

BLACKNETFREEDOM.ORG

THE DIGITAL CULTURE SHIFT: FROM SCALE TO POWER

How the Internet Shapes Social Change,
and How Social Change Is Shaping the Internet

A Center for Media Justice Publication
in partnership with
ColorofChange.org and Data & Society

Data&Society

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changing the color of democracy



About Us

The Center for Media Justice

Founded in 2008, the Center for Media Justice is a national, next-generation civil rights organization. We believe the right to communicate should belong to everyone, and that communities most impacted by media bias are best positioned to win that right for all. Through our national Media Action Grassroots Network, we partner with community groups across the country to win media rights, access, and representation for all.

Dragonfly Partners

Noah T. Winer is a Senior Partner at Dragonfly Partners LLC. He was a founding campaign strategist at MoveOn.org from 2003 to 2010, during which time he helped MoveOn grow by 4 million members and raised \$130 million in small donations for countless campaigns. In 2010, Mr. Winer directed the online organizing team for Greenpeace India in Bangalore. In this role, he led an intensive training for Greenpeace online organizers from Argentina, Australia, China, Italy, New Zealand, Turkey, the U.K., the U.S., and South Africa.

ColorOfChange.org

ColorofChange.org is an online civil rights organization with a mission to strengthen Black America's political voice. ColorOfChange.org empowers its members — Black people and their allies — to make government more responsive to the concerns of Black people, and to bring about positive political and social change for everyone.

Data & Society

Data & Society is an NYC-based think/do tank focused on social, cultural, and ethical issues arising from data-centric technological development.

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Preface:

Black Lives Do Matter, and Black Voices Do, Too

By James Rucker, Co-Founder, [ColorOfChange.org](https://colorofchange.org) and Citizen Engagement Lab

Everyone is now familiar with the declaration “Black Lives Matter.” It has become both a rallying call and an indictment of the status quo in which Black lives are shown to have less value at the hands of powerful institutions. The ostensible focus of the conversation is on the criminal justice system — one that too often hurts and terrorizes, rather than serves, Black people and our communities.

But anti-Black brutality does not begin or end with policing in America. A racially discriminatory criminal justice system didn’t arise from nowhere, nor has it been maintained without help. The creation and continued existence of what Michelle Alexander calls the “New Jim Crow” system of separate and unequal policing, and other forms of state violence, are possible, in part, because of the consistent marginalization of the public voices of those affected. Countering the harms of state violence demands that we shift how modern narratives are created and who controls them, while building the power of marginalized communities to set the terms of debate and speak truth to power through unfiltered mass media platforms.

The barriers to controlling our voice and representation aren't new. Legal and de-facto roadblocks to the rights and power of Black communities to make our voices heard were around well before mass media began influencing mainstream culture. From the printing press to broadcast radio to television, mass media has reliably amplified certain perspectives while burying others — with incumbents and the powerful controlling the landscape of discourse to suit their needs. This concentration of power reinforces hierarchies of privilege through false narratives that are told and retold to justify the status quo. Whether it's the story that the powerful deserve their privilege, the poor deserve their poverty, or Black people are a criminal threat — available research and statistics alone cannot counter narratives that reinforce and reproduce inequity.

As Black communities rise up to resist the systemic violence of brutal policing, we must also address the crisis of misrepresentation. The good news is that in a digital age, there exists an opportunity to use technology to disrupt concentrations of racial and economic power that shape public narratives. Missing that opportunity could cement these hierarchies of power and privilege for generations to come.



The Internet, and the Movement, Comes of Age

I left the software industry just over ten years ago, hoping to help realize the promise of the Internet and networked applications as a means to empower everyday people, especially against powerful, monied interests. I started as the fifth or sixth employee at MoveOn.org, helping progressive (overwhelmingly white, well-educated, and fairly well-to-do financially) Americans leverage the power of the Internet to aggregate their voice and enable them to take on powerful, entrenched interests.



There are several notable aspects to the story of MoveOn, but its success centered on the fact that, unlike other media, the Internet was free of corporate gatekeepers and it enabled individuals or organizations with few resources to engage millions of people in conversation with a sufficiently compelling message or call to action. The Internet opened the door for breaking the model of mass media and narrative control, and MoveOn walked through it.

While this work at MoveOn was important, it was still missing the mark. The people who had been most compromised in this country, and who bore the brunt of an enforced silence, continued to lack the technical infrastructure and digital strategies to bring their voices to scale.

Hurricane Katrina presented an opportunity to change that. Within a few weeks, I partnered with Van Jones to create ColorOfChange.org, which built on the approach of MoveOn by applying it to the Black community. Every level of government had botched the response to Katrina, and the mainstream media focused on stale stories of Black criminality vs. the historic and present neglect of those left behind in the storm. For us, it was the moment to rally Black folks and those concerned about our fate to create a new center of power, with the promise of being able to control our own narrative.

ColorOfChange was thus the first, and is now the largest, online civil rights organization focused on amplifying the voices of Black people. But, Black Americans don't have the sole claim on having someone else control our narrative or determine our fate. This is true for women, immigrants, members of the LGBTQ community, and many others. It's for this reason that I joined Ian Inaba and Daniel Souweine to create Citizen Engagement Laboratory (CEL), an incubator for starting and supporting digital efforts to empower communities — building off of ColorOfChange as a model.

False Choices, False Solutions

For more than a decade, the work of ColorOfChange and CEL has focused on empowering marginalized groups through organizing and campaigning on one hand, and protecting or mobilizing the power of the Internet on the other. Both are critical for civic engagement and strengthening the effectiveness of our democracy. Yet, in practice, most of the people and organizations involved in social change efforts are on one side of the equation, without much of an eye to the other.

If you consume mainstream media, the stories told about our digital rights reinforce this bifurcation.

On one side, there is a fight to democratize the ownership, regulation, and application of telecommunications — largely framed as important because of the increasingly central role of the Internet in global commerce. On the other side, there are seemingly separate and distinct fights against police brutality and environmental destruction, and for immigrant rights, the fight to increase the minimum wage, and more.

But these arenas of change-making — one for the right and power to communicate, the other for the right and power to live — are not separate or distinct. The media landscape twenty years ago would have prevented the stories driving the movement for Black lives today from breaking through. The voices we're now hearing, reading, and seeing are all enabled by an open Internet that has largely avoided a corporate or government filter. And they are shifting public dialogue, impacting culture, and building momentum to change policy.

Unfortunately, the fight to communicate and the fight to live are largely being waged independently, with policy and organizing nonprofits — and their allies in the halls of Congress and elsewhere — existing largely in separate silos. There are those who have dedicated their careers to the preservation of independent media, the reduction of media consolidation, and affordable access to the mechanisms of publication by everyday people. There are also those who have worked tirelessly to ensure equal opportunities for all when it comes to education, access to the ballot box, or, as is being discussed more recently, fairness at the hands of the criminal justice system — especially as these inequities concern communities of color. Most involved in either set of work, exist in one domain or the other — but not both.

A Moment of Opportunity

Despite this, we stand at the precipice of a huge opportunity. If we are able to develop an integrated approach that connects the need for sound, open, accessible, and independent communications infrastructure with the actual movement work that is

served by such infrastructure, we can inject a surge of strength into both efforts, expanding the constituencies that power each. As the nation emerges from a decade-long fight to keep the Internet open into a period of extraordinary contest for the role digital technologies will play in the lives of Black Americans and others, missing this opportunity would empower the forces that benefit from a corporate-controlled media: large, incumbent corporations and those who currently enjoy disproportionate power.



After years of progress bridging the gap between technology, Black representation, and social justice, this is a cost Black communities — and all those pushed to the margins of both democracy and debate — just can't afford. ■

Executive Summary

More than ever before, social movements in the digital age are using technology to achieve greater scale and impact. But, is the Internet building power for social change? Or helping maintain the status quo?

The American public continues to be saturated with inaccurate portrayals in news and entertainment media¹ that misrepresent communities of color and America's poor.² More and more, though, people are choosing to bypass these traditional mainstream media gatekeepers by using the Internet. Yet, discriminatory practices in Internet content, price, and application by corporations and governments reinforce racial and economic hierarchies, and continue to perpetuate disparities, with sometimes fatal consequences.

“ Discriminatory practices in Internet content, price, and application by corporations and governments reinforce racial and economic hierarchies. ”

Pew Internet Project's research finds that 87 percent of U.S. adults use the Internet.³ According to the Pew study: *Who's Not Online and Why*, there is more to this number.⁴ While 95 percent of upper-income households⁵ use the Internet, 37 percent of lower-income households do not.⁶ Nor do 48 percent of those without a high-school diploma.

Moreover, 100 million Americans⁷ are living without equal access to broadband. Though 70 percent of all Americans have a home broadband connection, the majority of those with limited Internet access are Black, Latino, Native, or rural.⁸ People of color, younger adults, and lower-income individuals are more likely to rely exclusively on cell phones for access, and 19 million have no access at all.



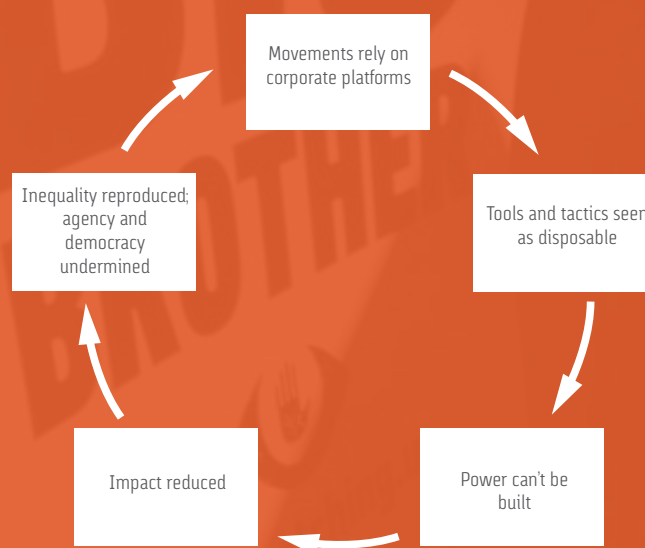
Strategies to increase broadband adoption in low-income communities⁹ are hindered by the cost¹⁰ and consolidation of service. Internet service providers (ISPs) have lobbied forcefully against network-neutrality rules that prevent price discrimination online, while companies providing inmate phone services have opposed rules that keep the cost of calls from prison affordable. These discriminatory corporate practices force a false choice between affordable service and self-representation. With record highs in American poverty¹¹ and an expanding racial wealth gap, digital discrimination is a cost many communities can't afford.



A 2014 White House review of big data practices and policies¹² found that while big data can help address inequities, it also supercharges¹³ the potential for discrimination and targeted disadvantage. Surveillance technologies are increasingly used to police communities of color,¹⁴ monitor the poor,¹⁵ militarize the border,¹⁶ track students,¹⁷ govern cities,¹⁸ and peddle products.¹⁹ Already, racial and ethnic minorities represent 60 percent of those in prison²⁰ and more than 58 percent of the working poor.²¹ Without civil,²² constitutional,²³ and consumer²⁴ protections for the era of big data, automated decision-making exacerbates these conditions by reducing fairness and reinforcing systems of hierarchy and privilege, resulting in high-tech racial profiling. This threatens the dignity and safety of migrants, Muslim communities, minimum/low-wage workers, and those confined by mass incarceration.

Though the Internet is changing the way we live, work, play, and organize for change, social movement leaders continue to relate to the Internet either as a tool or as an arena for change. The consequences of this either/or approach to the Internet threaten the viability of social movements in the 21st century. Our discussions with practitioners and experts in the field identified five reasons why:

- 1) Without significant shifts in the dynamics of media production and ownership, social movements are forced to rely on corporate tools.
- 2) As a result, social movement leaders based in under-represented communities often see digital tools and tactics as useful, but disposable.
- 3) Though perceived as largely disposable by some, digital tools and tactics that improve efficiency and expand scale are often prioritized within foundations and the field.
- 4) While this approach may build influence for short-term wins, it is not grounded in an analysis of power or proven approaches to building collective power, and is unable to sustain long-haul victory. This reduces the impact of social movement strategies and weakens the disruptive potential of digital technologies.
- 5) As a result, technological advances reinforce and reproduce persistent inequality, and undermine agency and the potential for democratic governance.



Our movements are stuck in a vicious cycle, limiting the possibilities for social change. To succeed, we need a both/and approach that connects the fight for digital access and rights to the process for democratic engagement and equity.

Major Findings

A clear theme emerged throughout these interviews: Battles for digital rights and access are certainly important, but often feel secondary to what are typically perceived as more pressing social movements such as immigrant rights and racial justice.

Most people acknowledge that this is a flawed way of looking at things, and 98 percent of respondents ultimately suggested that social justice movements need a both/and approach — one that builds momentum through online organizing around distinct social justice campaigns, while at the same time connecting that tactical work to the broader fights for universal Internet access and fair public protections online.

Other critical findings included:

- 100% of those interviewed said that digital strategies and platforms provide a voice when mainstream media ignores issues.
- The vast majority widely use digital platforms to catalyze action, but say over-reliance on these tools can limit relationship building.
- The Internet is changing the meaning of membership and forcing social change leaders to re-think the forms of organization. More than 80% of respondents indicated that Internet was helping to shift national organizations from centralized to de-centralized, from geographically specific to geographically diverse, and from hierarchical leadership to multi-level leadership.

- Targeted surveillance is a top concern, particularly for organizations working with communities of color, migrants, or poor communities — but the vast majority of leaders interviewed felt that the movement for digital privacy did not include their voices or their visions for change. Still, digital rights groups are finding common cause with legacy and emerging civil rights groups to counter the discriminatory collection and application of data.

Major Recommendations

- New approaches are needed in both the field and philanthropic organizations, in which digital strategies are driven by values, focused on equity, rooted in a long-term social change vision, and supported by universal digital access and rights.
- Change the platform to change the issue: The more open and democratic our systems of communication are, the more those platforms will drive a healthy and participatory public debate on social issues.
- One significant way to change the platform is to scale up successful projects like Van Jones' #Yes We Code, or the Open Web Fellows program to inject digital experts with best-in-class algorithm skills into social movements.
- Ultimately to change the way we “do change,” those in social justice fields and in the philanthropic organizations that fund this work must develop new approaches that trust and support organizers, fund at intersections, and invest in shared infrastructure, multi-level stakeholder collaboration, and digital leadership development.

The recommendations in this report provide a path forward that ensures the Open Internet remains a critical vehicle for civic engagement and opportunity for all. ■



Methodology:

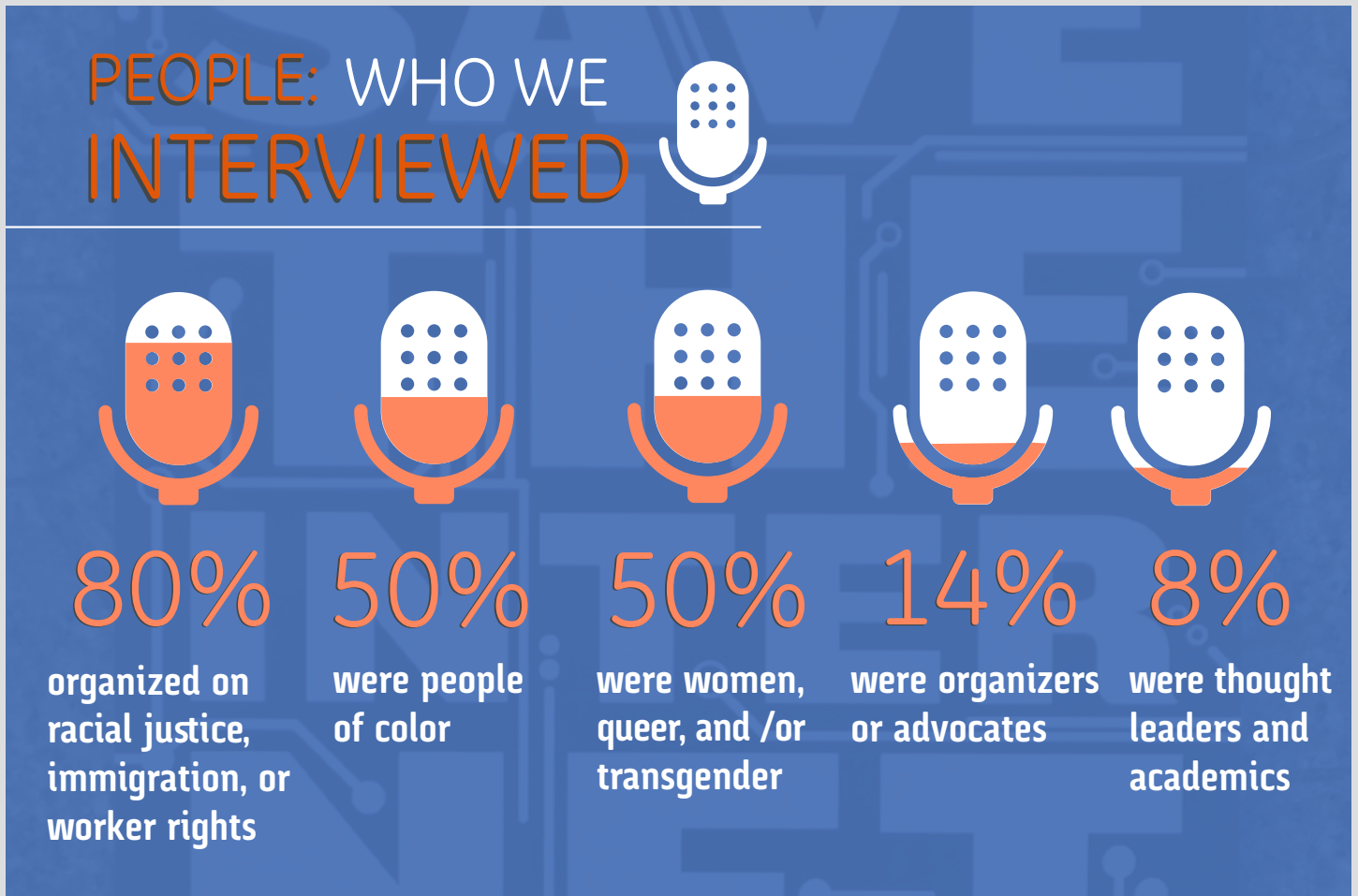
What We Did

This report from the Center for Media Justice, in Partnership with ColorOfChange.org and Data and Society asserts the need for a new, integrated approach to digital strategy, if social movements are to be successful in a digital age. The battle for improved infrastructure and digital access, along with the fight for digital rights and privacy (what) are pre-conditions for the use of the Internet as a tool for civic engagement, political and community organizing campaigns, and movement building (why). Together, these elements offer an emerging taxonomy and framework for digital rights and movement building (how) informed by the thought leadership of ColorOfChange.org and Data & Society, with additional analysis provided by Virginia Eubanks, Micah L. Sifry, CEL, LeftRoots, CultureStrike, and the Movement Strategy Center, among others.

To understand where our movements are at present, Malkia Cyril, Executive Director of the Center for Media Justice, identified movement leaders contributing to the development of emerging models for digital rights and movement building. CMJ contracted Noah T. Winer of Dragonfly Partners to interview a set of 22 progressive social change leaders working as academics, technologists, or within community-based or Internet organizations, and produce a set of documented findings.

Half of the leaders Dragonfly Partners interviewed were people of color, and about half were women or trans folks. Of this group, half led “Netroots” groups (groups founded primarily to employ digital strategies), while the other half represented a variety of other organizations.

For further perspective, CMJ and Dragonfly Partners also hosted two 90-minute small group discussions with academic, technology, and legal experts and thinkers in related fields. A complete list of the movement leaders and experts, and the questions asked, are in Appendices A and B. Finally, a range of literature was reviewed, including scholarly and popular writings recommended by interviewees and experts. ■





Perspectives:

The Digital Approaches of Movement Leaders

We explored three core concepts in our interviews with movement leaders: Why and how groups are employing digital strategies, where these strategies are building power for our movements, and how groups understand the relationship between using digital strategies and fighting for digital rights.

Key Findings on Digital Strategies

Digital strategies are now being adopted beyond Netroots groups.

While many people think it's only the Netroots groups that are actively using digital tools and platforms to advance their community organizing, campaigning, and coalition building work, we found many other groups employing digital strategies as well. These tools are no longer the exclusive domain of a narrow set of social-change actors within particular social justice sectors, groups across a whole range of fields are now using them

Groups are going online because that's where they believe they can find their base. From undocumented immigrants to next-generation civil rights organizers, four out of six of the non-Netroots leaders we interviewed use email and social media to mobilize their base for offline actions and to grow their constituency.

Groups also go online because they want to operate at a larger scale. For example, the group OUR Walmart, supported by the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union, is using Facebook Messenger and private groups to reach and support a base of workers spread across more than 4,000 Walmart stores in the United States.

“ Groups are going online because that’s where they believe they can find their base. ”

Digital strategies provide a voice when mainstream media ignore issues.

Organizations representing communities of color, poor communities, queer communities, and groups otherwise marginalized in mainstream media indicated they were using social media platforms to bypass corporate gatekeepers, avoid stereotypes, and frame social issues to influence coverage.

Spotlight:

Building Scale and Power at the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union...Online

Eric Schlein, online-to-field organizer at UFCW, says it’s “less about finding needles in haystacks; the needles are coming to us.” UFCW invested time up front to train Walmart workers in areas where they don’t have organizers. Now, when a Walmart worker writes on the OUR Walmart Facebook wall, they’ll hear back from another worker. Since Walmart monitors the Facebook wall, the response is by private message. After a brief back and forth, they’ll get on the phone to continue building the relationship. At first, UFCW was drowning in data, but with help from a developer, the organization built a database to track everyone who reaches out and initiate the appropriate follow-up process.

Another reason groups leverage digital tools is because these platforms provide a voice for their issues without the need for major resources and infrastructure; the barriers to entry are low. An immigrant rights group said that because of social media, they're able to stream, share photos, and humanize their campaigns: "If there was just mainstream media, we'd be at a huge disadvantage, so we're working hard to protect that."

Rashad Robinson described ColorOfChange.org as "utilizing technology to transform moment into movement." If a particular cultural moment can draw enough grassroots action, the public attention to the issue can be extended, and eventually connections can be made to the next moment — making the case for systemic change and elevating a marginalized conversation to the popular stage.

Digital strategies allow communities that are geographically dispersed and marginalized to form a unified group identity.

Cayden Mak views the work of 18MillionRising as "a large-scale critical intervention into the way AAPIs (Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders) think of themselves as a politicized group working for racial justice, and how the rest of the world thinks of AAPIs as a politicized active group engaged in racial justice issues."

Mak described a "massive proliferation of AAPIs skipping over coastal population centers to Houston and Memphis where there's not a critical mass, just pockets. People coming up in a world where not a lot of people look like them, sh-t is kinda racist, [and] they're not connected to community like a Chinatown. So, they need place to explore identity and develop an idea of what it means to be Asian American that's reflective of what it looks like for the next 50 years."

Online platforms are widely used to catalyze action offline, but may limit relationship building.

Most groups we spoke to are using an “online platform to help people take action offline” or to identify “online hand-raisers” who they can further organize with one-on-one relationship building. Increasingly, however, groups are moving away from this idea, to instead, as one interviewee put it “see the online and the offline as two different communities, and that’s...liberating...[though] there’s something lost.”

The contrast between the “weak ties” supported by digital strategies and the “strong ties” supported by community organizing is in wide debate. In 2010, The New Yorker published Malcolm Gladwell’s essay “Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted,” which brought this question into the public conversation, arguing that digital organizing relies on weak-tie relationships between people who don’t know each other. In contrast, he says, traditional community organizing is based on strong-tie relationships between people who know and trust each other, giving people the courage to take high-risk actions. Further, Gladwell argues, serious change requires a centralized hierarchy, but online organizing only facilitates decisions made through consensus.

Spotlight:

From the Internet to the Streets: Black Lives, and Relationships, Matter

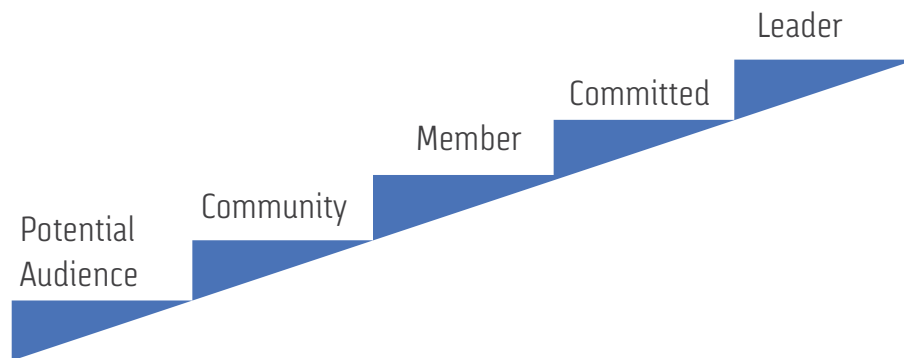
Co-founder Alicia Garza says the goal of Black Lives Matter wasn’t get to a million “likes” or “shares,” but to “use social media and online platforms to expand people’s consciousness about the lives of Black people” and “create a space for Black people to organize.”

Building relationships was always central to the project. People from dozens of cities got to know each other by social media and email, but also on conference calls. They spent weeks with local leaders in Ferguson before organizing the Freedom Rides.

“Without those relationships,” says Garza, “the engagement stays really shallow...You have to be patient with people checking you out...You can’t be overly accommodating or condescending and eliminating, so folks could really feel safe and feel this is a place for them.”

In contrast, Taj James of the Movement Strategy Center and Marianne Manilov of the Engage Network wrote an essay called “Movement Building and Deep Change: A Call to Mobilize Strong and Weak Ties,” where they argue social movements need both weak ties (to prioritize scale) and strong ties (to prioritize depth).

Often, people find each other online, then build deeper relationships and develop leadership offline. James and Manilov describe an engagement ladder that moves people from loose social ties to movement leaders.



Moving people up this engagement ladder requires deliberate cultivation: “For [a member] to be committed, she will need in-person connection and ways to reach out to others in her community. And for her to move from committed to leader, she will need training and a clear pathway that builds her up as a leader.”

James and Manilov’s embrace of both weak ties and strong ties echoes questions raised by early social network theorists. In 1973, sociologist Mark Granovetter published what became one of the most highly cited sociology essays of all time, “The Strength of Weak Ties,” where he offers this definition of tie strength:

Most intuitive notions of the “strength” of an interpersonal tie should be satisfied by the following definition: The strength of a tie is a (probably linear) combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services that characterize the tie.²⁵

Granovetter concludes his paper by suggesting tie strength exists on a continuum of weak to strong, rather than weak *or* strong.

Leading online organizer Ben Brandzel also responded to Gladwell's critique with "What Malcolm Gladwell Missed About Online Organizing and Creating Big Change" in *The Nation*. Brandzel acknowledged Gladwell's cautions, but asserted that digital tools "also allow people to communicate and collaborate with entire networks of close friends much faster than we've ever been able to before...Social media can't replace the power of real friendship, but it can enhance the motivational utility of pre-existing strong-tie relationships by enabling the rapid diffusion of important information through those same strong-tie networks at critical moments of choice."

In response to Gladwell's claim that online organizing doesn't enable hierarchical decision making, Brandzel says:

It is true that online tools can be used to facilitate leaderless, network-based activity...But for the purposes of organizing, they are far more commonly used to extend the reach of a more traditional hierarchical model, fully conducive to central planning.

Brandzel continues:

It is, however, important to remember that while the Internet is great at enabling action through information-sharing, it is quite poor at pushing people to do anything they do not want to do. Without the immediate social pressure of in-person conversations or even the dedicated visual real estate of a television ad, it's almost always easier for potential activists reached online to dismiss an unwelcome call to arms than it is for them to change their minds. That's why successful online organizing is often based on a "member service" approach, in which campaign guidance emerges from membership through carefully measured response metrics and formal input channels.

Many of the non-Netroots groups we interviewed raised concerns about how much relationship building is possible in the digital sphere, though these concerns were notably about engagement through text (email, social media) and not voice or video (Skype, Hangouts). In fact, even the "face-to-face" organizing is often happening by phone or digitally, with less frequent, but valuable, physical meetings.

One group asked: “What’s the balance between using digital technology and staying true to the complex and subtle racial justice analysis?...A lot of deeper dives around Ferguson feel strange to be doing online — there’s something urgent and human about a lot of contemporary flash points of these issues. Urgent humanness is dampened or ‘decomplexified’ by the Internet.”

The meaning of membership is in significant dispute.

One of the fiercest points of contention in this debate is the meaning of membership and governance. For example, many Netroots leaders interviewed referred to individuals on their email list as members. Email list “members” may be asked to weigh in on decisions, but there’s no guarantee of decision-making authority. Participation is decided on a per-action basis — each member can opt in or opt out. In this context, members are the group of people who can be readily mobilized for action.

In community organizing, members are the base of people who help govern an organization and determine action strategy. Membership guarantees decision-making authority. Membership requires commitment, and participation is expected.

Those interviewed wanted the benefits of both approaches. Yet with philanthropic resources heavily weighted toward strategies that build networks rather than organizations, partnership between grassroots and Netroots groups remains a challenge.

Even though the platform has changed, the approach remains the same.

The leaders we interviewed made clear that the core principles of community organizing haven’t changed — only the platform has.

Respondents strongly asserted that, as with all community organizing, digital strategies should be grounded in a power analysis. Respondents repeatedly raised the need for online organizing to re-invest in relationships — creating a base online, then forging relationships and leadership offline through strategies that build collective power, move the middle, and marginalize the opposition. Finally, respondents noted that developing relationships, honing strategy, and executing tactics still require organizers.

Lack of tech savvy — or tech funding — is a limiting factor for many groups.

The capacity to use digital tools effectively ranges widely. Organizations either must have enough staff or consultants with a high degree of tech savvy, or the money to purchase adequate tools that require less expertise.

Some interviewees worried about their colleagues not having more technical expertise. One said, “organizations need someone who is a product manager, who understands how the tech fits together [to oversee technical contractors]...then hire someone who knows CSS, HTML, JavaScript, and a little Ruby — basic front-end development stuff... You could probably do it with one person.”

The vast majority of the groups interviewed are dependent on commercial tools. The availability of effective open-source and non-commercial tools is minimal. Groups often use commercial tools because they don't have the expertise or resources to build anything else.

In lieu of the expertise to build their own platforms, some of the leaders we interviewed had been part of a discussion to build a shared platform to replace Salsa and connect to the Voter Activation Network (VAN). The groups were unable to put together the right team to build this, at least in part because the groups with the most expertise were under-resourced.

Most see digital technologies as a means, not an arena, to contest power.

Groups see digital technologies as useful yet disposable tools for communicating and organizing, and not a distinct arena of power within their theory of change. One interviewee alluded to this concept by saying, “If Facebook challenged our organizing in any real way, we'd go to the next social media network.” In general, social media is not part of the structural analysis.

Unlike mainstream media, which is moderated by external gatekeepers, groups see the Internet as a platform they control — the effect of the corporate ownership of the Internet is less visible to them.

However, one group acknowledged “The physical infrastructure of the Internet is owned by corporations — the places people congregate are sold as commons, but they’re not...People have decreasing technical expertise...[and] if you don’t know how to operate your tool, it’s controlling you.”

Another group said, “I can’t actually imagine the scenario of the technology being taken away. It’s not that they can’t [try to] take it away...[but] this technology has been in the hands of too many people for too long. We expect it so much that we wouldn’t give it up without fighting so hard we’d win!”

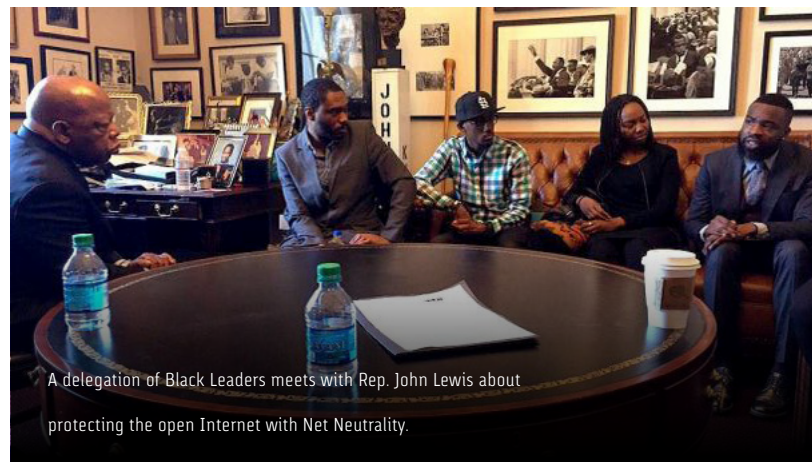
“ ...if you don’t know how to operate your tool, it’s controlling you. ”

Digital rights matter to all groups using digital strategies, but feel secondary to fights over bread-and-butter issues.

“We could send someone to Congress to testify [about digital rights issues], but we’re probably not going to be part of figuring out the strategy,” said one immigrant rights leader. “We have other issues that keep us up at night.”

“The Internet for us is like driving on a highway — you don’t notice the road unless you hit a pothole...When our website goes down, we get pissed at our web server, so we should probably be thinking about our web server all the time. But like any organizing, people often don’t get involved unless there’s an urgent crisis.”

A workers’ rights leader said, “We’d come across digital rights groups talking about issues that totally matter to workers. We agree, but don’t have capacity to work on [them]. What’s the best way to complement and make space? I’d need more on-ramps for where and how we can be part, or moments when we have shared corporate targets.



A delegation of Black Leaders meets with Rep. John Lewis about protecting the open Internet with Net Neutrality.

"I'm not sure we...have ever engaged seriously with others in the digital rights arena around what are we fundamentally trying to shift in terms of digital rights. [We need] individuals and organizations...who can...identify opportunities for when organizations like mine can do something sharper and stronger."

While free speech issues like Net neutrality were absolutely viewed as important, groups cited the need for more education and engagement to understand threats to the open Internet and their implications for social justice.

Netroots organizations see Net neutrality as an issue critical to their work, but as one Netroots group interviewee said, it's "not a standing ovation-type issue." Groups that don't identify as online organizations see it as important, but not as critical as the felt issues that are their primary work.

As one interviewee said, "I know what the threat of privatized water is, but not the threat of privatized Internet...To be reductionist, if I can save my family or save the

Internet — I'm going with my family. I'd be interested in being convinced that's short-sighted." These groups were interested in more clear and relevant opportunities to weigh in at key moments, but articulated that issues of Net neutrality and digital policy in general feel secondary.

A few groups interviewed noted the challenges posed by the financial ties between civil rights groups and the telecommunications industry. In light of these financial ties, one organization suggested it's a matter of direct local engagement, "convening to discuss these issues—it's not

happening in our communities...not enough resources are being spent to diversify the fight." Respondents also offered recommendations for engaging with civil rights groups on specific telecommunications issues that target criminal justice.



Groups are concerned about digital security and list protocols, but they don't have a clear strategy to protect themselves or their constituents.

Groups are worried about surveillance on a theoretical level, but are unclear about the role of surveillance in their constituents' day-to-day lives. Instead, most spoke about surveillance of the organizing itself — and most assume and accept that all of their organizing efforts are being watched. They see surveillance as inevitable, and aim to organize with integrity and transparency. They feel more secure protocols would be too great an obstacle to participation. One group said, “we err on the side of speed vs. security — we've unintentionally taken the attitude of transparency.”

Stop LAPD Spying, a group that focuses on surveillance, spying, and infiltration, described these practices as “disorganizing... not just an invasion of privacy...[but] tools for social control.” This group expressed concern that digital privacy advocates focus on specific legislative solutions for new privacy threats, but don't share resources to enable organizing in frontline communities where privacy violations are a long-standing reality.

Spotlight:

The Open Internet Gave Birth to the Racial Justice Netroots

Just when the fight for an open Internet took a turn for the worse, with a handful of the most influential civil rights organizations opposing network neutrality alongside members of the congressional tri-caucus—the racial justice Netroots stepped in, challenged the racial wedge, and changed the game.

Groups like ColorofChange.org, Presente.org, and 18MillionRising represent the first and largest civil rights organizations birthed by the Internet.

Using their online reach, these groups have powerfully led on- and off-line strategies that ultimately helped win neutrality rules that will keep the Internet open for generations to come.



Surveillance is a top concern, but groups felt that the frame of “digital privacy” — and the focus on mass surveillance that results from that frame — can be limiting and, at times, isolating.

While many agree that surveillance is an important issue, some groups felt framing it exclusively as “digital privacy” hides the harm to communities of color, and makes groups working on issues of policing and criminal justice feel disconnected.

A Netroots group said, “The community that works on digital privacy and digital rights is quite removed from the rest of the social justice struggles — they’re lawyers and technologist-driven organizations...they’re prickly, not so good at building coalitions with people different from them — even I find it exclusionary and difficult.”

Another group said, “the frame of privacy is about my individual rights and my relationship to the government — couched in a narrative around government being too big.” Yet another group said “privacy is [perceived as] something for people who don’t have anything more urgent to care about — white-privileged anxiety,” but cautioned

“privacy isn’t a good way to slice the space.” It’s not about “persuading anyone to change issues, but to say effective advocacy in long-standing issues requires changes because technology is becoming key...in the decisions that shape people’s lives.”

Malkia A. Cyril reframed the issue as a matter of civil rights in a piece for the Huffington Post: “Today, the indiscriminate and covert collection of private data expedites, expands, and entrenches racially discriminatory policing practices...Social movements for Black dignity and power must urgently mobilize civil rights principles, policies, and practices to counter the emergence of high-tech surveillance as a driver of structural racism in the 21st century.”²⁶

In addition to the challenges presented by the “digital privacy” framing, groups don’t have the resources to organize communities around long-standing patterns of surveillance. Groups care and are actively resisting government and corporate surveillance, but without a significant reallocation of resources to focus on targeted surveillance, they can’t respond effectively.

Spotlight:

Los Angeles Fights Back Against Police Spying

The Stop LAPD Spying Coalition doesn’t look at body-worn cameras or drones in isolation.

Instead, these organizers have built an amazing front line of resistance against police spying in Los Angeles by understanding that the lives of poor people and people of color in the United States are mediated by digital technologies.

Through this lens, the Stop LAPD Spying Coalition launched a campaign to eliminate the use of drones by local law enforcement, successfully shut down a local fusion center, and countered the use of suspicious activity reporting to criminalize communities.

Big data has the potential to deepen discrimination, and digital rights groups are finding common cause with traditional civil rights groups to counter the discriminatory collection and application of data.

Several groups are fighting discriminatory uses of big data in criminal justice, hiring, and consumer credit. One group noted “it’s been an area where we’ve found a lot of common ground with organizations who may not be with us on Net neutrality.”

A few groups have even used big data in their own organizing: “We use the voter file and Catalyst. We have sent outreaches to members’ homes saying these are people [in your house] who are not registered to vote. We’ve used tax policy models to predict who is likely to engage on Social Security and debt ceiling fights.” But the same group cautioned “the voter file is deeply flawed for the Black community... especially after the housing crisis... Predictive measures don’t work as clearly when it comes to Black folks.” In short, civic tech is an arena in desperate need of a power analysis when it comes to its collection and use of big data. For example, digital tools are often used to mobilize “likely voters,” while tools effective at connecting all communities to democracy might look very different.

Spotlight:

Applying Civil Rights to Big Data

Coordinated by the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, a unique coalition of civil rights and media justice organizations ranging from the ACLU and the NAACP to ColorOfChange and the Center for Media Justice worked together to develop the “Civil Rights Principles for the Era of Big Data.”

The Principles include a stop to high-tech profiling, fairness in automated decisions, and protection from inaccurate data.

The release of the Principles has generated significant interest from activists and policymakers, and were cited in a White House review of big data practices.

The coalition recently released similar civil rights principles to protect civilians from high-tech profiling when body-worn police cameras are being used.

Both sets of principles can be found at: www.civilrights.org

Most groups interviewed didn't have a clear plan around political security as it relates to digital platforms. Groups working with undocumented immigrants or other legally vulnerable populations had a higher degree of concern about their list falling into the wrong hands: "We have a campaign asking immigrants...to sign up for undocumented driver's licenses. Now we have this database of undocumented immigrants. Is ICE going to try to come in and take that? We worry there could be a breach and it could be used for mass deportation purposes. A bill passed this year bans the state from sharing this information with the federal government."

Most groups don't talk about the limitations of digital access.

Traditional organizing groups are leveraging digital strategies without clear assessment of their constituencies' ability to access the Internet. They believe they are able to reach their constituents online, but the metrics for that assessment are unclear.

At the same time, they see digital strategies as an enhancement to traditional face-to-face relationships, not a replacement for it. Some groups are using a combination of strategies, such as doing paper petitions in parallel with online petitions.

These groups believe their base is online, mostly via mobile platforms. One group noted "Pew has looked at adoption of smartphones and Black people's use of the Internet via smartphones — the community is over-indexed."

In contrast, Netroots groups are targeting their digital strategies at a particular demographic slice of the population. Despite the data on disparate access, one Netroots group said "access isn't particularly an issue for the community we mobilize. We don't reach every single Black person with the work we do, but the audience we seek to mobilize is plugged in" via smartphones. Netroots groups are reaching a privileged subset of people of color. This raises the question of whether digital strategies are intended to engage an already mobilized population, and whether that engagement builds power. ■



Principles:

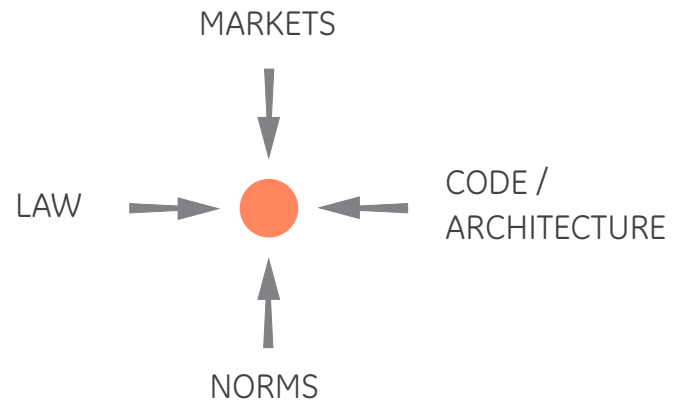
A New Approach to Digital Rights and Movement Building

We asked small groups of leading academic, technology, and legal experts in digital rights and movement building to describe the principles that would support an integrated approach to the Internet. The solutions we heard are detailed below.

Driven by Values: Encode Core Social Justice Values into Internet Architecture

Several of the experts we interviewed see technology architecture as a more dynamic force for change than the market, the law, or even social norms. For instance, danah boyd, founder of the Data & Society Research Institute, pointed to the framework of Lawrence Lessig's "pathetic dot theory"²⁸ as a basis: "Lessig identifies four forces that constrain our actions: the law, social norms, the market, and architecture or code."

“Lessig identifies four forces that constrain our actions: the law, social norms, the market, and architecture or code.”



Lessig noted that the key difference in regulation of the Internet (cyberspace), compared to the real world (“realspace”), is the fact that the architecture of the Internet — the computer code that underlies all software — is created by humans, whereas in the real world much of the architecture — based on laws of physics, biology, and major social and cultural forces — is beyond our control.

Lessig sees code as an important force that should be of interest to the wider public, not only to the programmers. He notes the importance of how technology-mediated architecture, such as coded software, can affect and regulate our behavior:

[The code] will present the greatest threat to both liberal and libertarian ideals, as well as their greatest promise. We can build, or architect, or code cyberspace to protect values that we believe are fundamental. Or we can build, or architect, or code cyberspace to allow those values to disappear. There is no middle ground. There is no choice that does not include some kind of building. Code is never found; it is only ever made, and only ever made by us.”²⁹

The leaders we spoke to warned that new technologies are only briefly disruptive before those with privilege use them to consolidate power. We saw this in the past with radio and cable television. Many feel the Internet is at a critical juncture before things resettle.

Focused on Equity: Assume Big Data is Biased Until Proven Otherwise

Echoing Lessig, technologists like David Robinson have raised concerns about how a platform's structure — invisible to the public or policymakers — shapes the effects and use of a technology, often with unintended consequences.

Predictive policing, for instance, uses a big set of data about different populations, then attempts to predict which populations are most likely to commit crime or which areas most need a police presence. Because the algorithms aren't explicitly looking at poverty or race, many argue they eliminate any chance of discrimination.

Yet the American Civil Liberties Union says this method actually creates "a feedback loop of injustice":

The predictive policing model is deceptive and problematic because it presumes that data inputs and algorithms are neutral, and therefore that the information the computer spits out will present police officers with objective, discrimination-free leads on where to send officers or deploy other resources. This couldn't be farther from the truth. As Ronald Bailey wrote for Reason, "The accuracy of predictive policing programs depends on the accuracy of the information they are fed.

Many crimes aren't reported at all, and when it comes to the drug war, we know for certain that police don't enforce the law equally.³⁰

Furthermore, as digital justice proponent Virginia Eubanks explains, once you place more police in a neighborhood, you add more data about crimes in that neighborhood, leading to the placement of even more police. "It's a positive feedback loop with a negative effect."

danah boyd cautions that traditional legal discrimination tools like "protected class" are flawed, causing "minor harms that won't add up to harm in a legal sense." boyd continues by saying, "We need new legal interventions, new social interventions, new language because what we're seeing is at a technical level which is very different from how we can frame at a social or legal level."

In a new paper called “Big Data’s Disparate Impact,” legal scholars Solon Barocas and Andrew D. Selbst write about this issue further:

Big data claims to be neutral. It isn’t.

Advocates of algorithmic techniques like data mining argue that they eliminate human biases from the decision-making process. But an algorithm is only as good as the data it works with. Data mining can inherit the prejudices of prior decision makers or reflect the widespread biases that persist in society at large. Often, the “patterns” it discovers are simply pre-existing societal patterns of inequality and exclusion. Unthinking reliance on data mining can deny members of vulnerable groups full participation in society. Worse still, because the resulting discrimination is almost always an unintentional emergent property of the algorithm’s use rather than a conscious choice by its programmers, it can be unusually hard to identify the source of the problem or to explain it to a court.³¹

In short, we assume new technologies will work one way, but if we bake in the existing structural inequities, they won’t.

Rooted in Vision: Open, Accountable, and Fair

Big data also requires new notions of accountability. As Eubanks says, “In the past, you dealt with racial inequality by challenging a caseworker’s determinations through fair hearings — you had to prove intent to discriminate or that they didn’t follow all the procedural steps. Now, automated decision-making systems are built on assumptions like ‘people are basically fraudulent,’ but the computer can’t be racist and never skips steps.”

boyd makes a similar point, “The programmer doesn’t even know the race of individuals... That’s what makes accountability look very different than the accountability of a social worker who has that information at the point of decision making. So there’s a moment when everyone passes responsibility on.”



Tracy Van Slyke from the Culture Lab also raised the lack of accountability in digital platforms. When women and people of color are targeted by online harassment, there's no clarity about how to address the problem. Twitter recently admitted it's doing a terrible job of handling abuse.³² Law enforcement doesn't know how to handle it, and lawmakers don't know enough about technology to craft legislative solutions.

Dave Steer from the Mozilla Foundation shared Van Slyke's concern about lawmakers, saying "a big challenge is not enough people with tech expertise are in the public policy and civil society environment. The incentives for someone with tech skills are out of whack from a compensation perspective, and in terms of what they can build and ship — they'll go to Facebook, Google, or Twitter over the ACLU. So not enough people who understand how tech is working are in a position to shape the Web. There's so much appetite for people with tech skills to get involved in this space — we just need a channel to do it. Mozilla is doing a fellowship program to change this."

Steer also noted, "we haven't told the story of the Web as a fragile shared global resource that could become entirely different if we don't treat it like the ocean or forests. How do we talk about the free and open Web without those words? We have to speak about safety, jobs, economy."

Universal Access, Without Fear: Reimagine the Online Organizing Model

Micah L. Sifry from Personal Democracy Media noted the successful emergence of a professional community of online organizing, but he warned that it hasn't yet addressed four important challenges to the model:

- In the post-Snowden era, not enough online organizing groups have taken the Internet freedom issues of privacy and surveillance seriously. At the same time, many are seeking protection from surveillance by being less visible, which makes organizing a visible movement far harder.
- The Internet — and online organizing — is increasingly dominated by corporate walled gardens like Facebook and Twitter. Professional online organizers often focus on how to work within these systems, rather than how to preserve the open Internet.
- The Internet is like a Sherpa — it allows organizers to climb the mountain without developing the muscles for staying power. In other words, the Internet allows for massive digital campaigns that can achieve some victories without developing long-term power, relationships, leaders, political analysis, and democratic strategic decision-making.
- Meanwhile, digital organizing may be destroying people's attention, eating away at the commons and leading to an eventual dead end.³³ A lot of organizations are at war for a shrinking sliver of attention — my viral video destroys the success of your viral video. ■

No Digital
Discrimination

“ We can build, architect,
or code cyberspace
to protect values
that we believe are
fundamental. Or we
can build, or architect,
or code cyberspace to
allow those values to
disappear. ”



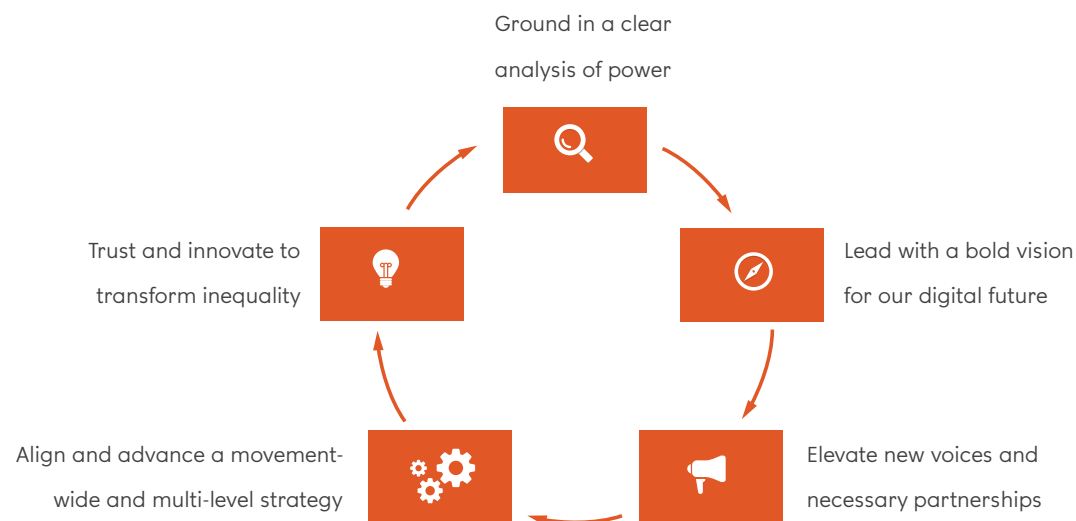
Pivots:

Moving Beyond Scale, Toward Power

Digital strategies allow organizations to operate at a greater scale, but scale isn't useful unless it also builds power for our movements. What new approaches are needed to create a digital culture-shift that changes the role of the Internet in organizing from a tool to expand scale, to a core element of building power?

A Cycle of Change

To replace challenges with strengths, the Movement Strategy Center suggests the model of "Movement Pivots,"³⁴ which this report built upon, to create the five pivots below.



If movements make these five pivots, we can exit the vicious cycle of digital inequality, described earlier, and enter a virtuous cycle of digital equity, in which efficiency is replaced by democracy as the center of gravity.

1) Hold a broad awareness that grounds approaches to the Internet in a clear analysis of power.

We propose an approach to the Internet that creates a broad awareness in order to connect issues and constituents. By approaching our movements with a “digital justice” lens, we can rethink the meaning of access. This offers the opportunity to connect issues and constituencies frequently excluded from this process.

Whether change-makers embrace or eschew technology in organizing, technology is an issue to organize around. Digital rights and representation are justice issues.

The conventional framing of the “digital divide” presumes that more access to technology will address social inequities, but the everyday lives of poor and working people are not lacking in technology. In fact, their lives are technology-rich. However, much of the technology is used to track or make decisions about them.

For example, electronic key fobs track who comes and goes in public housing. Workplace surveillance tracks service workers and long-haul truckers. Automated decision-making processes determine who gets welfare benefits, who is granted visitation rights by child protective services, and even criminal justice outcomes. Automatic license plate readers spit out lists of out-of-date registrations and overdue tickets,³⁵ generating citations and eventually warrants.

Many people would call these infractions of privacy. They see privacy as the earned right of innocent people, but boyd noted that privacy isn't the framing used by most poor and working people. While privacy is the existing technical and legal framework, many communities of poor and working people frame these issues as control/power: Automation undermines agency. Privacy depends on social power to expect and enforce. Rather, poor and working people are more likely to talk about others “being in my business.” Efforts to prevent this are done not to guarantee privacy, but just to get by.

Digital justice advocates warn that poor and working people represent the future of surveillance.³⁶ Surveillance technologies are developed to track poor and working people first, before they are adopted more broadly. As a result, it's essential to build alliances between digital justice and economic justice movements.

Because big data can reproduce existing discrimination, community organizations are working to map the technology that poor and working people come into contact with, and identify whom their information is being shared with and under what circumstances.

Eubanks asserts that digital justice is not possible until we commit to a conversation with all people, including poor and working people, about the role of technology in our lives.

The real question is how much agency people have in relationship to the technologies around them. Do people have access to the technologies or do the technologies have access to people?

There's access that increases agency, and there's access that decreases agency. A power analysis helps shift from the question of access to the question of agency. What do marginalized communities want from technology? How can technology empower democratic engagement and equity?

“ A power analysis helps shift the question of access to the question of agency. ”

2) Lead with a bold vision for our digital future.

Many leaders were challenged to understand the visceral harms at stake in the fights for access and rights. Unlike a fight over privatized water, for example, the fight over a privatized Internet feels disconnected from daily survival.

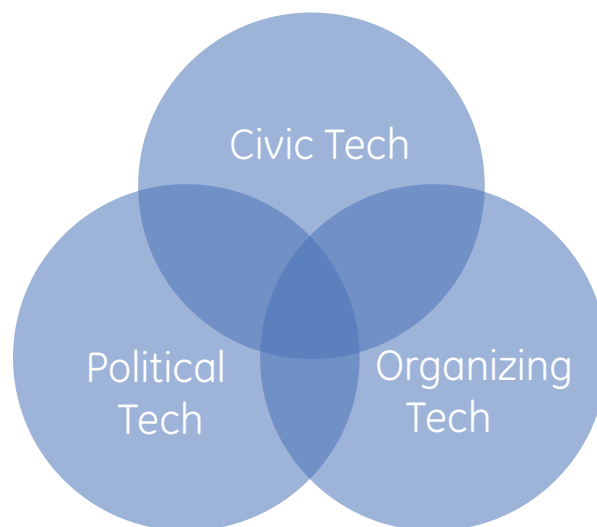
The fights for access and rights must be framed as fights between business and people. Business is seeking to use technology to track, control, and profit, not to expand democratic participation and shift power.

Reframing what's at stake offers new approaches to governance, particularly by reimagining the meaning and the role of civic, political, and organizing tech.

Some experts have offered a taxonomy, with three overlapping categories:

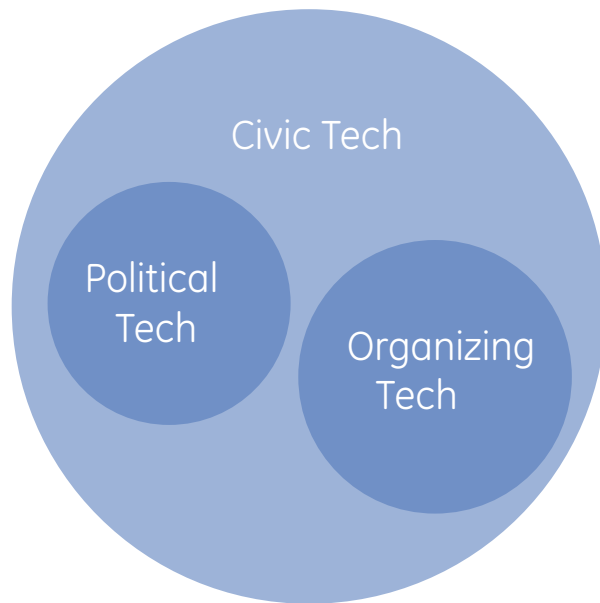
- Civic tech (e.g., government transparency, democratic participation, crowdsourcing);
- Political tech (e.g., Dean '04, Obama '08, Voter Activation Network); and
- Organizing tech (e.g., petition tools, grassroots-led campaign platforms).

Others conceive civic tech very broadly. Sifry defines civic tech as "all the tools and processes people use to organize themselves to get something done [that] they need. Voting is civic tech, petitioning is civic tech. Civic tech goes back thousands of years, but what's new is tech in which ubiquitous connectivity is taken as a given."



In this taxonomy, political tech and organizing tech are important subsets of civic tech.

Civic tech includes government efforts to modernize and be more efficient. In some cases, this is an effort to appear more modern, while in other cases civil servants actually want to better serve people they represent.



Social change actors may attempt to use civic tech simply to open up access to more people or to shift the balance of power. But, when we fail to address the dynamics of agency and power, civic tech might only be used to make delivery of state resources more efficient or to strengthen state power, rather than to build grassroots power.

3) Shift focus and funding to elevate new voices and necessary partnerships between those at the margins and those in the mainstream.

Whether civic tech is understood broadly or more specifically, it either seeks to make the state more efficient or make social movements more efficient. Yet the drive for efficiency ignores the need to build power.

In fact, building power is the goal of social movements. Decision makers and decisions need to change, and our movements need the power to change them. Relationships are the smallest unit of power. Tools and methodologies grounded in relationships provide the best opportunity to scale in ways that still build power.

Our present approach to organizing on the Internet treats all “netizens” (citizens on the Internet) as equal. A common principle of online organizing is to be “member-driven,” which means prioritizing campaigns with the most response from both the existing and potential base. A petition with high response rates from existing members or a large number of new people signing means the campaign is worth investing in.

Metrics like this provide immediate feedback about the number of people interested in a campaign. But because of the reality of disparate access and rights, this mode of organizing disproportionately engages the existing power of more privileged communities (e.g., to fight surveillance based on concerns about individual privacy).

These campaigns don’t offer ways for people without as much privilege to build power, and they don’t address the interests of marginalized communities (e.g., to fight surveillance targeting whole communities).

As a result, these communities can’t muster enough broad-based support to win — or they can only muster enough to win partial victories, not structural changes.

However, if we re-orient our approach to include the interests of marginalized communities, we could create fights that both marginalized and privileged communities can participate in. This would result in enough power to win structural changes that guarantee equity.

“If we re-orient our approach to include the interests of marginalized communities, we could create fights that both marginalized and privileged communities can participate in.”

We might call this a “targeted universalism” approach, rather than a traditional universalism approach. As legal scholar John A. Powell writes, “A targeted universal strategy is one that is inclusive of the needs of both the dominant and the marginal groups, but pays particular attention to the situation of the marginal group.” Targeted universalism acknowledges that various groups are situated differently relative to the

institutions and resources of society.

“A targeted universal strategy is one that is inclusive of the needs of both the dominant and the marginal groups, but pays particular attention to the situation of the marginal group.”

Targeted universalism recognizes that problems faced by particular segments of American society are problems that could spill over into the lives of everyone. Take for instance the Lower Ninth Ward during Hurricane Katrina — it was not the only part of New Orleans to suffer in the wake of the storm. Likewise, the sub-prime credit crisis did not end in poor, urban communi-

ties, but has spread far beyond and has been felt throughout the global economy.

An approach of targeted universalism provides the best opportunity to engage new voices, new approaches, and new priorities in order to build power for change.

4) Align and advance a movement-wide and multi-level strategy.

Field leaders are joined by foundations in recognizing the need for an integrated approach. The NetGain Challenge, launched in February 2015 by the Knight, MacArthur, Open Society, Mozilla, and Ford Foundations, is a new philanthropic partnership to spark the next generation of innovation for social change and progress.

The partnership is asking questions like: How do we balance security and privacy? How will we connect the entire world's populations? How will we archive all information and make this knowledge accessible? How can technology make democracies more participatory and responsive?

Both leaders and experts pointed to the Net Neutrality Coalition as a successful example of collaboration to build power. They also expressed great enthusiasm for a similar grouping on issues like surveillance.

5) Trust and innovate to transform inequality.

Trust and innovate require both risk and relationships as we center the new voices and visions emerging from this digital culture shift.

In one of our interviews, Todd Wolfson, Assistant Professor at Rutgers University and co-founder of the Media Mobilizing Project highlighted Franz Fanon's essay "This Is the Voice of Algeria,"³⁸ about the adoption of radio under French colonial rule. For many years, Algerians had no interest in purchasing radios because the programming available only represented French colonial interests. As soon as the Algerian resistance began broadcasting the Voice of Free Algeria, however, radio adoption soared:

Almost magically...the technical instrument of the radio receiver lost its identity as an enemy object. The radio set was no longer a part of the occupier's arsenal of cultural oppression. In making the radio a primary means of resisting the increasingly overwhelming psychological and military pressures of the occupant, Algerian society made an autonomous decision to embrace the new technique and thus tune itself in on the new signaling systems brought into being by the Revolution.

Wolfson also notes that digital rights discourse is often organized around a goal of openness, not justice. To build buy-in from a broader community, he says, new voices must be central.

boyd says she draws on the work of network sociologist Manuel Castells to describe how “being able to make and maintain and negotiate networks gives people power. Technology disrupts networks and may offer opportunities for less privileged people to obtain control, but the privileged have often already regained control of those networks.”

Castells writes that networks enable or even require new forms of organization and new ways to organize:

Our exploration of emergent social structures across domains of human activity and experience leads to an over-arching conclusion: As an historical trend, dominant functions and processes in the Information Age are increasingly organized around networks. Networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power, and culture. While the networking form of social organization has existed in other times and spaces, the new information technology paradigm provides the material basis for its pervasive expansion throughout the entire social structure.³⁹

Whether during a past anti-colonial struggle, or a present-day approach to new forms of organization and organizing in a digital age — authentic relationships reduce the risks of the kinds of innovation social movements can't live without. This principle is particularly evident in the surge of activism for migrant rights. From the direct action of undocumented “Dreamers” to the bold use of video and the Internet to increase the visibility of those emerging from the shadow, the experimentation and risk-taking of campaigns like #Not1More fueled decisions by President Obama to boldly risk executive action to protect thousands from immoral deportation.⁴⁰



PLATFORMS



Many use it, but aren't happy with it



ACTIONKIT

Considered the gold standard, but expensive



Many think it might be the best mix of cost and usability

- A few groups use custom platforms
- One group is working “to prove it’s possible to use a free campaign tool like Action Network as a white-label petition and email tool without spending any money on overhead, just labor,” but this requires a skilled project manager.

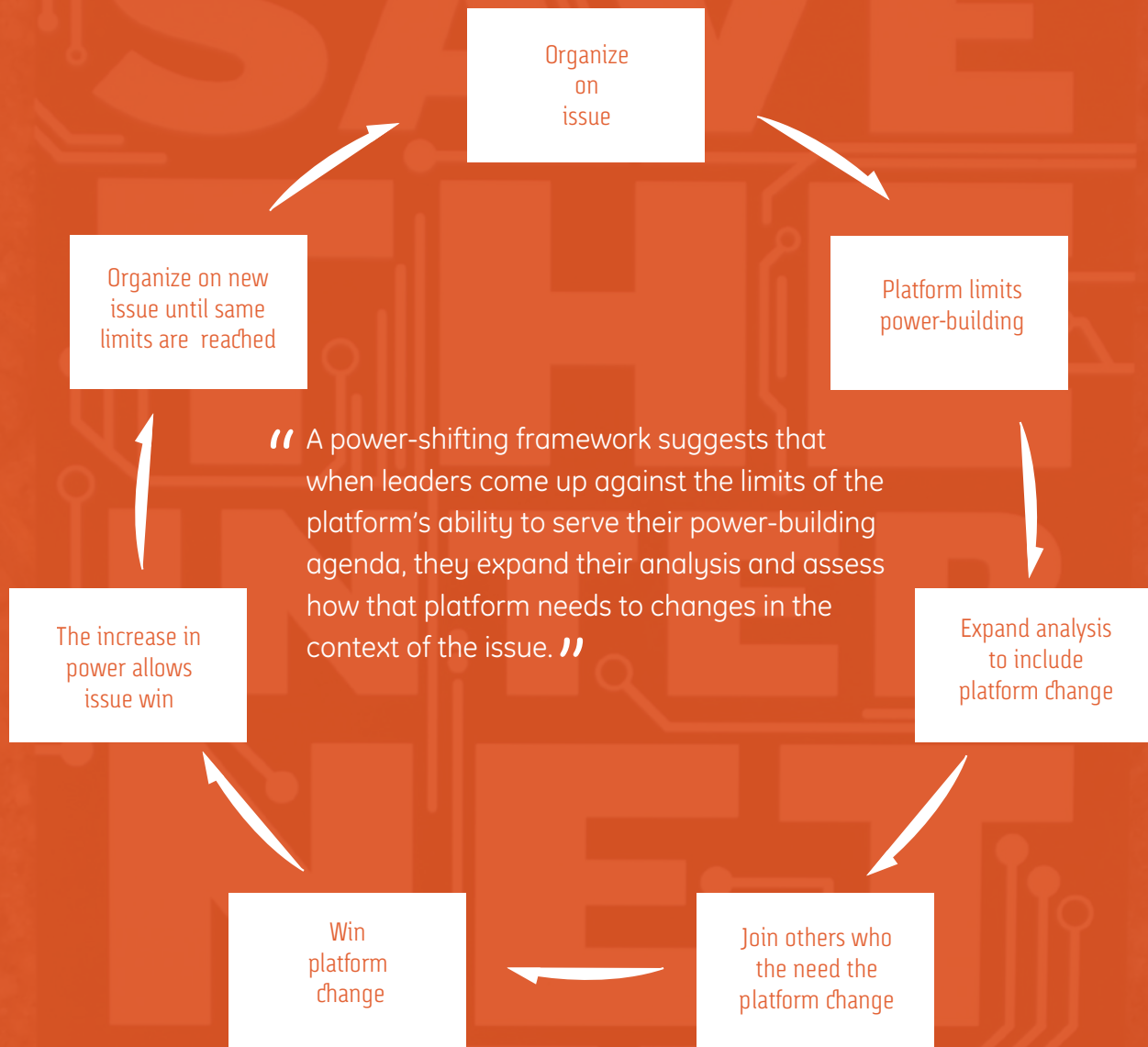
Change the Platform to Change the Issue

Along with the five pivots, it’s also important to evaluate the platform. Many of the leaders we interviewed understand how the very structure of the digital platforms they rely on can prevent them from building enough power to win their bread-and-butter issue campaigns. Yet without an integrated framework, they don’t see an alternative, and hope to somehow build enough power to win on a playing field tilted against them.

A power-shifting framework suggests that when leaders come up against the limits of the platform’s ability to serve their power-building agenda, they expand their analysis and assess how that platform needs to change in the context of the issue.

While they may continue to power-build on their bread-and-butter issue, an additional front is opened which focuses on joining with other groups facing the same tilted platform. They use their joined power to fight for and eventually win platform change. In other words, they shift the playing field on which their bread-and-butter issue campaigns rest.

With the platform change achieved, each group is able to win on its bread-and-butter issue, then move on to identify the next issue it will campaign for.





Practices:

Recommendations to Foundation and Field Leaders

FOR THE FIELD

EXPERIMENT: As one group said: “Best practices are likely to change every six months. [The key is] to make experiments more effective.” Another said: “We’re building a culture of taking risks.” Document and inventory key strategies as a way to learn from experimentation and build broader capacity.

MAKE TIMELY INTERVENTIONS: Use digital platforms to launch an independent campaign when traditional non-profits can’t respond quickly enough to seize a timely moment. Whenever possible, focus these timely mobilizations as part of a larger strategy — make initial contact, spark initial action, then deepen relationships offline. Groups need tactics to move audiences from online to offline fairly quickly.

TARGET YOUR AUDIENCE: Differentiate between strategies to connect with members and strategies to connect with a wider audience. Funders may prioritize the mobilization of secondary audiences over organizing a base, but that requires a distinct narrative strategy.

FIND COMMON GROUND: Groups focused on digital rights must find common ground with groups working on broader social issues to reframe new/existing campaigns in a way that marries digital rights with the issues they are campaigning for.

MAKE STORYTELLING STRATEGIC: Integrate the strategic development of stories in the context of campaigns. Pair organizers with content creators in diverse genres. Since form does, in fact, follow function — goals, audience, and content must determine the medium. One important way to make storytelling strategic is to use teachable moments that emerge from popular culture (e.g., when Taylor Swift or Jennifer Lawrence were hacked). Organizations like The Culture Lab are building projects to track those moments.

“Use teachable moments that emerge from popular culture.”

MAKE COMMUNICATION RIGHTS CENTRAL TO EVERY ISSUE: The fight for access, rights, and representation in a digital age is only as significant as what it enables. Touchstone social justice fights require only a communications strategy, but strategies to lay claim to the platforms and secure the rights required to communicate.

DEMAND DIVERSITY IN TECHNOLOGY: While diversity in technology frequently refers to closing the gender gap and shortage of Black and Latino workers found at emerging tech companies, it also refers to the need for tech training for those who govern and the governed, to ensure democratic participation in a digital age.

RECOGNIZE THAT TECHNOLOGY IS RECONFIGURING EVERY EXISTING ARENA OF SOCIETY: From the mechanisms of warfare to the dynamics of our labor force, and from the infrastructure of criminal justice to the underpinnings of health care, the Internet is changing how we live, work, and play. Rather than seeing tech as separate, advocates should deepen their understanding of how technology and data are altering areas where they are already invested.

FOR FUNDERS

RESOURCE SHARED INFRASTRUCTURE: Make tech tools more available by supporting or offering shared platforms. In particular, improve the organizing technology for large groups. The existing tools don't scale well for genuine participation in groups of a few hundred. We don't yet know what forms of mass movement are possible in a fully networked digital age. There are people working on it, but there's a dearth of funding.

INJECT EXPERTISE: Encourage groups to hire people with best-in-class algorithm skills, likely from the finance world, rather than reinventing the wheel. After election cycles, fund groups to hire campaign staff who did voter targeting or data mining. Double down investment to fill talent pipeline, especially in wake of Net neutrality victory when interest is high. Scale up programs like the newly initiated Open Web Fellows Program, with a particular focus on engaging technologists of color.

ESTABLISH DISCRETIONARY RAPID RESPONSE FUNDS: Support organizers to launch campaigns outside of traditional non-profits. One group noted: "Groups need resources that aren't all tied to particular programs, because so much of the online work is about being able to pivot and capture moments...Funders in this area are sometimes overly prescriptive about metrics, what success looks like." Another group agreed: "It's hard to raise resources to support this...discourse-setting work we're doing...because the results are hard to predict."

FUND DIGITAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT: Support training where social justice change-makers can learn to how to think about the trade-offs of security vs. ease of use and how to neutralize the effects of disorganizing. One group commented: "The Allied Media Conference security and surveillance track started talking about this this year — most of them are on the nerdy side," so it's not accessible to many groups.

TRUST AND SUPPORT ORGANIZERS: Local base building groups are the connective tissue between national networks and organizations and local communities. Support local organizers, organizations, and campaign over 3–10 year periods. This allows groups to better craft effective strategies to strengthen movements and win campaigns. One group said: “Funders often want to invest in what they see as shortest point from A to B. There’s emphasis on the shiniest thing. What suffers in that equation is organizing, which is slow work and not attached to a short-term grant period. Over time and through relationships leaders build enough trust to take risks together, and that’s where big change becomes possible.

INVEST IN INTERSECTIONS: Within approaches to social change, the intersections are where the most valuable content is often found. Whether it is the intersection of digital rights and digital strategy, social and media justice, or narrative and material change, resourcing key fights as strategic initiatives rather than discreet campaigns gets more bang for the buck. Continue to fund organizations that integrate digital rights and strategy to address the critical issues of our time — including “digital access/inclusion and digital restriction.”

FUND COLLABORATION: Only a cross-sector approach can ensure social justice movements can navigate power, governance, and change in a digital context. For example, a cross-sector approach to surveillance, cybersecurity, and other threats could produce new arenas of accountability and expand efforts for transparency to include algorithms. The secrecy of algorithms in corporate tools and police technology is a new form of media power, with minimal challenge because they now rely on it to distribute content.

“Funders often want to invest in what they see as shortest point from A to B. There’s an emphasis on the shiniest things. What suffers in that equation is organizing.”

Conclusion

For emerging movements such as Black Lives Matter to those focused on ending migrant deportation, increasing the minimum wage, and defending against climate change, the Internet has become a critical vehicle through which social movements communicate and facilitate change. In the 21st century, the Internet is the only platform on which social movements of under-represented communities can bypass corporate and government gatekeepers to speak for themselves — sparking popular uprisings, setting the terms of debate, and mobilizing audiences to act.

However, the Internet facilitates much more than multi-directional communication — it's become a critical factor in facilitating social justice strategies, shaping culture, sharing information, and providing a platform for civic and economic engagement. Despite the powerful role the Internet plays, it can drive either equity or inequality depending on the degree it is democratized.⁴¹

The use of the Internet to drive strategies for racial and economic justice remains disconnected from fights to promote and preserve digital rights and access. This separation reduces the effectiveness of each, and weakens overall movement strategies for change.

We hope the strategies and approaches in this report provide a path forward for addressing this disconnect and forging a more comprehensive approach to digital change. This starts by recognizing the Internet as a critical vehicle for civic engagement, and the infrastructure through which policy battles are fought to secure human rights in a digital age. ■

Appendix A:

Interviewees

On behalf of CMJ, Dragonfly Partners interviewed leaders at a dozen organizations in five sectors contributing to the development of this emerging change model for digital rights and movement building:

1. Racial justice Netroots organizations are using the Internet to emerge as a new wave of civil rights leadership, and to fight for an open Internet.

Interviewees: Rashad Robinson, ColorofChange.org; Arturo Carmona, Presente.org; Cayden Mak, 18MillionRising

2. Nationally and locally, a new civil rights agenda for digital privacy is brewing, integrating new principles and leadership to counter digital discrimination and disadvantage in an era of big data.

Interviewees: Hamid Kahn, Stop LAPD Spying Coalition; David Robinson, Equal Future

3. Low-wage worker organizations use digital strategies to change the story on the future of work, build a movement led by women of color, and win rights for workers often excluded from traditional labor organizing.

Interviewees: Sarita Gupta, Jobs with Justice; B. Loewe, National Day Laborer Organizing Network; Jamie Way, Eric Shlein, and Grace Sheedy, United Food and Commercial Workers

4. Black organizing in the 21st century uses digital platforms to bypass historic barriers to media engagement to mobilize a new generation of leaders and change the story on anti-black racism and police violence.

Interviewee: Alicia Garza, Black Lives Matter

5. Progressive strategy in the 21st century is using civic and campaign tech in innovative ways to engage voters and bring nimble political campaigns to scale across issue and geography.

Interviewees: Becky Bond, CREDO Action; David Segal, Demand Progress; Micah L. Sifry, Personal Democracy Media

Interview Questions

1. What's the mission and vision of your work?
2. What is your organization's theory of change, or how do we get from the status quo to your vision?
3. Some organizations engage with the Internet as a tool for social change, others as a social change issue. How is the Internet and digital technology positioned in your theory of change? Why has your organization taken this stance toward the Internet and digital technologies?
4. Given your organization's theory of change and stance, what are the most significant benefits and limitations to the use of digital technologies to achieve your vision?
5. How are digital technologies, and the emergence of big data, reshaping democracy, economy, and/or political participation within the constituencies you serve? How do these changes impact your social change approaches?
6. How should organizations like yours approach civic engagement, campaign mobilization, narrative strategy, or political security in a digital age? What best practices do you recommend or integrate?
7. Can you share one or two stories from your work that highlight any of those best practices in action? What was the problem you were trying to solve, what steps did you take, and what was the result?
8. What digital platforms or strategies are your organization most likely to engage, given your mission, vision, and constituency, and why?
9. What resources are necessary for an organization like yours to adequately engage with the Internet and digital technologies in a way that supports or amplifies your work?
10. If you could offer one significant recommendation to funders about best practices for resourcing digital rights and/or strategy, what would it be?

Appendix B:

Dialogue Contributors

The Center for Media Justice invited eight thought leaders in the fields of digital rights and movement building to discuss the taxonomy and potential for an integrated model.

Craig Aaron, Free Press

Micah L. Sifry, Personal Democracy Media

Virginia Eubanks, New America Fellow and University at Albany, SUNY

danah boyd, Microsoft Research and Data & Society Research Institute

Todd Wolfson, Media Mobilizing Project and Rutgers University

Tracy Van Slyke, The Culture Lab at Citizen Engagement Laboratory

Dave Steer, Mozilla Foundation

David Robinson, Equal Future and Robinson + Yu LLC

Dialogue Questions

1. What challenges are posed to social justice actors by social change approaches that fragment digital rights from digital organizing?
2. What are the key areas of practice (e.g., civic tech, political tech, digital rights, privacy) that inform your work or theory of change? What key theories, terms, and trends are important to these areas?
3. Where do you see the potential for an integrated model that connects digital infrastructure/rights and digital organizing/movement building? What assumptions/guiding principles/best practices/theory of change might inform that integration?
4. What recommendations to funders and to the field would help address the current contradictions and bridge the gaps?

Appendix C:

New Words, New Meanings

CMJ's dialogues with experts unearthed many new terms that are still being defined. The practice of defining new terms is one of creating new meanings that can drive new purposes and new approaches.

We asked our experts to offer their own definitions for some of the most important new terms:

danah boyd, *Data and Society*

- Kate Crawford and I defined **big data** as “a cultural, technological, and scholarly phenomenon that rests on the interplay of technology, analysis, and mythology.” <http://www.danah.org/papers/2012/BigData-ICS-Draft.pdf> We purposefully went this route to highlight that big data isn't really about bigness or even, often, data, but all of the hype that surrounds the possibility of having more information.
- Alice Marwick and I argue that achieving **privacy** is about the ability to control a social situation. <http://nms.sagepub.com/content/16/7/1051> It's not a property of any data or a state of being. It's a process and that process requires agency, context, and skills. These three are often undermined, which is why people experience a violation of privacy.
- Computer scientists working in this space want to algorithmically compute **fairness**, which raises serious questions whose definition of fairness is valued. Equality? Equity? Market logic? For more information on algorithmic fairness see: <https://medium.com/message/what-is-fairness-73940071840>
- When used in buzzword fashion, the idea of **transparency** is that having access to the algorithm is itself informative and equalizing. But most people can't read algorithms and most algorithms mean nothing without data and, most problematically, learning algorithms are hard to assess even if you have the training set and technical skills. So what do we mean by transparency? Transparency to whom and to achieve what purpose? Data don't speak for themselves.

Micah L. Sifry, Personal Democracy Forum

- **Civic tech** is, broadly speaking, any use of tech to enable a community or group to empower itself to address issues of public concern, which can include partnering with government, influencing government to move in a particular direction, co-creating new services with government, or even creating free-standing civic services that directly solve a community need without direct resort to government. It's worth parsing when civic tech is reformist, conformist, or transformist in its goals, in my humble opinion (more discussion of how to define and measure kinds of civic tech here: <http://techpresident.com/news/25261/civic-tech-and-engagement-search-common-language>).
- **Big data** is the capacity to collect massive amounts of raw information for later processing, all at relatively low cost. Until a few years ago, it was quite expensive to amass a large amount of data of a wide variety and analyze it fast enough to derive significant value from it. When these three processes were all difficult and expensive, people were forced to limit what data they would take in for analysis. Cloud computing, new processing platforms, and the continuing improvement in computing power signified by Moore's Law (all things being equal, the speed and capacity of a computer chip has doubled every 18–24 months), make those choices obsolete. Now we can observe and record nearly every human and digital interchange, so more institutions (not just the National Security Agency) are putting their arms around all the data they can get. And data analytics, the procedures and tools that we can use to derive meaning from raw data, are the new Holy Grail.
- A **member** is someone who has a say in the running of an organization. (Not to be confused with the member of a list.)
- **Online vs. offline:** I personally believe it is impossible to parse this distinction. Sure, wearing a button is "offline" and putting a "button" on one's Facebook page is "online," but what exactly are we differentiating?

- One more term I'd like to complicate: **grassroots**. It's thrown around too easily without discussing the power equation. In my view, a movement is grassroots when the power to make decisions is vested at the base. It's "grassrootsy" when money and resources come from the base but decisions are made at the top. Too often, we see organizations and campaigns that are funded by small donations described as "grassroots," but in fact the power is not shared (MoveOn is grassrootsy; the Obama campaign was grassrootsy, etc.). See <http://techpresident.com/blog-entry/grassroots-vs-grassrootsy-how-parse-technologys-role-politics> for more discussion.

Dave Steer, Mozilla

- **Web literacy** is the skills and competencies needed for reading, writing, and participating on the Web. It includes literacy around exploration (reading on the web), building (writing the web), and connecting (participating on the web). See the Web Literacy map that we co-created with our community.

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