



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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



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

The full report can be downloaded from <https://theengineroom.org/library/alternativesocialmedia2024>

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Introduction

Background

In recent years, social justice organizations have expressed concerns over the intrusive data collection and surveillance policies of mainstream social media platforms.

With distrust in these platforms growing, particularly after the 2022 acquisition of Twitter (now X) by Elon Musk,⁰¹ there has been a rising interest in alternative social media. However, few studies have been conducted on the experiences of Majority World social justice organizations in migrating to and adopting these platforms.

From July 2023 to October 2024, The Engine Room, with support from the Open Society Foundations, investigated the current practices, needs and challenges of social justice organizations in the Majority World on both mainstream and alternative social media, to better understand what it will take to transition a critical mass of users to alternative platforms.

The aims of this research were to:

- Amplify the perspectives and experiences of social justice organizations in the Majority World on social media platforms.
- Support the creation of more equitable and inclusive digital environments.
- Inform philanthropic decision makers about the feasibility of alternative options.

Our research is informed by interviews conducted with practitioners from Majority World social justice organizations, researchers, alternative tech service providers and developers, and funders.

⁰¹ Arvind Ganesan, "Musk Chaos Raises Serious Rights Concerns over Twitter," Human Rights Watch, November 12, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/11/12/musk-chaos-raises-serious-rights-concerns-over-twitter>

Key findings

Rather than aiming for a transition towards a specific set of alternative platforms, our research findings demonstrate the importance of developing a holistic strategy that supports Majority World social justice organizations to transition away from social media models based on surveillance economics, censorship and intrusive data extraction practices.

When considering a transition, experts also imagine a way forward towards a “pluriverse” of options that affords people agency, autonomy and choice. This involves repurposing existing platforms, embracing low-tech approaches, and developing innovative alternatives that meet the needs of social justice organizations and marginalized communities, while building capacity to protect them from the harms and shortcomings of mainstream social media.

Recommendations

A transition to a more diverse, equitable social media ecosystem includes addressing technological barriers, increasing awareness to imagine a different future, and building local capacity for the creation of flourishing, inclusive and safe online communities. This research recommends a three-pronged approach:

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

Strategies for each of these can be found at the end of each section below.

Key findings

Our research into mainstream and alternative social media experiences of Majority World social justice organizations had key findings related to three focus areas: 1) the challenges and opportunities of mainstream social media, 2) the affordances and limitations of alternative platforms, and 3) considerations for transitioning to alternatives.

1. Challenges and opportunities of mainstream social media

What we hear in workshops is: “Listen, my community is going through a war,” “my community is going through a natural disaster,” “my community is going through a genocide ... I really don’t have the time to tell them about the fediverse and to migrate.” We are just happy with them being able to get access to the internet and share their messages with the world and most importantly connect for aid and emergency response. We are just going to do our best to amplify their voices and to support them.

- Rima Sghaier, feminist activist, researcher and advocate for internet freedom working on issues related to digital safety in the SWANA region.

Mainstream social media has become an essential element of people’s lives, with 62.2% of the world’s population (or roughly 6 in 10 people) using some form of social media.⁰² Some social media companies also offer more wide-ranging services – Meta, for example

⁰² “Social Media: Worldwide Penetration Rate 2019,” Statista, accessed October 1, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/269615/social-network-penetration-by-region/>

(the company that owns Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp) offers a package called Free Basics that essentially acts as the internet, especially in places with limited options and high data prices, and some mobile service providers in the Majority World sell prepaid data plans with access to only certain mainstream mainstream platforms like YouTube or TikTok.

But while mainstream social media platforms are widely used, they have also faced backlash concerning extractive data collection practices, surveillance, online harm and abuse, and rampant information disorder.

Our research explores how social justice organizations in the Majority World are navigating the risks and limitations of these platforms, as they conduct their advocacy work. Factors such as ease of use, convenience, and wide availability will continue to be motivations to use these platforms; however, addressing their harms and building resilience for social justice organizations remain essential elements of building healthier digital ecosystems.

Key findings concerning mainstream social media use from our interviews

- 01.** Mainstream social media remains an important channel for social justice organizations **to disseminate information, connect and mobilize**. Staying on these platforms is often a choice made with agency and motivated by an inclusion agenda, as mainstream spaces allow social justice organizations to reach audiences on the platforms they use, connect with people in areas of low connectivity, as well as bridge generational divides.
- 02.** Social justice organizations take issue with how mainstream social media **ad-based business models often prioritize profits over safety considerations**, contribute to the spread of information disorder and leave specific communities in the Majority World unprotected.
- 03.** For individuals and organizations who decide to remain on these mainstream social media platforms, **ensuring there is support to address and protect against harms** is a necessary intervention.

Strategies

Recommendation 1

Build resilience against the shortcomings of mainstream platforms by:

- Increasing awareness of the risks and shortcomings of these platforms.
- Investing in digital literacy and holistic digital security programs.
- Providing holistic psycho-social support for those facing harassment and abuse.
- Developing alternative engagement strategies for social justice organizations that are not reliant on metrics and practices developed by these corporations.

2. Affordances and limitations of alternative platforms

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

- Erin Kissane - Researcher and community lead investigating social and decentralized networks across contexts

Alternative social media platforms are spaces that replicate the positive aspects of social networking for users, such as developing digital identities, building relationships, building online communities or generating content, while building in features that might allow for a more transparent, private, and censorship-resistant online environment (for example through . ad-free business models, decentralized architectures, community governance and the use of open protocols and software).

Popular alternatives mentioned in this research include platforms such as Mastodon and BlueSky, or other social networks that belong to the fediverse.

Research on the uptake of alternative social media in the Majority World has found that there is a growing interest in more decentralized and less commercial social media models.⁰³ However, technological barriers to entry and the absence of relevant communities and language diversity are roadblocks to adoption. Our research looked at adoption of alternative social media by Majority World social justice organizations from the perspective of both perceived benefits and barriers to adoption.

⁰³ See: Sursiendo, "Redes Sociales Libres: Usos, Alcances Y Desafíos Para Nuestras Organizaciones." June 28, 2023, <https://sursiendo.org/2023/06/actividades-desde-sursiendo-para-reflexionar-y-reapropiarnos-de-las-redeslibres/>; and Research ICT Africa "Will Africa Join the Fediverse?," June 6, 2024, <https://researchictafrica.net/research/will-africa-join-the-fediverse/>.



Key findings concerning alternative social media use from our interviews



- 01.** Alternative platforms are perceived as potentially beneficial in so far as they **enable a less extractive and more community-led user experience**. For example, the ability of users to create, join and manage their own platforms can create opportunities to center and facilitate “safe harbors” for activists and marginalized communities online.
- 02.** However, alternative platforms have **higher technical barriers to entry** and involve additional costs for small organizations that choose to host and maintain their own servers (e.g. self-hosting an instance of Mastodon), as opposed to using a commercial platform. As a result, communities joining alternative platforms tend to be smaller and more niche, leading to ‘bubbles of like-minded people’ that have limited engagement with more diverse voices and points of view.
- 03.** Alternative platforms, as with mainstream options, also face challenges around **safety, abusive content and inadequate content moderation**. Further support is needed to ensure that self-managed platforms do not replicate and perpetuate the inequities and risks experienced on mainstream options.
- 04.** Presenting alternative options as **replacements for their mainstream counterparts** (e.g. “Twitter substitute”) is misleading, as these platforms can offer different features and affordances. To enjoy alternatives, users may need to embrace slower forms of engagement and more “low-fi” experiences with technology.



Strategies

Recommendation 2

Support meaningful adoption of existing alternative social media platforms by social justice organizations by:

- Promoting awareness of alternatives through outreach campaigns.
- Investing in digital literacy and overcoming usability challenges.
- Investing in building communities around the adoption of alternative technologies.
- Conducting further research on the risks associated with these platforms and the reimagining of future alternatives.

3. What needs to be considered in a transition to alternative social media platforms?

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

- activistadigital, lead of Power to Voices, a global social media platform designed to strengthen social justice movements

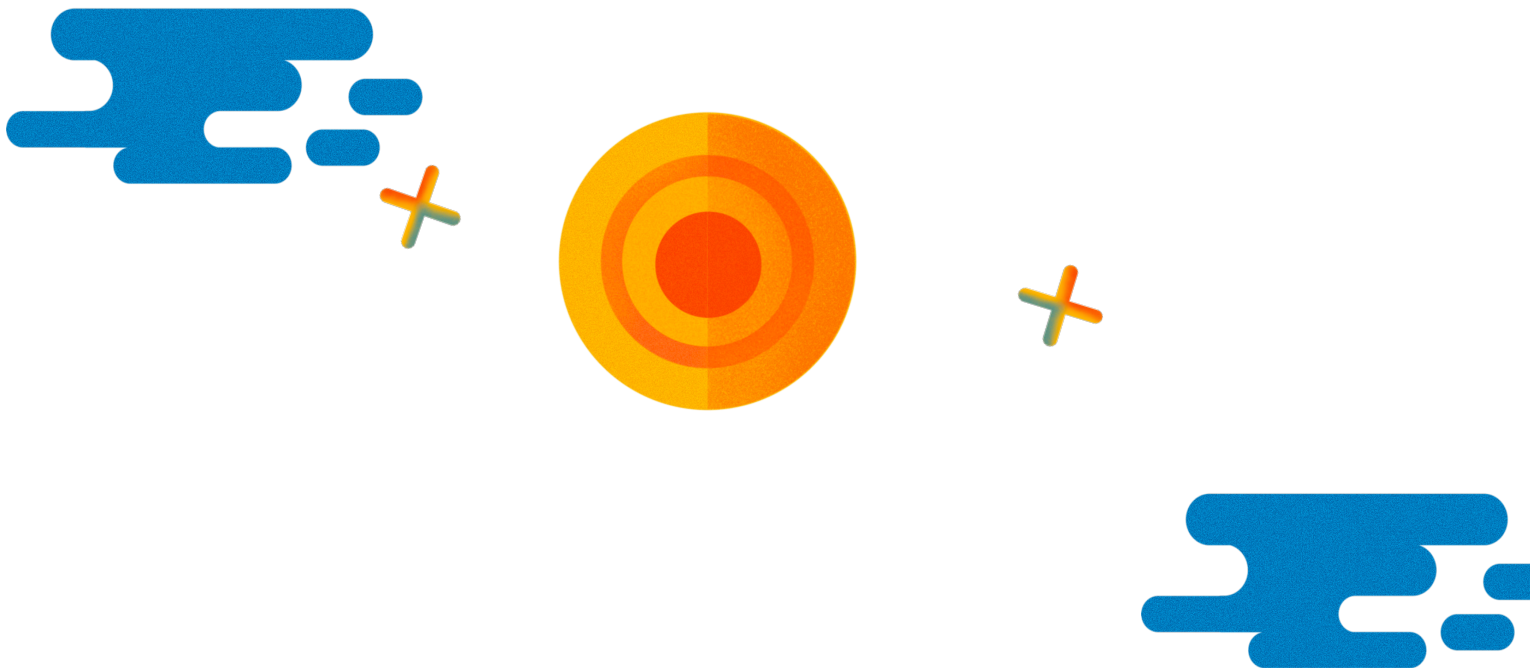
When considering a transition, users prefer to have agency and autonomy to choose the digital community that best suits their needs. They need the information and skills to move freely and safely in between several online spaces, have the option to use mainstream social media for advocacy and join an alternative platform for more niche conversations, and have the ability to create online spaces to fulfill specific needs.

Drawing from our interviews and desk research, our research surfaced some key considerations for funders, designers, developers, researchers and social justice organizations who are envisioning a healthy transition to a pluriverse of mainstream and alternative platforms.

Ten considerations for a possible transition to alternative platforms:

01. Alternatives are **not a direct replacement** for mainstream platforms (they will have different uses and features).
02. A transition to a **"pluriverse" of community spaces** is more desirable than a transition to specific platforms.
03. Social justice organizations **need additional support** to use mainstream social media safely.

04. Alternative platforms should be **designed “from the margins”** to protect the most vulnerable users.
05. Alternative social media platforms need to integrate **low-tech solutions** to help address internet limitations, economic injustice and digital divides.
06. A transition to alternatives needs to be **centered around the needs and capabilities of non-technical communities.**
07. Challenges surrounding **safety and the implementation of content moderation** on alternative social media platforms need further attention.
08. More intimate, **self led community-driven spaces** can allow activists to connect and re-energize to advance social justice agendas.
09. Alternatives can play a role in fostering a **culture of slowness and re-connection** in social media from a place of affection and care.
10. To begin the transition away from mainstream social media, users need to become comfortable with **refusing existing technologies and disrupting the status quo.**



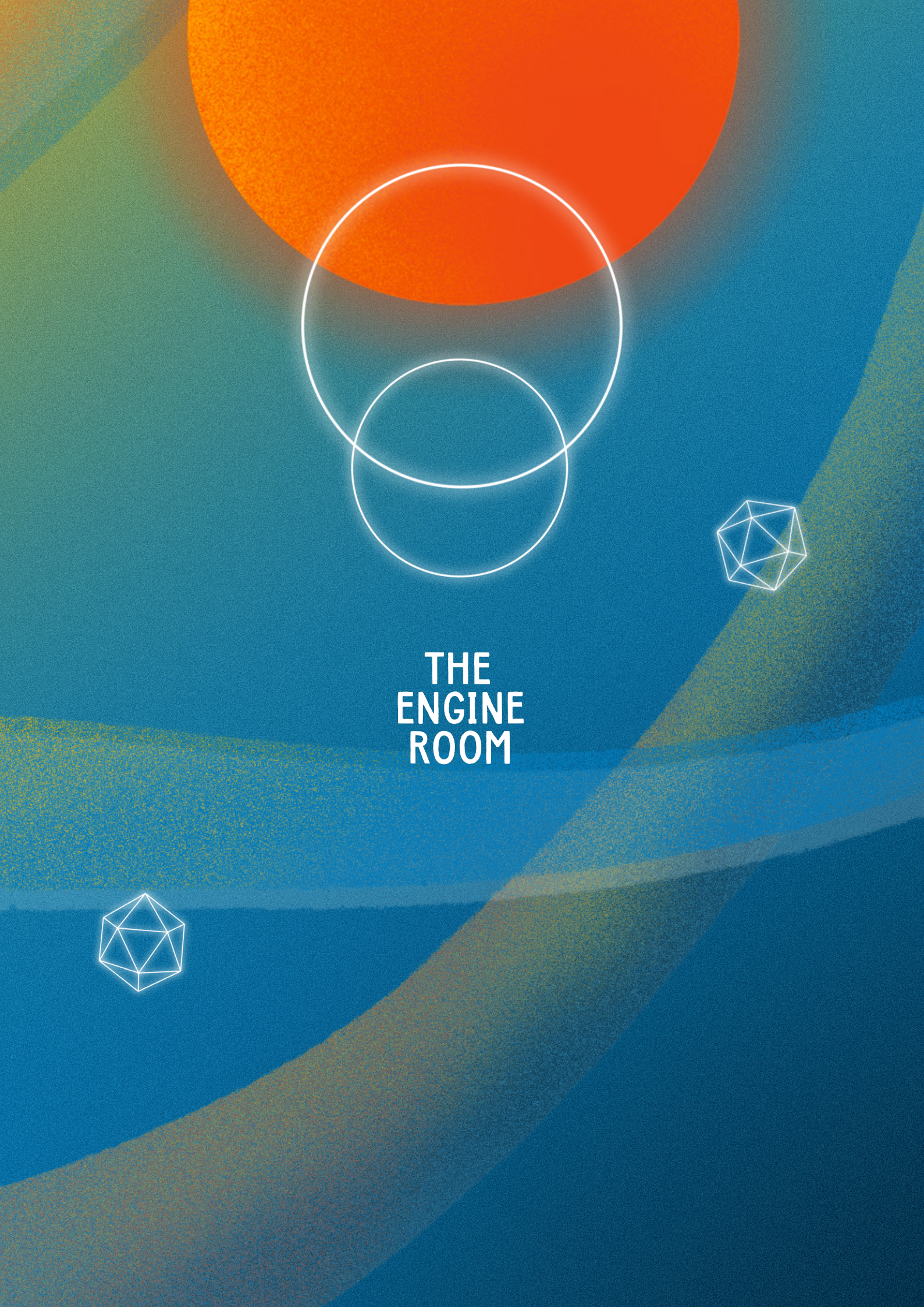
Strategies

Recommendation 3

Strengthen capacity to imagine and build a pluriverse of community-centered alternatives where organizations can mobilize, organize and connect, by:

- Supporting the use of open source technologies to build new digital communities.
- Supporting the creation of platforms that advance social justice agendas.
- Building capacity for trust and safety practices in emerging alternative platforms.
- Reducing the financial and environmental costs of maintaining new infrastructures.
- Supporting platforms that operate in contexts of low connectivity.

We hope these prompt further questions and reflections over imagining what a **digital pluriverse** might look like, and how to get there.



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