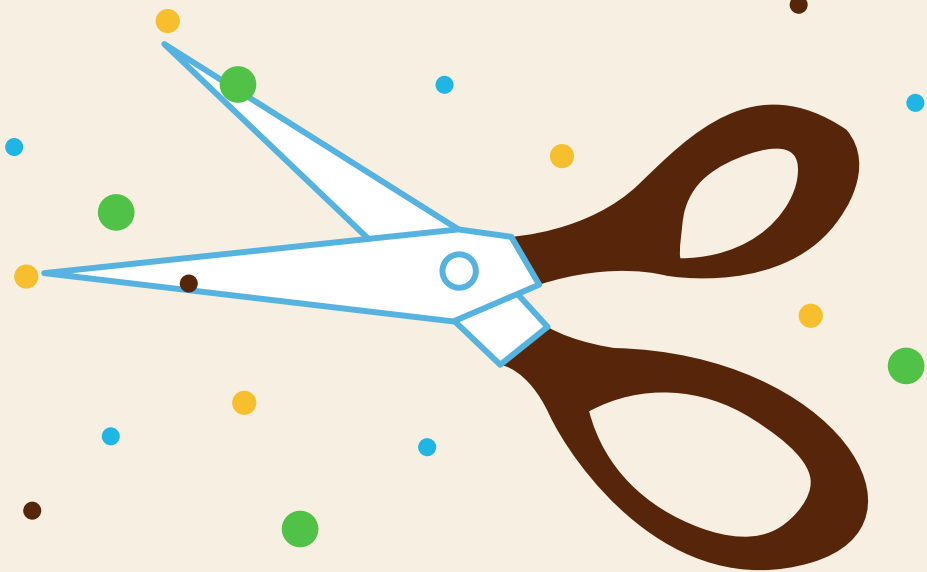


Mayfirst



Cutting the Cord

Addressing the movement's dependence on Big Tech
by growing our autonomous technology ecosystem

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It was a crucial time during the genocidal war against Gaza, with protests sweeping campuses around the country. The news of Google's support of the Israeli military had hit the main stream via an article in *Time* magazine.²

The proposal to Infrared was simple: Let's act in solidarity with Palestinian self-determination by encouraging people to move away from Gmail to any of the movement-aligned email hosting providers from the Infrared network as an act of protest against the war.

The proposal immediately met resistance, not for political reasons but for practical ones: could our network of non-corporate, politically aligned email providers meet the needs of movement organizations that are currently dependent on Gmail? What are those needs? What would be the main obstacles to making such a move? And, is there really enough political will to go through with it?

2 <https://time.com/6966102/google-contract-israel-defense-ministry-gaza-war/>

The project quickly changed from a campaign to a research project, and this report serves to share our initial findings:

- The left is highly motivated to move away from Gmail, Google services and Big Tech in general;
- Gmail is tightly integrated with calendars and document sharing so it's hard to move away from Gmail without also moving away from related services;
- The biggest obstacle to leaving Google behind is collaboration since we regularly work with people beyond our own organizations, it's hard to make the first move to a new platform when everyone is using services like Google Docs;
- Making major wholesale changes in technology use is resource intensive, slow, requires extensive planning, and benefits from in-house technology knowledge;
- Autonomous technology providers seeking to help organizations make the move should focus on providing integrated services, making it easy to transfer data, and simplifying the user experience.

Motivation

The goal of Cutting the Cord is to provide an initial road map for reducing our movement's dependence on Google in particular and Big Tech in general. It provides a political overview of the reasons for moving away from large corporate technology services and a deeper understanding of the obstacles facing activists and organizers motivated to make the move, while providing information to help autonomous technology providers better meet their needs.



It hasn't always been like this

The movement's relationship to the Internet has taken many dramatic turns in the last 40 years.

In the early 90's, before the Internet was mainstream, left organizations around the world were developing dial in access to bulletin boards such as EcoNet and PeaceNet. A new international organization, the Association for Progressive Communications,³ formed to help knit these disparate efforts together into the first electronic network connecting activists and organizers from far flung regions around the globe.⁴

A few years later, as the Internet was becoming mainstream, the Zapatistas demonstrated its value. News of their revolutionary movement spread rapidly online, garnering significant international support and legitimacy.

During this initial period, the left was intimately involved in and exerted a significant influence on the development of Internet tools. This influence culminated in 1999 with the Battle in Seattle, when activists from around the world successfully disrupted the World Trade Organization's meeting. The massive protest launched the Global Independent Media Center Network (aka Indymedia),⁵ leading to the development of hundreds of autonomous, locally administered websites sprouting up around the world. Each website provided what was then an innovation: the ability for anyone, with minimal technical skill, to anonymously or pseudo-anonymously post a report or a

³ <https://apc.org>

⁴ See <https://www.apc.org/en/history-0>

⁵ <https://indymedia.org>

photo of a local protest. This international feedback loop in turn fueled a four-year cycle of protests against international banking and austerity programs, which inspired other movements such as the World Social Forum.⁶

Unfortunately, the 9/11 attack in the United States ushered in an era of repression that killed the movement, which then starved the Indymedia network of energy and resources. This period was also the beginning of corporate social networks, which capitalized on Indymedia's successful model of user generated content, investing millions of dollars into designing slick systems to attract users.

By 2010, the second phase of the movement's relationship with the Internet was in full force. During this period of corporate romance, the left flocked en masse to the easy to use tools offered by Google, Facebook, Twitter and others. Because these tools didn't exist before, there were no transition costs associated with the move. Everyone was starting from scratch, learning tools that had been refined by millions of dollars of venture capital designed for their dopamine effect.

The relationship between the movement and corporate technology was so entrenched that not even Edward Snowden's revelations about the US government's practice of routinely obtaining data from corporate technology providers was enough to make an impact on the steady flow of data from our movements into the data hungry corporate servers.

In 2018, the facade finally began developing cracks. Mijente launched a ground breaking study documenting the relationship between Amazon and the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency.⁷ The Facebook Cambridge Analytica scandal demonstrated Facebook's disregard for the data of their users and the dangerous implications of data breaches.⁸ Elon Musk's purchase of Twitter and quick conversion of the social media site into a hub of white supremacy revealed just how little control or influence we had over our daily technology.⁹ By the time the Big Tech CEOs lined up for the 2025 inauguration of the US President Trump, the third phase of the movement's relationship with the Internet was sealed: we are hostages.

⁶ See https://www.cjr.org/business_of_news/local-news-indymedia-network-25-anniversary.php

⁷ <https://notechforice.com/>

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Facebook-Cambridge_Analytica_data_scandal

⁹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2024/11/x-white-supremacist-site/680538/>



How bad is it?

The problem with the movement's dependence on Big Tech goes well beyond the issue of what software or platform we should be using. Over the last twenty years, capitalism has defined the narrative and arc of the day-to-day technologies that shape our lives. At the same time, these technologies have become entrenched into every major political issue we face. Without directly confronting the capitalist technology narrative, we have little chance of making an impact in the fight against Big Tech.

Climate change

Two technologies in particular have centered technology in the climate crisis: Crypto currencies and Artificial Intelligence. Both have demanding computer operations requiring significantly more electricity than the already power hungry needs of typical Internet services. Both Crypto currency and AI have, at different points in their histories, surpassed the total electricity uses of entire countries.¹⁰

¹⁰ For crypto currency, see "Bitcoin Uses More Electricity Than Many Countries. How Is That Possible?", <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/09/03/climate/bitcoin-carbon-footprint-electricity.html>, for Artificial Intelligence, see "AI already uses as much energy as a small country. It's only the beginning.", <https://www.vox.com/climate/2024/3/28/24111721/climate-ai-tech-energy-demand-rising>.

The need for more power hungry data centers prompted Microsoft to re-open the Three Mile Island nuclear power facility while other corporate efforts to open new data centers have spawned community protests and campaigns.¹¹

While technology is critical to building renewable energy systems, as long as capitalism is driving technology development, we are likely to continue building new technologies with power needs that outstrip those of the previous generation.

Policing, immigration and militarization

Police, immigration agencies and the military are increasingly reliant on surveillance technology.

Despite Google's early pledge to "not be evil," they have built a technology empire specifically designed to track users and profile people for the purposes of advertising, dovetailing with government surveillance systems. Nearly every other Big Tech technology on which we depend is fundamentally designed to monetize our interactions for this purpose. Every time we tag a photo of another user in a post or invite another user to share our document, we contribute either directly to a social network database that is tracking us or we are helping to build the technology that can be contracted out to local police departments or the US Department of Homeland Security.

Mijente's 2018 report of Amazon's contracts with the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) are just the beginning. Every major technology provider has signed dozens of contracts with local police and the US government.¹²

¹¹ <https://www.npr.org/2024/09/20/nx-s1-5120581/three-mile-island-nuclear-power-plant-micro-soft-ai>

¹² <https://www.cnn.com/2022/12/08/tech/pentagon-cloud-contract-big-tech/index.html> and <https://www.technologyreview.com/2024/11/19/1106979/how-the-largest-gathering-of-us-police-chiefs-is-talking-about-ai/> and <https://theintercept.com/2024/11/17/tech-industry-trump-military-contracts/>

These contracts extend well beyond US borders. In addition to every Big Tech company having contracts with the US military, they also have contracts with the militaries of other countries; most notably Israel.¹³ Project Nimbus, a joint Amazon/Google contract with Israel's government that includes military components, is one example.¹⁴

Media and democracy

It is unclear whether any government has successfully altered an election by manipulating social media sites, however the threat is credible. Additionally, any confusion over why Elon Musk purchased Twitter is now clear: social media platforms have become the new media monopolies.

As the Internet went from an independent media utopia to another centralized media monopoly, the one Internet medium that has managed to survive as a method for reaching a mass audience is email. However, while email can function in a distributed manner, 2/3 of all email accounts are controlled by Google, Microsoft and Yahoo.¹⁵

Moving our mailboxes to autonomous providers is a crucial step towards preserving one of the oldest and most reliable ways of reaching large numbers of people.



¹³ <https://techinquiry.org/docs/InternationalCloud.pdf>

¹⁴ <https://theintercept.com/2024/05/01/google-amazon-nimbus-israel-weapons-arms-gaza/>

¹⁵ based on internal logging at May First.



Methodology

Scope

We chose to focus the Cutting the Cord research on Gmail, while also collecting data on related Google services.

We chose Google because, despite the movement's high dependence on other Big Tech companies (notably Microsoft), Google provides a broad network of services, used not only by social justice movement organizations, but also used personally by many activists and organizers.

We focused on Gmail specifically because it seemed to be the hardest service to leave due to the amount of data people had stored there, and because of the difficulty we saw of breaking habits and usage patterns reinforced by hours of daily use. Additionally, Gmail is a common denominator. While organizations may or may not use Google Docs or Calendar or any of the other services, almost everyone uses Gmail.

By limiting the scope in this manner we hoped to gain more focused and compelling data with the limited resources we had.

The survey

We started the study with a survey. In collaboration with members of the Infrared network, we developed a short series of questions to better understand the obstacles to leaving Gmail. To accurately track the possible difference in responses between individuals and organizations, we began with a question clarifying whether the survey was being filled out by an individual or on behalf of an organization (with an invitation to fill it out twice, once for each role).

To publicize the survey, we depended on members of the Infrared network. To our surprise, it was wildly popular. We optimistically expected between 100 and 200 responses and ultimately collected nearly 500 responses in both English and Spanish.

Follow up interviews

Based on the survey results, we followed up with a series of focus groups and one-on-one interviews with both organizations and individuals.

The 2024 Aspiration Nonprofit Development Summit provided an ideal opportunity for focus groups. We led several in-person sessions at the summit where we explored obstacles to moving away from Gmail, learned what people needed to consider a move, and worked on narratives for describing this work.¹⁶

Following the summit, we conducted 9 follow up interviews with people who filled out the survey. Our interview questions were designed to fill in gaps from the survey results and the questions focused on how people use Google services, what motivated them to participate in the study and what they would look for when evaluating an alternative.

¹⁶ <https://aspirationtech.org/events/devsummit24>

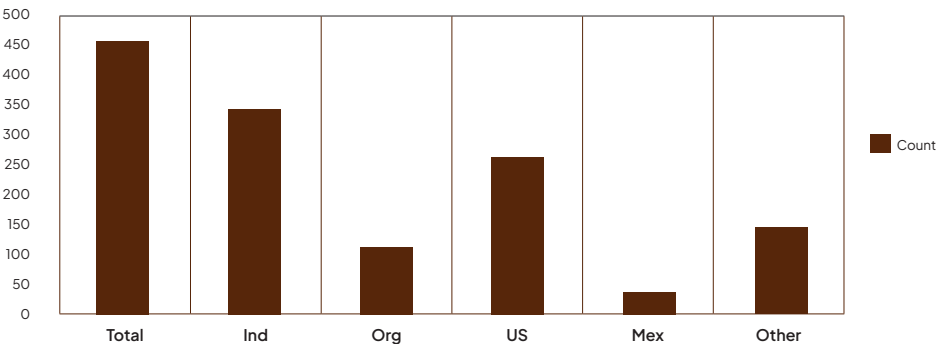
Results

The survey

During October and November of 2024 we collected over 450 survey results.

Who

Number of responses by role and country



Although our initial interest was in moving activist organizations off of Gmail, we received more than twice as many individual respondents as organizational respondents. Fortunately, with over 100 organizations filling out the survey, we still had statistically significant results.

In addition, just over half the respondents were from the US. We tried separating out responses from Mexico, which accounted for the second highest number of respondents, but did not have a high enough number to produce meaningful results. Therefore, we made comparisons between the US and the rest of the world, but not between any other countries.

Ranking obstacles

We provided a list of potential obstacles for leaving Gmail behind and asked respondents to choose one description to capture how big of a barrier each obstacle would be.

6.1. Lack of information: I'm not familiar with the alternative technology options providing similar services or I don't feel like I have enough information to know where or how to move

- ☐ Not an obstacle
- ☐ Minor hassle
- ☐ Major hassle
- ☐ Blocking obstacle

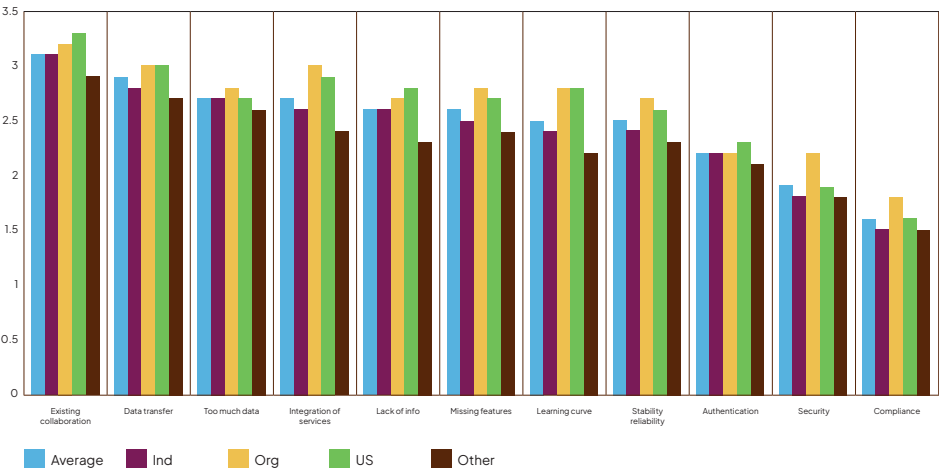
The obstacles on the survey were:

1. **Lack of information:** I'm not familiar with the alternative technology options providing similar services or I don't feel like I have enough information to know where or how to move.
2. **Learning curve:** Learning a new system would be too hard and/or I don't have time to do it right now.
3. **Too much data:** I have so much email and/or other data that I need to keep and I don't think other providers could handle it.
4. **Data transfer:** Moving my data to another service seems too hard and/or I don't have time right now, or I'm afraid to lose data in the transition.
5. **Existing collaborations:** I closely collaborate with others using Google services and I don't think I can convince them to leave too.
6. **Integration of services:** The Google services (Email, Calendar, Docs, etc.) are conveniently linked together and I don't think I could get that any where else.
7. **Missing features:** Gmail or Google services can do things I don't think are possible on other platforms.

8. **Stability/reliability:** I don't think other providers would have the same stability and reliability as Google does, and they would not be able to ensure that email messages I send end up in the inbox instead of the spam box.
9. **Security:** Google's security features seem to address my particular security concerns better than other providers.
10. **Authentication:** I use my Google account to authenticate other services (using the "Sign in with your Google account" button) and changing that would be hard.
11. **Compliance:** My organization has to comply with certain digital security or other requirements (e.g. HIPAA, GDPR) that I don't think other providers can offer.

The results:

Rank of Obstacle: 1-4



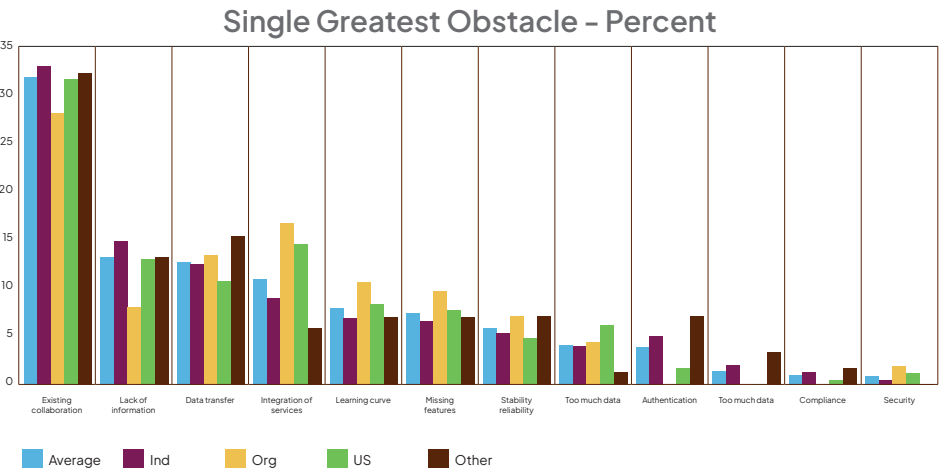
The two highest ranked obstacles are existing collaborations and the difficulty of data transfer.

Too much data, integration of services, lack of information, missing features, learning curve and stability occupy a middle ground. (However, the differences between the top eight are not sizable.)

Authentication, security and compliance trail off at the end.

Another significant result is that organizations consistently ranked every obstacle higher than individuals did, and US respondents consistently ranked each obstacle higher than non-US respondents, suggesting that US based organizations perceive that moving off Google would be harder than anyone else's perception.

When we asked people to rank the large list of obstacles the results are very close, however, when we asked people to pick the single biggest obstacle, we got very different results:



Existing collaboration is far and away the biggest obstacle, with lack of information, data transfer and integration of services coming next.

Unlike all other obstacles, the “existing collaborations” obstacle is difficult to act on for movement providers. However, the results do demonstrate a high degree of motivation to leave Google and a high level of confidence in alternative technologies.

Lack of information, the difficulty of data transfer and the need for integrated services, in contrast, are highly actionable items.

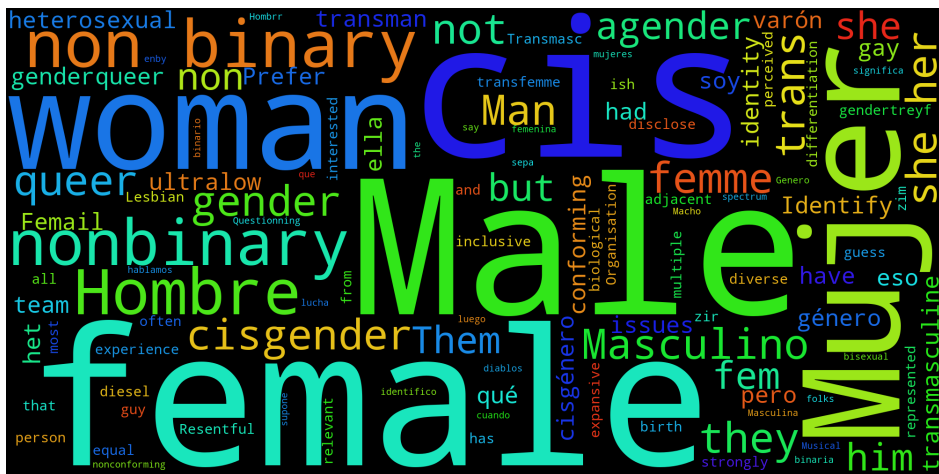
Diversity of respondents

Our diversity goals were to ensure a balance of respondents in terms of:

- Language - we only had resources to provide the survey in English and Spanish
- Country - we expected most responses to come from the Americas due to the limitation of language
- Gender - in particular we sought to avoid an imbalance of cisgender male respondents

Our final survey results included 358 surveys in English and 100 in Spanish. We had 263 surveys filled out by people in the US, and 195 from other countries with 47 total different countries represented.

Rather than force respondents to pick from a limited number of gender identities, we provided a free form gender field, which populated the following word cloud, suggesting success in avoiding a dominance of cis-gender males.



The interviews

In addition to the survey, we conducted the following focus groups and interviews:

Focus groups at Aspiration's 2024 Nonprofit Development Summit:

- We held six rapid fire focus groups of 4–6 participants each, lasting about 5–7 minutes each to ask how people use Google services, what services they depend on, and why they want to move away from them;
- We held a one-hour session with about 15 people discussing and assessing the movement's ability to move away from Google services; and
- We held a one-hour session with about 15 people to build narratives about why we want to move from Google services

One-on-one interviews

- Melanie, May First board member (<https://mayfirst.org>)
- Loan, National Co-Director, Rising Majority (<https://therisingmajority.com>)
- Maegan, Instituto de Educacion Popular del Sur de California (Popular Education Institute of Southern California) (<https://idepsca.org>)
- Vero, Climate Justice Alliance (<https://climatejusticealliance.org>)
- Cynthia, Arch Community Fund (<https://archcommunityfund.org>)
- Azizi, Organization for Black Struggle (<https://obs-stl.org/>)
- Tatiana and Kate, Voices of Community Activists and Leaders (VOCAL) (<https://vocal-us.org>)
- Brandon, MediaJustice (<https://mediajustice.org>)
- Dulce from a Mexican organization engaged in building local control and autonomy over their territories

Summary

What Google services are being used?

The Aspiration rapid fire focus groups confirmed what we found in the surveys: movement activists and organizations use a huge variety of Google services beyond just email, docs and calendar—including photos, single sign on, maps, domain hosting, and more. In addition, many services not typically associated with Google (or that we sometimes forget are entirely controlled by Google) were mentioned, such as You Tube, Android phones, the Play Store and more.

In their interviews, Azizi, Tatiana, Kate and Brandon all mentioned using an organizational Google account that provides access to the full range of integrated apps, which seems common among movement organizations, particularly those with more than a few employees. The larger the organization, the more entrenched Google seems to be. As Brandon said, "The benefit is the full suite."

However, despite the number of different apps mentioned, almost all groups emphasized Google Docs as being among the most important. In the words of Dulce, "The cloud is what we use the most because in the organization there are different areas but in our area the team is in different places, so Drive is very accessible to edit documents simultaneously."

Even with individual activists, the cloud storage was key. Melanie, for example, described how she regularly stores files in Google Drive and then shares links via email, often searching past email messages in order to again find links to the documents.

Why leave?

During the Aspiration session on narrative building, we explored the motivations people had for taking on the huge task of making a technology transition, with the goal of using this information to help build narratives for our future outreach and political education efforts. Major themes that came to light from the session centered around care, support, mutuality, safety and solidarity.

The interviews, in contrast, revealed more mission-based answers. Brandon stated: "Google and the similar large platforms are targets and adversaries for us." Maegan said quite simply: There are "no clean hands in capitalism." For Vero, it was about protecting their organization: "Social justice organizations are being targeted at this moment – whether it be racial, queer/gender or climate justice work."

Interestingly, Tatiana and Kate emphasized that there are strong organizational reasons for Vocal to leave Google, but the impetus has to come from individual staff people. This reality seems to suggest that, while there are arguments for leaving Google that apply more readily to organizations than individuals (and vice versa), the audience may be one and the same: we need to inspire individuals to convince their organizations.

During the narrative session at Aspiration we also spent time describing tactics for conveying the values of autonomous technology over corporate tech, which included:

- The metaphor "eat your broccoli" (it may be hard to leave Gmail, but we have to do it for our health)
- Identify conflicts, tell stories that resolve those conflicts
- Identify falsehoods in corporate narratives

How to successfully move away from Google

Any effort to move off of Google is risky. An organization that tries to move off of Google and fails is worse off than not trying at all because a failure can contribute to a culture or history within the organization that causes reluctance to ever try again.

In the Aspiration focus group on assessing our ability to move, we identified qualities that could lead to a higher probability of success. These included direct mission alignment (or conflict with Big Tech), more tech savvy staff or access to technologist support, a high level of political consciousness about the reasons for moving, and the presence of internal champions that have influence in the organization.

In this same session we also identified obstacles that might make a move more difficult, including: the need for accessibility features, failed attempts in the past, lack of staff resources/time, lack of resources to hire

help, working with collaborators who heavily use Google, and security needs better met by corporate tools.

The interviews reinforced these ideas. Brandon mentioned that Media-Justice has a desire to make the change, but lacks the will. The problem is compounded by their need to collaborate heavily outside their organization, with groups that are heavily invested in Google tools used for these collaborations.

Brandon also mentioned that, due to his use of Google for single sign-on, he only has to keep track of one password. Leaving Google would require changing his security practices dramatically.

Loan said a successful move would require a provider that won't give up the data—assurance that the data is secure and will not be sold or turned over.

Maegan and Vero both emphasized that a successful move would include support of all staff, including ongoing trainings, and that the providers would need to be movement and values-aligned.

Another step towards a successful move is for movement providers to set expectations. Alternative providers do not provide feature-by-feature alternative services. For example, if we create an expectation that we are offering a new service that is "the same, just more secure" then we are likely to experience problems after the move.

Part of the challenge is in level of quality and reliability (and this can largely be attributed to lack of resourcing). As Dulce reported in reference to using Nextcloud, sometimes changes aren't properly saved or access to a document is lost for a user. These small bugs or problems may be more common with non-corporate hosts since there is simply no way that a service supported by a small team can compete in terms of features and stability against a service funded with billions of dollars of advertising revenue and military contracts. Preparing users for this experience and this political reality is critical to ensuring a more collaborative transition in which everyone understands what to expect.

Lastly, many interviewees explicitly said that financial cost was not an issue. Loan said "we don't have money, but we can figure it out" and "cost is less of a barrier because the trade offs are more beneficial in the long run." Maegan said they already pay extra for Google and would rather give it to another values aligned provider.



Conclusions

The clearest conclusion that came from this research is that transitioning our movement off of Gmail and Google services is a long-term project. To be successful, we will need large-scale and ongoing investment in non-corporate infrastructure, labor from politically aligned capacity building groups to help with the transition, and organizations will need to invest in in-house technology expertise to guide them through the transition, addressing their unique organizational needs and challenges.

In addition, we will never complete the move successfully without internalizing the political reasons into our strategic plans. It is too expensive to make this move without an understanding of how our technology choices intersect with our core values and missions.

While the project is daunting, the rewards are immense. By regaining control over our own communications technology, the movement can begin wrestling control of the technology narrative away from surveillance capitalism and telling a different story about renewable and humane technology made for people, not for profit.

Next steps

The best way to get the resources we need is to organize! We hope this document can provide a useful starting point. For more information on how to join this campaign, please see the Rise Against Big Tech campaign¹⁷ or reach out to info@mayfirst.org or info@progressivetech.org.

Our next steps include:

1. **Distribute this report:** we will share the results broadly to build momentum for moving away from corporate technology and specifically with our network of autonomous providers to find ways to improve our services to overcome the obstacles identified;
2. **Build an online library:** we will collect resources to help make the case for moving off of Big Tech, including research, sample grant proposals, visual propaganda, and concise, well tested talking points and narratives;
3. **Develop curriculum:** we will design traditional and popular education style workshops to understand the contradiction between movements for liberation and corporate technology;
4. **Write case studies:** we will record stories of organizations who have successfully made the transition;
5. **List autonomous providers and consultants:** we will publicize a list of non-corporate providers and consultants who can help with the move;
6. **Provide software demos and screen shots:** we will show what it looks like to work without embedding corporate technology in our work lives;
7. **Show how to contribute:** we will provide links to popular software projects, their documentation and how you can open issues or improve the documentation.

¹⁷ <https://rabt.in.fra.red/>



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