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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## Opportunity

Everyone's online, all the time. Digital rights are more important than ever. The work digital rights organizations do is mainstreaming, and there's a massive opportunity to reach and mobilize larger audiences in ways that weren't imaginable ten years ago. Additionally, we see the effects of digitization everywhere. We no longer have to call out potential risks, but (unfortunately) can find, and then point to, the concrete evidence of digital wrongdoing. This evidence can strengthen our advocacy work in new, more emotive and convincing ways.

In order to make the most of these opportunities, we need better digital tools and corresponding strategies. We need to first modernize the digital rights field's basic infrastructure, followed by expanding our research- and communications toolkits. Besides strengthening our own organizations and increasing our field's impact, modernizing our digital tooling will also have a spillover-effect onto broader civil society, and contribute to the growing civic tech field.

## Steps taken

This research departed from the hypothesis that the digital rights field is not making optimal use of technology to achieve its goals. Furthermore, based on requests we receive from non-digital rights organizations, our assumption was that this is a problem beyond the digital rights field.

We interviewed 19 digital rights organizations, including ourselves, and mapped organizations' current use of digital tooling, the field's needs and possible ways forward. We published our first findings in [August 2022](#), zooming in on three overlapping core areas:

1. tooling to run our organizations and workspaces;
2. communications tooling (running campaigns, mobilization and outreach to (new) audiences);
3. tooling for research and evidence-gathering.

We then held interviews with nearly 20 non-digital rights organizations in the Netherlands to compare our findings. We encountered the same challenges and an even greater reliance on Big Tech.

## 2. MYTHBUSTING

First, let's get some faulty assumptions out of the way.

### Myth #1: Digital rights organizations are tech organizations

We encountered huge differences between digital rights organizations' digital practices. Some organizations use command-line interfaces, some have more or less complete (cobbled together) open source office suits, and others make use of Google Workspace. What most organizations do have in common, is that they struggle to organize their IT sustainably. We encountered a lack of tooling, a lot of backlog including tooling way past its prime, and often a lack of management from having (had) too many chefs in the kitchen. Organizations with a larger percentage of unrestricted funding, have a higher chance of having some sort of sustainable focus on IT.

### Myth #2: Digital rights organizations reject Big Tech

8 out of 19 digital rights organizations rely heavily if not fully on Google or Microsoft. It seems that if organizations do not have a hard policy *against* using big tech services or tools, they will eventually accept the use of big tech in their organization.

Feature-richness, ease, user experience and familiarity are often-heard reasons for using proprietary, non-privacy-friendly tech. We also encountered a few instances of tech companies specifically targeting civil society, such as [TechSoup](#) and [Google's non-profit program](#), both of which offer support, services and discounts for implementing their tools. This is framed as "more money going to the real cause", playing on civil society's "mission guilt". All NGOs are prone to this, but those outside of the digital rights community perhaps even more.

Finally, the field is not immune to thinking that open source software is less reliable, less favorable and not worthy of investment, or even falling into the trap of believing technology to be intrinsically annoying and hard. Both premises get in our way of imagining and seeking out tools that align with, and will help us achieve, our goals.

## 3. THE TECH WE USE

While the 19 digital rights organizations that contributed to this research differ in size, scope and aims, they all to a degree struggle when it comes to their digital infrastructure. Their basic needs, however, don't differ all that much. Most of us need a basic office suite, combined in some cases with more elaborate/niche communications- and research tooling.

**Office.** Our office tooling is probably the most advanced. A lot of open source tools are already in use. Tools we encountered most often are: Mattermost, Matrix, CiviCRM,, Jitsi, BigBlueButton, Nextcloud, Framasoft and Signal. However, these tools aren't always used to their full extent, onboarding is often described as cumbersome, many of these tools are self-hosted, which means organizations need structural IT-capacity to maintain them, and finally, a lack of interoperability makes it difficult to use the tools to collaborate between organizations.

**Communication.** Our use of communications tooling paints a completely different picture. Some organizations steer away from Big Tech platforms altogether, some operate under some form of self-imposed limitations, and others make full use of the functionality social media platforms offer, including targeting and advertising based on profiling. We find a similar diversity in the use of analytics. Practices range from Google Analytics to self-hosted tooling deployed with and without self-imposed "limitations" (masking IP-addresses; limiting access or use, etc.). These stark differences sometimes make it difficult to collaborate.

**Research.** Our research tooling, finally, is the least developed. Many organizations don't engage in evidence gathering, and when others do, they usually make use of proprietary tools.

## 4. NEEDS

Technology can and should advance our work in support of open and just societies. We're convinced it can only do so when we use technology that aligns with our values and message. We also need the technology we use and the way we use it to be progressive, inspiring and fun.

### 4.0 Leadership

Across the board, we encountered a need for guidelines, for proven setups, and for a sense of direction. In short: a need for leadership. If properly supported, we see ample opportunity for shared, decentralized leadership emerging from the field itself.

#### Needs

- Bring together existing initiatives and practitioners.
- Create a work program and agree on a direction for the years ahead.

### 4.1 An open office suite

Since our basic office needs, to a large extent, overlap, we can easily share practices and perhaps even hosting responsibilities. In addition, we see organizations

beyond the digital rights bubble becoming increasingly interested in alternatives to Big Tech products. Getting this right therefore will help us connect, and offer value, to organizations and institutions outside the digital rights bubble, additionally opening up a conversation about the role and impact of technology on (semi-)public institutions and social justice causes.

#### Needs

- Develop explicit ambitions and policies when it comes to our digital infrastructure.
- Collectivize our demands.
- Share best practices across organizations and fields.

### 4.2 Stimulating civic tech

As noted, many of our organizations make use of the same open source tooling for our basic needs. We also, to a large extent, have overlapping requirements for third-party service providers such as hosting companies and sysadmins. Finally, we have a great understanding of how software works and therefore what is needed from software developers in order to respect our audience, volunteers and donors. When we are able to collectivize, the digital rights field can serve as an important user of open source, privacy-friendly tooling, demonstrating demand and stimulating investment and development.

#### Needs

- Verify common recurring tools identified in this research.
- Collectivize our needs and demonstrate demand.
- Source, negotiate with, and lower the barrier to service providers that operate in line with our values.
- Invest in and engage with open source communities and products.

### 4.3 Modern campaigning infrastructure

In the last decade, online life has changed dramatically. Yet the ways in which we inform and mobilize people largely seem to have remained the same: text-heavy, "one-pager"-campaigning websites as a base, with interaction limited to "contact your MEP"-actions or petition-style calls. On top of that, although our tactics haven't changed, this hasn't resulted in anything resembling a robust set of tools for these purposes. To the contrary: the tooling the digital rights field uses to run campaigns and mobilize people doesn't seem to have developed very much over the past decade. From defining audiences, reaching out to new people, and supporting/developing existing volunteers and donors, to project management, distribution management and

analytics: we seem to be lacking acceptable and interoperable tools in every department. We see two reasons for this.

Firstly, as a largely policy focused field, at the basis of many of our campaigns and campaign tooling lie one-off grants and temporary volunteer-capacity. This is a precarious place to be. It leaves tooling and the people that rely on it vulnerable to unreliable, or altogether absent support beyond the initial launch, and leads to funds being wasted. Capacity spent hasn't been capacity built. While this might have been acceptable, or unavoidable, a decade ago, we have grown and our impact, reach and relevance are paying the price of inefficient campaigning.

Secondly, it's here that we encounter the biggest amount of friction between campaign goals and known tactics on the one hand, and the digital rights field's values on the other. It's much harder than a decade ago to reach new audiences without funneling money into big tech or making use of tools that rely on profiling and targeting. In addition, we wonder if the increased maturity of our organizations, and of our funding, creates a (funder-side) "demand" for more precise metrics and measurable results, which in turn leads organizations toward the use of tracking technology. One could argue this might be impeding digital rights organizations' freedom of movement.

### Needs

- Agree on standards for acceptable online advertising, metrics and other types of tracking.
- Source an open-source, privacy-friendly campaigning software suite, including tools for publishing, metrics and project management, reporting and monitoring our impact and engagement.
- Use it! Experiment with novel strategies and tactics.
- Collaborate on, and more actively share our in-house developed tools.

## 4.4 Tech research tools

Evidence gathering in the European digital rights field is up and coming. Therefore, we looked to academia to see what we might be able to expect in the future. There, it seems that a lot of research relies on Google's infrastructure. Additionally, because large platforms actively prohibit research, we also see marketing tools being used to conduct research on platforms themselves. This might mean that, if we don't actively decide otherwise, it is likely that civil society's use of research tools will develop along the same lines as our use of communications tooling. In other words, there will be a prevalence of Big Tech and other proprietary tools.

Finally, those of us who have in some shape or form developed their own tooling, have shared these tools within our network, though express a desire to share more widely.

### Needs

- Set standards for tooling in the digital rights field to make sure we can secure the autonomy and safety of digital research and those being researched, considering, among other things, the use of AI, ML and OSINT tools.
- Collaborate and make our own tools widely accessible and reusable.

## 5. NEXT STEPS

This research has identified four change paths that each contribute to a more strategic use of technology to achieve our goals. Based on their capacity and position in the field, different organizations are best suited to tackle the various challenges and opportunities. Bits of Freedom is committed to take on the following work.

### An open office suite

1. Set standards for our office tooling and share best practices.
2. Source service providers

### Modern campaigning infrastructure

1. Run a multi-member state campaign experiment (baseline).
2. Build inventory of which tooling is used or needed and why.
3. Draft standards for online ads, metrics, CRM.
4. Organize a workshop with the wider community.
5. Start building a modular campaigning toolkit.
6. Run a series of data-driven supporters campaigns.

If you're interested in getting involved in the described work, or have questions about this report, please contact [Martijn de Heer](#) or [Evelyn Austin](#). We want to thank the following digital rights organizations for their openness to engage: Article 19, Aspiration Tech, Association for Progressive Communications, DATACTIVE, Digital Freedom Fund, Digitalcourage, Digitale Gesellschaft, EDRI, epicenter.works, Fight for the Future, Free Software Foundation Europe, Greenpeace, La Quadrature Du Net, Milieudéfense, Mozilla, noyb, Open Rights Group, and Panoptykon.



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These fundamental rights are essential for your development, for technological innovation and for the rule of law. But this freedom isn't self-evident. Your data is being stored and analysed. Your internet traffic is slowed down and blocked.

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