PHILANTHROPY AND
DIGITAL CIVIL SOCIETY:

BLUEPRINT

THE ANNUAL
INDUSTRY FORECAST

by Lucy Bernholz

2020
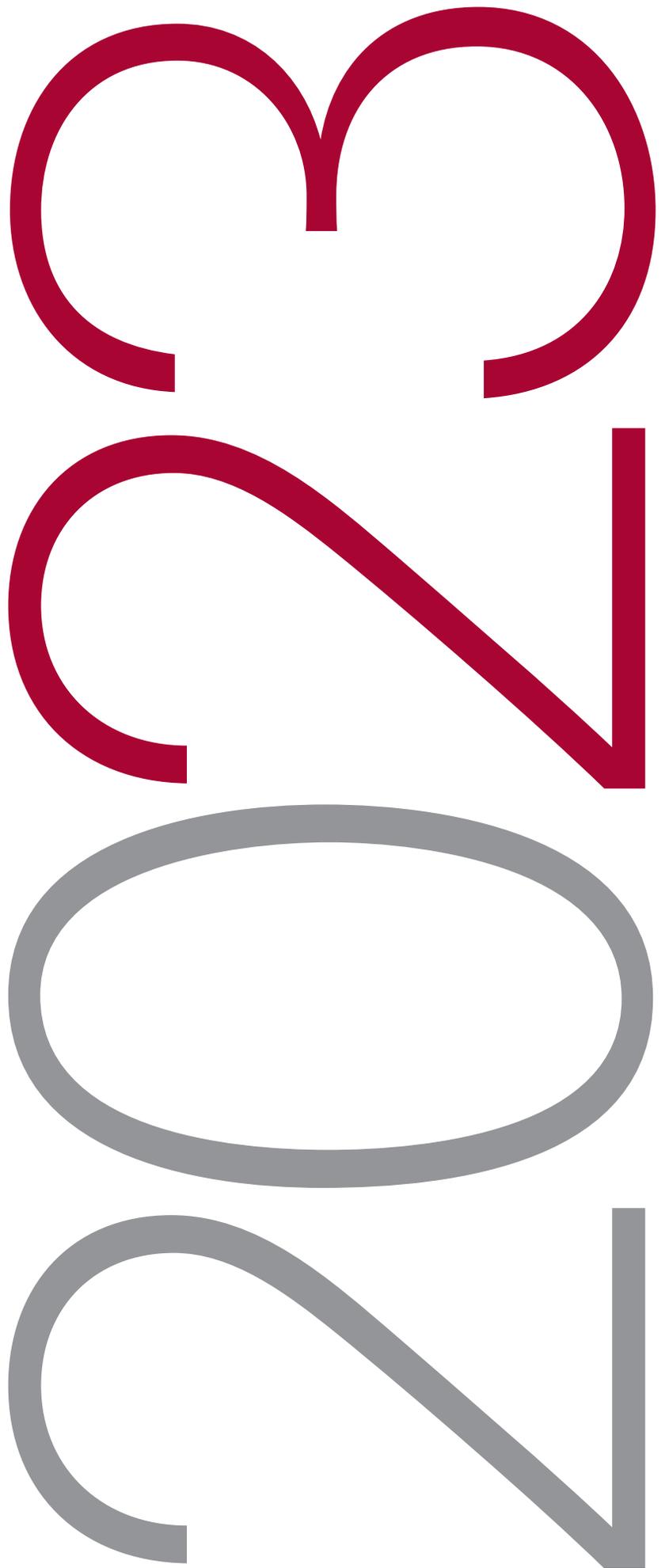
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Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION Review

Stanford PACS
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Digital Civil Society Lab

Acknowledgments

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WHAT IS THIS MONOGRAPH?

Philanthropy and Digital Civil Society: Blueprint 2023 is the 14th annual industry forecast about the ways we use private resources for public benefit in the digital age. Each year, I use the *Blueprint* to provide an overview of the current landscape, point to big ideas that will matter in the coming year, and direct your attention to sources of future promise.

WHY IS IT CALLED A BLUEPRINT?

I use the metaphor of a blueprint to describe the forecast because blueprints are guides for things yet to come and storage devices for decisions already made. My father is an architect. I grew up surrounded by scale models of buildings, playing in unfinished foundations, trying to not get hurt by exposed rebar. I eavesdropped on discussions with contractors, planning agencies, homeowners, and draftsmen[1]—all of whom bring different skills and interpretations to creating, reading, and using blueprints. Creating a useful blueprint requires drawing ideas from many people, using a common grammar so that work can get done, and expecting multiple interpretations of any final product. I intend my *Blueprints* to speak to everyone involved in using private resources for public benefit and to help people see their individual and institutional roles within the dynamics of the larger collective project of creating civil society. I hope you will use it as a starting point for debate and as input for your own planning. Please follow on Fediverse at #blueprint2023.

WHO WROTE THIS DOCUMENT?

I'm Lucy Bernholz and I'm a philanthropy wonk. I am senior research scholar and director of the **Digital Civil Society Lab**, which is part of **Stanford University's Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society (PACS)**. *HuffPost* calls me a "philanthropy game changer," *Fast Company* magazine named my blog *Philanthropy2173* "Best in Class," and I've twice been named to *The Nonprofit Times'* annual list of 50 most influential people. I studied history and earned a BA from Yale University and an MA and PhD from Stanford University. My website is **www.lucybernholz.com**. The Digital Civil Society Lab curates, creates, and shares free resources related to data governance at **www.digitalimpact.io**.

This year, for the first time, there are two commissioned contributions from colleagues affiliated with the Digital Civil Society Lab. Their contributions are called out by the authors' names in the document; everything else was written by Lucy Bernholz.

WHERE CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION?

In addition to my blog and website, information about Stanford's Digital Civil Society Lab is at **https://pacscenter.stanford.edu/research/digital-civil-society-lab/**. Previous *Blueprints* can be downloaded at **https://pacscenter.stanford.edu/resources/blueprints**. If you are just joining the *Blueprint* series with this edition, welcome. If you've been reading since 2010, thank you. Feel free to go back in time by reviewing previous editions (several of which include organizational worksheets). The worksheets are free online at **https://digitalimpact.io**.

INTRODUCTION

I organized the previous edition in this series, *Blueprint 2022*, around time, space, and motion. In retrospect, that structure has taken on even more relevance for me personally. In January 2022 I became ill and have subsequently been disabled by long COVID. My own relationships to time, space, and motion are radically different now than they were in 2021. Some of the insights I've had since becoming sick will no doubt appear throughout this document.

More important than my personal experiences, however, are the ways in which the events of 2022 require me to revisit the purpose of this document. When I started in 2010, my aspiration for the *Blueprint* series was to expand the horizons of what got discussed in philanthropic and nonprofit circles. I wanted to draw different boundaries around the "social sector," "independent sector," and "nonprofit sector," and my focus was primarily on the United States. This effort at boundary expansion meant considering impact investing, informal associations, online activism, nonprofits, philanthropy, benefit corporations, political action, and peer-to-peer giving as one piece—the spaces and ways in which we use resources in pursuit of social goods. In 2018, as the impact of our digital dependency grew stronger, I changed the *Blueprint*'s subtitle from "Philanthropy and the Social Economy" to "Philanthropy and Digital Civil Society." I have urged us to "assume digital." I've long questioned how always-on, globally connected, digital systems interact

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Fourteen editions later, parts of this broader conversation are common fare. What was once speculative is now familiar. Other parts of it—particularly the ways in which digital systems and collective action interact and shape each other—still require a lot of convincing. People, nonprofits, and funders are still enamored of big tech's democratizing promises, even as the evidence of centralized power and control is incontrovertible. A small percentage of actors in civil society take the threats of digital dependence seriously. Many nonprofits and foundations, however, just like most cell phone–using individuals, continue to trade safety for expedience and greater control for financial savings.

Even more important, our ability to choose when we "go online" is no longer under our control. We've built digital systems, big data–driven decision-making machines, and artificial intelligence into the world around us in pervasive ways. While dog-shaped robots carrying guns awe and distract us, subtle semiautonomous systems are hidden
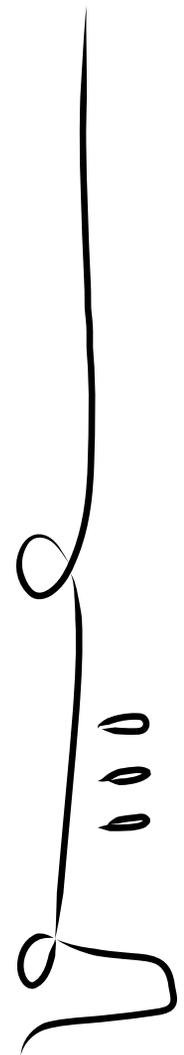
everywhere in plain sight. Customer service phone trees, website chat bots, student **test proctoring** systems, **workplace surveillant software**, app-driven **work assignments**, and **artificially generated news articles** are only a few, familiar examples.

For decades, vulnerable and marginalized people and communities have warned of the harms that come from our digital dependencies; but mainstream, white institutions have largely ignored this wisdom. Even as awareness has grown of pervasive surveillance, data misuse, authoritarian internet shutdowns, and online/offline harms, the tech industry's incessant marketing to the public and lobbying of governments has allowed it to retain the upper hand. While the European Union has established itself as the globe's most consistent and strongest regulator of technology, governments in the rest of the world have either bent technology to an authoritarian will (Russia, China) or fumbled along, mostly paying lip service to change while doing what the companies ask. This has long been the story in the U.S., home to several of the most dominant global platforms.

Within the United States it has become the job of state governments to develop and enforce policies about data privacy, biometric surveillance, facial recognition, and other major tech-related public policy issues. Here civil society organizations and alliances have had real success—Illinois leads on preventing the use of biometric data, and California has a strong consumer privacy law. But state-level legislating of technology falls along the same politically partisan lines as abortion and voting rights. As I write this, Florida and Texas are challenging online platform companies'

ability to moderate content. California has passed laws to protect user data about abortion from being accessed by legal authorities in other anti-abortion states. The internet is fragmenting.

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This matters to civil society. We are late to the table in understanding just how much digital public policy matters to our ability to associate, assemble, speak, and take collective action. While civil society is finally pulling up a chair to the policy-making table, companies and governments are moving the debate to a different room. Our digital dependencies are not limited to the expressive media of communications. We live in a world where transportation, energy, education, health care, welfare, work, and collective action depend on—and are changed by—omnipresent and invisible digital systems.

My intention with this year's *Blueprint* is different from the past. I intend to challenge you, the reader, to recalibrate your understanding of how much philanthropy and civil society can and must do. I am seeing many organizations doubling down on things they can control rather than trying to adapt to a future of unknowns. Most of us don't know how to come to terms with the simultaneity of environmental collapse, war, debilitating and pervasive illness, and indefensible inequality. The rise of fascism speaks to the fragility of democracy in an age of fear, lies, and hatemongering. This *Blueprint* is about helping us see that

many forces we've debated as futuristic possibilities are now present context. There is much to do, and there are glimmers of hope. There is clear danger in standing still.

The first section considers the question of where we are, which I break into six subsections: the global context, the forces at work in the U.S., the current state of digital civil society, the condition of digital governance within nonprofits and philanthropy, opportunities for institutional innovation in digital civil society, and the importance to our democracy of digital pluralism. What used to be presented as distant is now close; a watched-for future is now the present.

The center section consists of five essays. I wrote two of them; I commissioned two others from colleagues affiliated with the Digital Civil Society Lab, Aaron Horvath, PhD, and Venita E. Griffin; and the fifth is a visual dialogue using human and AI-generated images by Sabrina Newsome and Amelie-Sophie Vavrosky. Working this way allowed me to connect with others while being ill and meet a long-standing goal to engage more people in the *Blueprints*. It is a small step toward breaking with the past as I make sense of the present and future.

This *Blueprint* also shows some of the subtle ways that digital systems have slipped deeply into everyday life. The illustrations in the visual dialogue were created in two ways. The main artwork was commissioned from Sabrina Newsome, a professional illustrator. Images within the artwork were created using an open-source image-generating tool called DALL-E. It is, in general parlance, an artificial intelligence (AI) system; in technology-speak it is an example of generative AI (see "Buzzword Watch"). It is a piece of software, trained by humans on the creative output of other humans, to create

output that might obviate one need for humans. Similar systems exist for text (GPT-3) and videos (Make-A-Video).

What the auto-generated images don't show is what tools like DALL-E mean for values such as ownership, consent, and beauty. The artists whose images were used to train DALL-E were never asked permission for their art, and much of it is copyright protected. AI art is winning awards and changing who and what is considered an artist. There are intellectual property questions all the way through the layer cake of code and images and creation unleashed by these tools.
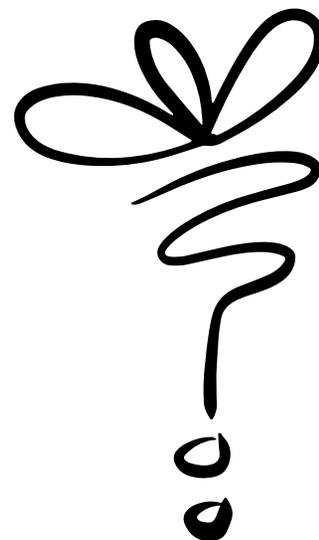
DIGITAL CIVIL SOCIETY ALL THE WAY DOWN

There's a phrase, "Turtles all the way down," that draws from cultural traditions in which the Earth is balanced on the back of a turtle standing on a turtle standing on a turtle, etc. The phrase captures the idea of infinite regress—there's no bottom; the pile of turtles goes on forever. When talking about open-source AI systems such as DALL-E and GPT-3, I'd be remiss if I didn't note that these tools were created at an organization called OpenAI, which was founded in 2015 as a nonprofit. Its mission is to build AI tools available to the public in ways that can "benefit humanity." In 2019 the nonprofit launched OpenAI LP, a "capped-profit" company to reap profits from the nonprofit's research. Just like the turtles, OpenAI and the intermingling of profit, purpose, and AI systems raise questions all the way down.

AI-generated images (and text and video) are already everywhere, but the most basic questions about them remain unanswered.

WRITING THE FUTURE IN THE PRESENT TENSE

Digital systems are pervasive and obscure. We need to write about climate catastrophe in the present tense. Authoritarianism and fascism are rising, democracies are struggling, and the sorting of the globe into two systems of governance makes little sense as the definitions keep shifting. The digital underpinnings of our economies, social structures, schools, hospitals, transportation systems, energy grids, and news sources change how everyday life, war, and everyday life during war are experienced. It's worth taking the time to recalibrate where we're starting from.

GLOBAL CONTEXT

Two years into a global pandemic, war is back in Europe. Death, refugee flows, and nuclear threats dominate the news. The war in Ukraine provides a singular example of the intersection and mutually reinforcing crises of weakened democratic rule, climate catastrophe, global inequality, food insecurity, fragile international alliances, disinformation, and digital power consolidation.

From the beginning of the Russian invasion, people have been caring for, housing, transporting, and resettling millions of other people. Some work

through formal governmental or nongovernmental structures, while many others act through extended family ties or diasporic connections. Digital networks for communication, planning, donations, fact-checking, citizen journalism, and logistics enable all sorts of rapid mobilization with very little fanfare.

Meanwhile, the unjust distribution of medical resources across the globe produces easily anticipated consequences— disproportionate rates of disease and death and ongoing viral mutations moving faster than the speed of science. The coronavirus pandemic continues.

THE UNITED STATES TODAY

On July 13, 2022, *The New York Times* ran this headline on its front page:

> *Is the World Really Falling Apart,*
> *or Does It Just Feel That Way?*

What I've been wondering, and I doubt I'm alone, is more along the lines of "Do the frogs know they're boiling?"[2] As an historian, I often wonder what the people living through certain events knew and understood as the events unfolded. I mean the people not in the headlines. Not the newsmakers but

everyone else. This question applies to many current situations, but the context in which I ask it has to do with talk of civil war in the United States. The claim that we're headed to civil war is heard everywhere in the country. That is alarming. Some of this talk is **informed by scholarship**. Some of this talk is manufactured to spur the violence it purports to predict. Currently a favored tactic of right-wing politicians and media outlets in the U.S. is to position themselves as victims of systems they control while fanning the flames of fear and hatred against those they depict as "others."

In the U.S., Black people, people of color, Indigenous people, immigrants, people with disabilities, queer people, Jews, Muslims, women of all races, and those of us who fit into several of these boxes are these "others." Collectively, we are most of the population. We are harmed by laws written by a **network of nonprofit** and political action groups and **moved through state legislatures**. The groups' stew of ingredients includes election denial, anti-gay/transgender legislation, voter suppression efforts, compulsory-birth laws, and gun rights fundamentalism. The mix reflects the strange alliance of Christian nationalists and free market libertarians it hopes to mobilize.

The result? Children are slaughtered while attending school, and politicians and judges continue to expand the rights of gun owners. Ongoing efforts to disenfranchise entire populations are intensifying (Black people and Native Americans, poor people, formerly incarcerated people, people with disabilities). Other groups are being banned from accessing health care (pregnant people, LGBTQ people) or representation in curricula (Black people, LGBTQ people in Florida). The U.S. Supreme Court has

stripped away long-standing rights of Native American tribes, people pulled over by the police, and pregnant people.

There is a patchwork quilt of legalized harms across the nation—producing red/blue-marked maps that reveal a nation divided. This is not new, but the rifts are expanding. People have different rights in different U.S. states. To reinforce states' perceived sovereignty over their residents, some state governments are proposing limits on **interstate travel** and online information in defiance of laws that define the nation.
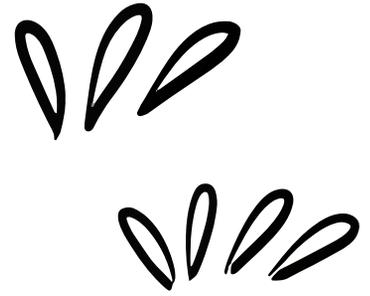
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U.S. politicians have been chiseling away at core liberties that underpin civil society and the nonprofit sector. Republican politicians pass state-level laws **limiting public protest** while **hiding the identities** of political donors. Other lawmakers are attempting to **outlaw charitable giving** on city streets. These efforts directly undermine philanthropy and nonprofits, which depend on both our liberties and the civic space they engender. Yet, nonprofit and philanthropy-wide advocacy groups don't note these concerns on their public policy agendas.

Twenty-first-century civil wars won't look like those from centuries ago. In the U.S., racism undergirds present and future schisms, as it has always shaped the nation.

Individuals and organized groups, armed to the teeth and calling themselves protected militias, are everywhere—at meetings of city councils, school boards, and libraries, and at state capitols and in Washington, D.C., threatening people and demanding control. Republican politicians blithely run for office brandishing weapons. Daily life in the U.S. is now marked by the presence of armed vigilantes pursuing nonexistent voter fraud and by armed individuals killing crowds of people while declaring their intent to start a race war. Scholars of protest are noting that even as the number of people-powered protests is rising, their success rates have fallen since the start of the pandemic.[3] A new version of civil war has arrived. Some are calling it a slow civil war and placing it in context of a new global cold war.[4] We in those "other" categories certainly feel the water temperature rising.

CURRENT STATE OF DIGITAL CIVIL SOCIETY

The *Blueprint* series aims to understand the roles that civil society—its places, rules, norms, and protections for collective action—play in democracies. Weak civil societies, and efforts to weaken strong ones, contribute to authoritarianism in its many guises.

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The year 2022 is closing out as a boom time for digital civil society. While the news (and people's daily social media addiction) has been focused on changes at Twitter, the flip side of the company's demise is newfound attention on its digital civil society alternative—the *fediverse* (see "Buzzword Watch"). The web servers that make up the fediverse are independently owned and operated, sometimes supported by small donations. Each server owner makes up their own rules for behavior; many outright ban connections to platforms dedicated to right-wing politics and hate speech. In the week following an ownership change at Twitter, the number of users of Mastodon (part of the fediverse) doubled. The transition was like watching history happen—as people habituated to the norms of a commercial, data-extractive, ad-based company tried to navigate sites built for other purposes. Given the federated nature of Mastodon, there are many different norms and behaviors, some as racist, homophobic, and misogynist as commercial social media and others that are dedicated to safe, inclusive community building.

The implosion of Twitter created a lot of harm for vulnerable people who had built communities of support and protest and humor on the site. It will take some time for people to find new places to rebuild or decide to stay put and push back against corporate changes. The Twitter/Mastodon story is an important example of technology built in digital civil society hiding in plain sight. Whether the fediverse thrives or suffers during this transition will become an important moment in internet history; those of us making the switch now have a role to play in how this turns out.

Digital rights activists have been warning about the links between digital trails and physical world rights since the 1980s.[5]

After two decades of growing digital dependence (and months of sheltering in place), the public is more attentive to basic rights of speech, privacy, assembly, association, and mobility. In the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling on abortion, Americans are realizing that today's pervasive digital trails portend a very different reality for those seeking health care services. Digital rights organizations are a small, oft under-heralded segment of the broader nonprofit and philanthropic sector. Their work now is increasingly focused on integrated alliances—between digital rights and health; digital rights and education; digital rights and immigration, housing, social welfare, etc. These intersections exist because of our digital dependencies. The joint advocacy, program development, and problem-solving that is happening is a critical step forward for digital civil society.

Our ability to come together, to speak freely, to protest, and to move through the world in pursuit of our individual and collective welfare is shaped by the way we regulate digital systems—whether the system consists of sensors and the data they collect, algorithmically informed decision-making, or the location data we generate by simple access to a mobile phone. Minoritized and oppressed groups have long known this. The list of those affected seems only to expand.

Governments seek data for numerous reasons and often carve out civil liberties protections from their own rule set, as when they collect data on citizens with neither warrants nor notice. Corporations seek market dominance by data. The only voices for a third perspective, one that centers individuals and communities, come from digital civil society.

> *Civil society must recognize that it is, and must be, a leader in how digital systems are designed, regulated, deployed, and prohibited.*

This is the logic that leads me to argue that *all* civil society needs to engage deeply with the public policies that shape digital systems. It is the only sector that has the incentives and aspirations to do so on behalf of individuals and communities. Civil society organizations and advocates need to discard the sense that they are passively subject to the outcome of digital public policy negotiations or technology innovation. Civil society must recognize that it is, and must be, a leader in how digital systems are designed, regulated, deployed, and prohibited. A small subset of the massive nonprofit and philanthropic universe recognizes this role. This subset of organizations has been leading this fight for decades. As our awareness grows of the extent to which all aspects of daily life are digitally dependent, so must the rest of civil society (regardless of mission or purpose) recognize—and join the fights for—digital tools and rules that serve individuals and communities.

DIGITAL GOVERNANCE FOR NONPROFITS AND PHILANTHROPY

As part of civil society, nonprofits and philanthropy are organizational manifestations of our civil liberties. How we govern the digital systems on which civil society organizations depend is existentially important to their continued operation.
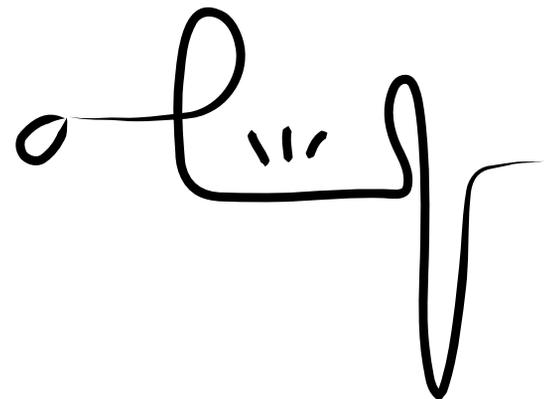
The core relationship between civil society organizations and digital governance is not merely one of organizational security (although that would be a good place for many organizations to start). It is one of existence. How we regulate and govern digital data and systems bounds the space—physical and virtual—in which individuals and communities can come together and act. Put more simply, the bounds on digital systems define civil society.

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What would it look like for all civil society organizations to follow the lead of digital rights advocacy groups and engage deeply with the public policies that shape digital systems?

Here is a short list of questions for you as an individual and for any organization where you work or volunteer:

- How well do you understand the digital trail you generate every day? What do you do to protect that information from being used against you?

- How well does your organization understand the data it collects and stores on everyone with whom it engages (staff, board, volunteers, community members, partners), and how is everyone involved in protecting that information?

- How well does your nonprofit negotiate trade-offs between safety, privacy, and other goals when choosing software (including using social media,

cloud-based tools, etc.) and hardware (mobile devices, computers, public-facing data collection tools, etc.)?

- How well do your organization and the associations of which it is a part understand (and act on) the digital ramifications of your work?

Here are questions you might ask if you work in any of the following fields:

- Children's programming: How do edtech and student data regulations matter to what you do?

- Environmental justice: How are data sensors and location information factored in?

- Health or mental health: What information that you collect is protected health data and what isn't? What sensor data (CCTV, building swipes, etc.) are you collecting on people, and how is it governed for their safety and privacy?

- Arts and culture: How are copyright laws and content moderation practices relevant to you?

- Disability access and care: How do the public rules on caregivers or home health aides affect your community? How might the medical devices they use double as surveillance of both caregivers and clients?

- Food and shelter: How are public allocation decisions being influenced by algorithms, and what due process or recourse is available to community members? How are location data or building access cards used to monitor people?

- Employment development: How are civil rights and anti-discrimination protections being enforced in the tools used by hiring groups?

The above list is a quick brainstorm of the intersections between domains of nonprofit and philanthropic engagement, digital systems, and individual and community safety and dignity. It is important, but not sufficient, to understand how these systems shape the work of those in your organization.[6] The workplace is one of the fastest-growing domains of software surveillance, especially as remote and hybrid work continues.

Even more important than how digital tools and rules affect those who work at your organization is how they affect the lives of those you purport to help. It's important to understand their intersections with your digital tools and rules. If your organization is gathering data (actively or passively) on the people you work with and not communicating clearly about the data you're gathering, what you're using it for, and how you are protecting it, you are extracting data from people and not advancing a public-good mission. If you are not doing your utmost to protect that data, you are making those people more vulnerable than before they connected with your organization. In other words, data practices that prioritize individual and community rights are critical, or your organization is doing harm, not good.

Nonprofits and philanthropy proudly claim the mantle of "doing good." How organizations within civil society manage the data they collect is central to determining whether those claims are valid.
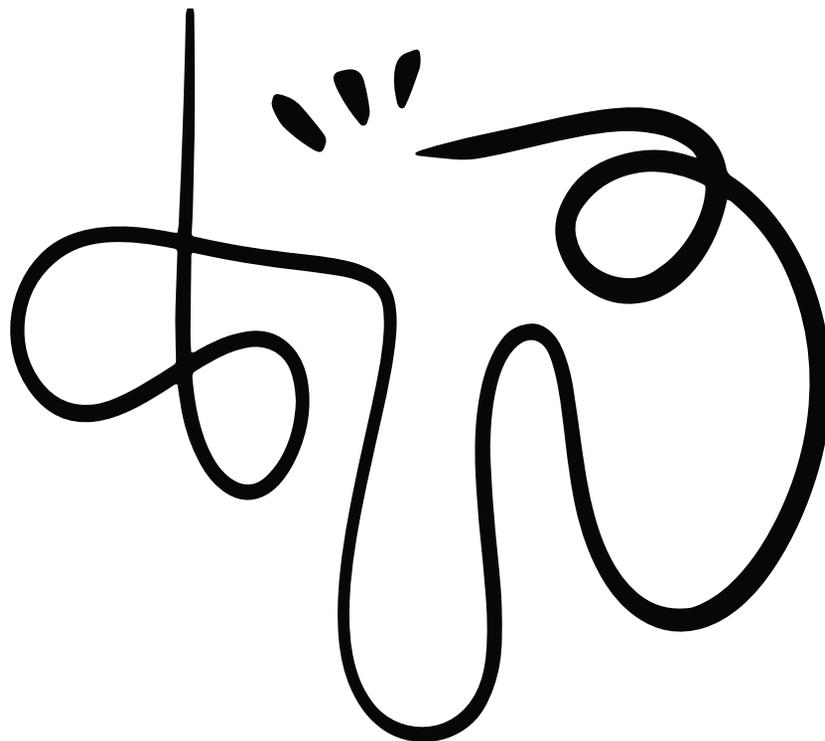
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INEVITABLE DISASTER: AN EXAMPLE

Examples are important in seeing how things can go right and how they can go wrong. I've argued that civil society organizations can and should be leading the way in developing governance procedures and even in creating tools that provide alternatives to the commercial and government surveillance and datafication models we've come to know so well. Just saying that doesn't make it so.

In 2022, a previously promising effort at using digital systems and data to serve a public good came crashing to ground. **Crisis Text Line** (CTL), a nonprofit founded to help expand access to remote crisis counseling, had long succeeded. It helped volunteer counseling centers add the capacity to communicate via text to their phone-based services. In many regards, this was the perfect case study for how a "simple" switch to digital unleashed enormous changes, both good and bad.

First, think about what's involved in switching from voice to text-based services. The caller—the person in crisis—still uses the same device, a cell phone. But rather than talking, they type. Same device + different use = big change.

Some of the positive results for callers are obvious. Texting is silent, so people can do it during the school day or while an abuser is in the other room. People can seek help in settings when phone calls would endanger them. From a provider's point of view, responding to text instead of phone calls also required numerous changes, some of which were also positive. Individual counselors could participate in multiple conversations at once. They could more easily work across time zones, helping them reach more people. They could seek input from supervisors or others during a session, to bring in more expertise.

Switching to texting from calling also raised enormous challenges. First and foremost, what should be done with all the text messages themselves? These are digital data. And the data act as records of callers' most vulnerable moments. They need to be protected from misuse in the present and future. Callers need to be notified of what is being done with this data. Protocols need to be put in place about what can and cannot be done with the aggregated results of millions of text exchanges.

Crisis Text Line had a board of directors filled with people who'd had commercial success in digital business, along with scholars of technology and data ethics. It raised significant money from philanthropists both in and out of the tech sector. It successfully partnered with **counseling centers**

across the country for more than a decade. It had, for a brief time, a data ethics advisory board. (Full disclosure: I was a listed member of this board until I resigned in protest over CTL's decision to partner with Facebook).[7] In other words, this was a nonprofit that knew how important its data was, knew how critical its data practices would be to its work, and was rich in money and expertise.

By 2021, however, much of this was being called into question. **Whistleblowers** were raising questions about data practices. The founder of CTL was replaced after widespread concerns about her managerial style were brought to light. CTL, a tax-exempt nonprofit, then spun out a commercial firm, Loris.ai, in an arrangement that first raised eyebrows and then regulatory concerns.

The software that Loris.ai sells was trained, in part, on the data it got from CTL. Put more bluntly, CTL was using the records of its crisis counseling sessions to train algorithms for a commercial software partner organization. In early 2022, the **Federal Communications Commission** demanded that CTL cease its practice of leasing subsets of its data to Loris.ai, which sells software to customer service departments.

There's more to how this came to happen, **what decisions were made**, and whether **whistleblowers were ignored**. There's an important interwoven story about privatization—as there's evidence that people associated with Crisis Text Line, a nonprofit corporation, urged the **government to support CTL's efforts** rather than create a similar government-funded service. This is, as Joanne McNeil wrote in *Vice*, classic Silicon Valley **technology company lobbying practice** (no doubt, other industries lobby in the same way). This quick recap of events is enough to point out that even a well-resourced, expertly staffed nonprofit that knew a great deal about trust, data governance, and data security made catastrophic mistakes in how it governed its digital resources. No one knows what harm may have accrued to those using the services. These data practices were so bad that regulators stepped in to shut them down.

We'll learn more about what happened with Crisis Text Line in the coming months. The most important thing for others in civil society to recognize is that the story of CTL was not an anomaly. It was inevitable. Every nonprofit has data that need protecting, but few have the financial or human resources to think hard about doing it well. If even a CTL could fall prey to the allure of earning revenue from data, then it's hard not to expect others to do the same.

The story of the Crisis Text Line details how even a well-positioned nonprofit failed to meet the challenges of data governance and was forced to end its data practices. These are precisely the challenges that are powering others to demand "inclusive governance" of data collected and used by nonprofits and other civil society associations. The Why Not Lab helps unions across the globe develop their data governance skills. Worker Info Exchange is modeling the use of worker data for labor advocacy. Proposals for data collectives, data alliances, data cooperatives, data trusts, and data commons are all variations on a theme: Those whose data is in the data should rule the data.

Proposals for data collectives, data alliances, data cooperatives, data trusts, and data commons are all variations on a theme: Those whose data is in the data should rule the data.

Civil society can develop and pursue alternative digital futures. Activist technologists and scholars can contribute. The public interest technology movement may be useful in training people to think differently about technological possibilities, and governments can write and enforce better regulations for tech companies. But the vision, commitment, and sense of urgency will come from civil society. Examples abound—from the Design Justice movement to the long-running Allied Media Conference; from Ubuntu-informed AI to Indigenous data sovereignty movements. There are many proposals for digital futures built around humans and human values and not around data extraction and market concentration.

The opportunity now is for inventing the new institutional structures, norms, and regulations for civil society and democracies that are digitally dependent.

The opportunity here now is to recognize that this isn't simply about data governance (not that that is simple). It's about institutional innovation—inventing the new institutional structures, norms, and regulations for civil society and democracies that are digitally dependent. Collecting, storing, analyzing, protecting, using, and destroying data is to today's civil society organizations what collecting and using donated funds and time have always been—core to achieving a mission.

Look at it this way—nonprofit corporations are distinguished from other corporations only by a very few tweaks to corporate law. The differences are few but significant. For example:

- *Excess revenue over cost (profit) must be reinvested in mission*. Individuals can't profit from the work. Profits must go back to the mission, creating (in theory) a sustaining cycle committed to mission.

- *Self-dealing is banned*. Individuals associated with the organization cannot materially profit from their association.

- *A board of directors is required*. In theory, this is for public accountability. While it doesn't always work, compare it

with private businesses, which have no such requirement.

- *Donations must come from more than a few people*. The public benefit test signals that the organization isn't beholden to (or the plaything of) a single donor.

These few regulations are what separate nonprofit corporations from commercial ones. These legal distinctions allowed the creation of millions of organizations that claim to serve a public trust. They are all focused on the finances of the organization. They say nothing about the use of data. Efforts to create data governance standards and practices that can earn the trust of the public are not window dressing. They are critical to the development of a trusted sector of institutions that will steward data in the public interest. Such organizational innovation is the greatest opportunity facing civil society in our lifetime— the birth of new organizational forms, dedicated to and capable of stewarding data for public good.

DIGITAL PLURALISM: ADVOCACY, ACTIVISM, OPPOSITION, AND CONFLICT

Experimenting with organizational alternatives is not the only role that civil society plays in shaping digital futures. It is the home of protest movements and efforts to create transparency in technology companies, such as the advocacy of Mijente and the Ranking Digital Rights project. Civil society houses many of the lead actors in efforts to de-monopolize the tech industry, from the scholarship of Lina Khan to the work of the Freedom from Facebook and Google coalition. The power of these efforts can be seen in industry's response to them, which includes setting up counteracting lobbying efforts, such as American Edge.

Civil society is also building new technological requirements and new technological applications. Civil society and academia are leading the work on algorithmic audits, algorithmic destruction, and enforceable forms of transparency for companies and governments. They are also home to participant-controlled digital tools, such as WeClock and Gigbox, two worker-centric phone apps that give workers visibility into their hours and wages.

> *The mechanisms and structures of civil society are being used both by groups of individuals working for the public good and by dark money-funded, top-down, deceptive campaigns that seek to reify inequities while wearing a disguise of shared benefit.*

The mechanisms and structures of civil society are being used both by groups of individuals working for the public good and by dark money–funded, top-down, deceptive campaigns that seek to reify inequities while wearing a disguise of shared benefit. For decades, civil society advocates have celebrated the ways that campaigning, organizing, and mobilizing people can be expanded and accelerated by digital tools. This is just one part of a complicated story. Scholars such as André Brock, Francesca Tripodi, and Wendy Hui Kyong Chun have revealed some of the shadow sides of the same methods. There is extensive scholarship on disinformation in the digital age, with more and more of it focusing on population-specific attacks (e.g., in the U.S. on Black people, Latinos, Asian Americans, and women; in other places, attacks focus on specific minority or caste groups). On every one of its issues,
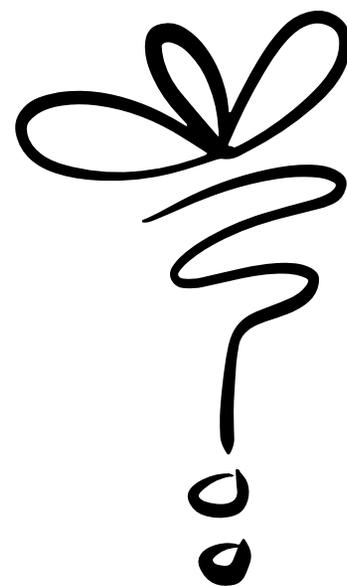
civil society must consider that the tools it uses may be the same tools used by its opposition, and it must also consider the extent to which online "discourse" is embedded in a marketplace **geared toward extremism**.

Focusing on and calling out opposition is common among political activists and much less visible among theoretically nonpartisan organizations and funders. I was delighted to see a series of articles in 2022 from *Inside Philanthropy* that presented the numbers of dollars and key funders on issues such as support for **abortion rights** in context with the key **funders and dollars** spent to oppose the same rights. For too long, the reporting on (and indeed the publicly visible strategizing about) the fight to slow climate change, educate low-income kids, feed low-income families, etc., has been presented as if fights for change were not countered by fights for the status quo, or worse. This doesn't serve anyone well. In a hyper-politicized environment, everything has opponents and opposition. Not mentioning them doesn't make them go away.

The key point here, of course, is that digital civil society, like civil society, is home to protagonists and antagonists on every issue. Sometimes, there are centralized, wealthy forces hiding behind the digital apparatus, making their ideas look like they have widespread support from lots of people. This view can be manufactured with greater and greater ease—using troll farms, the tactics of misinformation, and bots. The apparatus is issue-agnostic; it can be used by all.

Civil society, therefore, and the advocates within it who seek to preserve it, strengthen it, and reinforce

Civil society's rules need to protect its pluralism and its divisiveness—to see it as a place for contesting divergent ideas.

it, need to do so with an eye toward protecting pluralism and contestation. The rules need to protect its pluralism and its divisiveness—to see civil society as a place for contesting divergent ideas.

In reconfiguring the rules and regulations of civil society for the digital age, we can start with existing principles of pluralism, participation, privacy/anonymity, and collective action and then adapt them to the reality of global digital networks. It is here, at this deep level, that civil society advocates, democracy defenders, and digital systems experts need to work together. Current legal challenges (U.S.) to protect donor privacy, a core principle of U.S. charitable law, are being pursued to protect concentrated wealth, not to support widespread individual participation. These legal efforts are closely aligned with efforts to enable anonymous political contributions. Political laws and charitable laws are being layered on top of each other in ways that obscure the source of funding. The regulations of digital civil society need to be written in this legal context and in a world of digital data sourcing and reporting and of data scraping and transparency efforts by third parties.

New forms of digital governance will leak, seep, or be regulated into your nonprofit or funder practice whether you are ready for it or not.

This same form of contextualization is needed at the ground level of institutional innovation. We need to get down to the root level of how digital systems undergird our work, what data we collect (knowingly and due to defaults in the systems we use), and what our organizations do with the data. Some of this work is already underway in the form of data trusts, alliances, and cooperatives. However, most nonprofits and funders—maybe even you?—still think that these innovations are interesting but not relevant to your work at the XYZ Foundation or ABC nonprofit. Nothing could be further from the truth. The new norms of digital governance being tested in these trusts and alliances will leak, seep, or be regulated into practice for both XYZ and ABC before too long.

The need for purpose-built digital organizational governance is an enormous opportunity that digital civil society can meet. Digital civil society is creating organizational forms that center and protect the most vulnerable.

THE ESSAYS

—

The following five essays investigate components of digital civil society that are revealing the fissures between analog and digital norms. They continue this *Blueprint*'s focus on showing us where we are now, how it's different from where we were in the past, and how it's not where we may have thought we'd be. Importantly, they also allow us to see opportunities for moving forward.

We begin with a visual dialogue. It contains art created by a colleague using DALL-E and by the professional illustrator whose doodles appear throughout this publication. The second essay picks up where *Blueprint 2022* left off, looking at the "state" of digital public infrastructure and its implications for digital civil society and philanthropy. The third essay, by Aaron Horvath, PhD, looks at how decades of nonprofit and philanthropic attention on quantitative measurement contributed to a decrease in broad participation in civil society. Venita E. Griffin wrote the fourth essay, which looks at how the marketization of voting data underpins political and community campaigning, and how community organizers are vital producers of useful data. The final essay asks, what if democratic governance of data centered collectives and not individuals?

ESSAY 1:
GENERATIVE AI AND EVERYDAY TRUTH: A VISUAL DIALOGUE

Sabrina Newsome and **Amelie-Sophie Vavrosky**

Anyone with a broadband connection can now use generative AI (see "Buzzword Watch") to make text, photos, or videos. This raises questions of authenticity, ownership, and truth for both creators and readers. In the following scene, we meet a professional artist, Sabrina Newsome, as she uses DALL-E to help with an illustration project. First, Sabrina searches for images of philanthropists; then she asks a colleague from Stanford's Digital Civil Society Lab, Amelie-Sophie Vavrovsky, to try a similar search. They get very different results for their searches, none of them helpful.

For Sabrina, an artist, generative AI tools are exciting, useful, and potentially threatening to future freelance gigs. The rest of us will need to doubt the genesis of every image or video we see and learn how to identify those created using AI tools. It's also worth considering how these systems were trained—what data, from whom, and with what, if any, consent or contractual agreement? Can you distinguish between human- and machine-generated content? Advances in these technologies bring inspiration and fun, while increasing the potential reach and realism of malevolent fakes.

ESSAY 2:
DIGITAL PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE

Lucy Bernholz

There's a new term on the block: *digital public infrastructure*. At least four U.S. foundations—Omidyar Network, Siegel Family Endowment, The Rockefeller Foundation, and Knight Foundation—have significant funding streams and specific program areas dedicated to digital public infrastructure. The United Nations General Assembly took up the idea in 2022. I wrote about digital public infrastructure in *Blueprint 2022*.

We at the Digital Civil Society Lab hosted a three-day conference on the topic in 2020, building on a workshop on digital public goods we'd held in 2013. Scholars have launched research centers dedicated to the idea, nation-states (India and Norway) are writing about it, and the World Economic Forum is promoting the idea.

There are a few different definitions of digital public infrastructure (DPI). The Initiative for Digital Public Infrastructure at UMass Amherst says DPI means building "an internet full of spaces that are intentionally public, with economics and governance driven by their users."[8] The World Economic Forum describes it by analogy: "DPI refers to digital solutions that enable basic functions essential for public and private service delivery, i.e. collaboration, commerce, and governance. Think about our existing shared public infrastructure, such as roads and education, but online."[9]

> *A systems view of public digital infrastructure, including the tools and the rules, calls on us to examine how people and communities can be in control and have authority over the systems on which we depend.*

What the first definition mentions that the second one only implies is that a public infrastructure—digital or otherwise—is more than just the material pieces (servers, routers, devices, etc.) and the software elements (software-generated "spaces" on the internet). It is also the governance structures, values, and economics that oversee and support these elements. This is critical. This systems view—including the tools (networks, software, etc.) and the rules (decision-making, restrictions, and incentives)—calls on us to examine how people and communities can be in control of and have authority over the systems on which we depend. This is more than just developing alternatives to corporate-dominated platforms. It is more than just

legally restricting how government agencies can use the data they collect on people. It's a call to reimagine the whole. And civil society organizations and values are central.

DPI is a global idea. Digital public infrastructure, to some extent, already exists in that the internet itself has a governing body that's neither national nor corporate. There is a layer cake of governance groups with responsibilities for overseeing the internet. Some are global, nongovernmental bodies such as the Internet Engineering Task Force. Others, including the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), are formal corporations, the control of which has become fodder for international politics. Numerous other civil society–based associations manage various elements of internet oversight, from technical standards to human rights concerns. Theoretically, anyone can participate in the governance bodies of the internet.

This theory of participation is a long way from reality for predictable reasons of access, cost, and gatekeeping. Governance that is truly public exists at a small scale in many places. In the public digital infrastructure, these range from community mesh networks to some open-source software projects. The opportunity is to elevate, mimic, expand, and engage more people in more such opportunities. At their grandest, there are numerous visons for a wholesale alternative to the corporatized, government-monitored digital systems of today. As such, we can embrace the diversity,

pluralism, and fragmentation of existing efforts, for no one of them can possibly become dominant or the vision is lost. The vision—the intended outcome—is for a whole of many pieces, which offer people choices and influence and, in aggregate, form the competitive alternative to streamlined, centralized, extractive corporate products. Sasha Costanza-Shock, in describing this, refers to the Zapatista frame of "a world where many worlds fit." Success should be (if it must be) measured not in the scale of any single element, but in the multiplicity of options. In theory, philanthropy and nonprofits should be well-equipped to imagine, build, and communicate value in this pluralistic way. The corporatized approach to scale is an impediment to thinking this way and will require nonprofits and philanthropy to examine some of their core working assumptions while undertaking this work.
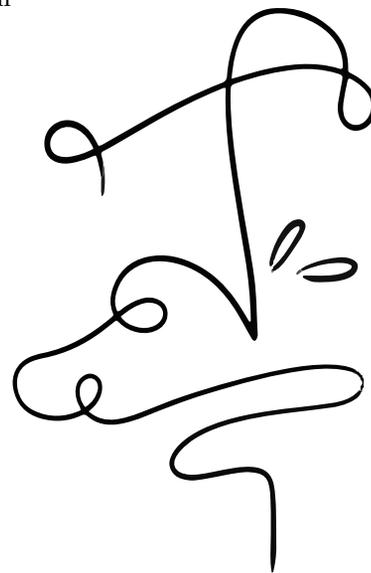
> *In theory, philanthropy and nonprofits should be well-equipped to imagine, build, and communicate value in a pluralistic way.*

In his 2022 book, *Road to Nowhere*, Paris Marx provides a useful framework for thinking about transportation systems. A transportation system includes vehicles, pedestrians, roads, tracks, regulations, regulators, fuel, market incentives, public transit options—all the pieces required for people to move from place to place safely and with regard to others.[10] This broad framework applies to other technologies as well— tools such as social media or internet search or storage or

> *The vision for public-centered governance of our digital infrastructure is for a whole of many pieces.*

email should be thought of as pieces of broad digital systems that include the tools, the providers of the tools, the incentives and regulations that guide those providers, and so on.

We need to think about digital public infrastructure within such a framework. What are the components of the digital part? The digital part gives us tools, regulations, and direct and indirect users (like the drivers and pedestrians in a transportation framework). The public part points us to procedures such as governance mechanisms and organizational structures, and to values such as access, due process, participation, representation, and accountability. The infrastructure part starts with shared necessity, responsibility, and oversight, and then adds values such as broad access determined by proximity and cost, and system characteristics such as safety and reliability.

A study done by Digital Civil Society Lab researchers Drs. Argyri Panezi and Jessica Feldman on open-source software and critical digital infrastructure for democracy notes an additional quality to be considered: How significant is the infrastructure? Governments around the world designate some physical infrastructure—often energy and water systems—as critical. This designation generally comes with additional levels of security and resources. In their work on digital infrastructure, Panezi and Feldman point to the technological infrastructure of elections as an example of criticality. Their work suggests that the critical digital infrastructure for democracy has a recursive element and must itself be governed through democratic processes. In other words, to use technology in governing democracies, the governance of the technology must itself be democratic.[11]

When technology is used in governing democracies, the governance of the technology must itself be democratic.

Digital civil society is home to several parts of an overall framework for digital public infrastructure—global networks testing new tools, communities (such as the one nurtured by New Public) that are both imagining and testing digital spaces. One example of a social network designed around safety and diversity is Majal.org. Digital civil society will also birth new organizational structures designed to govern and manage digital data for public purposes. Taking these three parts together, it's clear that discussions of digital public infrastructure can't be limited to topics such as alternative social media tools or open-source software. They are all pieces, not the whole.

The component of the digital public infrastructure movement that involves organizational innovation includes forms such as data trusts, open collectives, and Data Commons and is strongly rooted in civil society. These organizational innovations are being designed by civil
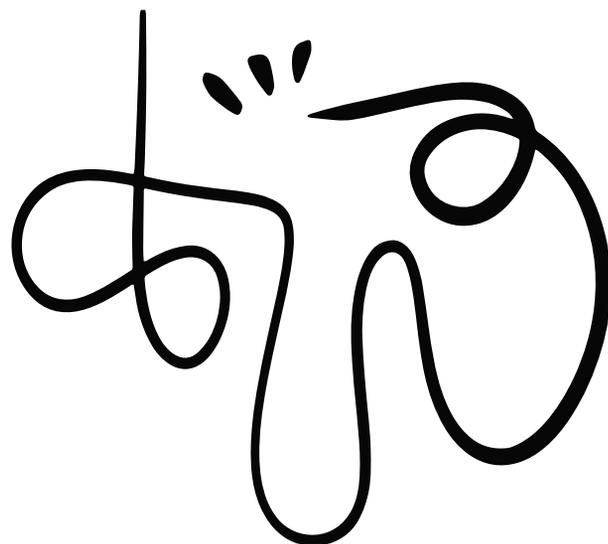
society activists and are being tested as solutions for managing "private" data for "public" good.

When I look at the innovative activity already underway to design organizations to manage digital data, tools, and networks for public benefit, I see the early formation of the future digital civil society. It's like looking at the birth of a star—what we see now with our most powerful telescopes are events of the past and foreshadows of the future. Digital data trusts, data commons, and others still yet unformed are the organizations that will come to dominate digital civil society soon. Just as nonprofits emerged as an organizational form to manage private resources of time and money for public good, so too will these organizational innovations develop as purpose-built options for managing digital data for public benefit.

> *When I look at the innovative activity already underway to design organizations that manage digital data, tools, and networks for public benefit, I see the early formation of the future digital civil society. It's like looking at the birth of a star.*

Which forms, if any, will "win out" is unclear at this point. Experimentation is fragmented and small-scale. Some efforts to weave them together are underway, including the work on governance mechanisms being done by digitalpublic.io. An enormous opportunity exists to foster and support broad experimentation with organizational forms and digital governance. Broad input will be needed to answer shared questions: What revenue models will work? What structures can be created if people want to donate their

> *An enormous opportunity exists to foster and support broad experimentation with forms and governance.*

data—how will people give data and how will organizations request it? What new laws or legal guardrails will be necessary? What sources of funding will be available? New consulting services, networks for individual innovators, and places to translate lessons learned to policy advisories are all needed.

Public infrastructure of any kind—analog or digital—is meant to serve all people. The choices of governance, oversight, and financing of infrastructure are what determine if the physical systems meet that challenge. Over the last decade in the U.S., several major cities, all with majority Black populations, have become unable to provide their residents with the most basic municipal function—clean water. In writing about the city of Jackson, Mississippi, which lost all access to clean water in August 2022, Kaitlyn Greenidge wrote:

> *As pundits scrambled to blame different political parties for the current emergency, the people of Jackson did what Black people in Mississippi have always done: They got to work imagining radical ways to help one another.... The Mississippi imagined and inhabited by Black folks and their allies has*

always existed in the tension between those two spaces—the chains of the past and the boundless imagination of what a future freedom might look like.

Greenidge goes on to introduce Maisie Brown, a 22-year-old Jackson resident and college student, and the water collection and distribution system that she and her friends established overnight. The rapid response was possible because Black communities in Jackson have been fending for themselves for a long time. As Greenidge quotes Brown:

> *It's a spontaneous community response to the mess of a bigger structural problem. "It becomes frustrating when you live in a state where it feels like the people who are in leadership don't care as much about you because you don't look like them," Brown says. Jackson is a Black, Democratic city in a state where political power lies in the Republican, largely white-led, party. "We are a community that is used to being self-reliant. So, there are a lot of people in this community who are always willing to lend a helping hand to others because we are used to not really getting that assistance that we need and deserve.[12]*

The networks of self-help and mutual aid that Black communities in Jackson have built over centuries are examples of community-accountable and -managed service delivery. They're necessary because formal systems of governing in the area relentlessly
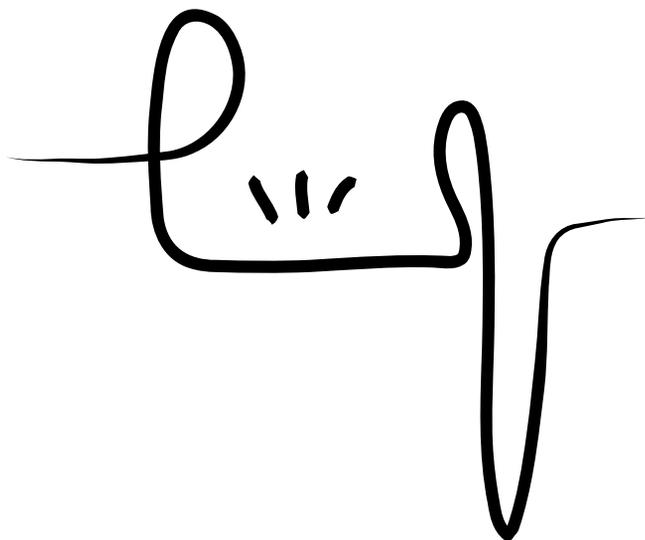
discriminate against and fail to serve Black people. These community systems are practical, functioning alternatives to current and former designed-to-fail, white-led systems. The water crisis in Jackson, Mississippi, is the intentional result of decades of racist public policy decisions, as are the water crises in Detroit and Flint, Michigan; on Native American reservations; and in majority-Latino neighborhoods of border cities.

City governments exist to provide basic services to their residents. Failure to provide water takes years of intentional underinvestment in basic infrastructure—underinvestment made possible by racist redlining and vulturous privatization. While the pipes may burst under the pressure of climate change–induced storms, the wreckage has its roots in racist exploitation. The same patterns are visible in many of the region's schools, hospitals, and energy grids.

As we imagine digital public infrastructures, we must reckon with the ways our existing public systems and governing authorities have consistently failed specific communities—and right these wrongs. The opportunity to build new digital public infrastructures is a chance

The networks of self-help and mutual aid that Black communities in Jackson have built over centuries are examples of community-accountable and -managed service delivery.

to repair longstanding harms. If we push our imaginations beyond the shiny new digital part of these systems and toward the components of access, equity, and justice, we have the chance to do something truly important: that is, to build truly public—fair, accountable, and inclusive—systems.

Great possibility lies here. Philanthropy can support digital governance experiments led by marginalized communities to ensure that their needs are centered during this period of experimentation.

Great possibility lies here. Philanthropy, especially philanthropy concerned with equity and justice, can support digital governance experiments led by marginalized communities to ensure that their needs are centered during this period of experimentation. Such efforts should also be supported to identify potential harms in advance and to use that knowledge to inform the development of regulations for safety, equity, and participation. Innovation from within digital civil society, firmly focused on protecting vulnerable people while pursuing the best that digital tools have to offer, can provide important new organizational and governance possibilities while burying the "pursue profits–harm people–fight regulation" cycle of most digital innovation.

These efforts to reimagine, redesign, and reengineer digital systems are more than meet the eye. They are intertwined with reimaginations of democracy, of community health and safety, of capitalism, of growth, and of life on a climatically collapsing planet. The gap between those served by the status quo and those whose daily lives and basic rights are threatened by it grows greater with every day that politicians act as if nothing need change. Another way of looking at these multiple movements for change is to imagine numerous doors open to participation—there are many ways into making change on small and grand scales. Given the syndemic nature of our climate, health, and democratic challenges, we can also seek out mutually reinforcing movements toward solutions in other fields. Looking at it in this light, we can see the potential of a reimagined digital public infrastructure.[13]
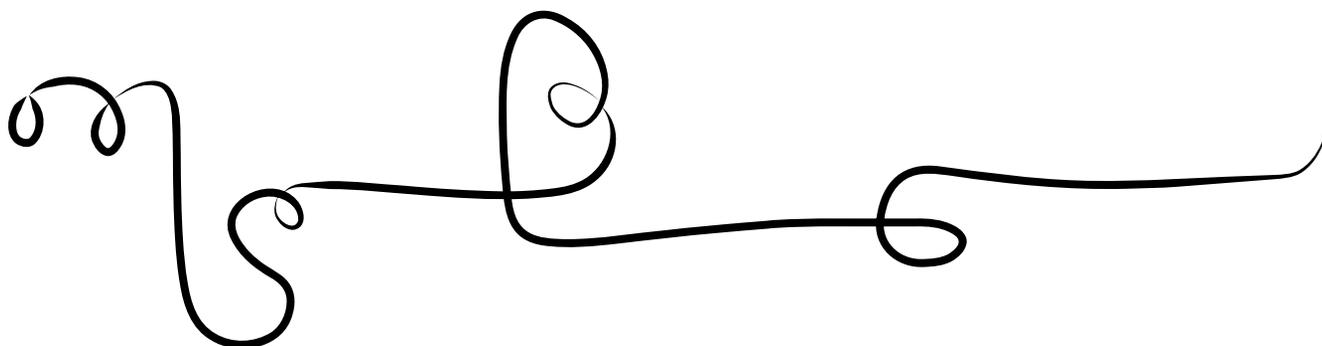
ESSAY 3:
COUNTING ALONE?

Aaron Horvath, PhD

In this essay, Aaron Horvath brings a sociologist's swerve to the decades-long debate about measurement and impact in the nonprofit sector. Horvath, a recent PhD colleague of mine from Stanford, has written extensively on foundation philanthropy and the transformation of the nonprofit sector over the last 20 years. In this essay, he looks beyond granular debates over types of measurement to consider a bigger question—how has the focus on measurable impact changed the way nonprofits function as sites of community participation?

A few years ago, members of the Stanford Civic Life of Cities Lab and I visited a children's health nonprofit in San Jose. We met with the executive director, who told us how she'd recently hired an epidemiologist to study her organization's impact. Asked what she expected to learn from the study, she responded, "Nothing I don't already know," adding with a wink, "I just want a stamp of approval."

Later in the visit, I met with one of the organization's social workers as she updated a spreadsheet with data from one of her clients. "What do you like about this job?" I asked, as she navigated back and forth between Salesforce and Excel.

"When I get to go out and interact with the kids," she replied.

"How often do you get to do that?" I asked.

"Maybe once or twice a year."

*

Over the last few decades, the principles and practices of impact evaluation have seeped into every corner of the nonprofit sector, fundamentally altering how nonprofits go about their work and interact with the people they serve. Tangled in a web of performance indicators, benchmarks, reporting protocols, and the like, it's easy to forget that today's obsession with evaluation is relatively new. Indeed, few of its major proponents—including rating agencies, metric-obsessed funders, and impact-peddling consultancies—existed more than 25 years ago. And yet this kind of evaluation is so taken for granted that it's difficult to imagine American civil society without it. But maybe we should. After all, we've grown so concerned with the practicalities of impact evaluation that we rarely consider why we do it at all or whether the practice itself has distorted our conception of civil society.

> *We've grown so concerned with the practicalities of impact evaluation that we rarely consider why we do it at all or whether the practice itself has distorted our conception of civil society.*

My argument, in brief, is this: The rise of impact evaluation is partly the product of a civil society in decline, but it also has accelerated the decline by institutionalizing intermediaries and reframing civic participation as civic spectatorship. While quantitative obsessions aren't solely to blame for a reduction in civic engagement and growing feelings of political malaise, they have contributed to a sort of civic myopia that has impaired our ability to imagine and collectively pursue positive social change.

It is important to recognize that the nonprofit sector's turn to evaluation did not happen in isolation. Rather, it was part and parcel of a much broader social shift in which formal and quantitative methods of verification (e.g., regulatory oversight, audit, and standardized performance criteria) came to dominate social settings that previously depended on more relational forms of accountability (e.g., personal experience, face-to-face interaction, and word-of-mouth communication).[14] In other words, abstract and numeric assessments now serve as surrogates for interpersonal trust. Indeed, when trust is in short supply—such as when social interactions grow diffuse or geographically distant—people turn to specialized intermediaries to vouch for characteristics we might otherwise appraise in person. Ineffable attributes like integrity, quality, and reliability become the purview of dispassionate analysts and quantitative rigor.

The nonprofit sector was not immune to these broader transformations. At the turn of the 21st century, four interrelated trends converged that helped set obsessions with quantitative evaluation in motion:

- Declining rates of civic engagement in the late 1990s and early 2000s changed how people interacted with organizations in the communities where they lived.

Scholars sounded alarms about how the United States, long celebrated as a "nation of joiners," was quickly becoming a nation of nonparticipants.[15]

- The growth of the internet greatly facilitated the ability of individuals to do from afar what they previously might have done in person. As people increasingly engaged with nonprofits online—through websites, listservs, and eventually social media—geographically bounded conceptions of community began to crumble.

- The start of the 21st century saw a growing interest in using for-profit means to achieve nonprofit ends. Management gurus, business scholars, and philanthropy-minded investors argued that foundations should take their cues from venture capital and embrace practices like risk assessment and performance measurement as a routine part of the grantmaking process.

- A spate of high-profile scandals rocked the nonprofit sector around the turn of the century. Reputable organizations like the United Way and the Red Cross came under fire for misleading donors, misusing funds, overpaying executives, and other abuses of public trust.

FERTILE GROUND FOR AN OBSESSION WITH METRICS

If, as scholars argue, quantitative evaluation tends to sprout amid dwindling trust and limited face-to-face interactions, then the nonprofit sector of the late 1990s and early 2000s could hardly have provided more fertile soil. As civil society became less involved, more distant, more abstract, and less trusting, formalized oversight, intermediaries, and
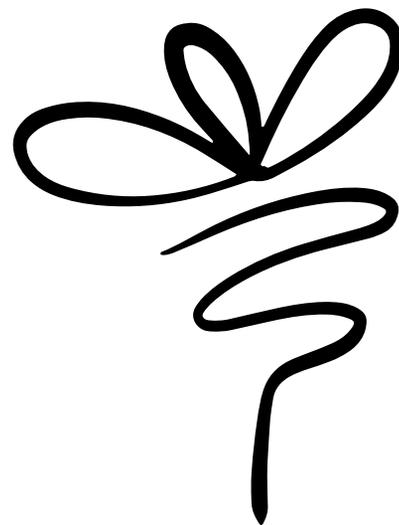
numeric assessments of organizational performance began to take root.

In 1996, after Congress mandated that nonprofits make their federal tax returns available on demand, the IRS (along with Guidestar and the National Center for Charitable Statistics) began digitizing Form 990s and making them available online.[16] The data allowed fledgling nonprofit rating agencies like Charity Navigator, the Better Business Bureau Wise Giving Alliance, and Charity Watch to calculate financial ratios and assign accountability scores in accordance with benchmarks.[17] Some raters went so far as to encourage donors to ignore what they saw with their own eyes and rely instead on the cold impartiality of financial metrics.

Taking a somewhat different approach, funders propelled program evaluation and outcome measurement to the forefront of nonprofit discourse. Foundations like Gates, Hewlett, Kellogg, and others built metrics and logic models into their grantmaking procedures and established dedicated impact evaluation units to assess grantees. The gospel of impact picked up steam as a new set of consulting firms, philanthropic advisors, and funder coalitions—like Bridgespan, FSG, the Center for Effective Philanthropy, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, and many others—began offering guidance to philanthropists and lay donors who were looking to maximize the demonstrable benefits of their contributions.[18]

In short, the explosion of quantitative evaluation occurred in response to declining participation in civic life and growing anxieties about charitable malfeasance. Through quantitative evaluations and simplistic metrics, the public could now keep tabs on nonprofits from a distance— no personal knowledge or face-to-face

interaction necessary. And if we take evaluation proponents at their word, these new practices would do more than help nonprofits to become more efficient and impactful. They'd also restore public faith in the nonprofit sector and perhaps even rekindle America's civic vibrancy.

CIVIL SOCIETY BY THE NUMBERS

In practice, things didn't go quite as planned. For one, the new evaluative demands wreaked havoc for nonprofits. From data I've collected with the Stanford Civic Life of Cities Lab—a research project that has been following a representative sample of San Francisco Bay Area nonprofits over the past two decades— it's clear that nonprofits felt "besieged by unrealistic demands" from funders and other outsiders that insisted on knowing their organization through its numbers. In interviews, nonprofit directors complained of evaluations eating up valuable time and resources and interfering with the actual work they had set out to do. As one director put it, "More time goes into the reporting and less time to actually working with people."

Making matters worse, respondents believed that the performance criteria by which they were evaluated were, at best, poor approximations of the work they did or the contexts in which they did it. In fact, 74 percent of nonprofits subjected to external evaluations noted major discrepancies between their own performance criteria and the performance criteria imposed on them from outside. As one respondent put it, "How can you have a measuring stick that is equally viable for the YMCA as it is for a 300-bed hospital?" One director made the point starkly:

> Let's say you have a kid who is rating very low because their behavior is awful. [Evaluators] will be saying, "Why are you spending resources on this kid? Your

program must suck … you haven't made a difference in their life." And they base [their view] on the numbers and not the fact that his dad beat his mom and his brother shot himself…. They'll conclude another organization's numbers are better. But that organization deals with kids whose parents actually talk to them.

With funders and evaluators designing abstract performance criteria with little sensitivity to nonprofit missions or to the specific communities served by the nonprofits, these sorts of mismatches became routine.

More than interfering with nonprofits' abilities to get work done, these mismatches threatened to alter the kind of work that nonprofits did. As scholars have amply demonstrated, avowedly objective measures do not simply assess organizations as they are. They also shape what matters to organizations and, in doing so, shape how organizations set priorities and allocate resources.[19] For nonprofits, the risk is mission drift and myopia. When performance metrics prioritize short time horizons, nonprofits might underinvest in their staff, forgo long-term organizational improvements, and falter in response to unforeseen community needs. Metrics that emphasize beneficiaries throughout undermine the relational aspects of nonprofit work and render service provision cold and transactional. And when performance criteria valorize easily countable

outputs and outcomes, complex and elusive goals become invisible to evaluation. Activities like encouraging civic engagement or building community will likely fall by the wayside.[20]

Beyond all this, the funder-centricity of so many evaluation efforts risk the pernicious effect of reorienting nonprofits around donors' whims, not around the needs of the people they serve. The familiar adage *What gets measured gets managed* rings true. But it also raises an uncomfortable question: *Who's deciding what gets measured?*

Perhaps the most damning effect of the metrics obsession, then, is that it has fundamentally altered relationships between nonprofits and the communities in which they are embedded. It didn't take long for nonprofit leaders to realize this effect. Respondents described the growing use of abstract and impersonal evaluations as corrosive to long-standing presumptions of good faith. They bemoaned that people are "much more critical of the product they're buying in the nonprofit environment" and "now want to know how we rank from an outside source." Directors lamented that "the world is going into numbers and trying to do things online that ought to be done in person," that their "lives have taken on this whole return on investment notion," and that people were becoming too easily impressed by glossy reports that bore little resemblance to organizational realities. The antidote, as one director put it, required "meeting the people whose lives we've impacted, hearing their stories, seeing the smiles on their faces, and seeing the glow in their eyes."

Avowedly objective measures do not simply assess organizations as they are; they shape what matters to organizations and how organizations set priorities and allocate resources.

But hope for such interactions was quickly fading. The growing discourse around impact evaluation and the common injunction that people should only contribute to "highly rated" nonprofits helped to delegitimize more participative forms of accountability, such as personal experience, active engagement, and word of mouth. It elevated intermediaries—expert evaluators and dispassionate rating agencies—as the primary means of ascertaining nonprofit effectiveness. And as that industry of intermediaries continues to grow, it has further cemented the idea that civil society is not a place for lay participation. It is a place for spectatorship and speculation where you comparison shop for maximum impact at minimum cost. This isn't just a transformation in how we evaluate nonprofits. It's an even deeper transformation in our collective understanding of what the nonprofit sector is for and how we ought to relate to it. A cycle ensues: We grow distant, we demand evaluation, we grow even more distant, we demand even more evaluation.

"showing [the public] meaningful examples of what the work does" and giving outsiders "opportunities to encounter" the organization from afar. There are inklings too that evaluators, raters, consultancies, and funders are beginning to change their tune and accept more textured understandings of nonprofit performance. Some philanthropists have also exhibited a change of heart and have, for example, updated their evaluation policies with the intention, as Hewlett puts it, of countering "the power imbalance that inherently exists between us and our grantees."

These changes are still underway and offer some hope. At the same time, while many now promote evaluation with a softer edge, merely experimenting with how we go about evaluation will amount to nothing if we fail to question whether evaluation is necessary at all. It's as if there's a lot of effort going into fixing evaluation itself and not the crumbling civic infrastructure that necessitated the practice in the first place.

BREAKING THE EVALUATIVE CYCLE?

To be sure, nonprofits haven't just stood idly by for the last 20 years while impact evaluation has transformed the civic culture around them. Many of them have worked to reestablish connections with the communities they serve, often using whatever resources they've had at their disposal. Some directors have, in effect, brought their organizations out to the community,

THE CIVIC LIFE OF CITIES LAB

The **Civic Life of Cities Lab** brings together scholars from around the world to understand the organizational building blocks of a vibrant civil society. A 2022 publication by the Lab, ***Special Collection: The Civic Lives of Cities Around the World***, published by the University of California Press, is rich with detail on the contributions of nonprofits in times of crisis. It draws on original research done in six cities—San Francisco, Seattle, Shenzhen, Singapore, Sydney, and Vienna, to examine how formal civil society organizations contribute to the vitality of urban life. Although the cities vary in political, economic, and social regimes, the authors find robust contributions being made by nonprofit organizations, even amid a global pandemic.

ESSAY 4:
COMMUNITY-ORGANIZED DATA COLLECTION

Venita E. Griffin

Venita E. Griffin, a Chicago-based community organizer and Digital Civil Society Lab Practitioner Fellow, argues that community organizers are the unsung heroes of political change, especially in this era of data-driven campaigning. This is because good organizers don't just use data, they are expert sources of it. However, because they now operate on the front lines of a privatized, profit-oriented market for political data, their own expertise is devalued, and the data they contribute is rarely used well.

Organizers on the ground, working for a myriad of movement- and cause-based organizations, are doing the challenging work of door-knocking, making voter contact, reaching the hard-to-find populations, and building robust local databases in the process.

And that personal outreach works. On both sides.

We saw the power of organizing when the "Blue Wall" crumbled in the 2016 general election; when Georgia "flipped blue" in 2020; and again this year when voters in Kansas, a "red" state, decided to keep abortion legal. Organizing works. And when combined with good data, it has the potential to shake up the world.

But good data can be hard to come by.

Electoral organizing data, even that used by the big political campaigns, often begins with what's pulled from the state voter files. Unfortunately, too many states fail to update their voter files on a regular basis. Organizers are forced to work with lists of people who've changed their phone numbers, moved, or passed away.

Making matters worse is the fact that voter data is highly partisan. There are a few firms that share data across the aisle, but most data sets are exclusively "red" or "blue." And private equity is in control on both sides.

DATA IS POWER

American democracy promises that we are all equal and that our voices matter and must be counted in free and open elections.

The U.S. has failed to keep that promise on many occasions, historically disenfranchising Black and other people of color, women, the poor, the formerly incarcerated, and more.
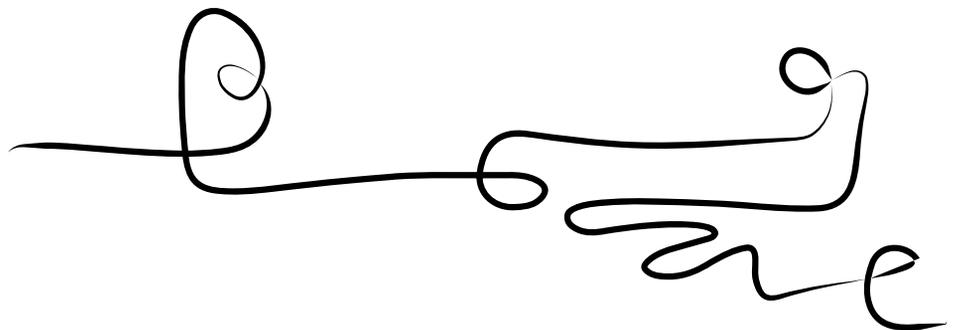
People-powered movements and the passage of time bring progress, and we move closer to becoming a truly free, open, and multiracial democracy. And now, with technology connecting us and disrupting every sector, progress is coming faster than ever.

Or so we'd like to believe.

Despite access to a dizzying array of firms and tools that aggregate voter and consumer data, the reality is that the absence of a racial and economic justice lens when compiling and using this data in the civic engagement space has only served to push historically disenfranchised groups further into the margins.

> *Because communities don't control their data, private equity firms that control voter data drive our civic engagement process, and it's moving us further and further away from democracy.*

Because communities don't control their data, private equity firms that control voter data drive our civic engagement process. This is moving us further and further away from democracy. The increasing commercialization of our consumer and voter data has turned the civic engagement tech space into a big business that many grassroots organizations can't afford to buy into.

PREACHING TO THE CHOIR

We often shame people for not turning out to vote or for being otherwise disengaged from the civic engagement process. But current civic engagement tools and systems are not set up to reach poor people, Black

people, and other people of color. In fact, most people probably don't know that the two biggest sources of voter data for either political party—and key to all political campaigning—are owned by private equity firms.

A recent poll from the Asian and Pacific Islander American Vote (APIAVote) surveyed 1,601 Asian voters across the country. Many respondents said they planned to vote in the November 2022 midterm election— with 33 percent saying they were "more enthusiastic" about voting in the election than they were in previous cycles.[21]

Alarmingly, more than half of respondents, regardless of political affiliation, said they had never been contacted by any major party—52 percent said they never heard from the Democratic Party, and 60 percent said they were never contacted by the Republican Party.

If you asked Black or Latino voters, you'd find the numbers to be the same. The two major political parties just don't reach out to certain groups unless there's a particularly close election.

It's easy to understand how and why this happens.

Both Republicans and Democrats work with large, private data firms to create databases of voter files, collecting information from state voter rolls, credit bureaus, and more to compile detailed profiles of voters. These profiles consist of thousands of data points that campaigns use to help decide whom they want to target in their outreach efforts.

The two biggest companies providing voter data are Data Trust and SmartVAN.

Take a quick look at the Data Trust website and you will learn that it has data on over

"300 million individuals and a unique data warehouse that contains nearly 2,500 individual data points, including hundreds that are unique to Data Trust's inventory."

SmartVAN is a hybrid product that brings together two powerhouse entities—TargetSmart Communications and NGP VAN—and, as per its website, provides "the most detailed and consistently updated voter information available to progressive campaigns and organizations."

The data compiled by these private firms and shared with campaigns and organizations contains information on whether someone voted in their last municipal, state, or federal elections. Because voters who participated in past elections are often most likely to vote in the upcoming cycle, campaigns begin their outreach efforts with them. This means there is a lot of "preaching to the choir" when it comes to outreach, and a lot of newly eligible voters and those who, for whatever reason, are disengaged from the process are often excluded from outreach efforts.

If you have unstable housing, don't use credit cards, and have a small or nonexistent digital footprint, then the data these firms can collect on you is extremely limited, and your voter file is practically nonexistent. The data imply that you don't matter in the context of the election.

WHAT'S RACE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Researchers at Brigham Young University and the University of Virginia recently analyzed over 400 million voter records from the 2014 midterm election and 2016 general election and concluded that voter turnout is segregated by race, politics, and age.[22]

So is voter outreach. Which came first, the chicken or the egg?
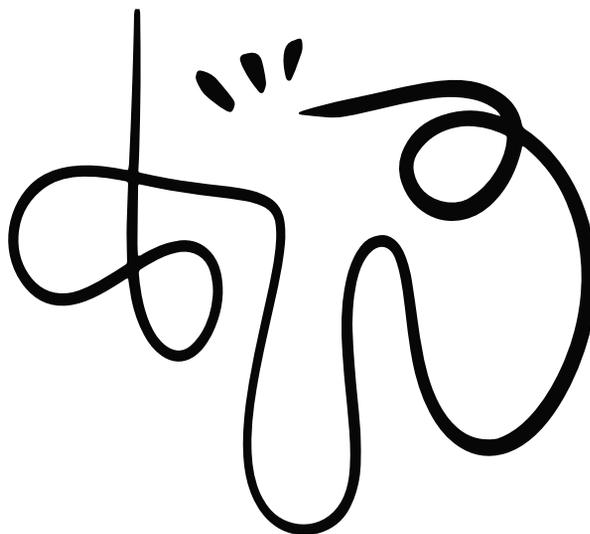
Campaigns often choose to focus outreach on zip codes that have high voter turnout. The thinking is, again, that previously engaged voters will be more receptive to mobilization efforts.

According to the survey, Black, Latino, and young people tend to live in "turnout deserts," communities with voter turnout that is below the national average. Knowing this, it's clear why traditional campaign outreach methods often miss these groups.

Private voter data will often guess a voter's racial identity (based on zip code or other data) or omit it altogether. This haphazard approach and omission are counter to outreach efforts because, for better or worse, racial identity is one of the most powerful predictive data points in electoral politics. Voter data that looks at ethnicity and groups within races is also lacking.

The idea of actively choosing to include race in voter data in this country, where race was used to disenfranchise people for generations, will make anyone feel uneasy. From housing to education to employment to medical care and beyond, this issue of thinking about race in terms of data is a complex issue, one that will need to be addressed in multiple ways. And while

we don't yet have a perfect solution, one thing is clear: Continuing to omit race from data sets does harm.[23] And when race isn't a part of voter files, it often means entire communities are left out of the civic engagement process.

BIG DATA, BIG MONEY

For organizers doing the work, data represents real people they need to connect with—supporters, volunteers, donors, and more. But for the multimillion-dollar companies that scrub and aggregate voter files, data is money. And lots of it.

Voter file data is available for purchase in every U.S. state and in Washington, D.C. Each state has its own guidelines regarding who can buy the voter data and what data is included.[24] Typically a file has a voter's name and address, as well as a record of the elections in which they have participated.

Depending on the state, the file may also contain your age, phone numbers, email addresses, previous political donations, and more. The price for these files varies from state to state as well. For just $35, you can purchase Missouri voter files that include a voter's name, birth date, address, and voting history.[25]

This is great for organizers in Missouri. Even though the data are incomplete and problematic, voter data files are very useful for fieldwork and voter engagement.

But when those same files get into the hands of for-profit companies and are married with consumer data, they can be a powerful source of information. And downright invasive.

Political data firms purchase and layer voter data files with information from credit bureaus, property searches, and their business partners (which often include Amazon, Google, and others). They add in smartphone location data, combine it with whatever else they can find, and then sell it to the political parties.

That data is then used by political parties and other groups to determine whether you are someone who supports or opposes gun control or abortion rights, for example; if you have the means to become a donor; and if you can be counted on to vote in an upcoming election.

There are several problems here.

> *If you don't have a digital footprint, you aren't included in outreach efforts, and your voice and vote are left out of the national conversation. If you do have a digital footprint, your private data is being used to make an alarming number of assumptions about who you are and what you care about.*

As mentioned earlier, if you don't have a digital footprint, you aren't included in outreach efforts, and your voice and vote are left out of the national conversation.

For those who *do* have a digital footprint, your private data is being used to make an alarming number of assumptions about who you are and what you care about. This is highly problematic, considering that you did not consent for political parties to have this kind of data about you. But they do have it

on you and millions of others. And they can use it to micro-target only those voters they deem most important at any given time.

ENTER THE ORGANIZER

If a grassroots organization has the budget to buy into a data service like Data Trust or SmartVAN that appends and layers data, it still must contend with the fact that the very people it wants to connect with aren't always found within those datasets.

Re:power, a nonprofit organization that trains organizers and organizations across the progressive movement, recently conducted a survey of over 350 organizers.[26] Survey respondents noted that data on populations that are pushed to the margins is often inaccurate and that data on those who do not vote, along with more granular data on communities of color, is needed.

Despite these and other data challenges, organizers do the best they can. In fact, because they serve as the boots on the ground, organizers typically have some of the best data on their local communities, with valuable information on some of the most forgotten populations. But that data often exists in a silo and isn't easy to share across communities, organizations, or issues.

How much better would our democracy be if organizers, who typically have better data than private firms, had the resources to build and maintain their own robust data housing and sharing tools? What if they didn't have to "re-create the wheel" for every outreach effort and had historical data that allowed them to measure impact? Then, what would voter turnout look like in communities of color and in impoverished and rural areas? How different would our public discourse be?

FULFILLING THE PROMISE OF DEMOCRACY

A hodgepodge of voter data laws across the country, questionable collection practices by data brokers, and national political parties' overreliance on third-party data, combined with little to no oversight into how consumer data is used in electoral politics, are making it more difficult to reach communities that have historically been pushed to the margins. Even as big data becomes a critical resource for democracy, the financialization of data means that critical information is not always available to redress existing harms and expand voter participation.

What can we do to begin to address these issues so that we can use technology and data in a way that builds a true democracy?
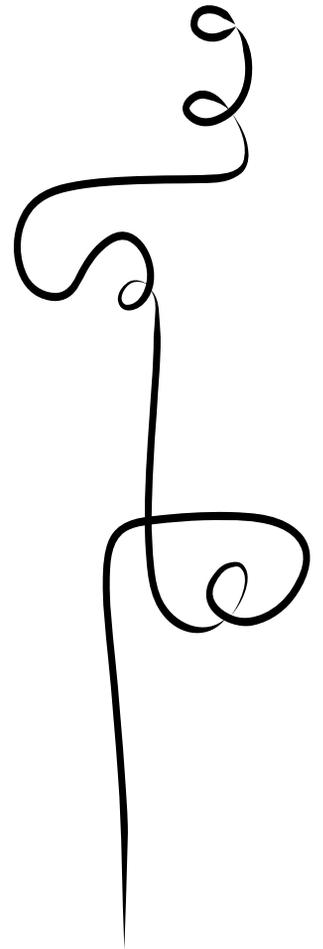
Organizers typically have some of the best data on their local communities, with valuable information on some of the most forgotten populations.

Most of the organizers surveyed in the re:power survey indicated that existing tools don't meet their data needs and they'd welcome support in conducting their own research and creating systems for storing data.

Rethink voter files. There should be a nationwide standardization of voter data files, including how often they are updated and who can access data.

Voter files should limit campaign access to data like voter history while including data like race and ethnicity.

If campaigns were restricted from accessing voter history, they might potentially be forced to do more and engage with a larger cross-section of the public. Similarly, if race and ethnicity were captured on voter data files, campaigns and organizers would be able to see which communities they were and were not reaching.

Fund organizations fighting to protect consumer data. Consumer privacy is a nonpartisan issue and should be funded at scale.

Philanthropy can invest in campaigns working to ensure that voter files are used only for noncommercial purposes. It can also invest in campaigns working to prevent purchasers of voter data from reproducing it, layering it with other data, and selling it without consent. Organizers need data to do our jobs. But this work isn't about getting data by any means necessary. It's about connecting with people on- and offline, earning their trust, and building data as we grow those relationships.

> *Organizers need data to do our jobs. But this work isn't about getting data by any means necessary. It's about connecting with people on- and offline, earning their trust, and building data as we grow those relationships.*

Investment in grassroots data collection and storage. Philanthropy can make a real difference by investing in organizations that train data scientists and strategists, working at the grassroots level. In addition, funding grassroots data-sharing tools for organizers will ensure that on-the-ground data collection is sustainable.

TWO VIEWS INTO DIGITAL CIVIL SOCIETY

Horvath and Griffin provide two new views into digital civil society. The effects of digital dependence run through both essays. Horvath sees in impact measurement a tool that elevates remote engagement over proximal participation. That remote engagement—and the industry of third-party measurement functionaries such as GiveWell, Candid, and Charity Navigator—is only possible in the digital age. It is a strong example of how "assuming digital" reveals a new way of seeing a familiar phenomenon—in this case, impact measurement.

Griffin, meanwhile, digs into the role of humans in a data-dependent world. The best data for political mobilization, particularly of communities long ignored by politicians, comes from community organizers. But that expertise—and the organizers' data contributions—are swallowed up by a privatized market that is designed to benefit its owners, not to reward and incentivize the relational work of changemaking.

ESSAY 5: DATA AND COLLECTIVE GOVERNANCE

Lucy Bernholz

We have an opportunity to build new digital public infrastructure. Part of that infrastructure is digital data itself. Both Horvath's thoughts on impact measurement and Griffin's essay on community organizers reveal important flaws in how nonprofits collect and use data now. We need to shift our mental model of data if we are to succeed in creating a just, equitable, and functioning digital civil society. Put bluntly, we need to see data not as a "me" thing but as a "we" thing. We need to incorporate the collective, communal characteristics of data into the laws we write, the organizations we create, and the strategies we use for pursuing social change.

> *We need to see data not as a "me" thing but as a "we" thing. We need to incorporate the collective, communal characteristics of data into the laws we write, the organizations we create, and the strategies we use for pursuing social change.*

For decades now, there has been a rhetorical fight underway about "my" data versus "the company's" data. We have been spinning our wheels about who owns what. Governments have based regulatory frameworks on unsatisfactory answers to this question, using regulations that protect individual privacy as a central concern and branching ever outward from there. But what if this whole model is broken? What if the idea of data as belonging to an individual doesn't make sense?

Most data that we generate as individuals—location information, search histories, texts and emails and other forms of messages, shopping history—can be linked both to us and to others. Communication data, for example, has both senders and recipients. My text message history "implicates" not only me but everyone I message with or even everyone in the address book of my device. It also depends on systems built by the telecom company, the device makers, and the software providers. It is regulated by the laws that govern those companies as well as their own internal data policies. Jasmine McNealy of the University of Florida describes this as the "ecology" of digital data, and she notes that we should think of data as representations of relationships.[27]

Legal scholar Salomé Viljöen builds on this recognition of data's relationality to argue that our current mindset about data (mine or yours) is misguided to the point of harm. Trying to write laws or develop governing practices that privilege individuals will never account for the harms that might accrue to many. What we need, argues Viljöen, is democratic data governance that centers the collective, not the individual:

We need mechanisms for governing data that involve the people who are represented in the data. Governing the data that is derived from people and used to shape our lives must itself be done democratically if the data and its uses are to be supportive of the bigger democratic project.

> *Structuring organizations to account for data's existence within a web of relationships might create norms and institutions that recognize the same truths about shared land, air, water, and planet.*

*Reconceptualizing the project of data governance from that of securing individual rights to institutionalizing collective ordering shifts the relevant line of inquiry. In the first instance, the question is how to secure greater data-subject control or better legal expressions of data-subject autonomy. **The new line of inquiry asks how we can balance the overlapping and, at times, competing interests that comprise the population-level effects of data production. This reorientation raises core questions of democratic governance: how to grant people a say in the social processes of their own formation; how to balance fair recognition with special concern for certain minority interests;** how to identify the relevant "public" or institutional level of civic life at which to coalesce and govern such collective interests; and how to not only recognize that data production produces winners and losers, but also develop fair institutional responses to these effects [emphasis added].*[28]

Very little data is now governed this way. Companies don't do this. Governments don't do it, though some have led participatory design or research processes to better inform their data practices. Nonprofits don't do it; they rarely make democratic decisions about anything. A new form of organization is needed.

Structuring organizations to account for data's existence within a web of relationships might create norms and institutions that recognize the same truths about shared land, air, water, and planet. By themselves, these impulses aren't enough to counter authoritarianism, though perhaps they can reinspire our commitment to collective self-governance. The efforts to imagine and create such communal ways of being instill hope. They are steps toward better futures, structural experiments building from today for tomorrow.
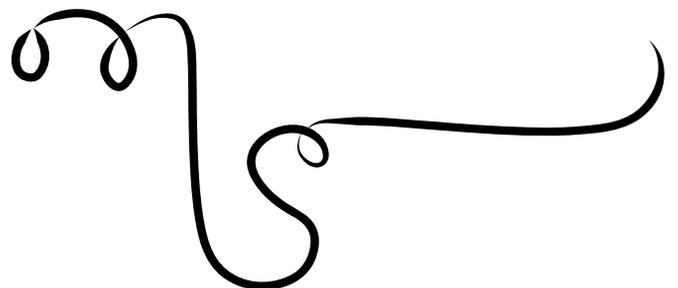
CONCLUSION

Warning lights are flashing red alerts on the inhabitability of the planet, the continuation of pandemics, the social harms of digital technology, stability amid inequality, and the state of democracy around the globe.

Despite how pervasive the warning lights are, institutional philanthropy and civil society show few signs of heeding the alarms. Even so, reasons for hope can be found. Philanthropy deserves some credit for supporting activists who for decades have been part of the science and policy domains warning of global warming and a coming age of pandemics (see *Pandemicene* in "Buzzword Watch"). Activists also monitor and warn about the **state of democracies**.

Other signs of meaningful change can be seen as philanthropy and civil society work to strengthen the state of democracy. Within **foundations**, for example, early commitments to **reparations** and **land back** efforts reveal organizations and their donors paying more than rhetorical attention to the power imbalances that pervade civil society. In part, this work follows in the wake of major endowments, mostly at universities, reckoning with their **slaveholding** pasts. Similarly, civil society and philanthropy are working on ideas, such as fighting for the **rights of nature**, that seem dreamlike now but will be mainstream by the 20th edition of this series.

Progress on issues such as government legitimacy, new economic approaches, inclusion, and equity are sometimes seen most easily in the intensity of the opposition. Concerns about the overreach of capitalism, the abandonment of public goods, labor rights, technological harms, and surveillant cities are met with **critical op-eds**, scolding defenses of the status quo, and even efforts to redefine broadly understood terms such as *diversity*. These disagreements are important—they are themselves signs of the pluralism of the sector. The more heated they get, the more you can be sure that the small, fragmented efforts at change are making a mark.

Another area where change can be seen is in what gets counted as giving. My own work on this can be found in *How We Give Now*, a 2021 book that looks at how everyday people define their giving. More important, groups that measure philanthropy in the U.S., including **Giving Tuesday** and the **Urban Institute**, have both expanded their definitions beyond tax-deductible donations to tax-exempt organizations. Opening the aperture on how we give is a small step toward recognizing the fullness and diversity of democratic participation.

At a small scale—within cultural and geographically close communities—people respond to adversity by showing up for each other, over and over and over again.

We are three years into a global pandemic. During this time, other viruses have taken hold in places where they were previously

unfound, and polio and tuberculosis, thought to be under control, are roaring back. At a small scale—within cultural and geographically close communities—people respond to adversity by showing up for each other, over and over and over again.

These long-standing community networks and bonds of connection generally operate out of the spotlight. For a few years, the big fad in philanthropy circles was attention to "longtermism," a concept drawn from the effective altruism movement and utilitarian philosophy (see "Buzzword Watch"). There was big money driving this attention—in two ways. First, proponents of effective altruism (EA) controlled a lot of money (July estimates, which basically added together the fortunes of two entrepreneurs, between $26 billion and $30 billion).[29] By November 2022, those estimates were worthless, as crypto billionaire Sam Bankman-Fried's companies and wealth collapsed and Elon Musk's destruction of Twitter hit him in his bank account. Second, wealthy proponents of EA were buying attention to EA through political contributions, philanthropy, and media investments. Following the debacles by Musk and Bankman-Fried, the EA community is now defending itself against fraud and facing an uphill battle for positive attention. Meanwhile, no one is buying press about philanthropy focused on equity, inclusion, or legitimacy—yet mutual aid networks and community-led efforts are saving and sustaining life. Where, I wonder, might the money come for the proud, inclusive messages about vibrant futures for all that are abundant among Black feminists and Indigenous communities?
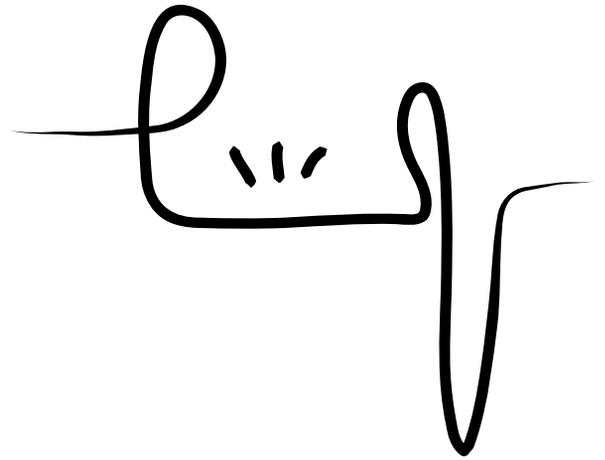
The layoffs at technology companies in late 2022, along with the collapse of cryptocurrency exchange FTX and the cracks in the dominance of Meta (née Facebook), create an incredible opportunity for digital civil society. As the commercial behemoths stumble, everyday people are getting a glimpse of alternative ways to connect online. The rise in workplace surveillance is opening people's eyes to the degree to which their access to privacy has eroded. An infrastructure of academic centers now exists to engage with and support technologically skilled and socially aware professionals looking to make a positive social impact. The networks of people working on re-decentralizing the web, rebooting social media, or reclaiming digital public infrastructure are ready to welcome in new partners and navigate between the cracks (and rubble) of former leviathans to build publicly owned, publicly maintained, and safer digital systems.

This is an important moment for digital civil society and philanthropy. It is a moment for digital systems that protect individuals, that prioritize safety and autonomy, and that distribute rather than extract wealth.

This is an important moment for digital civil society and philanthropy. It is a moment to highlight the work of funders focused on justice and just societies, or on digital rights, or on the digital implications for their other programs. It is a moment to help digital rights organizations move from defense to offense. Just as renewable energy has moved out of the shadows into mainstream investment opportunity, so digital systems that protect individuals, that prioritize safety and autonomy, and that distribute rather than extract wealth are ripe for this moment.

Make no mistake. There are opportunities now to build and foster a more just and humane set of digital experiences. Simultaneously, there are powerful commercial forces moving as quickly as they can to take advantage of weakness in the century's giants. For example, the rapid growth of Mastodon is **already attracting investors**, sending some old-time users off to build (again) something new, and is causing a clash of norms between users. It's rare that philanthropic capital moves quickly,

although funders have demonstrated their ability to do so during natural disasters, in pandemics, and against (some) threats to democracy. Looking at this moment in digital history, it would be thrilling to see concerted efforts to support community-controlled, public-interest-oriented digital systems, as well as the legal codes, regulations, governance, and financing mechanisms needed to sustain them.

We face extraordinary opportunities—there's never been a better time to reinvent energy, health care, and democracy.

We face extraordinary opportunities—there's never been a better time to reinvent energy systems, health care, education, and democracy. Experimentation is opening doors for broad participation and new sources of new ideas. Philanthropy and digital civil society are both sources and beneficiaries of the changes this moment needs.
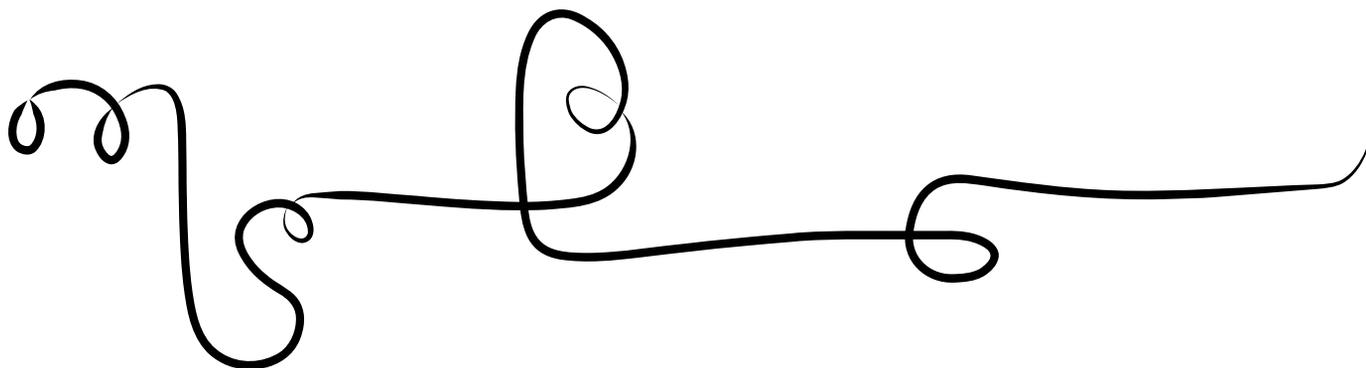
BUZZWORD WATCH

As always, this section provides food for thought on meaningful trends and momentary hype at the intersection of technology, philanthropy, and civil society. Here are 10 buzzwords to listen for in the year ahead.

Algorithmic destruction. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the European Union introduced many people to the idea of having their online data destroyed. Building on that, some activists are calling for the **destruction** of algorithms that are found to be discriminatory or harmful, sometimes along with the data sets on which they were trained. As with all things digital, the ripple effects of this complicate the idea.

Attack philanthropy. The phrase was coined by Barre Seid, the electronics billionaire who "gave" $1.6 billion to the Marble Freedom Trust and put an archconservative kingmaker in charge of it. An article by ProPublica credits Seid with the term, which he **defined** as "looking for ways to place financial bets that had the potential to make epochal change." Seid set a new bar for using the tax code and disclosure laws to advance his political interests while protecting his privacy. Absent significant regulatory changes regarding philanthropy and political activity, this kind of tax-avoidant, dark money giving will only grow.

Family office. DAFs? LLCs? Those are old "new" innovations in philanthropy. Real power now lies in family offices. Billionaires use their offices for everything from investments to household budgets to hiring butlers and airplane captains. Philanthropic advisors—along with political and investment advisors—are folded into these offices. Family offices add yet another layer of obscurity to how the super-wealthy manage their money and give it away.

Fediverse. This is the interconnected web of independent servers for web and file hosting that enables people to communicate, share photos and videos, make new connections, and interact online. It has existed since 2008. The number of users of Mastodon, one part of the fediverse, almost doubled in the week following Elon Musk's purchase of Twitter. *Fediverse* is a portmanteau of *federated* and *universe*.

Generative AI. These are artificial intelligence systems that take existing information and create something new from it. The "something new" may be images, videos, text, or anything that can be digitized. Prominent examples for images include **DALL-E 2** (which has been used in this *Blueprint*), **Stable Diffusion**, **Craiyon**, and **Midjourney**; for text there are **GPT-3** and countless applications for writing ad copy, software code, and drafts of legal documents; for video there are **Make-A-Video** (built by the company that owns Facebook), **Movio**, and others.

Longtermism. Longtermism, meant to encourage people today to give priority to people in the long term future, is part of effective altruism (EA), a utilitarian philosophy promoting giving that seeks the greatest good, usually measured with some form of cost-benefit analysis. In 2022, well-funded proponents of the idea placed themselves on **podcasts**, launched **news platforms**, invested in **existing online sites**, and attached themselves to **social media–made personalities**. The collapse of FTX, a major crypto exchange, and the bankruptcy of its owner, led to the simultaneous **collapse of the FTX Future Fund**, a major funder promoting both EA and longtermism.

Pandemicene. A name for **this era in human history**, one that will be shaped by multiple, ongoing, and overlapping health pandemics. These pandemics are believed to be driven in part by the damage to the global climate and the shifts that the damage is causing among habitats for creatures great and small.

Predatory Inclusion. The phrase is inherently oxymoronic, yet crypto enthusiasts use it sincerely. The crypto industry uses the phrase to tout promises of a whole new financial system, but they are speaking out of both sides of their mouth. The inclusion part is meant to position the potential for crypto to aid communities that have been harmed by the immense inequity of existing financial systems. The predatory part speaks to the reality that crypto has made a few people ridiculously rich while leaving others worse off than before. The idea can be generalized to other systems that concentrate power behind the scenes while promising accessibility and "democratization."

Protestware. The term took off after Russia invaded Ukraine. Recognizing how pervasive open-source software code is, activist coders deliberately corrupt parts of open-source libraries to **cause systems to fail** and to express their objections to Russia's actions. This is an extreme example, but it illustrates why the promise of open-source software requires attention to its governance as well as its code.

Regenerative [fill in the blank]. You've heard of regenerative agriculture—a type of farming designed to rejuvenate the health of the soil and everything it produces. In addition to agriculture, I've seen the adjective *regenerative* applied to **technology**, finance, and medicine. The word seems to be rapidly becoming as vapid a descriptor as *impact*.
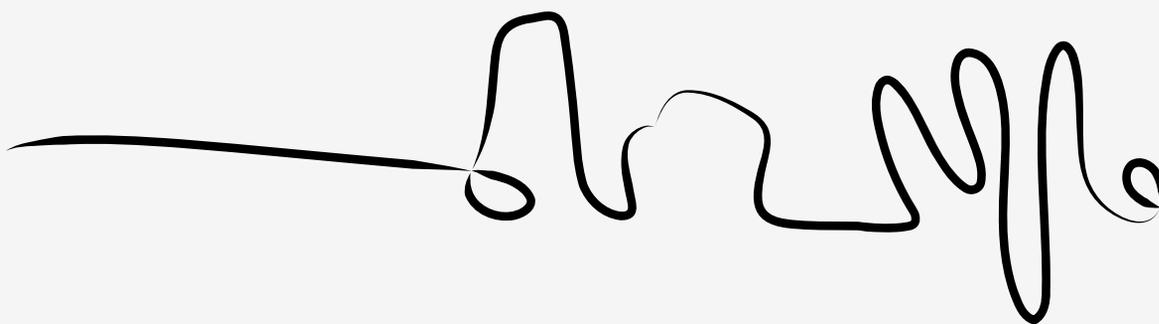
PREDICTIONS FOR 2023

Here are 10 predictions for philanthropy and digital civil society in the year ahead.

- There will be a boom in *cy pres* funding for nonprofits. Courts will order the creation of philanthropic funds from the settlements born of class action defamation suits (*United States v. Alex Jones*, *Dominion Voting Systems v. Fox*, etc.) and frivolous cases linked to the former president of the U.S. These will follow along the lines of previous court-created funds in tobacco, big tech and privacy, and elsewhere.

- The hype about crypto giving will die down as the rest of the crypto world deals with the fallout of massive fraud and collapsing value. It's worth being on alert to the likelihood that "do good" crypto hype will rise as a tactic for a battered industry.

- Trusts will return to fashion, especially as a way of creating funding sources for both philanthropy and politics, following in the footsteps of the **Patagonia Purpose Trust** and the **Marble Trust**. (See also prediction for Twitter, Inc., below.)

- Legislative and regulatory attention will turn to ensuring external access to corporate data. Election interference and **Meta's stranglehold on CrowdTangle** is the start, but data from **vehicles and transportation regulations**, "smart" devices and energy use, and individual wearable/phone/watch data for public health reasons are near frontiers.

- Twitter will cease to exist in any meaningful form. Some of its code and assets may wind up in a trust (see above), or lawsuits against the company's new owner might produce trusts.

- Technology companies' 2022 layoffs will set the table for another cycle of start-up hype, accompanied by a smaller burst of "tech for good" initiatives led by those who've lost their jobs.

- Labor fights against surveillance technology, in both white- and blue-collar settings (do those terms still mean anything?), will increase globally, including within the nonprofit sector.

- Experiments in ways to **pay to own digital artifacts** will continue beyond the NFT-hype cycle. This will include a growth in platforms such as **Patreon**, but also in **cooperative ownership models** and ways to pay for the **future value** of artists, journalists, and others. There's a great opportunity here for funders to reimagine capital markets beyond copyright.

- Effective altruism will return to being a niche interest of quant jocks and philosophers.

- Foundation and nonprofit workplaces, including those that stay as hybrids of in-person and remote work, will begin to adapt to the needs of disabled and chronically ill colleagues.

SCORECARD: RENOVATIONS TO 2022 PREDICTIONS

Making predictions is still a pretentious, but fun, thing to do. Holding myself accountable? Less fun, but that's how I do it.

PREDICTION	RIGHT	WRONG	NOTES
We will see more high-profile cases of philanthropic renaming.	✔		Some of this is a continuation of renaming efforts related to the Sackler family. Others are around slaveholding or genocide against Indigenous populations.
Crypto donations will increase.	✔		One notable change in this space was the takeover of the BitGive Foundation by Heifer International.
Restrictions on the right to protest will increase.	✔		In the U.S. and in other countries.
The number of collectives will increase.	✔		Cooperatives and mutual aid efforts also continue to grow in number.
Accountability for foundation pledges on racial equity will continue.	✔		Work started in 2020 continues.
We can expect more independent **foundation accountability projects**.	✔		This includes media reporting that contextualizes funding on one side of an issue with funding on the other side of the issue.
We will see more **hybrid public art projects**.	✔		
NFTs will boom for another year, then bust.		✔	The bust came in 2022, so I was off by a year on this one.
Gazillionaires will continue to move away from establishing foundations and toward LLCs and donor-advised funds.	✔		Use of family offices also grew.
More people from the tech industry will resign in disgust and establish their own nonprofit organizations to propose solutions to the harms of their former employers.		✔	I don't know that many new organizations were created in 2022. Many people may have resigned in disgust, but I don't know where they went.

NOTES

1. Draftsmen don't really exist anymore in the age of computer-aided design (CAD). This was just coming into practice at the time I'm referring to, and there were still people (the ones I knew were all men) who hand-drew every draft of every floor plan. They've gone the way of typing pools.

2. There's an old myth that if you put frogs into a pot of cold water and slowly raise the temperature, they won't jump to safety until it's too late. It's a myth, but a persistent one. https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2006/09/the-boiled-frog-myth-stop-the-lying-now/7446/

3. Erica Chenoweth, "Can nonviolent resistance survive COVID-19?" *Journal of Human Rights* 21, no. 3 (2022): 304–16, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14754835.2022.2077085.

4. See Jeff Sharlet, *The Undertow: Scenes from a Slow Civil War* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2023); and Michael Hirsch, "We Are Now in a Global Cold War," *Foreign Policy*, June 27, 2022, https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/27/new-cold-war-nato-summit-united-states-russia-ukraine-china/.

5. See Lucy Bernholz, "The Invention of Digital Civil Society," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Summer 2019, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_invention_of_digital_civil_society.

6. The Digital Civil Society Lab's Upgrade initiative provides more resources for organizational learning. Find them at https://digitalimpact.io/the-upgrade-initiative/.

7. I resigned from the ethics advisory when CTL arranged to be accessible via Facebook Messenger. I disagreed with the organization's analysis of the importance of reach over safety.

8. https://publicinfrastructure.org

9. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/08/4-reasons-you-should-care-about-digital-public-infrastructure/

10. Paris Marx, *Road to Nowhere: What Silicon Valley Gets Wrong about the Future of Transportation* (New York: Verso Books, 2022).

11. See https://digitalinfrastructure.fund/projects/what-makes-an-open-source-project-critical-digital-infrastructure.

12. Kaitlyn Greenidge, "What It's Like to Lose Water in Jackson, Mississippi," *Harper's Bazaar*, September 1, 2022, https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/features/a41054440/what-its-like-to-lose-water-in-jackson-mississippi/.

13. *Syndemic* refers to multiple interrelated epidemics happening at the same time and in a population already made vulnerable due to social stigma or other causes. In a syndemic, the individual challenges feed on and mutually exacerbate one another.

14. Scholars have variously described this shift as the "audit explosion" or the "audit culture." For more, see Michael Power, *The Audit Society: Rituals of Verification* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1997); Marilyn Strathern, *Audit Cultures: Anthropological Studies in Accountability, Ethics and the Academy* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Wendy Espeland and Berit Vannebo, "Accountability, Quantification, and Law," *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 3, no. 1 (2007): 21–43; Richard Rottenburg et al., *The World of Indicators: The Making of Governmental Knowledge through Quantification* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

15. See Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000). Also see Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003).

16. In effect, the repository was the nonprofit analogue to the SEC's recently developed EDGAR database for publicly traded companies. The for-profit inspiration was evident in other regulatory efforts as well. Some states, following in the mold of Sarbanes-Oxley, mandated that nonprofits undergo financial audits and fulfill extensive reporting requirements. California's Nonprofit Integrity Act (2004) required annual audits for nonprofits with more than $2 million in revenue, mandated the creation of independent audit boards, and ordered that certain fundraising activities be registered with the state's attorney general. For more, see Dana Reiser, "There Ought to Be a Law: The Disclosure Focus of Recent Legislative Proposals for Nonprofit Reform," *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 80 (2005): 559–612.

17. Basically: Low overhead was indicative of a trustworthy and efficient nonprofit worth supporting. High overhead meant the organization should be avoided.

18. Other contemporaneous influences include the rise of social entrepreneurship and other such forms of mission-driven capitalism. The rise of impact investing—and its associated measurement criteria like IRIS and GIIRS—helped to valorize standardized measurement in ways that bled into philanthropic thinking. Recent years have seen a growing interest in (and organizational infrastructure for) effective altruism. Most notably, GiveWell, founded in 2007 by former hedge fund managers, took the idea of charity rating to a higher level of rigor.

19. Sociologists have demonstrated this across a number of sectors, most notably by looking at how law schools have responded to the criteria in *U.S. News & World Report*'s annual rankings. See Wendy Espeland and Michael Sauder, *Engines of Anxiety: Academic Rankings, Reputation, and Accountability* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2016).

20. See Kennard Wing and Mark Hager, "Getting What We Pay For," Urban Institute, 2004; Lehn Benjamin, "Nonprofit Organizations and Outcome Measurement: From Tracking Program Activities to Focusing on Frontline Work," *American Journal of Evaluation* 33, no. 3 (2012): 431–47; Jennifer Mosley, Nicole Marwell, and Marci Ybarra, "How the 'What Works' Movement Is Failing Human Service Organizations and What Social Work Can Do to Fix It," *Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership and Governance* 43, no. 4 (2019): 326–35.

21. 2022 Asian American Voter Survey, https://apiavote.org/2022-asian-american-voter-survey-launch/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=2022-asian-american-voter-survey-launch.

22. https://news.byu.edu/intellect/400-million-voting-records-show-persistent-gaps-in-voter-turnout-by-race-age-and-political-affiliation

23. This is one of many reasons why organizations like the Algorithmic Justice League, Allied Media, Data for Black Lives, and Distributed AI Research (DAIR), and research coalitions like the Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency group of computer scientists, are so important.

24. Currently, 31 states have open availability, meaning they have no restrictions on who can purchase their voter file data. Sixteen states have mixed availability, meaning certain types of individuals or groups can purchase information from voter file data that is unavailable to others. And four states have restricted availability, meaning only certain types of individuals or groups are allowed to purchase voter file data.

25. https://ballotpedia.org/Availability_of_state_voter_files

26. https://repower.org/2022-organizer-survey/

27. Jasmine McNealy, "An Ecological Approach to Data Governance, YouTube, Databite 127, New York, January 8, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jB5_NrdWH7k&w=560&h=315.

28. Salomé Viljöen, "A Relational Theory of Data Governance," *Yale Law Journal* 131, issue 2 (November 2021): 638.

29. These estimates, as far as I can tell, came from adding together the wealth of two people, Dustin Moscovitz and Sam Bankman-Fried BEFORE the collapse of Bankman-Fried's companies and his loss of $20 billions in November. See https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2022/8/8/23150496/effective-altruism-sam-bankman-fried-dustin-moskovitz-billionaire-philanthropy-crytocurrency.