




Exploring a transition to alternative social media platforms for social justice organizations in the Majority World



THE
ENGINE
ROOM

This report is based on research conducted by The Engine Room, with support from Open Society Foundations, between July 2023 and October 2024. The content of this report does not reflect the official opinion of Open Society Foundations nor of advisory committee members. Responsibility for the information and views expressed lies with The Engine Room.

Research and writing: Jeff Deutch, Denisse Albornoz, Olivia Johnson

Review: Dalia Othman

Editing: Daisy Kidd, Helen Kilbey

Project support: Jen Lynn

Design: [La Propia Agencia](#)

The text of this work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International Licence. To view a copy of this license, visit: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

Suggested citation: The Engine Room: Jeff Deutch, Denisse Albornoz, Olivia Johnson. “Exploring a transition to alternative social media platforms for social justice organizations in the Majority World” (2024).



Contents

Introduction

Project background

Objectives of the research

Methodology

Key definitions

Findings

Section 1

Section 2

Section 3

Section 4

Conclusion

Appendix 1 – Interviewees

04

04

06

07

10

12

13

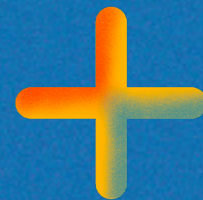
28

50

58

62

64





Introduction

“All over the world, all the time, someone is experiencing a local apocalypse, and we are all going to need tools that are sufficiently protected from certain kinds of surveillance, but that also allow human connection to flourish in order to practice collective survival and coalition building in a pretty chaotic landscape.”⁰¹



Project background

Surveys have found that worldwide, over 90% of internet users use at least one social media platform owned by one of a few major corporations - Meta (Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp), Alphabet (Youtube), X (Twitter), LinkedIn, Snapchat and Bytedance (TikTok).⁰² As Sri-lankan activist Subha Wijesiriwardena writes: “A large part of the regular person’s internet experience is shaped predominantly by about four or five US-based social media platforms, owned more or less by about two or three US-based corporations.”⁰³ This concentration of control has profound implications for digital rights and social justice oriented work, as these companies continue to shape how people across the world access information and communicate with each other.

While the impact of mainstream social media platforms has played a major role in digital activism around the world, civil society concerns have been growing, particularly around issues such as surveillance, censorship and privacy. Harassment and abuse are commonly reported

⁰¹ Interviewee 4

⁰² Rasmus Kleis Nielsen and Richard Fletcher, “Comparing the Platformization of News Media Systems: A Cross-country Analysis,” *European Journal of Communication* 38, no. 5 (July 19, 2023): 484–99, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02673231231189043>

⁰³ Subha Wijesiriwardena, “Private Parts: Obscenity and Censorship in the Digital Age,” *GenderIT.org*, June 24, 2019, <https://genderit.org/feminist-talk/private-parts-obscenity-and-censorship-digital-age>

on these platforms,⁰⁴ while their content moderation policies and algorithmic recommendations contribute to the spread of disinformation, conspiracy theories and political propaganda,⁰⁵ all of which disproportionately affect communities on the margins of society.⁰⁶ Furthermore, high-profile incidents such as the Cambridge Analytica scandal⁰⁷ and Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter in 2022 have undermined public trust in the ability of these platforms to uphold human rights protections.⁰⁸

In response to these challenges, there is growing interest in the potential transition to alternative social media platforms as one way of addressing the shortcomings of mainstream platforms. Many are turning to decentralized or federated platforms seeking refuge from unauthorized surveillance or large-scale content suppression.⁰⁹ For example, Mastodon, one of the most popular alternative social media platforms, defines itself as “a social network that is not for sale” offering an open, decentralized, ad-free and interoperable social media experience that puts social networks “back in people's hands.”¹⁰ Mastodon gained 2.5 million active users in 2022¹¹ following Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter (now X), and currently hosts over 10 million users.¹²

Like Mastodon, alternative social media platforms offer significant benefits to users, including increased privacy, security and community governance, free from the practices that characterize mainstream platform business models.¹³ However, there is little research on the experiences of Majority World users in the alternative social media

⁰⁴ Patrícia Figueiredo, “Negros são alvo de metade dos registros de violência contra população LGBT no Brasil, diz pesquisa,” *Globo*, July 15, 2020, <https://g1.globo.com/sp/sao-paulo/noticia/2020/07/15/negros-sao-alvo-de-metade-dos-registros-de-violencia-contr-a-populacao-lgbt-no-brasil-diz-pesquisa.ghtml>

⁰⁵ Jay Lloyd, “Misunderstanding Misinformation,” *Issues in Science and Technology*, October 1, 2024, <https://issues.org/misunderstanding-misinformation-wardle/>

⁰⁶ Rachel Keighley, “Hate Hurts: Exploring the Impact of Online Hate on LGBTQ+ Young People,” *Women & Criminal Justice*, 32:1-2 (2022), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/08974454.2021.1988034>

⁰⁷ Emma Graham-Harrison and Carole Cadwalladr, “Revealed: 50 Million Facebook Profiles Harvested for Cambridge Analytica in Major Data Breach,” *The Guardian*, September 29, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/17/cambridge-analytica-facebook-influence-us-election>
news/2018/mar/17/cambridge-analytica-facebook-influence-us-election, accessed May 2021

⁰⁸ Arvind Ganesan, “Musk Chaos Raises Serious Rights Concerns Over Twitter,” *Human Rights Watch*, November 13, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/11/12/musk-chaos-raises-serious-rights-concerns-over-twitter>

⁰⁹ Kristina Livitckaia et al., “Decentralised Social Media,” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, January 1, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4636894>

¹⁰ “Mastodon - Decentralized Social Media,” n.d., <https://joinmastodon.org/>

¹¹ “Mastodon Analytics,” n.d. Mastodon Analytics. <https://mastodon-analytics.com/>

¹² “Mastodon Users (@Mastodonusercount@Mastodon.social).” 2024

¹³ Robert Gehl, “Alternative Social Media: From Critique to Code,” April 20, 2016, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2955827

ecosystem, or on how these platforms are addressing the needs of social justice organizations and marginalized communities that operate in contexts of oppression or surveillance. Similarly, the growing uptake of alternatives is raising a new set of concerns and limitations for users, as described in Section 2 of this report.

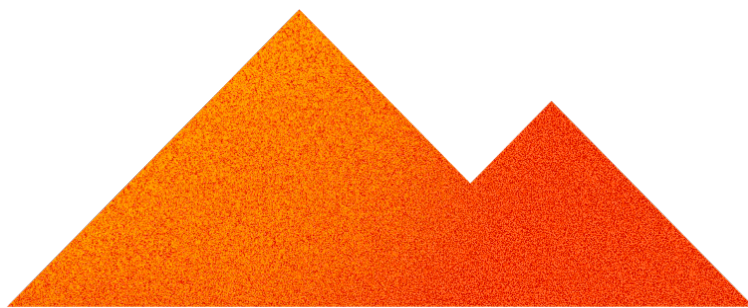
Objectives of the research

The Engine Room, with support from the Open Society Foundations, has conducted this research to understand the needs and challenges of marginalized communities on both mainstream and alternative social media platforms, to identify the preconditions needed for a critical mass to transition to alternative social media platforms, and to determine whether or not this transition is desirable.

The broader goals of this project are to:

- Amplify the perspectives of social justice organizations in Majority World contexts, to understand global dynamics of social media use and ensure representation of diverse voices.
- Support the creation of more equitable and inclusive digital environments by providing insights into the interests and experiences of Majority World social justice organizations on transitioning away from so-called “surveillance economies”.
- Inform philanthropic decision-making to support the development and adoption of alternative social media platforms in the Majority World.

By consolidating perspectives of networks of Majority World civil society organizations working on social justice outcomes across Latin America, Africa and Asia, the report outlines the practices, needs and challenges faced by marginalized communities on mainstream social media platforms and whether and how alternative social media platforms might better serve these needs.



Methodology

This report employs a mixed method approach, combining desk research and interviews to gather comprehensive insights.

Desk research

The Engine Room staff conducted a non-exhaustive literature review between April and July 2024 of secondary literature sources, including academic journal articles, practitioner reports and analysis related to mainstream social media platforms and their alternatives. The review shed light on key definitions, characteristics and adoption trends, as well as emerging challenges for social justice organizations that use social media to advance justice-oriented agendas. Based on the literature review, an interview protocol and coding schema were designed to understand the needs and challenges faced online by marginalized groups on social media platforms, as well as preconditions for a potential transition to alternatives.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted with a range of key experts, including practitioners from Majority World social justice organizations who have direct experience working with marginalized communities, researchers, alternative tech service providers and developers, and representatives of the philanthropic community. Interviewees were selected based on their expertise and involvement in social media platforms and alternative social media platforms, digital rights and philanthropy.

The criteria for selection was:

- **Majority World social justice organizations:** representatives from civil society organizations working primarily with marginalized communities on social justice outcomes from Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and SWANA regions.
- **Practitioners and researchers:** individuals with experience in alternative and emerging technologies, social media platforms, and digital rights or open source advocacy.

- **Alternative tech service providers:** developers and providers of decentralized and community-owned alternative social media platforms.
- **Philanthropic groups:** organizations including Open Society Foundations, Numan Fund, and Sovereign Tech Fund.

More information about interviewed experts can be found in **Appendix 1**.

The interview protocol, based on previous work conducted by The Engine Room, was designed in accord with ethical and risk minimization guidelines. The questions were developed to elicit meaningful insights into existing social media practices and preconditions for transitioning to alternative social media platforms. Creating a safe and inclusive space for participants was prioritized, with all efforts made to ensure participants could openly and safely share their experiences and perspectives.

Research limitations

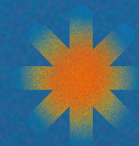
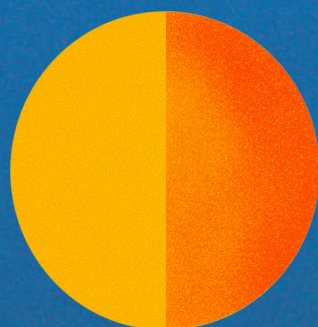
Alternative social media platforms are an emerging field and there is limited literature on their development and use, as well as their user base in Majority World contexts. The small number of interviews carried out as part of this research means that findings are not representative of all experiences, and the focus on Majority World social justice organizations may not fully capture the diverse needs and perspectives of communities with whom these organizations work. That said, the lack of literature on this topic means this research is both timely and necessary.

How to read the report

This report provides context and evidence to better understand the experiences of Majority World civil society organizations working on social justice outcomes on both mainstream social media platforms **(Section 1)** and alternative social media platforms **(Section 2)**. Both sections draw from expert insights to provide an overview of usage patterns as well as perceived benefits and challenges for marginalized groups.

This is followed by a reflection of key considerations for the transition to alternative social media platforms **(Section 3)**. The section highlights research findings around safety, infrastructure and capacity building which, according to expert perspectives, are central to determining whether a migration of users is viable and desirable.

The report closes with a set of recommendations **(Section 4)** to support a meaningful and healthy transition to alternative social media spaces, imagined as a plural, diverse and community-centered ecosystem of online communities.





Key definitions



Mainstream social media: “Mainstream social media” platforms (also referred to as “corporate social media”), are owned and operated by large technology corporations. Mainstream platforms share several key characteristics, including widespread use, centralized ownership and generally proprietary, data-driven business models.¹⁴

ActivityPub protocol: ActivityPub is a protocol and open standard for decentralized social networking and has become the main standard used in the fediverse, such as on platforms like Mastodon. The ActivityPub protocol enables federation by supporting the production of content in a “universally understandable format” that allows data to travel across different servers and apps.¹⁵

Alternative social media: “Alternative social media” refers to platforms that are often decentralized, open source and non-commercial. They emerge in response to critiques of mainstream social media, offering to address is-

suues relation to privacy violations, surveillance, the monetization of user data, and others.¹⁶ (See Section 2.1 on Use of alternative social media by social justice organizations)

Decentralized social media: Decentralized social media platforms operate on distributed infrastructures, routing data through interconnected nodes and servers rather than through a single central server or owner. Two common approaches to decentralization are federated networks and peer-to-peer protocols.¹⁷

Federated platforms: Federated platforms consist of a network of interconnected servers that allow self-hosting and enable individuals to set up, join or maintain their own servers (also called “instances”).¹⁸

Fediverse: An interconnected social platform ecosystem based on the open protocol ActivityPub, which allows users to port their content, data, and followers from one platform to another.¹⁹

¹⁴ Gehl, “Alternative Social Media: From Critique to Code.”

¹⁵ David Pierce, “The Fediverse, Explained: Mastodon, Threads, and the Open Future of Social Networking,” The Verge, February 7, 2024, <https://www.theverge.com/24063290/fediverse-explained-activitypub-social-media-open-protocol>

¹⁶ Gehl, “Alternative Social Media: From Critique to Code.”

¹⁷ Livitckaia et al., “Decentralised Social Media,”

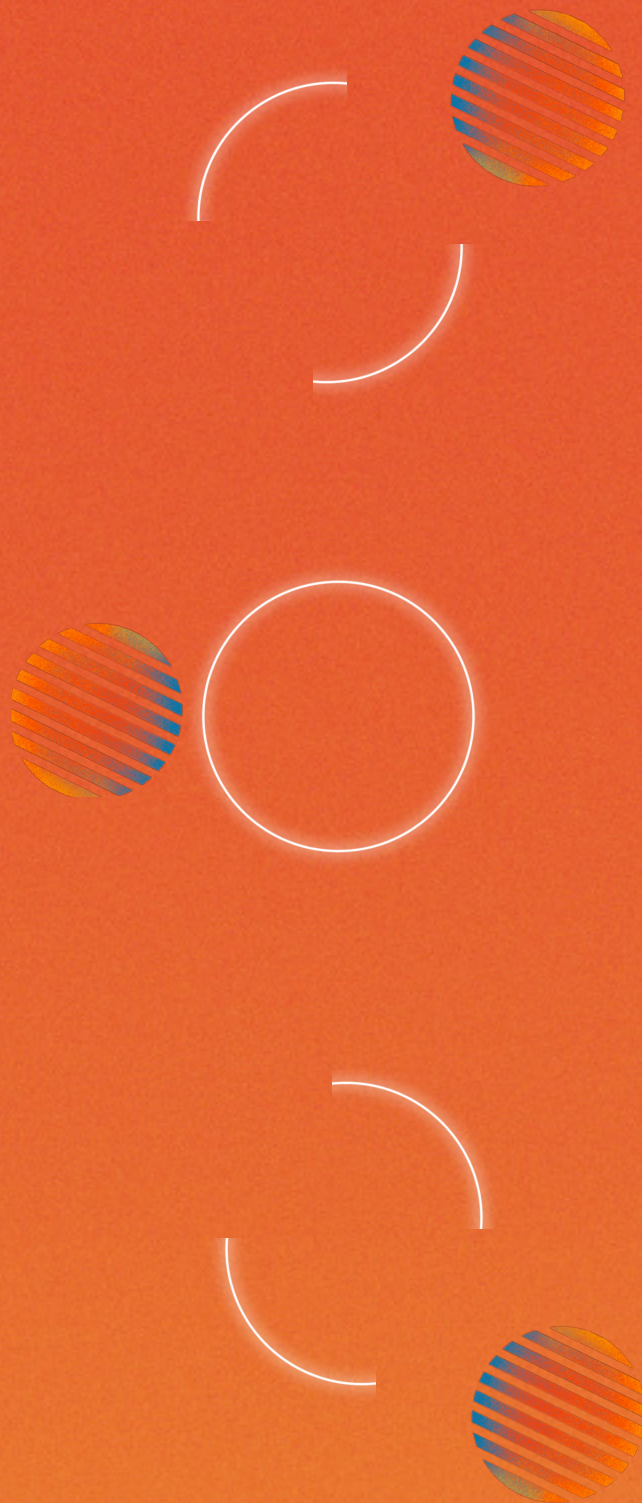
¹⁸ Gehl, “Alternative Social Media: From Critique to Code.”

¹⁹ Pierce, “The Fediverse, Explained: Mastodon, Threads, and the Open Future of Social Networking,”

Peer-to-peer platforms (P2P): In peer-to-peer (P2P) networks, users' devices (e.g. phones, tablets, laptops, or desktop computers) operate as both servers and clients, enabling confidential transactions and data storage between devices. This model can be more scalable than federation, as the network expands with every user, sharing bandwidth, computing power and storage, without having to incur additional hosting costs.²¹

Majority World: The Majority World refers to regions where the majority of the world resides (i.e. countries in Africa, Asia, Central/South America and Oceania). This terminology is meant to replace the usage of "Global South" and "developing countries," to reflect the current imbalances of political and economic power that are a result of the past injustices of colonialism and its ongoing legacies as well as current modes of neocolonialism, extraction and exploitation.²²

Marginalized communities: Groups and individuals who have been systematically and historically marginalized, disempowered or oppressed in their contexts, including Black and Indigenous people, People of Colour, LGBTQIA+ people, people with disabilities, and lower income class and labor movements, among others.²³



²⁰ Michael Kwet, "To Fix Social Media, We Need to Introduce Digital Socialism," Al Jazeera, May 19, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/5/19/to-fix-social-media-we-need-to-introduce-digital-socialism>

²¹ Newton Masinde and Kalman Graffi, "Peer-to-Peer-Based Social Networks: A Comprehensive Survey," SN Computer Science 1, no. 5 (September 1, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42979-020-00315-8>

²² "Oxfam GB | the Inclusive Language Guide: When We Include Everyone We Can Overcome Poverty," Oxfam GB, n.d., <https://www.oxfam.org.uk/about-us/the-inclusive-language-guide-when-we-include-everyone-we-can-overcome-poverty/>

²³ "Oxfam GB | The Inclusive Language Guide: When We Include Everyone We Can Overcome Poverty."

Findings

Section 1

How Majority World social justice organizations are navigating mainstream social media

Sometimes it's like exercising, right? You know that exercising is very healthy and you really want to do it. But when you are busy and when you are kind of stressed out, you just do the easy things. So for me, even though I would choose to be more active on Mastodon, Twitter has been easier because it's out of habit. As an organization, we really make sure that we use open source and more ethical platforms like Thunderbird, Mozilla, Nextcloud and Signal. We really are making that a priority. But with social media, it has been difficult.²⁴

This section of the report draws from desk research and expert interviews to outline how Majority World social justice organizations are navigating mainstream social media. It discusses both the challenges and the opportunities they find while using platforms to advance their social justice aims and outcomes.

Use of mainstream social media in the Majority World is widespread

Globally, social media platforms are used widely and have become an ingrained and essential part of everyday life. At the time of writing this report, 62.2% of the world's population (or 6 in 10 people) use some form of social media.²⁵ As of 2024, Facebook (Meta) has over 3 billion monthly active users, followed by YouTube (Google) with 2.5 billion users; WhatsApp and Instagram (Meta) have 2 billion users each,²⁶ TikTok has 1.5 billion users, and WeChat has 1.3 billion users. It is estimated that X (Twitter) had 251 million daily users in the second quarter of 2024, although the platform has not publicly shared user data since Elon Musk took ownership.²⁷ As a point of comparison, most popular alternative social media platforms, which are covered in Section 2, have significantly fewer users, with Mastodon having 10 million registered users in 2023²⁸ and BlueSky a total of 6 million.²⁹

In the Majority World, mainstream social media's impact is particularly noteworthy, with platforms like Facebook (Meta) offering a product called Free Basics, which essentially offers data-light websites and services for free.³⁰ In these scenarios, social media is effectively the internet as people have access only to those specific services and not to other areas of the web.³¹ Facebook and WhatsApp (both owned by Meta), dominate Majority World social media use, especially among middle income countries.³²

²⁵ Statista, "Social Media: Global Penetration Rate 2024, by Region," April 29, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/269615/social-network-penetration-by-region/>

²⁶ Statista, "Most Used Social Networks 2024, by Number of Users," July 10, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/>

²⁷ Matt Binder, "X / Twitter's User Base Has Stopped Growing Under Elon Musk," Mashable, July 9, 2024, <https://mashable.com/article/x-twitter-global-daily-active-users-stall-under-elon-musk>

²⁸ Statista, "Mastodon: Number of Registered Users 2022-2023," April 17, 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1376022/global-registered-mastodon-users/>

²⁹ Dave Ver Meer, "How Many Users Does Bluesky Have? 32+ Bluesky Stats (2024)," NamePepper, September 22, 2024, <https://www.namepepper.com/bluesky-statistics>

³⁰ Olivia Solon, "'It's Digital Colonialism': How Facebook's Free Internet Service Has Failed Its Users," *The Guardian*, April 20, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/jul/27/facebook-free-basics-developing-markets>

³¹ Interviewee 3

³² Jacob Poushter "WhatsApp and Facebook Dominate the Social Media Landscape in Middle-income Nations," Pew Research Center, July 23, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/03/22/whatsapp-and-facebook-dominate-the-social-media-landscape-in-middle-income-nations/>

1.1

Challenges and limitations faced by Majority World social justice organizations in using mainstream social media platforms

The following section outlines key concerns raised by experts working with social justice organizations and marginalized communities regarding their experiences of using mainstream social media platforms. In particular, they emphasize the centralization of ownership, data collection policies, surveillance of activists, content moderation and a rise in harassment and abuse on these platforms.

1

Mainstream social media platforms are governed by Minority World tech monopolies, centralizing ownership and decision making into the hands of a few corporations

Mainstream social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp (Meta), YouTube (Alphabet), X, and TikTok (ByteDance) are owned by a few large corporations, primarily based in the United States.³³ This centralization of infrastructure and ownership consolidates power and influence in the hands of a few tech giants, raising concerns about how their terms of service and control over vast amounts of user data affect billions of users worldwide.

In interviews, experts point out that the people making decisions in these major corporations do not always have people living in the Majority World or from historically marginalized groups in mind. Interviewee 5, a researcher on social media, explains:

I had a meeting with a team at Meta and their thinking is just so narrow. I was really shocked because I knew one of the people in the group, and they were asking us how to optimize content moderation algorithms, and it's a group of mostly white Europeans and North Americans. The question should not be how to optimize content moderation algorithms, it should be what you're optimizing for... How different cultures are

³³ Statista, "Most Used Social Networks 2024, by Number of Users,"

represented is shaped by how these technologies interface and integrate with other systems.³⁴

While mainstream platforms have the resources and staff to make updates and improve their features, Interviewee 9, a feminist activist and researcher who has worked to build the digital security skills of at-risk communities in MENA countries, emphasizes they do so first and foremost from the point of view of improving the product, rather than from “a point of view of care.”³⁵

2

Mainstream platforms rely on ad-based profit models which surveil and sell user data, with implications for expression and safety of activists

Mainstream social media platforms are typically monetarily free for users, in exchange for the platforms’ abilities to profit off user data and advertising.³⁶ Mainstream platforms collect massive amounts of user data by tracking user behavior, preferences, and interactions with other users and advertisements to create detailed user profiles.³⁷

Social media companies do not solely collect personal data when users navigate the platforms, they also track and collect people’s collateral data and internet behavior.³⁸ For instance, Facebook collects information surrounding posts, location data from photos, the people you interact with on the platform, hashtags and pages, as well as content aggregated from Instagram and WhatsApp. It does so through web browsers, user IDs, and open chats, to generate targeted advertising on user profiles.³⁹ This practice raises significant privacy concerns and ethical questions, a problem made more complex through the emergence of various scandals involving personal data and offline harms.⁴⁰

³⁴ Interviewee 5

³⁵ Interviewee 9

³⁶ Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (Profile Books, 2019).

³⁷ Peter Eavis and Steve Lohr, “Big Tech’s Domination of Business Reaches New Heights,” *New York Times*, August 19, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/19/technology/big-tech-business-domination.html>

³⁸ Kate O’Flaherty, “All the Ways Facebook Tracks You and How to Stop It,” *Forbes*, April 14, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kateoflahertyuk/2021/05/08/all-the-ways-facebook-tracks-you-and-how-to-stop-it/>

³⁹ Amnesty International, “What Is Big Tech’s Surveillance-based Business Model?,” March 8, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2022/02/what-is-big-techs-surveillance-based-business-model/>

⁴⁰ Graham-Harrison and Cadwalladr, “Revealed: 50 Million Facebook Profiles Harvested for Cambridge Analytica in Major Data Breach”

In interviews, experts highlight how the business model is perceived to be a contributor to patterns of surveillance and selective repression of activist voices online. Interviewee 8, who leads Power to Voices, a global social justice alternative social media platform, reflects on how repressive tactics in their context were amplified by targeted censorship in social media:

[Activists on] mainstream social media were getting blocked or are still getting blocked in very many countries, simply because there is an agenda to try and muzzle people's desires to speak out... or to [silence] dissenting voices.⁴¹

In addition to censoring dissident voices, mainstream social media platforms use commercially motivated algorithms to determine what users can see on the platforms. Many activists decide to remain on mainstream social media in order to stay visible to their audiences, however they have to implement a series of strategies to combat algorithmic recommendations and ensure their content reaches the right people. Interviewee 7, a Peruvian organizer, reflects:

The platforms are pushing you to talk about an issue when you don't want to talk about it. So if [their algorithms] dominate, no matter how much of a free space it is, in the end they reduce your reach. Because they're not interested in you talking about it [if] it's not commercial.⁴²

Interviewee 9 argues that commercial algorithms, designed to keep people online for longer and thereby generate ad revenue, often perpetuate negative and harmful information cycles:

From the company's point of view, it's for financial gain related to advertisement. There's a body of research that proves that it's the algorithm [that] contributed to the spread of disinformation, of hate speech and had real life consequences in making already existing conflicts a lot worse and leading to the threats to physical security of some journalists, women activists, queer activists, but also the livelihoods and the safety of entire ethnic groups.⁴³

The real life implications of these algorithmic models are further explored in the next section, especially in cases where information disorder and hate speech are promoted on these platforms.

⁴¹ Interviewee 8

⁴² Interviewee 7

⁴³ Interviewee 9

3

Mainstream platforms spread information disorder, and lack sufficient content moderation safeguards for Majority World users

Mainstream platforms have emerged as key distributors of mis- and disinformation, conspiracy theories and propaganda, which have a significant impact on public opinion.⁴⁴ In 2022, it was revealed that Meta's algorithms (such as newsfeed rankings prioritising content, recommended posts, and groups) promoted inflammatory disinformation and hate speech toward Rohingya populations in Myanmar, in the months and years during (and preceding) the violent displacement and genocide of the Rohingya people. In 2017, Amnesty reported that Facebook became "an echo chamber of virulent anti-Rohingya content."⁴⁵ Rather than removing this content quickly, Facebook's algorithms promoted posts, generating profits for the company from ad revenue.⁴⁶

While information disorder is an issue that is receiving more attention in regard to content moderation, much of the focus on and resources for countermeasures are going to English content. Facebook dedicates 87% of its misinformation budget toward English content, although only 9% of its users are English speakers.⁴⁷ Inequalities in regulation as well as in data sets used to train language models (for automated content moderation) leads to disparities in user experiences, primarily for users in the Majority World.⁴⁸

Interviewee 9 explains how current content moderation practices, especially those that are automated for mainstream social media, fails people in the Majority World:

The current state of moderation no longer relies on the human and this [has] resulted in a reality where these companies, they're failing with different languages from Majority World countries

⁴⁴ Claire Wardle, co-founder and co-director of the Information Futures Lab at Brown University, argues that the growing phenomenon of fake news, disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation can be categorized as part of a larger term of "information disorder." Read more: <https://issues.org/misunderstanding-misinformation-wardle/>

⁴⁵ Amnesty International, "Myanmar: The Social Atrocity: Meta and the Right to Remedy for the Rohingya - Amnesty International," October 3, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ASA16/5933/2022/en/>

⁴⁶ "Algorithm of Harm: Facebook Amplified Myanmar Military Propaganda Following Coup." 2021. Global Witness. June 23, 2021. <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/digital-threats/algorithm-harm-facebook-amplified-myanmar-military-propaganda-following-coup/>

⁴⁷ Center for Democracy and Technology, "Investigating Content Moderation Systems in the Global South - Center for Democracy and Technology," July 30, 2024, <https://cdt.org/insights/investigating-content-moderation-systems-in-the-global-south/>

⁴⁸ Ibid

and their dialects versus English and Latin based languages. It's resulting in a lot of censorship and over-enforcement of content moderation rules. If we see how much censorship is faced by people in historic Palestine who are reporting the egregious human rights violations and war crimes by Israel and those anywhere else in the world who express any form of solidarity with Palestinians; even if the content is not taken down, there are different ways that their content is de-promoted.⁴⁹

They add that the “black box” algorithms make this process even more obfuscated, since users do not fully understand what posts are amplified, and which are removed. In instances of shadowbanning,⁵⁰ like the case mentioned above, this creates an even more frustrating user experience.⁵¹ Interviewee 8 adds that these strategies are used to silent dissent, with platform complicity:

We had seen several cases of sometimes these big social platforms denying requests from autocratic regimes to share data or to put down accounts of activists. We've also seen this closure of accounts happen at some point. There's actually a campaign on Twitter during the times of Jack Dorsey, to restore accounts of activists that had been muted. But still lots of things continue to happen. The bias, the shadow banning, the algorithm based mis- and disinformation.⁵²

Similarly, Interviewee 9 notes how content moderation, such as an account being deleted, can lead to loss of documentation and control:

[...] You try everything to get support from that company to get your content back, and your appeal is rejected and not carefully considered, which is something that happened for some independent media and NGOs. The content moderation rules and limitations in mainstream social media produced an intentional bias that censored narratives and caused the destruction and deletion of very important content and archives of activist groups in the countries of the Majority World.⁵³

⁴⁹ Interviewee 9

⁵⁰ Rasha Younes, “Meta’s Broken Promises,” *Human Rights Watch*, January 26, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/12/21/metass-broken-promises/systemic-censorship-palestine-content-instagram-and>

⁵¹ Jessica Hallman, “‘Black Box Gaslighting’ Challenges Social-Media Algorithm Accountability | Penn State University,” *Www.psu.edu*. January 19, 2022. <https://www.psu.edu/news/information-sciences-and-technology/story/black-box-gas-lighting-challenges-social-media-algorithm-0/>

⁵² Interviewee 8

⁵³ Interviewee 9

This insight highlights the importance of alternative community spaces that promote self-ownership of user data. The combination of profit driven algorithms, shadow banning and censorship, as well as a lack of comprehensive content moderation results in the silencing of activist voices and the repression of social movements⁵⁴ on mainstream social media.

4

Mainstream platforms fail to adequately monitor and prevent online harassment, hate speech, and online hate and abuse

Harassment, abuse and online toxicity are rampant on mainstream social media platforms, affecting millions of users worldwide, including social justice organizations and civil society groups in the Majority World. While social media companies have worked to establish robust terms of service and content moderation policies, with both automated and human reviewers working to find and remove violence from online discourse, these initiatives often fall short of addressing widespread and systematic violent rhetoric.⁵⁵

Many civil society organizations working in the Majority World receive targeted harassment and online abuse as a result of their work, or face content takedowns of critical content documenting war crimes⁵⁶ and other human rights violations.⁵⁷ At the same time, research has found that content such as homophobic videos, which tend to generate a lot of comments and engagement, is “from a mathematical point of view, good for a platform’s business.”⁵⁸ This is because when people spend more time online, there is greater potential for increased ad revenue and monetized content.

Interviewee 8 describes the extent to which activists have been targeted on mainstream platforms, resulting in both online and offline violence.

⁵⁴ Amarnath Amarasingam and Thusiyan Nandakumar, “Social Media Platforms Are Silencing Social Movements,” Tech Policy Press, October 24, 2023, <https://www.techpolicy.press/social-media-platforms-are-silencing-social-movements/>

⁵⁵ Roger McNamee, “Social Media Platforms Claim Moderation Will Reduce Harassment, Disinformation and Conspiracies. It Won’t,” *TIME*, June 24, 2020, <https://time.com/5855733/social-media-platforms-claim-moderation-will-reduce-harassment-disinformation-and-conspiracies-it-wont/>

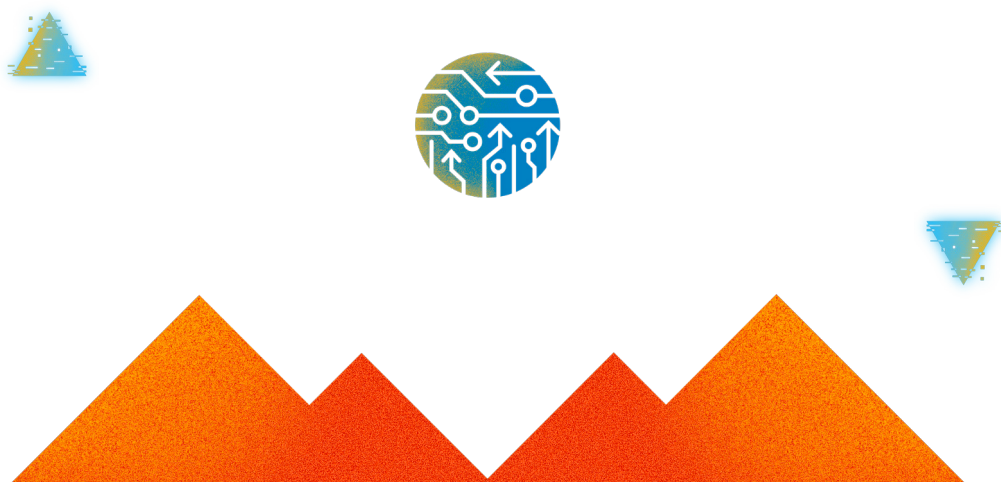
⁵⁶ Jillian York, “Caught in the Net: The Impact of ‘Extremist’ Speech Regulations On,” Electronic Frontier Foundation, June 3, 2019, <https://www.eff.org/wp/caught-net-impact-extremist-speech-regulations-human-rights-content>

⁵⁷ Avi Asher-Schapiro, “YouTube and Facebook are removing evidence of atrocities, Jeopardizing cases against war criminals,” *The Intercept*, November 2, 2017, <https://theintercept.com/2017/11/02/war-crimes-youtube-facebook-syria-rohingya/>

⁵⁸ Afef Abrougui, “Hate Speech: Why Social Media Platforms Are Failing the LGBTQ Community,” *Internet Gender & Sexuality*, May 17, 2021, <https://jeem.me/en/internet/548>

Activists were starting to get silenced as the attacks that were coming off their engagements on the mainstream social media were becoming gross every day. We were starting to see atrocities, were starting to see abductions, were starting to see lots of things happening to activists with dissenting voices. In a way, it was silencing their voices. I mean, with injustices pelting like rain. You can't stop organizing. You can't stop mobilizing, you can't stop campaigning. But how are we going to do this safely?⁵⁹

The work of social justice organizations and activists will continue, despite harassment. But given the severity of online violence and the targeting of dissent, there is a need for more secure online communities that ensure freedom of expression and protection against violence.



1.2

Why Majority World social justice organizations continue to use mainstream social media platforms

For all the harms and limitations of mainstream social media, there are still many activists and social justice organizations who have chosen to remain on these platforms. This section focuses on the perceived benefits, advantages and incentives of social justice organizations using mainstream social media; namely, reach, functionality in areas of low internet coverage, and strategic uses of social media for activism.

1

Mainstream platforms allow social justice organizations to meet people where they are online

One of the most common reasons for why organizations use mainstream social media is the simple fact that these platforms are where their audiences and communities are. Some organizations are begrudgingly using mainstream platforms for visibility. Interviewee 12, a social communicator, hackfeminist and visual artist based in southern Mexico, describes how they decided to stay on Facebook to share their content with local communities even though they limit their engagement and activities there.⁶⁰ Similarly, Interviewee 10, member of a digital rights feminist organization based in Nepal, explains:

We are using mainstream social media, primarily Instagram or Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. We use a lot of alternative media for our internal communication. But when it comes to social media, we have [...] not been able to explore alternative media. We just use the mainstream media because it's also about the critical mass and where to find the audience. For our kind of work, it's already very difficult to find people [that are] curious or receptive about our work. Our targeted audience is quite small. We rely on mainstream social media to find our audience to engage.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Interviewee 12

⁶¹ Interviewee 10

She explains that the digital rights and feminist space is small and still very new for some people: “We really have to put a lot of effort to get people’s attention, to engage them, to [get them] to give their attention to these topics and information.” While she personally uses Mastodon and Discord, these platforms are not where the majority of people are: “There could be some very nice technical communities.

But I think the primary thing is the critical mass and people are not really even aware about those other platforms.”⁶²

Likewise, Interviewee 5, a social media researcher, adds that a challenge with alternative digital spaces is that people need to want to use them. She comments: “If [the space that] I work with in Leeds wanted to set up on Mastodon two years ago, they would have just not been able to do it. And then to get the communities they work with to come on there to meet them. WhatsApp is already on everyone’s phones.”⁶³ Beyond people already having and using mainstream social media, a larger migration toward alternatives would require a communal shift toward alternatives that are desired, and collectively taken forward:

I teach students, and all of them want to make platforms to solve problems. And I’m like, who’s going to use this? You have to build with the community. If you’re going to start building these technologies, the community needs to better understand why it matters to build their own technologies...I think often when we’re doing this kind of work you’ve kind of got to meet people where they’re at.⁶⁴

Another expert explains that especially for social justice organizations working in challenging and resource-constrained contexts, it is important to meet people where they are at rather than prioritizing the shift to alternative platforms, even if the individuals or organizations are against the policies implemented by mainstream social media platforms.

For organizations working in situations of huge distress, even connecting to the internet is difficult, let alone using limited resources to convince people to shift their online behaviors. Interviewee 9 states:

⁶² Interviewee 10

⁶³ Interviewee 5

⁶⁴ Interviewee 5

What we hear in workshops is: “Listen, my community is going through a war now in Sudan,” “My community is going through a natural disaster in Syria and Turkey,” “My community is going through a genocide. I really don’t have the time to tell them about the fediverse and to migrate.” We’re just happy with them being able to get access to internet and share their messages with the world and most importantly connect for aid and emergency response, and we’re just going to do our best to amplify their voices and to support. So for the for the most part, they are like “Listen, my community in this country is on Twitter and I’m just going to stay there because I have to stay there, even though ethically I’m so against the company and I’m very unhappy to still have to use it.” So we’re talking about the context of communities where we’re in situations of huge distress and communities that live in disasters where really this is not something that is viable.⁶⁵

Meeting people where they are at, even if existing practices or infrastructures are not perfect, is essential, as explained in the following section about accessibility.

2

Mainstream platforms are preferred in areas with lower internet accessibility and bandwidth

Part of the reason why organizations have chosen to remain on mainstream social media is due to the limited options they have for services that function properly in areas with low internet and low bandwidth. People have found ways to adapt platforms to suit their needs given tech limitations, poor network coverage or lack of (or shared) devices. Interviewee 9 shares how in Tunisia, a lot of people were using mainstream social media due to it being widely available and free to use. In addition to widespread use, it was less censored than government media, especially before the Tunisian revolution.

While mainstream social media was more available, she notes it was also during a time when “not many people had access to a reliable internet connection or a desktop computer or a laptop.”⁶⁶ Another interviewee gives the example of when they were working with stu-

⁶⁵ Interviewee 9

⁶⁶ Interviewee 9

dents in Colombia and WhatsApp became the most viable platform to use during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using an innovative approach of assigning community leaders to act as liaison communicators, they found ways to work around connectivity challenges.

During Covid, everything kind of went a bit wrong, as it did for most people. So they started running workshops through WhatsApp instead of using their platform because that's how they could reach the communities they worked with. They had a person in each community with WhatsApp installed on their phone so that they could communicate remotely because video conferencing software wasn't an option. They kind of used these sorts of existing technologies in ways that hijacked them a little bit, but then they're still operating within the bounds of them.⁶⁷

3

Mainstream platforms remain important avenues for advocacy and activism

Organizations and activists struggle with the shortfalls of mainstream social media. Yet the challenges do not seem to override the opportunities to expand reach, connect with global funders and audiences, build solidarity and share knowledge.⁶⁸ Since mainstream social media has features that many alternatives currently lack (ease of use, large audience, user-friendly design, convenience, etc.), the findings suggest that organizations prefer to continue using mainstream platforms to advance their agendas.

Multiple interviewees raise the relevance of mainstream social media as a tool for organizing and going about everyday life. Interviewee 4, a researcher who explored the role of Meta and Facebook in the genocide of the Rohingya people in Myanmar, mentions that in Myanmar people were reliant on Facebook for organizing:

It's been obviously oppressive and devastating in some places, but I think it's also important to note that what we heard coming out of Myanmar was not "shut Facebook down." People still needed Facebook. They needed it to do all kinds of organizing work. And

⁶⁷ Interviewee 5

⁶⁸ Dhiraj Murthy, "Introduction to Social Media, Activism, and Organizations," *Social Media + Society* 4, no. 1 (January 1, 2018): 205630511775071, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305117750716>

Facebook later rolled out protective features for the folks working after the coup, under the junta to do collective resistance work. People need these networks, they need functional networks.⁶⁹

While alternatives are growing in relevance (as discussed in **Section 2**), mainstream social media still dominates most people's networks. Interviewee 10 commented, "Instagram is still good for dissemination and for advocacy. And Twitter if you want to get some attention from lawmakers and people engaged in politics."⁷⁰ She does note that Twitter (now X), has decreased in relevance:

There's not a progressive conversation happening on Twitter. It has been hijacked by the more regressive conversations and a lot of either memes or trolls. So we want to keep Twitter, but Twitter is not something as enjoyable as before. Especially to get updated and to engage with our collaborators and have those niche and more current or more refined conversations.⁷¹

Interviewee 12 comments that while they do not see much use for Facebook anymore, they are still active on Twitter:

We kept Twitter because it was historically a space that was very valuable for building conversation, before Elon Musk. A lot of things have changed and it's been going on over the years, but you could have some conversation on Twitter. That's been changing a lot in the last few years and there's been a lot more hate speech. On Twitter [...] we have a certain curatorship, let's say, about the things we share, they're not just ours, but we don't dedicate a lot of time to that or to the virilization and to - I say it in inverted commas - "building community" on Twitter.⁷²

Interviewee 7, a digital rights and feminist activist who has experimented with both mainstream and alternative social media platforms to advance different social justice agendas in Peru, shares how since 2014 they were able to build their community for the "Let's Stop Street Harassment"⁷³ campaign on Facebook. By 2016 they had 9,000 followers, which was a major turning point in their feminist organization.⁷⁴ Additionally, they raise the issue of a genera-

⁶⁹ Interviewee 4

⁷⁰ Interviewee 10

⁷¹ Interviewee 10

⁷² Interviewee 12

⁷³ "Paremos El Acoso Callejero -," May 23, 2016, <https://paremoselacosocallejero.com/>

⁷⁴ Interviewee 7

tional divide on mainstream social media. For older LGBTQ organizations in Lima, Peru, Twitter is still much more active than newer social media platforms like TikTok. Newer collectives have begun using more audiovisual platforms, with Interviewee 7 noting:

Facebook is actually quite relegated from the LGBTQ movements or activism.[...]But in the En Movimiento⁷⁵ [political activism group] there are activists and comrades who are over 50 years old. It is completely intergenerational. If we go have a specific focus on youth activism, Instagram and TikTok are the main ones, but on Twitter we find everything.⁷⁶

Similarly, Interviewee 9 comments it was surprising that privacy issues of mainstream platforms were, at times, not a priority. When discussing privacy risks, they found that activists care more about features and affordances that can make their work or campaign more visible. Interviewee 9 states:

We're talking about activist movements documenting protests and human rights violations which are heavily censored by despotic and/or occupying regimes and would otherwise most likely not make it at all to mainstream media. The live feature on, for instance, Facebook or Instagram is really vital for so many activists there. And that is not something available on Mastodon and other tools on the fediverse. These features are actually really important from a journalistic and documentation point of view.⁷⁷

The following section outlines the features and uses of alternative social media and explores how a migration to alternative tools could address the challenges outlined in Section 1.

⁷⁵ "En Movimiento" Facebook. See: https://www.facebook.com/enmovimientoperu/?locale=es_LA

⁷⁶ Interviewee 7

⁷⁷ Interviewee 9

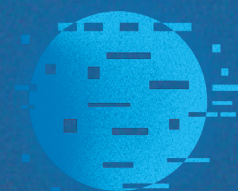
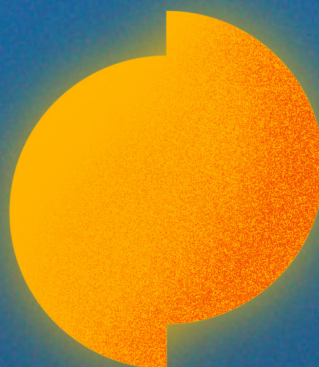


Section 2

How Majority World social justice organizations are navigating alternative social media

You can't stop organizing. You can't stop mobilizing, you can't stop campaigning. [...] There is a need for us to have a space where we can come together to connect, how we can come together to network, to share our campaigns, to rally solidarity, to keep doing what we do as activists.⁷⁸

This section describes the ways that Majority World social justice groups use alternative social media platforms. It includes key attributes of these platforms, in comparison to mainstream social media platforms, as well as providing an overview of challenges and limitations that were raised in interviews.



2.1

Use of alternative social media by social justice organizations

Alternative social media platforms are spaces that replicate the positive aspects of social networking for users, such as developing digital identities, building relationships or generating content, while building in features that might allow for a more transparent, private, and censorship-resistant online environment.⁷⁹ In comparison to mainstream platforms, the technical infrastructure, revenue models, and cultural practices of alternative social media platforms are distinct and aim to offer users a “choice,” challenging the notion that an online social media experience is only possible in dominant platforms.⁸⁰

While there is limited research available on what would motivate or dissuade social justice oriented organizations from adopting alternative social media,⁸¹ emerging research in Latin America and Africa suggests a growing interest in “more decentralized, less commercial and less discriminating [social media models].”⁸²

The Latin American organization Sursiendo conducted an exploratory qualitative survey about Mastodon in 2022 on the experiences of users who had migrated to the platform. Their findings offer mixed views, highlighting a desire for a smaller, more community-centered and safer social media experience, as well as a curiosity around what more open, decentralized and ad-free infrastructure can offer. However, issues around usability, the absence of relevant communities as well as content in different languages and instances of abuse were cited as barriers to adoption.⁸³

Similarly, Research ICT Africa produced a comprehensive review in 2024 surrounding the adoption of open and federated social media in Africa. Like Sursiendo, they identified strong community interest in federated platforms as an alternative to dominant social media,

⁷⁹ Thomas Paul, Antonino Famulari, and Thorsten Strufe, “A Survey on Decentralized Online Social Networks,” *Computer Networks* 75 (October 12, 2014): 437–52, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.comnet.2014.10.005>

⁸⁰ Gehl, “Alternative Social Media: From Critique to Code.”

⁸¹ Sursiendo, “Redes Sociales Libres: Usos, Alcances Y Desafíos Para Nuestras Organizaciones.” June 28, 2023, <https://sursiendo.org/2023/06/actividades-desde-sursiendo-para-reflexionar-y-reapropiarnos-de-las-redeslibres/>

⁸² Sursiendo, “Redes Sociales Libres: Usos, Alcances Y Desafíos Para Nuestras Organizaciones.”

⁸³ “Mastodon: Mucho Más Que Una Alternativa.” Sursiendo, November 17, 2022, <https://sursiendo.org/2022/11/mastodon-mucho-mas-que-una-alternativa-a/>

but were prevented from adopting them due to challenges including information disorder, inadequate content moderation in multiple languages, switching costs and network effects.⁸⁴

Both studies highlight the potential of decentralized alternatives (See **Glossary**) in particular, for empowering users and establishing a more open and inclusive digital sphere. In decentralized systems like the fediverse,⁸⁵ users and communities typically retain ownership and control over their personal data, making unauthorized surveillance or large-scale content suppression more challenging.⁸⁶ In this sense, decentralized platforms are perceived as a promising avenue to advance a social justice agenda, such as the fight for digital autonomy, the defense of digital rights, and the free software movement, among others.⁸⁷

Alternative social media featured in this report

There is limited research on what alternative social media platforms are popular in the Majority World. The primary alternative social media platform mentioned in expert interviews is Mastodon⁸⁸: a decentralized social media platform based on the ActivityPub protocol⁸⁹ and developed primarily by the German NGO Mastodon gGmbH⁹⁰. Mastodon allows for the creation of “instances” or individual servers with unique rules and moderation policies that are connected with other instances operating on the same protocol. This allows users to select or join environments that align with their values and interests.

Another platform occasionally mentioned during interviews is BlueSky.⁹¹ BlueSky is a newer platform that some users appreciate as a “space without hate.”⁹² However, its use for social justice work is debated. As Interviewee 9 points out:

⁸⁴ Andrew Rens, Hanani Hlomani, Jamie Fuller, Abdiaziz Abdikadir Ahmed, “Will Africa Join the Fediverse?,” Research ICT Africa, June 6, 2024, <https://researchictafrica.net/research/will-africa-join-the-fediverse/>

⁸⁵ The Fediverse is a popular example hosting over 2,232,105 people across 17,608 instances. The use open protocols like ActivityPub makes the Fediverse interoperable, allowing users to register on their preferred federated platform (eg. Mastodon, PeerTube, diaspora, Friendica, or others) while still being able to interact and interoperate with other federated services.

⁸⁶ Livitckaia, et al. “Decentralised Social Media,”

⁸⁷ “Hay Un Sábado de Común Denominadores.” Sursiendo, September 30, 2023, <https://sursiendo.org/2023/09/hay-un-sabado-de-comun-denominadores-487/>

⁸⁸ “Mastodon.” n.d. Mastodon Hosted on Mastodon.social. <https://mastodon.social/>

⁸⁹ “ActivityPub.” n.d. Www.w3.org. <https://www.w3.org/TR/activitypub/>

⁹⁰ Will Knight, “The Man Behind Mastodon, Eugen Rochko, Built It for This Moment,” WIRED, November 14, 2022, <https://www.wired.com/story/the-man-behind-mastodon-eugen-rochko-built-it-for-this-moment/>

⁹¹ “Bluesky Social.” n.d. Bsky.app. <https://bsky.app/>

⁹² Interviewee 9

For advocacy work, you need to be in a place with diversity, especially those who are not like-minded. BlueSky is nice, but it's just another bubble of like-minded people, and most are from the Global North. Maybe that's okay; I think it's a form of 'tech joy' to have safer community spaces but then we cannot claim it as an alternative to some of the mainstream social media platforms. For that to be the case, far more and more people should join from all around the world.⁹³

NoBlogs was also mentioned in interviews. In contrast to traditional one-to-one interaction models typically found on social media platforms, NoBlogs is a blogging platform that allows groups to post collectively. Interviewee 11, a researcher exploring the migration of marginalized activists to alternative networks, notes: "NoBlogs disrupts that one-to-one relationship we have with social media. It's like collective to collective, or collective to person. It's interesting to think about what it means not to navigate the internet alone."⁹⁴ This example broadens and challenges conventional notions around what makes an alternative platform, suggesting that a diversity of online communities could also fulfill the demand for an alternative.

The frequency and use of alternative social media platforms varies significantly among social justice organizations and activists, with interviewees repeatedly saying that these platforms, if used at all, are used as supplements to mainstream social media rather than as replacements. Interviewee 12 explains that Mastodon is most popular because it facilitates meaningful conversations: "We dedicate the most resources to Mastodon because it generates a certain level of conversation. It's not just interactions."⁹⁵ However, the same expert also highlights challenges such as the lack of comprehensive metrics to measure engagements, which can impact funding and resource allocation, an important factor for social justice groups to consider, especially those based and operating in the Majority World where resources are limited.

Further research is needed to understand contextual drivers, barriers and risks surrounding the adoption of these services, as well as the specific risks faced by social justice organizations in these spaces.⁹⁶

⁹³ Interviewee 9

⁹⁴ Interviewee 11

⁹⁵ Interviewee 12

⁹⁶ Sean Captain, "Can Mastodon be a Twitter refuge for marginalized groups?". Fast Company. November 30, 2022, <https://www.fastcompany.com/90817452/can-mastodon-be-a-twitter-refuge-for-marginalized-groups>

2.2

Reasons Majority World social justice organizations adopt and use alternative social media platforms

There are several perceived advantages of transitioning to alternative social media platforms, namely open and transparent technical infrastructures, non-commercial revenue models and user-centered governance.

1

Open source platforms enable tailored experiences and a more participatory culture, but can limit usability

Experts highlight how the possibility of building tailored and user-centered technical solutions in alternatives, that prioritize security and user control, is important to them. Interviewee 8 highlights the necessity of a platform that is designed by activists and for activists, ensuring that feedback is continuously integrated into the technical design and that changes are made to reflect changing needs. The expert, who has a computer science background and was heavily involved in the design of Power to Voices, an alternative platform for activists, explains, “throughout the process of the design, we ensured consultation with the activists and organizations that are working with activists.”⁹⁷ They took a participatory approach to the technical design of the platform, collecting information from activists to create a trusted and adaptable space.

Regarding the design of social media platforms, experts also mention the use of open source software for gaining user trust, as well as the importance of data security and compliance with regulations. Interviewee 8 explains: “We worked with Opensocial,⁹⁸ and we had another analysis of their security internally before using their space.”⁹⁹ Ensuring compliance with data protection laws, such as the Europe-

⁹⁷ Interviewee 8

⁹⁸ “OpenSocial Foundation Moves Standards Work to W3C Social Web Activity.” 2014. W3C. December 16, 2014. <https://www.w3.org/blog/2014/opensocial-foundation-moves-standards-work-to-w3c-social-web-activity/>

⁹⁹ Interviewee 8

an Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR),¹⁰⁰ is an important factor for many organizing groups, even those operating outside of the EU, leading them to prefer servers hosted in Europe to ensure better security, privacy, and data protection.¹⁰¹

The use of open protocols has been credited as an enabler of a more participatory culture, allowing different communities to inspect, modify, and contribute to software to reflect their preferences and interests. For example, ever since Mastodon started in 2016, queer, trans and non-binary volunteers have made significant contributions to Mastodon's code base and development.¹⁰² Interviewee 12 highlights the open source community's role in creating a different culture of engagement with technology:

When using free software, there are a lot of things that you learn more or less on your own. There is a practice of building community and of asking and of not understanding and of seeing how we do it and of being wrong. I'm not idealizing it. Communities have a lot of problems like any other community, but there is a logic of being in those spaces; that is, of inhabiting a software.¹⁰³

However, oftentimes the use of open source software requires a high level of technological literacy beyond the reach of the majority of people.¹⁰⁴ Centralized power dynamics can also persist if decision-making is concentrated to a small group of users.¹⁰⁵

Finally, experts highlight the linguistic and regional diversity supported by Mastodon and its instances, and the possibilities this brings for the development of more contextually-relevant online communities. For example, Interviewee 6, lead at IFTAS, a nonprofit working to create safer spaces in the fediverse, works personally to maintain a map of language-focused or geography-focused servers around the world: "Every time I get to fill in a country, I'm just so happy because over the

¹⁰⁰ GDPR. 2018. "General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)." General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). 2018. <https://gdpr-info.eu/>

¹⁰¹ Interviewee 8

¹⁰² "A (Partial) Queer, Trans, and Non-Binary History of Mastodon and the Fediverse." We Distribute, June 29, 2023. <https://wedistribute.org/2023/06/a-partial-queer-trans-and-non-binary-history-of-mastodon-and-the-fediverse/>

¹⁰³ Interviewee 12

¹⁰⁴ Kate Mannell and Eden T. Smith, "Alternative Social Media and the Complexities of a More Participatory Culture: A View From Scuttlebutt," *Social Media + Society* 8, no. 3 (July 1, 2022): 205630512211224, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305122112248>

¹⁰⁵ "Open Source Alternative Social Networks: Empowering Users or Same Old?," n.d., <https://networkcultures.org/unlikeus/resources/articles/open-source-alternative-social-networks-empowering-users-or-same-old/>

years that I've been keeping that map, a server has popped up in Uruguay, a server has popped up in Tunisia, a server has popped up in the Arabian Peninsula,"¹⁰⁶ illustrating that despite interviewees not considering alternative social media platforms to have a critical mass of users, there is a diversity of languages and regions represented globally.

2

Decentralization can facilitate interoperability and account portability

Another key advantage of the fediverse is interoperability and account portability. Interoperability is the ability for one user account on one federated platform to send and receive information to another platform using the same protocol, and account portability is the ability to transfer user data and content between platforms – an action that is not possible between non-federated platforms like Facebook or TikTok, but that is possible on mainstream federated platforms like Meta's Threads and BlueSky. Interviewee 6 shares:

Interoperability is what brought me in. I've hated social media since it showed up. I've tried it, being a technologist, I'm fully aware of surveillance state and what they do with my data and everyone else's. And I wanted very little part of that. So [interoperability] is what got me into this.¹⁰⁷

However, despite it being one of the main selling points of alternative social media platforms, in practice, using a tool within a heterogeneous network remains a challenge. Interviewee 2 notes: "Currently, lots of people who advocate for the fediverse highlight account portability, but if you actually try to move your account, you'd know how much of a pain it is."¹⁰⁸ Unfortunately, many alternative platforms do not support seamless data migration, making it difficult for users to retain their social media history and connections when switching between fediverse platforms or separate instances within the same fediverse platform.¹⁰⁹

This lack of interoperability can be a significant barrier, particularly for organizers or social justice organizations that have invested

¹⁰⁶ Interviewee 6

¹⁰⁷ Interviewee 6

¹⁰⁸ Interviewee 2

¹⁰⁹ Interviewee 6

years in building and maintaining their online presence and networks on mainstream platforms, and that may not be able to migrate their content from spaces in which they have their content (see **Section 1**).¹¹⁰

3

Alternative platforms do not rely on ad revenue, instead operating on donations and volunteer labor

Unlike mainstream social media platforms, which base their revenue model on advertising revenue with significant data privacy implications (see **Section 1**), most alternative social media platforms “refuse to engage in the sale of user attention to marketers” and instead rely on volunteer work, donations, and grants from foundations.¹¹¹ Interviewee 7 shares how, as part of their activism, they seek platforms “managed by people who think about human rights as a priority, rather than commercialization through data and advertising.”¹¹²

A bottom-up funding approach has the potential to minimize the data risks associated with advertising models, and aligns with the aspiration of building online spaces outside of the logic of commercialization.¹¹³ However, experts highlight how, despite not relying on the same revenue streams, decentralized platforms may not be inherently more private or secure for users’ data than centralized commercial platforms that are more widely used.¹¹⁴ For example, Interviewee 2 describes search functionality on the fediverse, stating: “There are ways to make search work, but that also means, if we can find it, then anyone else can use that to do things that you wouldn’t want with the data. [...] I know that someone that recently tried to scrape a whole bunch of microblogs to do sentiment analysis on them and repost them.” Because anyone who has access to a federated platform’s user data can exploit that data much in the same way as mainstream platforms do, there are significant data and privacy implications. Issues of scale, and limited user bases, however, means these risks to users’ data may be more limited in alternatives than on mainstream platforms.

¹¹⁰ Interviewee 7

¹¹¹ Gehl, “Alternative Social Media: From Critique to Code.” p. 12

¹¹² Interviewee 7

¹¹³ Interviewee 7

¹¹⁴ Bill Budington, “Is Mastodon Private and Secure? Let’s Take a Look.” Electronic Frontier Foundation., November 16, 2022, <https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2022/11/mastodon-private-and-secure-lets-take-a-look>

An ad-free funding model also means that alternative platforms may lack stable revenue streams and depend on short-term funding that limits their long-term sustainability. If funding depletes or developers lose interest, alternative platforms can struggle to survive.¹¹⁵ Interviewee 8 shares how in order to “drive growth [of new platforms], you need to build sustainability.”¹¹⁶

#4

Alternative social media relies on community-centered governance models that gives users more control and decision making power than mainstream options

Many decentralized platforms rely on community-driven governance models designed to put “users in control”¹¹⁷ to shape the design and governance of social media platforms. This governance model means alternative social media platforms are often seen as spaces where users can freely express themselves without fear of censorship or surveillance. Interviewee 7 shared: “On Mastodon, it was very friendly. It felt like a ‘safe space.’ I think [the word] ‘safe’ is a lot to attribute [to a platform], but it was a non-aggressive space.”¹¹⁸

The decentralized nature of Mastodon, for example, offers users a choice between servers, or “instances”, that operate under different sets of rules and moderation policies, giving users the ability to select environments that align with community values and norms. This model also enables the creation of contained spaces or “safe harbors” for activists and marginalized communities, such as black and LGBTQ+ communities, which emphasize policies on fair speech and content moderation to increase online safety.¹¹⁹

In alternative spaces, administrators also have controls that are not available on mainstream platforms, such as the ability to defederate or block the connection between two different fediverse instances. These are considered “nuclear options” within the alternative social media ecosystem.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ Interviewee 2

¹¹⁶ Interviewee 8

¹¹⁷ “The Diaspora* Project.” 2019. Diasporafoundation.org. 2019. <https://diasporafoundation.org/>

¹¹⁸ Interviewee 7

¹¹⁹ “The Mastodon Safe Harbor Policy”. The Oliphant, <https://writer.oliphant.social/oliphant/the-mastodon-safe-harbor-policy#current-known-supporters-of-this-policy>

¹²⁰ Interviewee 6

If a community finds another community that is either actively or through inaction harming them, they can defeat it, they can block them. Of the 29,000, most servers are probably blocking a few hundred to a thousand other servers who are bad for business. Because of the open nature of the global government of this system, most people can see what most people do, and if the wrong people block the wrong communities, you can really harm yourself.¹²¹

Defederating from servers that may not be ideologically aligned has the potential to ensure that safe spaces are created and maintained; however, it can also reify existing power structures and ideological silos (see **Section 2.3** on safety implications of community governance). As Interviewee 2, a public interest technologist explains: “there’s a power imbalance between the people who run the servers and the people who need to rely upon them.”¹²² Experts share that the majority of fediverse instances host “middle-of-the-road” users who want to do the right thing, but may not have the awareness, language, background, or value systems to engage with newer users who joined the fediverse after Elon Musk took over Twitter.¹²³ This discrepancy can make social justice organizations and marginalized communities who joined the fediverse later feel unsafe or unsupported on these platforms, especially if those running the servers are not coming from the same communities.

5

The ability to start smaller social network alternatives can help fit the needs of specific online communities

Decentralization enables the emergence of “small social networks,” or ‘Very Small Online Platforms’ (VSOP) (50 to 100 active users) that can feature tailored technical architecture and governance structures fit for the needs of specific communities.¹²⁴ Interviewee 4 reflects on the potential of building tools and spaces for smaller groups:

¹²¹ Interviewee 6

¹²² Interviewee 2

¹²³ Interviewee 6

¹²⁴ Ethan Zuckerman, “A Social Network Taxonomy,” *New_ Public* (blog), February 19, 2023, <https://newpublic.substack.com/p/a-social-network-taxonomy>

I think that there are so many opportunities to imagine making technologies for specific purposes, for specific communities with specific locales in mind. [...] A lot of people have been saying that small groups and communities can build technologies, have their own kind of governance models, use data practices that are open and transparent or as low as possible data practices, which I think is probably the best way to be thinking about data – giving opportunities for refusal and other ways to access the platform without having to give any data.¹²⁵

As explored in the project ‘Run Your Own Social’, there are advantages and trade-offs involved in establishing smaller social networks, such as obtaining social cohesion at the expense of discoverability, scalability and access to resources to develop effective anti-abuse tools.¹²⁶ There is a growing body of research about how smaller social networks can have a role in enabling a wider “pluriverse” of social media (**section 3**).¹²⁷



¹²⁵ Interviewee 4

¹²⁶ “How to Run a Small Social Network Site for Your Friends.” n.d. Runyourown.social. <https://runyourown.social/>.

¹²⁷ “The Three-Legged Stool: A Manifesto for a Smaller, Denser Internet.” Initiative for Digital Public Infrastructure, March 29, 2023, <https://publicinfrastructure.org/2023/03/29/the-three-legged-stool/>

2.3

Challenges and limitations faced by Majority World social justice organizations on alternative social media platforms

Findings from desk research and interviews uncovered a number of challenges and limitations towards alternative social media platform uptake by social justice organizations, especially those based in the Majority World. The issues largely center around affordability and infrastructure, high entry point and usability, network effects, safety, and account portability.

1

Alternative platforms present economic barriers for social justice organizations and the people they are trying to reach

One of the most significant challenges for social justice organizations considering alternative platforms is the cost associated with implementing, maintaining, and using these platforms. Running a server, which is often necessary for decentralized platforms like Mastodon, is simply not cost effective for many grassroots organizations who often have other priorities and limited resources. As Interviewee 6 explains: “You’ve got to run a server – that’s not the cheapest thing in the world.”¹²⁸

Interviewee 2 emphasizes how invisible costs like running and maintaining a server are a challenge for smaller players: “Those are the people who need the most support but will often get the least support,”¹²⁹ and who risk losing the agency and autonomy that comes with running their own infrastructure.¹³⁰

Other infrastructure challenges, such as limited internet bandwidth and high data costs can also hinder the adoption of alternative social media platforms. As Interviewee 3, a practicing designer and developer involved in sustaining tech infrastructures for feminist activ-

¹²⁸ Interviewee 6

¹²⁹ Interviewee 2

¹³⁰ Interviewee 2

ism, highlights, for most marginalized communities in the Majority World, a cheap Android is often their only computer. This influences the kinds of platforms that people can use, with mobile-friendly platforms being more popular than those more usable on laptop or desktop computers. And even then, the internet access on their mobile devices is often purchased using prepaid SIM cards that can limit the kinds of applications they can access. They explain:

For a lot of people in the larger [Majority] world, they're restricted to certain proprietary parts of the Internet because they connect through data, and in the larger world a lot of those data packages [...] that people buy are prepaid. And the cheaper prepaid packages are broken down by different categories: Facebook only, Youtube only, Instagram only, TikTok only, and so on. Some providers even provided a daily package for Zoom only, ever since Zoom became a common work and education requirement, and yet people are experiencing downward mobility and even more limited disposable income. By default, the data plans already lock you into certain proprietary platforms [...] They are cheaper than if you buy the whole monthly internet package. So how do we convince them to download an app that they cannot access?¹³¹

For those using prepaid data plans with restricted access to specific mainstream social media platforms, using non-mainstream social media apps often incurs additional costs that very few marginalized communities in the Majority World can afford. This means those transitioning to alternatives may need to consider these costs as barriers for the marginalized communities that the Majority World social justice organizations are trying to reach.

2

Alternative platforms are less user friendly and can require high levels of technological literacy

Motivating users to transition to alternative social media platforms remains a challenge, with user communities growing at a slower pace than commercial alternatives.¹³² Many alternative platforms require users to understand decentralized technologies and open protocols,

¹³¹ Interviewee 3

¹³² Sean Captain, "Can Mastodon be a Twitter refuge for marginalized groups?".

creating a high entry barrier for non-technical users. Lack of technical know-how can lead to inequalities within the user bases, with more experienced users having more control over less tech-savvy users.¹³³ Interviewee 11 adds: “I also think that there’s a level of technical knowledge and know-how required to be on these platforms that most people just don’t have.”¹³⁴

Interviewee 10’s organization routinely uses open source software for other tools; however, they came across challenges when trying to use it for social media. They state:

Open source, better data privacy, and more transparency and data ownership - those things are really important. [...] But when you are busy and when you are kind of stressed out, you just do the easy things. [...] Even though I would choose to be more active on Mastodon, Twitter has been easier because it’s like, out of habit. [...] From our organization, we really make sure that we use open source and more ethical platforms like Thunderbird, Mozilla, Nextcloud and Signal, and we really are making that a priority. But with social media, it has been difficult.¹³⁵

Steep technical learning curves and lack of user-friendly interfaces create challenges for less tech-savvy users to engage with these platforms effectively. Interviewee 6 explains that in order to have a critical mass of users transitioning to alternative social media platforms, good user interfaces (UI) and user experiences (UX) are essential, yet the (largely) free and open source software have a poor track record of providing these types of environments:

For any reasonable uptake, we need a friendly UI. And all of this tech is free and open source, which has a long history of terrible user experience. So by definition, the early adopters are tech savvy, conjoined with the desire to remove themselves from mainstream social media...People want to switch to something that will be better, but it better be easy and it better be sleek.¹³⁶

Alternative platforms, including those that are decentralized, have less funding and often fewer developers than major tech companies and therefore cannot dedicate the same amount of resources

¹³³ Kalman Graffi and Newton Masinde, “LibreSocial: A Peer-to-peer Framework for Online Social Networks,” *Concurrency and Computation Practice and Experience* 33, no. 8 (December 13, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1002/cpe.6150>

¹³⁴ Interviewee 11

¹³⁵ Interviewee 10

¹³⁶ Interviewee 6

to creating good interface design and user experiences. As a result, decentralized alternative platforms often have less intuitive interfaces compared to centralized counterparts, which can hinder adoption.¹³⁷ As Interviewee 11 explains: “poor user experience is just an obvious answer”¹³⁸ to the question of why people do not migrate to alternatives.

These barriers can lead to some social justice organizations, and importantly the partners and communities they are trying to reach, being reluctant to engage in alternatives. Interviewee 9 posits: “it was not easy to set up and manage. So usability from their point of view [partner groups], most of them are like, ‘I don’t get it. I think I need a person full time to figure this out. And I don’t have that right now.’”¹³⁹ Another expert, Interviewee 5, describes the barriers experienced by new users moving from Twitter to Mastodon after the Elon Musk takeover: “It’s a faff setting up these accounts as well. So a lot of people who’ve moved to it are people who perhaps have better access to technology and are more in tune with how to access these kinds of technologies.”¹⁴⁰

Further, several interviewees spoke to the open source community being notoriously unwelcoming to new users. Interviewee 4 explains:

Sometimes there’s a lot of pushback from the first generation, second, third and fifth generations of fediverse folks against the Twitter migration that was very controversial. But also just the expressed norms of communities coming in from central platforms where different social protocols had become, I think, expected. So there’s a lot of complexity there. It’s not necessarily obvious to me how it gets solved.¹⁴¹

In describing what needs to occur for increased adoption, Interviewee 1, an African technology policy expert conducting research on federated infrastructures, highlights the importance of the “cool factor” in technology adoption, particularly among younger users and those less familiar with technology. They state, “it needs a certain slickness. It needs a certain cool factor ... A lot of that effort to push open source ... which makes absolutely every

¹³⁷ Julian Marx and Marc Cheong, “Decentralised Social Media: Scoping Review and Future Research Directions,” AIS Electronic Library (AISeL), n.d., <https://aisel.laisnet.org/acis2023/58/>

¹³⁸ Interviewee 11

¹³⁹ Interviewee 9

¹⁴⁰ Interviewee 5

¹⁴¹ Interviewee 4

sense in Africa ... were met by this other stuff [mainstream platforms] that looks cool.”¹⁴²

In determining which features should be developed and implemented in order to increase usability, Interviewee 4 states that “there’s a lot of relatively low hanging fruit.”¹⁴³ Yet for many small alternative and decentralized platforms, the resources required to develop these new features, like the ability to repost or quote other posts, are beyond current capacities. A lack of usable features, however, results in it sometimes being difficult for users to perform basic functions, let alone engage in meaningful activism.

Finally, even those who do manage to overcome issues related to affordability, infrastructure, usability when setting up an instance or account on alternative social media platforms, connecting to others who are on such platforms with similar interests is also not easy. As Interviewee 6 explains: “You fire up a Mastodon account, there is nothing in your feed, you have no algorithms. Great. You also have no content because there’s no algorithms.”¹⁴⁴

3

Presenting platforms as the ‘alternative’ to their mainstream platforms is misleading

Ultimately, the expectation that fediverse instances and decentralized platforms can be direct replacements to mainstream social media platforms is misleading and unrealistic. As Interviewee 2 explains:

Something that people need to realize is sometimes you can’t have what you want, like a nice, clean, curated experience and federation at the same time because those are two very different design goals. I feel like there’s lots of opposing or incompatible goals. So maybe that’s a really difficult conversation to have, especially with the people who want both. If you want to have a federation, sometimes you have to accept that you won’t be in full control of features the whole time. You’ll never have perfect search, it’s always going to be deficient. You can’t expect

¹⁴² Interviewee 1

¹⁴³ Interviewee 4

¹⁴⁴ Interviewee 6

to have the Twitter experience with a federated protocol like that... You have to decide, ultimately as a user of a federated platform, you need to understand what the limitations are. Only then can we really get mass adoptions with protocols. If we keep pitching them as Twitter alternatives and people go on those platforms and have negative experiences, they're just going to think they are worse versions of Twitter. Whereas the reality is it's not a version of Twitter, it just looks like that. It's just a fundamentally different thing.¹⁴⁵

Interviewee 12 provides a similar reflection and challenges the categorization of these spaces as “alternatives” in and of themselves:

It seems to me that we cannot transfer the objectives that we have in corporate social networks. If we want to transfer that elsewhere to a social network that does not have that objective, then we are making a mistake. [For example] BigBlueButton...it's not an alternative to Zoom. It is a video call platform that has other features, that tries something else, and was built to be a learning space. They've had another objective for many years. If we call things 'alternative', what we are doing is setting an expectation that 'what I already know', I will be able to replicate exactly the same thing somewhere else.¹⁴⁶

For significant adoption of alternative platforms, especially decentralized platforms, it is essential for users to not expect the same experience or features that they have come to expect from mainstream social media platforms.

#4

Alternative platforms have less users, and therefore less opportunities for reaching and networking with a diverse audience

The ability to build a network plays a critical role in the success of social media platforms, with alternative platforms typically having a smaller user base and limited community representation.¹⁴⁷ Less accessibility features mean alternatives do not adequately support

¹⁴⁵ Interviewee 2

¹⁴⁶ Interviewee 12

¹⁴⁷ Sursiendo. “Redes Sociales Libres: Usos, Alcances Y Desafíos Para Nuestras Organizaciones.”

users with diverse abilities, those who speak different languages, or those who have different perspectives or value systems.¹⁴⁸

Social media platforms thrive on the presence of user communities and the lack of a critical mass on alternative platforms, in and of itself, may deter new users. Interviewee 7 explains, “when we’ve thought about migrating to an alternative, the only options have been Mastodon and Kwai ... there’s no tendency of a massive migration.”¹⁴⁹ This indicates that without substantial user bases, alternative platforms struggle to attract and retain users, leading to a cycle of low engagement and limited network growth, compounded due to other challenges like high cost and usability issues.

Many social justice organizations see alternative platforms as an additional digital space to operate in, rather than a replacement to mainstream platforms, and for organizations with limited capacity it can be too time consuming to do both. Interviewee 7 states: “Being on all of them is very exhausting, isn’t it? I don’t know if it’s for all generations necessarily, but it’s very exhausting.”¹⁵⁰

The emergence of smaller communities or VSOPs also runs the risk of inadvertently replicating or amplifying echo chambers by limiting exposure to diverse perspectives. On this topic, Interviewee 7 states: “We did this exercise of creating accounts for ourselves to see how to do it and we kind of fell into ... talking to each other.” This indicates that while there has been some experimentation in the use of alternative platforms by social justice organizations, it has not led to widespread adoption or daily use by those partnering with or networked to those social justice groups, while those who do join tend to be of similar backgrounds and mindsets. This insular user base limits the broader impact, reach and service provision that social justice organizations seek through their online presence.¹⁵¹

Interviewee 9, speaking about BlueSky, said they heard feedback that the alternative social media sphere is “a space without hate” but also that “it’s just another bubble of people, of like minded people...it’s like a beautiful digital utopia, you know? It’s nice, but for the purpose

¹⁴⁸ Cindy Cohn and Rory Mir, “The Fediverse Could Be Awesome (if We Don’t Screw It Up),” Electronic Frontier Foundation, December 9, 2022, <https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2022/11/fediverse-could-be-awesome-if-we-dont-screw-it>

¹⁴⁹ Interviewee 7

¹⁵⁰ Interviewee 12

¹⁵¹ Sursiendo. “Redes Sociales Libres: Usos, Alcances Y Desafíos Para Nuestras Organizaciones.”

of the work that you're doing it should be different."¹⁵² They note that diversity of opinions, backgrounds, and perspectives are vital towards creating a digital space in which ideas can be shared, conversations can flourish, and advocacy can reach those audiences who might not be ideologically aligned.

Interviewee 7 felt similarly, stating that "violence is a constant [in activism]. Sometimes we worry when there is no aggression. Because we have this perception that we're just talking to each other, right?"¹⁵³ This lack of pushback and engagement on alternative platforms can signify that users with differing viewpoints and perspectives are not being reached.

5

A lack of safety and effective content moderation on alternatives leaves users vulnerable to attacks and abusive content

Despite some interviewees stating how the more insular nature of social media alternatives can contribute to a sense of safety, others highlight the presence of abusive and toxic material and behaviors, as well as mis- and disinformation, as significant deterrents for alternative platform adoption. Mainstream platforms, despite their flaws, have established centralized content moderation policies and tools that combat harassment and abuse. On alternative and decentralized platforms, this lack of centralized control and robust moderation tools can lead to increased exposure to harassment, abuse, and toxic behaviors.

Many alternative platforms and small fediverse instances lack the capacity (from a technical perspective and a labor perspective) for effective moderation, leaving users vulnerable (See **Section 2.2** on platform governance). For activists and marginalized communities who are often the targets of coordinated attacks, this issue is particularly noteworthy.

The lack of a central authority, along with technological, governance and financial obstacles, makes it challenging for decentralized platforms to implement effective content moderation.¹⁵⁴ On both main-

¹⁵² Interviewee 9

¹⁵³ Interviewee 7

¹⁵⁴ Yoel Roth and Samantha Lai, "Securing Federated Platforms," *Journal of Online Trust and Safety* 2, no. 2 (February 28, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.54501/jots.v2i2.171>

stream and alternative social media platforms, significant efforts can be required to reduce the potential of harmful misuse; however, alternative platforms especially can lack the capabilities to detect and remove such content.¹⁵⁵ Instances of misinformation, abuse, server attacks, and harassment campaigns – including racist hate speech toward people of color and marginalized communities – have been widely documented in decentralized alternatives, including Mastodon.^{156 157}

For people joining the fediverse, the infrastructures and protocols mean that new users are automatically connected to existing networks that may not hold the same social justice positions or values that they do. Interviewee 6 explains:

Of the 29,000 servers, depending on how you define them, there are somewhere between 100 to 1000 of the absolutely worst people on the planet. By definition, the [fediverse] protocol connects you to them on day one....I've seen people set up servers, suffer tremendous trauma, just the mental anguish, the emotional anguish of going through that for 48 hours, and then pulling the rug, leaving, and never coming back.¹⁵⁸

The presence of such actors on these platforms poses significant safety risks for social justice groups and marginalized communities and can dissuade them from using these platforms.

While it may be possible for alternative social media platforms to implement some of these features, like automated content moderation or illegal and abusive content detection tools and other anti-harassment features that enable better controls for users, experts interviewed said doing so may not be easy, not necessarily due to it being technically difficult but more from a social and economic standpoint. Interviewee 4 states:

When Mastodon looks at something like [anti-harassment features, that] is a huge project for a tiny team that would involve re-architecting the way replies work on their entire service – it's going to take them a whole lot of funding and

¹⁵⁵ Atlantic Council, "ANNEX 5: Collective Security in a Federated World," Atlantic Council, June 21, 2023, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/scaling-trust_annex5/

¹⁵⁶ Nathan Schneider, "Mastodon Isn't Just a Replacement for Twitter," NOEMA, February 10, 2023, <https://www.noema-mag.com/mastodon-isnt-just-a-replacement-for-twitter/>

¹⁵⁷ Adi Robertson, "How The Biggest Decentralized Social Network Is Dealing With Its Nazi Problem," *The Verge*, July 12, 2019, <https://www.theverge.com/2019/7/12/20691957/mastodon-decentralized-social-network-gab-migration-fediverse-app-blocking>

¹⁵⁸ Interviewee 6

time they don't have. So would they like to be developing more sort of parity, specifically, on these anti-harassment features? Probably, I see public indications that, yes, they would like to, but they need money.¹⁵⁹

Without being able to detect adversarial behaviors like state-supported mis- and disinformation campaigns directed toward particularly at-risk groups, such as the Myanmar example described in **Section 1**, alternative social media platforms run the risk of being less safe than mainstream platforms. Interviewee 4 explains:

If the fediverse had been a factor in Myanmar in the period that I was looking at before the genocide of the Rohingya people, a government as sophisticated as Myanmar's technically could have had a field day with a Burmese fediverse server, particularly if it were the only one that was technically allowed to be used. That government had operatives embedded in the hacker scene in Yangon, it was just really entangled. And there's no reason that the fediverse can't be used against a populace in exactly the ways that central platforms and other technology tools are used.¹⁶⁰

It's not just adversarial state actors that are concerning when it comes to the ability to exploit fediverse capabilities. One expert explained that alternative social media platforms are also havens for groups or communities that have been banned or censored from mainstream social media as a result of illegal or harmful actions, including sharing of illegal and abusive content, such as CSAM (child sexual abuse materials).¹⁶¹ Contrary to the ideal equitable and inclusive space that alternative platforms aim to be, they can also serve as a breeding ground or "safe harbor" for abusive material, which often goes un- or under-moderated due to the platform being decentralized and generally less willing to cooperate with law enforcement.¹⁶²

Alternative social media platforms also run the risk of becoming unusable if more basic challenges like spam are not adequately addressed. Interviewee 4 explains:

¹⁵⁹ Interviewee 4

¹⁶⁰ Interviewee 4

¹⁶¹ For more information, see: International Association of Internet Hotlines - INHOPE. 2021. "What is Child Sexual Abuse Material?" INHOPE. <https://www.inhope.org/EN/articles/child-sexual-abuse-material>; H. Innes and M. Innes, "De-platforming Disinformation: Conspiracy Theories and Their Control," *Information Communication & Society* 26, no. 6 (October 28, 2021): 1262–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118x.2021.1994631>

¹⁶² Interviewee 6

You can't have an inclusive and equitable community if everyone's overrun by spam and brigading and bad actors and fake page networks. What you see on Facebook, it would be fake accounts spread across 20,000 servers on Mastodon. It's a real problem.¹⁶³

There are additional features built into centralized mainstream platforms that protect users from bad actors, identifying potential coordinated abuse or sophisticated covert behaviors through the use of centralized telemetry that are not in play on decentralized social media alternatives. Interviewee 4 explains:

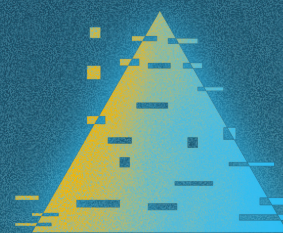
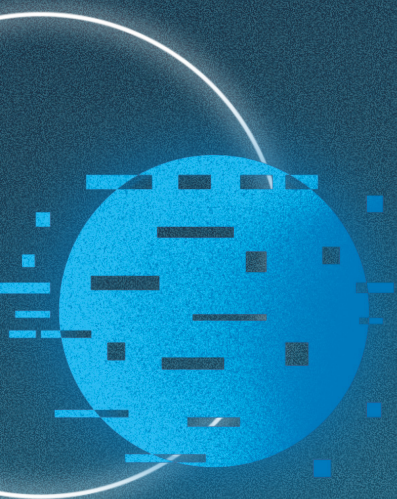
You rely on centralized telemetry to detect them, and you have specialists in your company who know how to sort of look for, identify, root out these, sometimes state-actor funded campaigns. If you're the fediverse you have nothing like that, there's no centralized telemetry, there's no full network view.¹⁶⁴

Experts note that while fake accounts and spam are no doubt present on alternative social media platforms already, the relatively low user-base of these platforms in comparison to mainstream platforms means the damage of such behavior is currently somewhat limited. Should user bases significantly increase on these alternative platforms, it is likely that these behaviors will present more of a challenge. This is especially the case given that alternative platforms may not have the technical capacity and resources to deal with these cases at scale.

The next section will describe needs to be considered when thinking about a transition away from mainstream social media to alternative social media platforms.

¹⁶³ Interviewee 4

¹⁶⁴ Interviewee 4

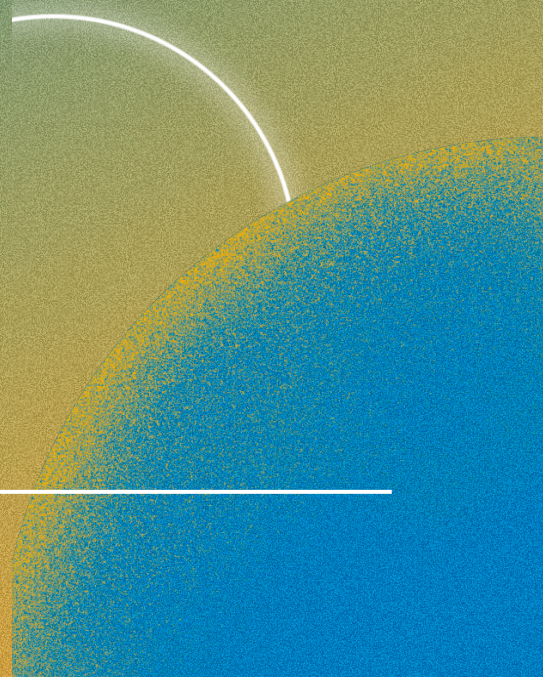
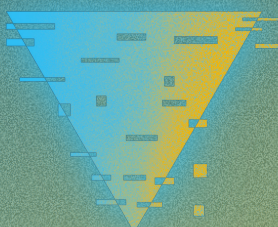


Section 3

Reflection: What needs to be considered in a possible transition to alternative social media platforms?

It's absolutely my hope that [...] some of these new technologies, and these independent, decentralized or non-centralized networks can become sites of liberation and local rule and sort of an escape from norms handed down in a very colonial way by Western powers and instead become refuges and spaces for collective action.¹⁶⁵

This section builds on findings from previous sections to describe how experts envision a transition to alternatives, as well as implications for resources and support needed to facilitate a transition.



1

Alternatives are not a replacement of mainstream social media platforms and adopting them presents a unique set of challenges

Findings suggest that social justice organizations working with marginalized communities have a wide range of positive and negative experiences on both mainstream and alternative social media platforms. Insights from interviews stress how, as new alternatives emerge in the social media ecosystem, it is important to remain critical toward the challenges and limitations for users from marginalized groups. Specifically, this includes concerns around safety, including those related to content moderation and the presence of abusive content, as well as a lack of diversity and representation in alternative spaces.¹⁶⁶ The notion of an ‘alternative’ in and of itself was challenged, suggesting that the emergence of new online communities and platforms should not be perceived as direct replacements or solutions to the challenges of mainstream platforms.

2

A transition toward a ‘pluriverse’ of community spaces is more desirable than the adoption of a specific set of platforms

Experts offer a holistic vision for the future of the social media ecosystem, in which social justice organizations and marginalized communities have the capabilities to navigate the challenges present in mainstream social media platforms, while having access to a more diverse social media landscape that offers them choice. This finding resonates with the work of Ethan Zuckerman, who has been advocating for a digital pluriverse – “a complex world of interoperable social networks where one can choose a technical architecture and governance structure appropriate to a community’s needs.”¹⁶⁷

Based on interviews conducted for this report, a “pluriverse” can include both mainstream and alternative social media platforms, as well as other spaces that facilitate community engagement, knowledge sharing and connection, including offline spaces. Two experts

¹⁶⁶ Justin Hendrix, “The Whiteness of Mastodon,” Tech Policy Press, November 28, 2023, <https://www.techpolicy.press/the-whiteness-of-mastodon/?ref=privacy.thenexus.today>

¹⁶⁷ Zuckerman, “A Social Network Taxonomy,” Also see: “Towards a Digital Pluriverse,” <https://pluriverse.world/>

highlight the importance of “connecting the online with the offline”¹⁶⁸ and supporting organizations to “meet again on the streets” as a strategy to strengthen activism and reduce reliance on social media as a space for movement building,¹⁶⁹ a theme that also resonates with the work of Zeynep Tufekci.¹⁷⁰ Social justice organizations need further resources to re-imagine how a digital pluriverse can contribute to more inclusive and equitable digital spaces.

3

Social justice organizations need additional support to use mainstream social media safely

As **Section 1** describes, social justice organizations continue to use mainstream social media due to the many benefits it brings to their activism. There is a clear tension between the convenience (and in some cases necessity) of using mainstream social media, and the concerns and trade-offs that using these platforms raise, especially for Majority World social justice organizations. One of the key incentives cited in interviews is to “meet people where they are,” and ensure that community members, especially those who rely heavily on mainstream social media because of a digital divide, are not left behind from their social movements. Interviewees make it clear that a transition away from these users is not desirable at this time, but rather, that they seek support and resources to remain critically aware of the shortcomings of mainstream platforms while building skills and infrastructure to keep them and their communities safe from the inherent risks of inhabiting these spaces.

¹⁶⁸ Interviewee 3

¹⁶⁹ Interviewee 6

¹⁷⁰ Zeynep Tufekci, “Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest”, New Haven: Yale University Press, May 2, 2017

4

Alternative platforms need to be designed ‘from the margins’ to protect the most vulnerable users

According to experts, a transition to alternative platforms involves designing technology “from the margins,”¹⁷¹ taking into account diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, diverse languages and the digital divide of unevenly connected regions, and incorporating best practices to make it accessible for people with various abilities. Participatory and co-design approaches,¹⁷² as well as the inclusion of Majority World developers in the open source ecosystem, can also ensure different use cases are addressed in the development of standards, protocols and documentation.¹⁷³ While this alone may not solve all limitations, as Interviewee 7 notes, it is a step towards creating inclusive and supportive digital environments that are not biased towards wealthy, Western, or urban perspectives.

5

Alternative social media platforms need to integrate low-tech solutions to help address economic injustice and digital divides

Designing from the margins also involves considering contexts of limited connectivity and economic injustice, while centering “the needs and the voices of those at the other end of the digital divide.”¹⁷⁴ As explored in **Section 1**, one of the main incentives to continue using mainstream platforms is their accessibility and affordability. A transition to alternatives should involve supporting the development of solutions that work effectively in low-bandwidth or intermittent connectivity environments, remaining competitive against “unlimited data bundles” that promote the use of mainstream options. Similarly, to enable the flourishing of alternatives in these contexts, more support is needed to sustain low-tech solutions to sharing knowledge and connecting, such as the use of SMS messaging and community radio to reach those without reliable internet access or smartphones.

¹⁷¹ Interviewee 7

¹⁷² Interviewee 8

¹⁷³ Interviewee 2

¹⁷⁴ Interviewee 9

6

A transition to alternatives needs to be designed around the needs and capabilities of non-technical communities

Findings suggest that technical features such as interoperability, account portability and good user experiences (UX) are essential to facilitating a transition for non-technical users, particularly those who are unfamiliar with open source technologies. The fediverse, in particular, was highlighted as a relevant model for how decentralized architectures could enable more freedom of movement while advancing the interests of new users, such as safety, data protection and account portability across platforms. As expressed by Interviewees 8 and 9, investing in enhancing interoperability can also support activists in managing several social media accounts with a lower investment of time and resources, which in turn can contribute towards easing the burnout and fatigue that comes with online activism. Further support is needed to develop user-centered technical solutions that center “activist capacities” and “what collective care means to them” in alternative online spaces.¹⁷⁵

7

Challenges surrounding safety and the implementation of content moderation in alternative social media platforms need further attention

As explored in **Section 2**, safety concerns and the lack of capacity for effective moderation, remain significant deterrents for the adoption or the development of alternative social media spaces by social justice organizations. As communities grapple with mitigating these risks, Interviewee 6 signals the importance of not “reintroducing the ills of larger social media” in content moderation, in which “people without context, without cultural sensitivity, without language” seek to prevent the harms of diverse communities.¹⁷⁶

In a transition to alternatives, experts highlight the importance of investing in safety testing (e.g. targeted user research, threat modeling, etc.) as well as in setting up regional and local institutions that can provide culturally sensitive oversight and support to server operators, moderators and developers that are setting up new

¹⁷⁵ Interviewee 8

¹⁷⁶ Interviewee 6

platforms.¹⁷⁷ Further research is needed to understand the specific risks and threats faced by users in alternative platforms across different social and political contexts; as well as effective strategies for context and community-specific content moderation.

8

More intimate, self-led and community-driven alternatives can allow activists to connect and re-energize to advance social justice agendas

Social justice organizations expressed an interest in building smaller-scale online platforms, where their communities can be owners, stewards and active participants in the design and governance of these spaces. Interviewee 7, for example, enthusiastically states: “if a platform would be known to be female or queer led - I would be there.”¹⁷⁸ Interviewees 4 and 5 emphasize the importance of funding spaces to “think about technology differently” from the perspective of diverse user groups. This can include supporting “communities with specific or shared identities”¹⁷⁹ and creating specific spaces for civil society organizations to work and experiment with technologists.¹⁸⁰

In the context of activism, community-driven spaces can help activists to connect, re-energize and increase their own capacity to advance social justice agendas¹⁸¹ as well as explore new community norms for moderation that are “fairly hands on, with teams who can intentionally try to construct safe spaces” for their communities.¹⁸² Further research is also needed to look into different community governance models beyond models presented by academic research.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁷ Interviewee 4

¹⁷⁸ Interviewee 7

¹⁷⁹ Interviewee 4

¹⁸⁰ Interviewee 5

¹⁸¹ Interviewee 8

¹⁸² Interviewee 4

¹⁸³ Ethan Zuckerman and Chand Rajendra-Nicolucci, “From Community Governance to Customer Service and Back Again: Re-Examining Pre-Web Models of Online Governance to Address Platforms’ Crisis of Legitimacy,” *Social Media + Society* 9, no. 3 (July 1, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231196864>

9

Alternatives can play a role in fostering a culture of slowness and re-connection in social media from a place of affection and care

Interviewees stress that mainstream social media platforms have played a crucial role in entrenching a culture of individualism, disengagement and “a logic of speed” in our relationships with technology and with each other. This has led to “a disconnection from ourselves, from the territory, from who we are, from our communities and from our interests.”¹⁸⁴

In this scenario, a transition to alternatives may involve unlearning these habits, changing user expectations around the slickness of technology, embracing “low-fi” experiences, as well as becoming more comfortable with technologies that are not “as clean and crispy.”¹⁸⁵ Interviewee 4 proposes adopting a culture of “slowness,” while Interviewee 12 suggests fostering a sense of presence in online spaces that “allow us to reconnect, gives us time to think [...] and makes it possible to stop, to listen, to read, to re-internalize and to share,” inviting users to reconnect with technologies from a place of affection and care.¹⁸⁶

10

To begin the transition away from mainstream social media, users need to become comfortable with refusing existing technologies and disrupting the status quo

The transition toward new online spaces and away from mainstream social media platforms involves preparing for an end to the status quo – or “the end of the world as we know it,” according to interviewees.¹⁸⁷ From this perspective, a transition involves designing strategies and “finding ways of better refusing existing tech,”¹⁸⁸ as well as developing a sense of urgency around what is at stake if a migration away from mainstream platforms does not take place.

¹⁸⁴ Interviewee 12

¹⁸⁵ Interviewee 5

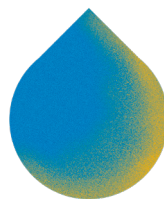
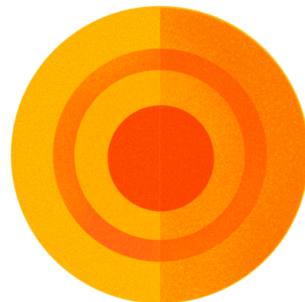
¹⁸⁶ Sursiendo, “Tecnoafecciones. Acciones Para (Re)Conectar Y Transformar Las Tecnologías”, March 2, 2024, <https://sursiendo.org/2023/07/campana-tecnoafecciones/>

¹⁸⁷ Interviewee 11

¹⁸⁸ Interviewee 5

I really understand how important it is to find alternatives, because otherwise we are just ... sleeping in the name of comfort, right? We are just sleeping into ourselves, our own self-destruction. [...] The comfort is being counterproductive.¹⁸⁹

Interviewees 9 and 10 expand on the importance of pushing through the discomfort to develop “healthier habits,” and building positive emotions around alternatives that are not only privacy-centric and ad-free, but that also foster connection, wellbeing and joy.¹⁹⁰



¹⁸⁹ Interviewee 10

¹⁹⁰ Interviewee 10

Section 4

Recommendations: Strategies for supporting a transition away from mainstream platforms

This section offers a set of strategies and recommendations that can support the successful transition away from mainstream social media platforms and towards a richer landscape of community-centered alternatives.

Overall, stakeholders across sectors are called to support this transition through a simultaneous, three-pronged approach:

- 01.** Build resilience of social justice organizations against the shortcomings and risks of mainstream social media platforms,
- 02.** Support the meaningful adoption of existing alternative social media platforms by social justice organizations
- 03.** Strengthen capacity to imagine and build a pluriverse of community-centered alternatives where organizations can mobilize, organize and connect.

4.1

Strategies to build resilience against the shortcomings of mainstream social media platforms

- **Increase awareness:** Support the productive questioning of the status quo of mainstream social media. This includes researching current barriers that prevent a transition away from mainstream technologies and facilitating open discussions around the risks of remaining on the current social media platforms.
- **Address technological barriers:** Invest in digital literacy and holistic digital security programs to enable the safe and strategic use of mainstream social media platforms, while protecting online communities from data breaches, surveillance, and harassment.
- **Provide holistic psychosocial support:** Invest in psychosocial support programs that provide tools and resources for communities that are facing harassment and abuse online as a result of their identities or social justice oriented work.
- **Support alternative engagement strategies:** Support social justice organizations to develop new ways of engaging with their audiences and measure the impact of their work without relying on metrics developed by mainstream social media platforms.

4.2

Strategies to support the meaningful adoption of alternative social media platforms

- **Increase awareness:** Promote awareness of emerging alternative social media platforms through targeted outreach, support and education campaigns.
- **Address technological barriers:** Invest in digital literacy programs to increase technical know-how and overcome usability challenges, particularly when it comes to platforms with high technical complexity or less intuitive interfaces.
- **Invest in movement building:** Invest in building strong communities around the adoption of alternative technologies. This can include supporting outreach campaigns, training workshops and convenings, as well as movement building both online and offline.
- **Conduct further research:** Support research that 1) addresses the contextual drivers, barriers and risks surrounding the adoption of these services, 2) specific risks faced by social justice organizations in alternative spaces, and 3) the re-imagining of alternative social media platforms by Majority World social justice organizations.

4.3

Strategies to build capacity to imagine and create a pluriverse of community-centered online communities

- **Diversify funding:** Support the development and scaling of diverse projects, with a focus on technology designed by and for communities advancing social justice agendas, such as those focused on women, LGBTQ+ communities, or human rights defenders.
- **Prioritize community-centered design:** Support developers to carry out user research, develop more intuitive user interfaces, and ensure the needs of marginalized communities are at the center of the design process.
- **Address technological barriers:** Support non-technical communities to use publicly available tools and open source technologies to build their own digital spaces and communities.
- **Address economic and environmental costs:** Explore solutions to reduce the financial and environmental costs of maintaining the infrastructures required to run alternative social media platforms.
- **Build capacity for trust and safety work:** Support capacity to conduct safety assessments (e.g. threat modeling, penetration testing, etc.) and implement effective content moderation in smaller and emerging platforms.
- **Strengthen local and regional support:** Support the formation of regional communities of practice or institutions that promote knowledge exchange across regions, and support the participation of Majority World developers in multi-stakeholder forums.

Conclusion

This research highlights the significant challenges faced by Majority World social justice organizations in their use of mainstream social media platforms and the potential benefits of transitioning to a richer landscape of alternative platforms.

Rather than aiming for a transition toward a specific set of platforms, our findings demonstrate the importance of developing a holistic strategy to transition away from social media models based on surveillance economics, censorship and intrusive data extraction practices. Key preconditions for a transition include addressing technological barriers, increasing awareness, and building local capacity for the flourishing of inclusive and supportive online communities.

The findings in this report underscore the critical role of philanthropy in driving innovation, promoting social justice and advancing digital rights in the context of platform transition efforts. There is a need for critical interventions and resources to support the underlying issues limiting choice when it comes to social media platforms including bridging digital divides, ensuring digital inclusion, improving digital literacy and technological knowledge, as well as funding for community-centered design practices and the maintenance of these alternative networks.

Likewise, further research is needed to build community guidelines and content moderation practices to combat harms - information disorder, hate speech and online violence - that continue to occur across social media platforms. In all cases, Majority World perspectives should be at the center of conversations that explore the opportunities, risks and challenges accompanying existing and emerging platforms.

By ensuring that there are inclusive, equitable and privacy-respecting platforms that fit the needs of communities, it provides the opportunity for social justice organizations to make the transition to these spaces. This research emphasizes that the creation and maintenance of these intimate community spaces is just as important as shifting critical masses to them.

There is no one solution for improving the social media ecosystem, and no one platform that will meet every need. Rather, this research suggests a pluriverse of options that include repurposing existing platforms, a variety of alternatives, and low-tech approaches as a way forward that meets the needs of social justice organizations and marginalized communities, while correcting the harms and limitations of mainstream social media.



Appendix 1 – Profile of interviewees

Interviewee 1	African technology policy expert	Researches the possible uptake of fediverse and alternative social media platforms in various African countries and recently completed research looking into this phenomenon.
Interviewee 2	Tara Tarakiyee	A public interest technologist working on designing support mechanisms and mobilizing resources to encourage, sustain and maintain the FOSS ecosystem. including supporting the Activitypub protocol.
Interviewee 3	Kathleen Azali	Researcher, practicing designer and developer, currently Tech Weaver at Numan Fund, a fund dedicated to seeding and sustaining tech infrastructures for feminist activism.
Interviewee 4	Erin Kissane	Researcher, and community lead that explores the role of new social networks and systems across contexts, and is interested in the governance of the fediverse and decentralized networks.
Interviewee 5	Anonymous	Social media researcher
Interviewee 6	Jaz-Michael King	Lead at IFTAS: federated trust and safety, working to create safer spaces in the fediverse through the creation of new tools and the organizing around content moderation issues. Has worked on developing tools for content moderation, trust and safety on the fediverse.
Interviewee 7	Fiorella Ferrari	Digital rights, political and feminist activist, who has experimented with both mainstream and alternative social media platforms to advance different social justice agendas
Interviewee 8	activistadigital	Lead of alternative social media platform Power to Voices, a global platform designed to strengthen social justice movements.

Interviewee 9 Rima Sghaier

A feminist activist, researcher, policy analyst, FOSS enthusiast, and advocate for internet freedom. Has worked on issues of digital rights and digital safety in the SWANA region, and advocates for the migration of social justice organizations to alternative social media platforms.

Interviewee 10 Dr. Dovan Rai

Researcher, writer, and educator. Currently based in Body and Data, a digital rights feminist organization based in Nepal.


Interviewee 11 Miliaku Nwabueze

Leads c0de switch, an experiential research project that asks: How do we build pathways to alternative tech and keep marginalized activists off the hegemonic web?

Interviewee 12 Jes Ciacchi

Social communicator and visual artist who believes in hacker ethics, collective work and peer to peer exchange spaces. Currently based in Sursiendo, an organization in southern Mexico that works for a free internet from the defense of digital communality, collective digital rights and hackfeminisms.





THE ENGINE ROOM