



Sharing Best Practices & Research Findings Through Digital Humanities & Social Science: An Invitation to Join the Rural Immigration Network

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Keywords:

Rural Immigration, Incorporation, Digital, Networking, Engagement, Public Scholarship

Introduction

How can we meet the goals that *Cambio de Colores* espouses: fostering cross-cultural connections, well-being, inclusion, prosperity and integration among all peoples living in rural communities? In-person contacts, supported by inclusive institutions and clear-eyed local leaders, nurtured into genuine relationships are surely best. Some of these patterns can come about by happenstance, given enough time (Lay 2012). Others can be fostered intentionally by sharing good ideas and best practices. Digital scholarship tools and trends open new opportunities for achieving these goals. They complement the direct connections made through daily interactions and through professional meetings, workshops and conferences.

This paper argues that scholars should ground their digital work on immigration within frameworks developed by community based learning and research practitioners. While many organizations addressing immigration-related issues maintain a digital presence, it seems safe to assume that they do so without delving into network or digital production theories. These organizations may have more tools and more willing partners at hand to support their efforts to ensure integration and well-being than they realize. Specifically, in the past two decades, academic institutions and funders have developed elaborate systems and theory to produce digital scholarship. Major funders support this effort, providing training workshops and graduate programs, open source technology and tools, and considerable knowledge of how to foster online communication. These systems parallel commercial digital infrastructures, but are guided by priorities and frameworks of the academy, rather than market or administrative logics. While not always realized, academic priorities leave space for more open, collaborative approaches to well-being and inclusion separate from profit motives.

With this essay, I invite people striving to connect academy, advocacy and community wellbeing around immigration issues to pay attention to the resources available in the digital scholarship world and to join in shaping one specific such resource, called the Rural Immigration Network (Tegtmeyer Pak, n.d.), which shares best practices and research findings. The Rural Immigration Network (RIN) grew out of a pedagogical commitment to engage college students in knowledge production practices that prioritize

reciprocity with those being studied: in this instance, persons and organizations involved in the “context of reception,” the interacting social processes and institutional settings that shape immigrant incorporation (Bloemraad, 2006a & 2006b; Jaworsky et al., 2012). Through RIN, undergraduate students learn interviewing and other primary research methods, develop their writing, editing and digital production skills, produce engaging, informative brief essays and make data available to all through an open-access website. Reciprocity is realized with community partners featured on the website by providing a forum for them to share their ideas about how to build community between recent immigrants, their families and longer term residents in rural areas of the United States. This invitation to join RIN involves the possibility of setting research and publication priorities, providing feedback on website usability, developing crowdsourced contribution options, and promoting the forum to a broader audience.

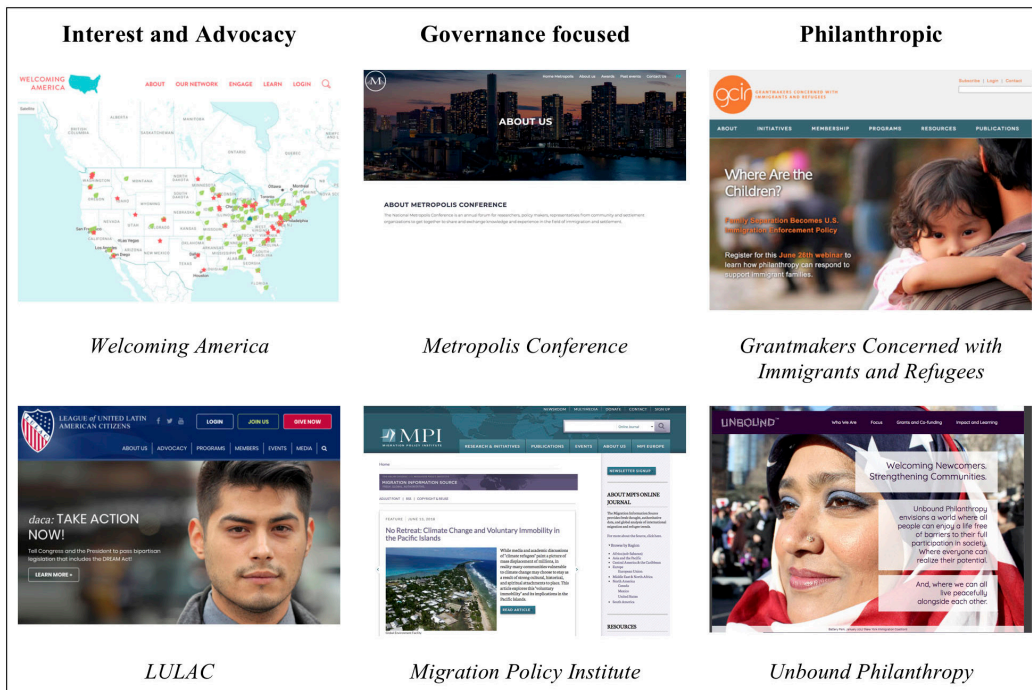
RIN relies upon digital humanities and social sciences frameworks in order to foster learning and networking opportunities that support prosperity, well-being, inclusion and cross-cultural connections among immigrants, their families and longer term American citizens. In the pages that follow, the RIN project will be situated within an overview of immigrant incorporation-related digital resources, introductions to the ethos of digital scholarship and civic engagement education, an overview of digital scholarship projects on immigration, and finally, an extended invitation to join the Rural Immigration Network project.

Immigrant Incorporation and the Digital World

Interest groups, government agencies, advocates, grant makers, think tanks and alliances across such organizations rely upon digital tools to communicate with their supporters. Immigration-related organizations with an online presence fall into three broad categories: interest-based or advocacy-related groups; governance and policy focused (which could include public websites such as those run by federal agencies); and philanthropic groups that support particular types of activities.

Their highly professional websites, which show off the latest in digital design trends, allow them to project a polished image, as demonstrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Example Websites of Immigration-Related Organizations



These websites include important information that can further the goals of integration and cross-cultural connections. They belong, however, to each of the organizations that they represent, and as such, do not invite open-ended collaboration, even though website readers may find the sites offer useful information and guidance about how to join, work for, or financially support the organizations. Without openness to collaboration, these websites provide only more focused and perhaps narrower perspectives on how to foster inclusion and well-being.

Reciprocal, Public Scholarship and the Digital Humanities and Digital Social Sciences

Digital humanities and social sciences afford an alternative philosophy and approach to crafting online immigration-related resources. Major funders point to public collaboration and democratizing knowledge as their core mission ("About the Office of Digital Humanities," n.d.; "Digital Culture," n.d.). And in recent years, individual scholars have begun to ask themselves hard questions about what and who their digital work is for, and how they can "become answerable" (Clement 2016; Posner 2016). Clement urges digital scholars to rededicate themselves to producing "interpretive, situated, and subjective knowledge" that references "as broad a spectrum of perspectives as possible." Hsu calls for digital

scholars to turn towards "public-benefit design" such that scholars design with rather than for members of the public (Hsu, 2016).

Public participatory geographic information systems (PPGIS) and public participatory video production scholars have developed subfields dedicated to these ideals. As some practitioners recognized that GIS in general developed to serve government projects, which meant that GIS projects often excludes marginalized populations, they created PPGIS to bring in more voices to digital mapping (Radil & Jiao, 2016). Evans and Foster call for participatory digital work, in this case referencing video making, to respect four core values - respect, relevance, reciprocity and responsibility - as a way to allow people to 'self-represent' (Evans & Foster, 2009).

Digital scholars are pushing to achieve a more collaborative and open approach to their work, which fits well with the Cambio goals of fostering inclusion. As Posner writes, "It is not only about shifting the focus of projects so that they feature marginalized communities more prominently; it is about ripping apart and rebuilding the machinery of the archive and database so that it does not reproduce the logic that got us here in the first place" (Posner, 2016).

Digital scholars and funders emphasize collaboration,

public knowledge and reciprocity in ways that echo insights from another significant interdisciplinary conversation about academic civic engagement. For decades, consortial organizations including Campus Compact, Imagining America and the American Association of Colleges & Universities have coordinated and encouraged college educators to ensure that their teaching and research address public issues by engaging community leaders and students in collaborative initiatives intended to generate public goods (AAC&U, 2013; Campus Compact, n.d.; Imagining America, n.d.). These ideas are not new; even in the American context they stretch back to the founding of our public universities, and gave rise to specific institutions including Extension, which of course created and fuels the Cambio conference (Fitzgerald, Bruns, Sonka, Furco, & Swanson, 2012).

The “new kind of engagement” in higher education emphasizes seven commitments that should also guide digital scholarship (2012, p. 12). At their core, they emphasize fair-minded reciprocal, sustained cooperation with community partners, such that scholars and their host universities share expertise and other resources in ways that further the public good. This vision for higher education renews the promise to attend to students’ suitability for democratic engagement and responsible citizenship. Civic engagement education complicates standard expectations about higher education. With regard to scholars, it pushes us to think past measuring the worth of knowledge production by counting peer-reviewed publications. As for students, it pushes us to invite them to view their education as an invitation to the public sphere and to seek more than professional credentialing.

Reciprocal Digital Scholarship and Immigration: State of the Field

To date, two main types of digital projects relevant to immigration prevail. First, multiple storytelling projects give voice to immigrant experiences through online video, image and narrative collections. Second, research teams seek to improve public understanding of immigration-related processes by sharing their findings with a broader online audience. These projects fit well within the broad framework of the new kind of engagement, but differ in the extent to which they clearly explain who their work is for and how it matters. Examples of each type of project follow.

The Universities of Iowa, North Carolina and Minnesota offer rich archives that document individual immigrant stories (“Home · New Roots,” n.d.; “Immigrant Stories,” n.d.; “Migration is Beautiful,” n.d.). Archivists run Iowa’s project, Migration is Beautiful. From 2005-2007, staff supervised students in conducting 100 oral history interviews, and preparing text narratives illustrated with photographs. Their purpose is “to fill gaps in the historical record. A new narrative emerges from this process that integrates the contributions of Latinas and their families into Iowa history.” Archivists and librarians likewise took the lead on the North Carolina project, New Roots/Nuevas Raíces. They oversee undergraduate and graduate student researchers, who have completed over 160 interviews since 2006. The project website curates interviews as audio files, typed transcripts and field notes, accompanied by maps showing countries of origin and North Carolina destination counties. The purpose also parallels that of the Iowa project, aiming to document “the contributions of Latino figures in the history of the South of the United States as well as in contemporary national movements for social justice, immigration and educational reform.” The Minnesota project, Immigrant Stories, differs in that it is organized by a historical center at the University, and in that it invites immigrants to record their own video narratives. A separate project, the Minnesota Digital Library, curates the resulting “immigrant stories,” as part of a larger collection of digitized oral histories of varied populations gathered by multiple cultural organizations across the state (“Minnesota’s Immigrants | About This Project,” n.d.).

Shifting to the research findings sites, two stand out: The University of Richmond’s “Foreign-Born Population: 1850-2010,” part of the larger American Panorama online history atlas and the University of Minnesota’s “Immigration Syllabus” (Design, n.d.; “Immigration Syllabus – #Immigration Syllabus,” n.d.). The former comprises an interactive, map focused visualization of 160 years of census data, illustrating how many immigrants have arrived, from where, and where they lived at each census survey. University of Richmond staff authored the map, working with professional designers. The latter project does exactly what its name suggests: it offers a syllabus for teaching about immigration. Its purpose is public and politically aware, following what’s become a common template of scholars from multiple institutions cooperating to make quality expertise about contentious debates easily available to

interested parties.

Among all five of these projects, the Immigrant Stories project in Minnesota most completely enacts the new engagement ideals discussed earlier, because of the extent of collaboration with community partners beyond the University. Immigrants shape their own narrative using the video-making website provided by the project. Further, project organizers have worked with a community partner, Advocates for Human Rights, to create a public curriculum to better disseminate the stories and the knowledge arising from them. By involving a broader circle of partners in creating content and grounding the digital resources they craft in a specific, the Minnesota Immigrant History Research Center staff offer a collaborative, tangible network and process for fostering cross-cultural connections enhanced by technology.

An Invitation to Join the Rural Immigration Network

The Rural Immigration Network aims to realize the potential of new engagement ideals in the immigration field at the same level achieved by the Immigrant Stories project, though focused on topics that more closely parallel the Cambio de Colores mission. At this stage in developing RIN, the goal is to share good ideas about community building among immigrants, their families, and longer-term residents in rural areas of the United States. The Steering Committee seeks feedback, advice and cooperation from community-based organizations in particular. The hope is to involve non-academics with relevant expertise in the Steering Committee directly, so as to better realize the promise of reciprocal research project design and implementation as well as the dissemination of findings. Academics interested in rural immigration are also invited to share in the research, writing and teaching dimensions of this project.

Persons willing to help manage and contribute to the RIN project stand to benefit in several ways. They will gain the opportunity to educate college students about diversity in rural areas and prepare them for better deliberation and public action as becoming well-informed citizens. They earn the satisfaction of providing a forum for sharing good ideas and networking among community organizations, local governments and concerned citizens across rural areas of the United States. Additionally, in a time

where much media attention goes to the problems with rural America, they gain the chance to uplift and celebrate positive community-building efforts already taking place in rural areas, to support the well-being, inclusion, and prosperity of all who live there.

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