Politics and practices of an
autonomous technology,
voices of the members of May First

Mayfirst
Movement
Technology
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By: Jes Ciacci, Alice Aguilar, Melanie E. L. Bush, Estrella Soria

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English translation: Cristian Opaso

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Introduction

What role do the technologies that we use everyday play in our lives? How and why should we get to know them, choose among them, encounter each other through them? Technologies have been with us from the dawn of time, supporting us in our daily activities. For the great majority of people today, to speak about technology refers almost exclusively to technology of a digital nature. Or, more precisely, to a very small number of digital technologies; those offered by huge transnational corporations. With them come new communications and research horizons, but also the imposition of values, wishes, epistemology and interests distant from those that use them. What would it mean to be able to create, build and maintain technologies that listen to those that use them? What would it mean to have infrastructure for political movements deeply rooted in their communities and committed to social justice? How could we design technologies in a consensual way, in order to support both people and our planet?
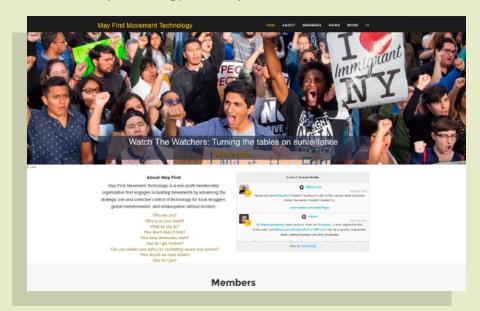
Resisting in the digital environment implies focusing on other values, intentions, dreams, hopes and technologies. Focusing on other ways to live, to be and to know. May First Movement Technology is a bi-national cooperative (based in the United States and Mexico) that aims to put these values into practice: digital media that supports social struggles and grassroots movements working to create the other world that we know is possible. It does so by maintaining our own technological infrastructure and helping expose the limitations of the services that we normally use in our digital lives. We are also working on building a shared political perspective among those that use these technologies on a daily basis. We can make technology work for us and make collective decisions on how it functions now and in the future. We can learn from it, create alliances, listen to each other from our own experiences and jointly walk through the multiple forms in which our hopes manifest.

In this article we will look into the different ways in which we strengthen this path of digitalempowerment. It will include our membership and their role, participation and leadership, perspectives and political education, trust and security in the digital world. The voices that we bring to you will help weave our day to day offline and online practices in order to bring about our hopes of more inclusive environments..

1. When who we are is being part of a movement: participation, membership and leadership.

On being part of May First

The struggles for digital and bodily autonomy go hand in hand is the first phrase we encounter when visiting the May First website. In the May First political manifesto and official documents there is a commitment to support the building of social movements based on the strategic and collective control of technology for our social struggles, global transformation and emancipation across borders. *https://mayfirst.coop*

May First is a cooperative organization led by more than 500 members and that legal structure makes it quite different from other technology services providers, as it promotes democratic participation.

https://mayfirst.coop/en/official-documents/

Jamie McClelland, Representative of the *Progressive Technology Project* and co-founder and member of the Board of Directors says:

"For me, May First's by-laws and structure, which guarantees member's control over the leadership, is the kind of commitment that makes May First not only different from corporate providers, but also distinguishes us from many of our radical tech peers."

"Our operating structure and the commitment of its members towards learning, making decisions and sharing knowledge about both political and technological problems makes May First a unique organization in the technical and social movement."

Ben Carroll,
from Southern Vision Alliance says:

"I think something that's so important about the way that May First operates is that its priorities and work is directed and informed by the membership. Whether its through the annual membership meetings that set organizational priorities, or the ability to easily communicate with May First staff/board and core volunteers individually or in working groups that take on advancing those collective priorities, there is regular communication and an ongoing attention to receiving feedback from the membership. This approach of regularly engaging the membership on these questions helps to ensure that there is shared investment in the work of the organization, and that the limited time to focus on various priorities - whether those are political (in the sense of interventions around political questions in the broader movement) or the development of shared infrastructure - is well spent."

The membership of May First is broad and diverse, having inspired many others to participate.

For **Mike Hales,**
de *meet.coop*,
it's important:

To "learn from the leadership approach of comrades, notably women and people of color."

Having a broad membership provides political strength that complements the technological infrastructure that is offered to organizations.

Natalie Brenner of the *Progressive Technology Project* shares the view regarding how the organization offers opportunities for political education and networking:

"May First membership is broad, and serves as the home to an impressive wealth of power, knowledge, skill and thought. Through May First, I've had the opportunity to learn about and be involved in many different spaces, such as Rising Majority, the World Social Forum, Media Justice, Allied Media, Aspiration Tech, Association for Progressive Communications, just to name a few. May First membership is growing all the time and the ability to both serve and to learn from the people behind these powerhouse organizations has been humbling and inspirational - especially in this challenging moment in our global history."

"These years we have learned that a diverse participation is key for the organization. Frequently there is the idea that as a technical organization, its governing board is made up of technical experts. May First's vision is quite the opposite; that of having people come from diverse struggles, movements, organizations and other social groupings, connecting to those diverse realities, expressing their analyzes, visions and sensibilities in the leadership of the organization."

Pablo Correa from *La Coperacha* emphasizes the importance of diversity

The political implications of membership involvement in developing the Coop is quite innovative and unique, so initial approaches to the organization may not reveal all that May First does or offers.

Alejandra Carrillo Olano *Red de Comunicadores Boca de Polen* shares her experience:

"To be honest, when we first began to use Mayfirst we weren't aware of all the potential, not only in terms of the tools available, but to discover what was not so evident at first, that is to be part of a network with a clear political vision regarding the use and appropiation of technology. It has enabled us to reflect upon, learn and change the way we relate to technology as well as little by little inviting others to be more careful and critical in their relationship to technology."

The leadership of May First is made up of committed community activists and technologists who - based on their values, vision and strategies regarding technologies - understand and evaluate the political times. The Board of Directors, as well as the membership, have throughout the years forged relationships with social movement organizations and activists, who have eventually become members of the Cooperative, amplifying their potential.

Suren Moodliar
of the Research Group
on Socialism and
Democracy (S&D)

shares his experience with May First co-founder Alfredo Lopez, showing how deep relationships can become new means of participation and collaborative work.

"Apart from the alignment of values, there were strong, deep personal ties between our journal and the founders of May First. Indeed, our board member who interfaces directly with May First on technical matters worked with a May First founder in the Puerto Rican solidarity movement of the 1970s. May First's staff's intimate involvement in radical social movements means that there is an enduring tie between them and most members of our board over the journal's 37 years of existence."

The building of a foundation of members that is representative of the movement as a whole is a strategic challenge for our organization and also provides a space for participation, collaboration and political awareness about the impacts of technology in the tasks of the movement, as well as potentially allowing members to share their leanings with a wider network, thus allowing for a multiplying effect.

Moodlier highlights this point:
"If we are to achieve inter-generational continuities and growth, participating in and learning from May First's and fellow members' experiences, challenges, and learnings with social media, post-COVID conferencing platforms, etc., will be vital."

Diverse contributions provide a wider range of voices, capacity in implementing projects and political education for the struggle of movements on the ground. The Coop also includes technical people that contribute and support on a voluntary basis in the development of its infrastructure. Since the tools used are free and open source they can also be shared with their own networks.

"I am able to put freedom respecting tools in the hands of my friends and clients."

as **Micky Metts**
from *Agaric Technology Collective* explains:

Members can participate in multiple ways, according to their interests and possibilities. Once a year a meeting is held for individual and organizational members to vote on the priorities of the organization. The members of the Board of Directors is also also democratically elected by direct voting. Apart from these spaces, the doors to active participation are open through the work groups that implement the decisions taken in the annual assemblies. Simultaneously, new links are developed with other members, joint working formulas are explored, allowing a political consciousnesses to develop regarding the role of technology.

https://mayfirst.coop/en/who

Ben Carroll describes this culture of communal participation and building of relationships: "We've cultivated many new relationships by virtue of our participation in the May First community that we wouldn't have otherwise made, and have raised our own understanding of the various political questions tied to our movements' relationship to technology and tried our best to bring that back to other partners in our day to day work. Our staff involved in technological work have received an incredible level of support from May First, both in the practical day to day work, as well as in raising and exploring more deeply other questions around technology, increasing their understanding on both fronts - both have carried through to many other areas of our work."

On our political vision

The organizations that are members of the Coop emphasize the fundamental role that political perspectives play in the building of a digital space that is clearly focused and meaningful for them.

Oren Robinson from Take Root Tech refers to the significance of a technology able to implement both "connection to the planet and opposition to capitalism, patriarchy, and racism."

FiPA Software comments that "digital power" must be a no-profit and non-capitalist infrastructure alternative, also firmly opposed to racism and sexism.

"May First's early conceptualization of the Internet as a global and world historical achievement of humanity as a whole, together with its dialectical appreciation for the surveillance and repressive functions of the same technology aligns completely with the analyses." This is the political vision that enables technology to become a meaningful social space instead of a lucrative one. And **Moodilar** continues saying that "May First's intersectional vision for social change incorporates a theorization of capitalism and an appreciation of social class." This political framework supports the manner in which the diverse organizations digitally empower the people with whom they work, both in their day to day practices, as well as in the technologies they use and how they choose to use them."

Another perspective on the central role that the political vision plays in strengthening the digital abilities of social movements is mentioned by **Jaime Villarreal,** a staff worker and member of the Board of Directors when he shares that technology should be designed and applied with "the direct participation of movements for liberation ... The work of building autonomous technology infrastructure is substantial and requires a critical mass of participants to pool the resources and energy necessary to support their project. We aren't just defending a virtual territory of resistance to an Internet controlled by state and corporate surveillance capitalism; we are ensuring our basic ability to communicate freely, organize and share both life and struggles both within and between our own respective communities and physical territories of resistance."

The political vision defines what organizations value and how movements build their technological capacities.

This is mentioned by **Kim Varela-Broxson of the National Network of Abortion Access** when debating about reproductive rights: "Clarifying the ties between the prison industrial complex, surveillance capitalism, and abortion bans allow us to strengthen our collective understanding of the intricate connections between our movements and build solidarity now and for the future."

Once connections are made, we can become stronger and use technology to effectively reach our objectives.

For **Pablo Correa** to explicitly state these connections is key to maintaining "the vision of technology as a collective and democratic process to build a free world from the bottom up." Even though it is crucial to work in specialized and fragmented areas, a greater challenge is to connect this puzzle. More so, when our political commitment is to have all participate in their preferred languages. **Shawna Finnegan, member of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC)** shared that "Conversations about language justice and commitment to bilingual discussion in all May First meetings has been really valuable for me, and I think that many organizations including **APC,** can learn from the May First experience."

As organizations, collectives and individuals that aim to liberate and transform dominant dynamics, we clearly see that our struggles cannot be isolated. To strengthen our collective work is absolutely necessary.

2. Practices to advance in our path to other possible worlds.

Security and political education around technologies

Protocols for trust.

When we talk about "trust" in digital spaces we refer to those elements that empower people and computer systems, and the characteristics of technology that allow the perception of security, compliance with policies, privacy and ethics. It is frequently linked to elements that relate to the people that develop and or administer digital systems and services. For many projects this only means offering free, open source and audit-able technology.

Even though these technical issues are essential, they are not enough. Regarding the storage of information we need to involve all the people that will take care of this information, which brings to light the need to forge agreements and implement practices that will contribute towards this aim.

All technologies can fail or have security "breaches." Furthermore technologies are developed and maintained by people with an ideology, whether they explicitly say so or not. And that lack of clear definitions can lead us to delegate our digital life (these days permanently linked to our analog lives) in platforms whose objectives and perspectives are not aligned with our values. As they say at **Avispa Midia:** "Opening digital tools is like opening up our homes."

Unlike service providers whose digital trust for the handling of information is based on business values, in a cooperative provider political affinities and relationships lead to security being directly linked to the sum of intentions that support a service. As Pablo Correa says: "In the specific area of technology it was important for us to know there was an organization that works under a cooperative vision and principles close to ours. Discovering that they could house information and protect it as if it were their own, was like finding an oasis."

Compared to how "easy" popular platforms can be, other "technological solutions" can appear far-off or complicated. In this regards another aspect of trust relates to developing, implementing and maintaining technologies that are friendly to the membership, while solving their communication needs. "We wanted to have a platform that was easy to use, but that at the same time was similar to our ways of being and working." **Canto de Cenzontles** believes that May First is also important "in order to have autonomy in the technological aspect, to have more control over where our data is held, to have our work be more secure."

Supporting technical infrastructures with a clear political statement of goals results in a membership for whom freedom of expression is a fundamental value. That is why many view May First as a vital pillar of support for organizations seeking to resist censorship, noting that the information housed in May First servers will be protected and defended by the organization. Kim Varela-Broxson states: "Our work in abortion access is increasingly criminalized, in the US and across the world. Working with values aligned organizations like May First demonstrates the power of resisting Big Tech on an international level, sharing lessons and building power together." Amidst the rise in criminalization, the political practices aimed at creating and maintaining digital power marks a key difference."

Increasing the technical capacities of our membership also requires that people who already have this knowledge share it. As stated by the folks at **FiPa Software:** "We know that the best way to keep our information and communications secure is to actively participate in the building of the platforms that we use."

Exercises for (self) learning

When one seeks references concerning the basis of education, we can find many diverse views. They all claim the well being of humanity as their ultimate goal, but what well-being do they refer to? Just as we have shared our view that technologies are far from neutral, the same goes for education.

When confronted with the inability of having a neutral education, Paulo Freire stated that, education has to be political, and this is also the case with digital environments.

Kyung-Ji Kate Rhee (KJ) is co-director of The Center for NuLeadership on Human Justice and Healing. In her position as responsible for the Program on Politics, Defense and Training she recognizes that technology connects the planet and is not limited to friendly movements, which means that its use brings with it great responsibilities. She believes that for the majority of social movement organizations there are cultural barriers to adopting new technologies, and many myths. At the same time, she recognizes that they have invested resources (both in time and money) using corporate technologies. She warns about philanthropy also reinforcing the use of corporate technologies in grant applications.

"If we think of it in terms of how do people learn and for what, it's the same thing as political education, that's why I always say everything comes down to pedagogy... And it basically came down to using the technology. And I think that has to stop. (…) Technology should be used for like pedagogical magic of disseminating information. But also, how do we connect people, bring people together?"

The dimensions of the learning process are varied. And sometimes they can appear contradictory. **For Avispa Midia:** "Technology can strengthen and weaken organizational processes. What technology allows is the access to a wide diversity of information that helps strengthen and empower those organizational processes. The better we are informed internally, the better tools we will have to break down media fences"

On the other hand, there is an appeal for technological organizations to abandon our "comfort zones" and to speak in terms that non-digital organizations can relate to, for example: sharing the origins and how the Internet developed and came to be what it is, and how it can be used to make our organizations stronger. We could jointly develop a "study plan" that includes understanding how things work.

This political education would have to identify those alternatives that our communities could access to in order to build on that potential. **KJ** adds: "If digital power is really looking to build up power, then what is at our disposal? What political education has missed out on is infrastructure. Building isn't out there, infrastructure building is here. And I think the easiest way to get at it is asking the question: Why do we do what we do? Why do we have what we have?"

In May First spaces, educational processes also occur, which are conceived through experiences and with intentionality. This can also be found in our open channels. In the forms in which we communicate, and in the sharing of our thoughts and action. In this sense, education is experienced in a multidimensional way, with the aim of not having hierarchies of knowledge.

We live practicing our belief that each one of us knows something that can add to our social processes.

3. BRINGING TO LIGHT

The power that we have.
TECHNOLOGICAL RESISTANCE AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS.

Technologies reach us as "fully formed" from a vantage point that makes them appear "innovative." However, when following the trail of the origins of several of the corporate platforms, this view dissolves as we reveal how they developed based on the looting of technologies from open source communities and efforts shared in the commons. We could write a separate article on the various cases.

For example, lets consider the widely used "social media." During the 90s the technologies were just emerging when the Zapatista Army for National Liberation (EZLN) took to the streets. The news was shared by word of mouth and it quickly reached the digital media of the times; journalists and activists found it via bulletin board systems (or BBSs) - an adequate space, free and independent from the traditional mass media - that allowed for the distribution of the news of the indigenous uprising in the southeastern part of Mexico, thus overcoming the media blockade. It was a very popular technology those days. But soon afterwards the Internet was co-opted into being a business and the independent bulletin boards ceased to be used, swallowed by social networks that, copying their characteristics, updated them and presented them as new forms of communication.

https://spectrum.ieee.org/social-medias-dialup-ancestor-the-bulletin-board-system

These days, when the abusive practices implemented by these platforms are questioned, once again the response juxtaposes "commodity versus security," making us blind to the political basis of the Internet that we use. When one reflects on the implications of technologies, beyond dichotomy narratives, it makes sense for us to choose a technological option different to that was imposed on us.

For **Avispa Media** "we cannot analyze technology without thinking on the flow and accumulation of capital, that precisely tries to overcome time and space, that imposes the flow of merchandise.

Vargarquista from Tadamun Antimili emphazises the advantages of the infrastructure available at May First, when expressing: "It is valuable because it allows us to explore open source software and participatory technologies, as well as warrantying the security of our communications and online work, since we know and trust our servers." Freeing ourselves from the technologies controlled by big business, and creating alternative infrastructure allowing organizations to have autonomy and control over their data and their work can change the rules of the game. **Oren Robinson from Take Root Tech** expressed "Transforming our relationship to technology from one of "lesser evils" and convenience at the cost of surveillance… to an intentional investment in tools and practices that build organized communities of consent and solidarity."

The mission of MayFirst describes making available a space of resistance not limited to defensive strategies, but also adding value through alternative technologies, designs and practices grounded in understanding the political environments that guide their implementation. As **Shawna Finnegan** says: "I really value May First infrastructure, and the commitment to make it increasingly more accessible and user-friendly, while also being clear about the importance of staying out of corporate tools and platforms, and creating infrastructure that is built for movements."

We walk towards horizons that include both free and open-source technologies, as well as political reflection on the ways in which corporate technologies can undermine our processes.

Ben Caroll believes it is necessary to recognize that: "…movements' choices around technology are political choices, and they can invest in collaborating and supporting the development of movement-based tools as an alternative to corporate software." He added that it should be a priority "in our day-to-day work with other grassroots organizations."
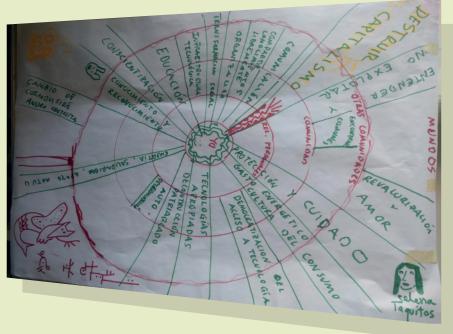
It is indeed a continuous process, since technology is ever-changing in relation to new advances, needs, and material conditions that surround the person. Add to this the commitment to have these technologies be accessible to more and more groups.

FiPa Software shares their view that "participation for us means also to help [May First] continue to grow so that more people can join. For us it is also important to contribute economically since we understand how difficult it is to maintain independent infrastructure projects."

Digital technologies have today been co-opted by private and corporate infrastructures with which many groups cannot live without (let's be optimistic and believe that this is "only for now"!). Even so, we are already moving forwards, in the path of the future that we envision and aim for.

Pablo Correa emphasizes that "technology, particularly that of the Internet, permeates almost all environments, from our daily lives to geopolitics. The global economy and its dynamics are closely linked to the direction and unfolding of the Internet. Digital currencies, the on-line financial platforms, the data markets, surveillance, the boom of the apps world, freedom of speech and access to information, not avoiding mentioning the new debates such as the governmental elections with digital tools, and of course not forgetting social media, all point to the fact that digital life will be the Commons in the coming decades. For these reasons it is fundamental that organizations such as May First and others be connected and grow in the new environments. It is necessary to balance Internet technologies with alternative visions."

4. REFLEXIONES FINALES

The experiences and voices that we share in this article reveal the motivations that move us to contribute to an efficient technological infrastructure, based on the values of collaboration, justice and liberation.

Our experience is not exempt from challenges and perspectives not yet included here. For this reason the more diversity we can include, the better we are thus the importance of showing a clear political vision and inclusive practices. Building what has become known as "digital power" implies learning which differences represent non-negotiable internal contradictions, and which can make us stronger.

A perspective that has become stronger these last few years are the interactions within our own Cooperative.

How do we listen to each other in better ways, being from two geographical spaces, that even though next to each other, have so different ways of being, doing, feeling and envisioning? Being a bi-national organization with memberships from different parts of Latin America and the world invites us (and sometimes tenderly imposes on us) to: "Speak briefly, talk slowly and listen profoundly." Our horizon is built with the voices, the concerns and the dreams of our movements that work daily to overcome oppressive systems and it is cultivated through strengthening our relationships.

We have a long road to travel still and many other hands to reach out to. So, why join May First? None of this could work without the participation and commitment of our members. Viewing technology from a political perspective is still far-off for most people, groups and communities. In this sense, critical digital education is a great ally, as are the learning experiences of social movements that today encompass practices, feelings and "sentipensares" (feeling-thinking) familiar to us, as well as those new to us, that are less familiar and which we are beginning to understand. But in all these instances, if being outraged by impositions is something that moves us, we can also act against technological tyranny and nurture digital spaces that are liberating, cooperative and autonomous.

https://mayfirst.coop/en/joinus/

As **Sursiendo** said: we know "there is little time for what's important, because we can barely take care of what is urgent." Digital spaces such as May First "invite us to think beyond mere devices, and towards building together so that those tools spark relations among ourselves and the natural environment that enable us to stop abusing them and at the same time remain connected. Spaces such as May First are becoming urgent, and we are just a few digital steps from reaching them, discovering each other and smiling there.

https://sursiendo.org/2017/05/biodiversidad-tecnologica-para-saltar-los-jardines-vallados-de-internet/

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