Despite a long history of social science research on the U.S.-Mexico border, binational collaboration has not been the norm (Weaver and Downing 1976). This situation can be traced to separate educational systems, the different languages spoken in the two neighboring countries, and different research priorities for both countries. Each country has its own professional associations and distinct sets of priorities that determine promotions and tenure-like appointments. At the same time, globalization, free trade, and new communication technologies have enhanced or even necessitated collaboration. Increasingly, scholars on both sides of the border speak both languages and attend meeting on both sides of the border. Mexico's National Council on Science and Technology (CONACYT) awards scholars who publish in international journals. Organizations like the University of California Institute for Mexico and the United States (UCMEXUS) encourage joint research, and the Puentes Consortium explicitly requires collaboration. With time, these pressures and opportunities should increase the frequency and depth of international collaboration.

Migrant Border Crossing Study: (In)security and Violence on the Border

The deadly conflict being played out on the Mexico-U.S. border links the drug cartels, the Mexican government, U.S. immigration policy, and the militarization of the border. While this has impacted many scholars, activists, and journalists working along the border, it has also provided an important point of self-reflection. What is the purpose of academic research and how can we push ourselves to improve our work so that it leads to better results? This comes on the heels of extremely anti-immigrant legislation passed by Arizona and Alabama that has increased death rates for migrants in the Sonora Desert in Arizona, and the horrific massacre of 72 would-be migrants in San Fernando, Tamaulipas, in August of 2010. Even more difficult to understand, and equally important for academic research to address, is the abuse and violence occurring every day on the border, particularly with people attempting to cross into the United States. The

period, an extended team, led by Daniel Martinez, a graduate student in the Sociology Department at the University of Arizona and a co-principal investigator of the Ford project, conducted more than 400 interviews.

In broadening the scope of the border project, we needed to incorporate more colleagues from all along the border. This type of study would be impossible without incorporating colleagues from both sides of the border from the cities where we are collecting information. In addition, it was important to include colleagues who could interview people in both the home communities of migrants in Mexico and migrants repatriated by airplanes to Mexico City. We held a two-day workshop with colleagues to decide on a timetable and methodology, and to discuss the results of the first round of data gathering in order to get as much input as possible before we selected the questions to include in the pre-test phase from January to February of 2011. While not all of the participants presently in the project attended the workshop, Mexican and U.S. colleagues who participated in the workshop played a major role in framing the project. Since that time, we have tried to cooperate with one another by exchanging information and resources, sharing data, and reflecting on the emerging comparisons.

The Migrant Border Crossing Study (MBCS) is the first binational attempt to obtain an overview of the abuses and violence experienced by recent border crossers who were subsequently deported; it addresses issues of banditry, violence by gender, kidnapping, extortion, physical abuse, and misconduct by authorities on both sides of the border, as well as legal misconduct in the court system and detention centers, among many other issues.

Research questions guiding the MBCS are:

1. To what degree do Mexicans encounter violence on their travels to and across the U.S.-Mexico borderlands?
2. Who is affected more by which types of violence, and how can our understanding of these abuses help protect specific populations (indigenous language speakers, women, the elderly, etc.)?
3. How do regional conditions along both sides of the border vary, and do these differences influence migrant decision-making and ultimately affect personal security?

to specific questions about the survey, as well as other questions about literature, regional differences, and some nuanced understandings that were not captured by the survey.

Because of the impossibility of conducting quantitative research that addresses everything, especially in such a highly dynamic and complicated environment as the border, we also have a qualitative component to the research. This is in part to provide data that “generates healthy skepticism of the [quantitative] data and their categories ... that opens a space for allies to scrutinize and participate actively in pragmatic evaluations of the results” (Hale 2008). Many migrant stories involve very specific, complicated details that shed light on migration and violence. Some survey interviews were recorded, but the majority of the qualitative data came from handwritten notes that accompanied each survey, as well as documentation of the informal conversations and shelter dynamics.

These conversations were key to providing more nuanced understandings, particularly about issues that we were uncomfortable including in the survey, such as the role of drug trafficking and criminal organizations in contemporary migration. Surveys have the benefit and drawback of being very open forms of research. All of the questions are written down in black-and-white for everyone to see. This makes it easy to support claims such as, “we are interested in your experiences and how you were treated during your migratory experiences.” Questions about drugs in explicit terms have the drawback of polluting this statement and could lead to problems in the field. Qualitative research, on the other hand, allows for an inductive approach to research, rather than a complicated set of survey questions designed to address the myriad experiences of individuals who may have crossed in the trunk of a car, with rented visas, or by trekking through the desert for days on end. Moreover, the addition of qualitative methods allows for individual participants to record their own data, focus on specific aspects of the experience, and write on a more flexible timeline. This is especially true when accommodating student participants’ thesis and other research projects that need to be completed in an expedited manner.

It is important to note that all contexts facilitate some aspects of the research and detract from others. For example, while working along the border we have access to a high volume of people with the specific characteristics we are interested in, but we have a very short time with each person because very few people spend much time at the border, preferring to cross again or go home within a day or two. The mobility provides people with the feeling of anonymity, which is

information. Although there are a few people who decline to speak with the researchers, the overwhelming majority of individuals are willing participants.

Although their specific histories and economic activities vary, the communities share the fact that the vast majority of their migrants are undocumented. According to preliminary results of our ongoing investigation, 92.2 percent of migrants were undocumented on their first migration to the United States (D'Aubeterre 2012). The high rate of undocumented migration is related to the incorporation of the communities into migrant flows after the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act in 1986, which provided for the legalization of more than 2 million Mexicans. Due to their unauthorized status in the United States, these migrants, their families, and communities are profoundly impacted by the economic downturn in the United States, border security measures, and increased border violence.

International migration is a prominent feature of everyday life in these communities. Because of the lack of local employment after the 1980s and lack of opportunities within the country, households and individuals tied their hopes for survival and a dignified life to working in the United States and saving money to construct and furnish a house, fund the children's education, start a business, subsidize small-scale agriculture, and pay for the day-to-day costs of maintaining a family. This is usually achieved through extended absences from the community; because of the high costs and risks involved in border crossings, migrants' strategies generally involve working in the United States for three, four, or five years before coming back to visit their families and communities. Migrants wishing to continue their life projects soon return to the United States and resume working. Although not all migrants achieve their financial goals, this basic pattern of circular migration with extended stays in the United States is common to the four communities.

Since 2010, our research team has focused on the impact of the global economic crisis on the patterns of migration and the ways in which migrant and non-migrant households have adjusted to these difficult times. In the first phase of this project, we conducted household surveys in four communities in the state of Puebla: Pahuatlan (135 households), Huaquechula (130), Chautla (200), and Zapotitlán Salinas (170). These figures represent an approximately 20 percent sample of the households in each community obtained through the employment of a spatial sampling technique. The instrument used was a modified version of the Mexican Migration Project

expensive to continue waiting in New York for work and so returned home, where they did not have to pay rent. And yet, the struggles did not end: return migrants have a hard time finding formal or informal employment back home. One unemployed construction worker from Chautla, Cesar, and his wife sold snacks to children outside the town's elementary school simply to survive. He has no hopes of continuing the construction of his house or paying off a \$3,000 debt to relatives that he acquired the last time he tried to cross the border, when he was detained for two months in Arizona by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and received a five-year deportation order. A sympathetic compatriot noted: "How much can they make from the stand? Elementary school children don't have a lot of money to spend."

Mario, 39, returned to Zapotitlán in 2008 after construction work in New York became scarce. He had acquired some 15 years of work experience in the United States, including construction and restaurant work. Back in Mexico, he has looked for work in supermarkets and industrial plants; however, he has been denied work because he does not have a high school education. "I didn't have the opportunity to study ... but I really want to work! I told my wife, you know what? I would rather migrate to the U.S. There they don't care if you didn't finish high school. What matters is that you work." His frustration is evident from the tears that roll down his cheeks.

The issue of returning, however, is much more complex because of border violence. In Zapotitlán Salinas, from the early 1990s to mid-2000s, residents were accustomed to making arrangements for their border crossings and journey to New York through local coyotes who accompanied them from the town, across the border, and into safe houses in Arizona. However, now local coyotes "sell" migrants to their contacts in larger criminal organizations involved in drug, arms, and human trafficking. Apolonia, 29, explains: "You leave Zapotitlán with the idea that the local coyote will take you across the border, but he sold us to another coyote in Agua Prieta."

Instead of dense social networks held together by bonds of mutual trust that protect migrants as they cross through the desert, migrants sold to other coyotes experience a greater sense of vulnerability to the ubiquitous violence. Augustín, 30, attempting to cross the border and return to his restaurant job in New York, is "sold" to an organization with operations near Nogales, Sonora. Over the next six weeks, his coyotes use him as "meat," that is, a means to distract the

this allows us to maintain central control of data entry, but provides flexibility for cooperation and help in data analysis among different regions. We use Skype for team meetings and social media such as Facebook and Twitter to create longer-term collaborations between graduate students and younger faculty who will hopefully generate future collaborations and binational research. We also have been using these tools in conjunction with a formal website to raise awareness of the project and increase the impact of our findings.

Technological Tools and Lessons

While we, like everyone else, use technology almost every waking minute, we have selected a few specific areas where communication technology and social media have helped to integrate collaboration and reflection in a large and complicated research agenda. We have divided these areas into three categories: research tools, collaboration and communication, and dissemination of results.

Tools for Research: iPad with TagPad

While we settled on the least technologically advanced method for data collection (a writing implement and paper),¹ we piloted some other possibilities for future research. The research team at San Diego State University (SDSU) was collaborating with individuals working on developing the TagPad app for the iPad (Bornoe et al. 2011). They programmed our 250-question survey into the application, allowing spaces for open-ended answers and precoded answers. The most intriguing function of TagPad is its ability to record audio of the interview while simultaneously answering pre-coded and open-ended answers within the structure of the survey. The audio recording is then divided according to which of the questions is being answered, allowing one to skip ahead to the audio that was being recorded while specific questions were highlighted in the application. For example, if we are asking questions about border patrol abuse, we can easily skip to this point in the audio recording because it is divided by the same structure as the survey. This allows for quick and easy coding of the audio files so that we can address specific issues, such as finding the verbatim recordings associated with people who experienced a kidnapping or abuse by the U.S. Border Patrol (USBP), for example.

¹ Although we originally used pen and paper, we did have to require people not to use pens as they caused legibility problems after scanning.

Skype

Skype was key in maintaining contact with distinct teams. As everyone knows, there are always multiple complications that arise in the field. These issues often include questions about sampling and methodology or clarifications about the specific meaning of questions, planning conferences, a master's thesis, and how to maintain a workable timeline for research. In addition to these fairly standard concerns, we were also dealing with issues of security and potential violence.

Jeremy Slack used Skype to communicate on about a biweekly basis with team leaders in Ciudad Juarez and Nuevo Laredo, but where Skype really provided the biggest benefit was allowing us to participate in team meetings with the Tijuana team. Slack was able to participate in four team meetings in which he fielded questions and gave suggestions based both on his experience conducting two field visits to Tijuana during planning phases and on the previous three years of development conducting research in Nogales, Sonora. This was useful in getting a feel for the unique challenges being faced in that city. For instance, Tijuana has a much longer history of research and therefore suffers from a bit of fatigue, having seen students researchers come and go for years. This complicated the ability to gain access. Moreover, Tijuana has the most shelters of any city, followed by Mexicali. These different shelters often compete with one another for resources, such as charitable donations and government aid. This makes it difficult to work in multiple shelters, as it casts suspicion on researchers whose often-murky roles may be misinterpreted by owners and workers as evaluators of the services they provide. Moreover, these shelters provide different types of services to groups, often leading to support that is a cross between a homeless service, drug rehabilitation center, halfway house, and migrant shelter.

Our conversations over Skype helped us understand the challenges of the city in question and brainstorm necessary modifications to the survey instrument in order to standardize the population so that it coincided with the other areas. This meant limiting the time that had elapsed since deportation in order to eliminate people who began living permanently in shelters or on the border. However, in our overzealousness, our restrictions on the amount of time since deportation were too stringent, making it too difficult to find people who fit in the sample

Especially in regions where cities have basically been abandoned by the outside world and stigmatized internationally as a “murder city” (Bowden and Cardona 2010), the act of showing up, participating in local events, and creating sustainable contacts is in itself a strong political statement. While it is true that new levels of caution are necessary while navigating border cities, decrees that ban research or official travel have a damning effect on binational relationships (Slack et al. 2011). However, facilitating interactions between people is not the only utility of Facebook.

We created a Facebook group to communicate with members and send out invitations to conferences, notices of publications, and new requests for proposals. While email is still the standard bearer for these types of announcements, the number of invitations to participate in conferences or to publish people receive on a daily basis can be overwhelming. Therefore, establishing a group specifically dedicated to this project helps to limit the scope of the content, allowing users to focus more specifically on the events associated with our group research rather than on more general inquiries. It also makes it easy to check up on the project at any time, rather than searching through a mailbox for past emails. This can also be done in our open Facebook page (MBCS—Violencia y Migración, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/MBCS-Violencia-y-Migracion/214057608671086>). Whereas the group is limited to members who are directly involved in the project, the Facebook page is open to a general audience and serves as a forum to list open publications, public lectures, news coverage, and other forthcoming activities that might be of interest to the general public.

Our stated goal with this project is to create high profile, high quality information about violence and undocumented immigration along the border. We are not content to publish academic books and articles, although we have already begun this process and acknowledge its importance. As per the Ford Foundation’s directives, high impact research is of the utmost importance when it comes to affecting policy debates. While this has normally entailed white papers, press coverage, and policy reports, we are determined to reach beyond traditional policy-oriented venues to create public awareness as well as an outcry against the tremendous abuses that we have documented. These tremendous new social media tools are seldom utilized within academia, especially because evaluations for advancement (such as tenure) do not take this type of activity

We are completely aware that the majority of our research findings will not lead to meaningful policy changes, especially in the current climate that solely focuses on security. This includes critiques on the human rights violation of deportees, which would allow the free movement of people back and forth so as to remove the incentives for human smuggling and make it easier for authorities to focus on drug trafficking, for example. Some of our findings simply reify the current debates—supporting the push to allow a path to U.S. citizenship or pass the DREAM Act or a guest worker program, as well as the ever-present dream of open borders—and therefore provide nothing new to policymakers or activists. Other more specific findings—like the discovery that rates of abuse by U.S. Border Patrol agents are much higher in the Tucson Sector than the rest of the border, or that sectors of the border that sentence people to jail time for having crossed into the United States throw away the migrants’ possessions—provide specific, addressable concerns. A recommendation that people deported to dangerous northern border cities where they know no one are repatriated with documents and possessions, etc., have more traction because of their specificity. (See policy recommendations later in this paper for a more in-depth discussion.) Therefore, we are using methods outside of traditional policy reports that create awareness and provide more resources to the wide-ranging activist communities that are struggling for change on innumerable levels. This can hopefully become a new avenue for activist researchers to gain further access to the public and other groups interested in their research.

Website

The MBCS project has put together a website (to date, offline) to host an overview of the project and lists of publications and reports as well as a media library. The static website will serve to establish a Web presence for the project. The initial static website will be an informational hub and can easily feature all of the following: the research project title, an introduction, research project funding, a basic overview, important articles, relevant links, downloadable pdfs with descriptive results and policy reports, biographies of all individuals involved, links, news, media coverage, and contact information. Once this site is online, updates can be made via a request from the principal investigator (PI) through an automated ticketing support system (SBS Technical Services at The University of Arizona). The static website will at least establish a

Activist Scholarship and the MBCS: Opportunities through Technology

Social media as a form of globalization may increase both transparency and accountability. All too frequently, globalization works to increase economic and political inequality, enhancing the status quo (Whiteford and Cortez 2005). The ethical challenge of engaged social science—which involves a choice between pragmatic reforms that accept the status quo but attempt to make things “better,” and a call for radical transformations—runs through activist scholarship. Some scholars have suggested an ongoing stream of moral thinking and decision-making on the part of researchers (Heyman 2009).

For the border region, fundamental reforms of national programs on both sides of the border may be required. In this context, others have found that cultural critiques are a failed exercise. Hale describes a “cultural critique” as embodying “familiar progressive desires to champion subaltern peoples and to deconstruct the powerful ... [by] research and writing in which political alignment is manifested through the content of the knowledge produced, not through the relationship established with an organized group of people in struggle” (2005). For Hale, this is a failed endeavor, and he proposes an activist framework in which “we affirm a political alignment with an organized group of people in struggle and allow dialogue with them to shape each phase of the process, from conception of the research topic to data collection to verification and dissemination of the results” (2005). While commendable for its radical and difficult paradigm shift, there are limitations to this approach as well. Namely, we ask how one engages with a group that is not organized? As is the case of undocumented immigration, there are many humanitarian and activist groups that protest and work toward immigration reform, but should we as researchers accept their political and ideological projects as our own? We tend to reject this view and take a broader, non-bounded conceptualization of community and struggle in order to address the broad range of issues and opinions set forth by people who agree to talk with us during our research.

The majority of the authors in activist scholarship, as well as other forms of engaged or social justice-oriented works, collaborate closely (if not fully integrate with existing or nascent social

results; the big picture is frustratingly missing, and social inequality, poverty, structural factors and racial and ethnic divisions are ignored.

There is a constant struggle to produce academic work that takes into account the bigger picture and more nuanced findings while trying to produce social change. In this sense we are drawing from so-called activist scholars (Hale 2006; Pulido 2006; Speed 2006; Hale 2008; Speed 2008) and taking advantage of new methods of communication and social media to reach a broader audience and contribute to greater research impacts. This is precisely because our goal with this project has been to provide missing information about what is happening to people along our shared border. We are committed to using this information in every way possible to push for broader social change.

Intrinsic to this struggle is the use of technology. We outlined tools such as the TagPad and Google Docs, which can help the process of research, as well as Facebook and Skype, which provide new ways to collaborate and communicate effectively. Other tools such as Twitter and dynamic websites can help provide new ways to access our results and create greater impacts and awareness. This is key to our overall goal of providing something of use to as many people as possible. On that note, we would like to leave with a few brief policy points.

Policy Recommendations

1. Bi-national collaboration as well as technological and institutional support for alternative research

a. Institutions should encourage their departments to recognize collaborative work, publications in other languages, and research for nonacademic audiences as valuable during tenure and promotion hearings.

b. Institutions should provide support for the use of technology as a tool for disseminating, creating, and raising awareness about critical research.

c. Good collaboration is long-term, requires flexibility, and is built on mutual interest and respect. It cannot be reverse-engineered and needs institutional support and recognition in order to spread on a larger scale.

c. Currently, no bar on legal U.S. entry is as difficult to overcome as a prior false claim of citizenship (i.e., claiming to be a U.S. citizen to a law enforcement officer). People are deemed permanently inadmissible; while judges can waive other criminal infractions, they cannot do so in this instance (even in cases of marriage, for example). We would like to point out that the only people who get in trouble for this are people, usually young adults, who have spent the majority of their lives in the United States and know nothing of Mexico. Few people would dare to try to trick a customs official into believing they are from the United States unless they are culturally and linguistically American. We believe that this law directly targets people who are adversely affected by deportation to an extreme degree, usually finding themselves without an identity in Mexico because they left at a very young age. Moreover, this group of people should be considered at the top of the list for amnesty because of their familial and social responsibilities in the United States.

d. Our last, and perhaps most urgent point regards deportation to northeast Mexico. As is common knowledge, the high concentrations of drug-related violence along the border present a new hazard for the nearly 500,000 annual deportees to Mexico. Pleas from the mayor of Ciudad Juárez greatly diminished the number of people deported to that hotspot of violence, largely because he blamed the migrants for the violence; other requests have not been granted. In October 2011, a group of migrants in a New Mexico detention center sent letters requesting that they not be deported to the northeast of Mexico. While it has received far less coverage than other parts of the border, Tamaulipas, and to an extent, Coahuila, has been host to one of the most brutal battles for control over the valuable passages to the north. The conflict between the paramilitary cartel Los Zetas and their former employers, the Gulf Cartel, has created a unique situation for undocumented migrants. The Zetas, with their military background, have diversified their activities away from drugs in contrast to other groups in Mexico (Garzon 2008; Ravelo 2009). This has created a particular emphasis on kidnapping, extortion, and even human trafficking, making it one of the deadliest zones on the planet for deportees. We have documented cases of kidnapping to extort a few thousand dollars for migrants because of their family contacts in the United States. The conditions are atrocious and include torture, rape, and even murder. Moreover, a disturbing number of the interviewees report escaping or mysteriously being let go, suggesting that we are not seeing the whole story. Combine this suspicion with the

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