Digital Organizing:
It's all about the apps

Siomara Valladares,

Kate Somerville,

Michelle Renée Valladares

Research Hub for Youth Organizing,

University of Colorado Boulder

Layout and design
by Ichigo Takikawa

THE
COLORADO
TRUST

A Health Equity Foundation

Research Hub for Youth Organizing
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO **BOULDER**

Digital Organizing: It's all about the apps

Siomara Valladares, Kate Somerville, Michelle Renée Valladares

Research Hub for Youth Organizing, University of Colorado Boulder

Table of Contents

Introduction

We are witnessing increased interest in the use of digital technologies for activism. In the last two decades, growing access to the Internet, affordable devices like cellphones, and countless applications (**apps**) have transformed grassroots community organizing. The onset of the COVID 19 pandemic[a] and related remote working and learning has accelerated the world's increased reliance on technology. In 2020, Zoom became the most-downloaded mobile application across the world, followed by WhatsApp and Facebook. What implications does this increased reliance on technology have for grassroots and community organizing groups?

Based on interviews with ten organizing groups and a review of available literature, this brief introduces the idea of **digital organizing** and shares the applications most used by community organizers. The companion report, *Digital Organizing Strategies*, presents best practices and strategies for organizing online, and a series of resource documents provide additional information. For example, Resource Document A includes a brief introduction to the interviewed organizations.

These publications are based on a study of digital organizing that was conducted by the Research Hub for Youth Organizing at the University of Colorado Boulder and commissioned by The Colorado Trust, to support the digital organizing work of the Building and Bridging Power strategy grantee partners. For a detailed description of the research design and data collection process, please refer to Resource Document B. For definitions of key terms used throughout this report, please refer to Resource Document C.

Apps—Applications or software, are the computer programs that make digital devices like computers and cell phones usable.

Digital organizing—Practices and strategies used by community organizing groups that employ digital tools including social media to engage, organize, and build political power.

[a] The US first declared a public health emergency due to the coronavirus outbreak on February 3, 2020. See https://www.ajmc.com/view/what-were-reading-us-declares-coronavirus-a-public-health-emergency-fda-approves-peanut-allergy-drug-california-healthcare-tax-rejected

A glance at the history of digital organizing

Social media provides significant arenas for political debate and other interactions that connect relationship building and action spaces. This interactivity can promote participation, motivation, and understanding that can enrich movements and facilitate direct political action.[1] According to the Pew Research Center,[2] "From global protests against racial injustice to the 2020 election, Americans who use social media are taking to these applications to mobilize others and show their support for causes or issues."

Social movements like Occupy Wall Street (2011), the Arab Uprisings (2012), #BlackLivesMatter (2013), Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement (2014), BLM's Ferguson, Missouri protests (2014), Standing Rock (2016), Women's March (2017), #MeToo (2017), and March for our Lives (2018) relied on apps like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube to engage in online organizing. Most recently, the BLM protests following the murder of George Floyd in 2020 used social media to share local events and encourage national turnout.

Organizers around the world are embracing digital technology as a tool for (1) sharing information about their organizations and work (e.g. websites, blogs, tweets), (2) mobilizing people to attend events (e.g. protests, online meetings, community forums), (3) building relationships and ways for members of the organization or movement to engage with each other (e.g. Facebook groups, YouTube videos, online petitions or polls), and (4) forming new networks that can bridge physical space (e.g. Student Voice is an online-only organization of youth across the United States).

Digital organizing in 2022—
It's all about the apps

We asked community organizers what digital organizing practices and strategies they used. Their responses focused on "apps," downloadable software applications, and the unique ways these apps support community organizing and movement-building. **We focus this report on the most common apps used by interviewed organizers and how they use these apps to advance community organizing goals.** Apps are often free and easy to download but are contingent upon having an internet connection and a compatible device and vary in usability. Despite a rise in digital organizing, it is important to recognize that inequalities in technology and internet access still exist and are creating a digital divide. We include a quick summary of the digital divide in community organizing in Resource Document D.

Report Outline

This report describes a set of web-based, software applications commonly used by community organizers in this study: 1) social media apps, 2) communication apps and 3) work delivery apps. For each app, we provide summary information about what the app is, highlight its benefits and drawbacks for community organizing and summarize how it is being used by interviewed community organizers. This report can be read in order, or it can be used as a reference guide to different popular organizing apps. The image below provides a map of these different apps.

Apps Used By Community Organizers

Social Media Apps:
Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube

Work Delivery Apps:
Google Workplace, EveryAction, HootSuite, Social Media App Analytics

Communication Apps:
Email, Zoom, Text Messaging, WhatsApp, Google Chat, Slack

Social Media Apps

Social media apps were discussed by all interview participants, more than any other kind of application. Facebook and Twitter were the most popular apps, closely followed by Instagram. Participants from three of the organizations also mentioned using TikTok and YouTube.[b] In the following sections, we provide more app-specific information, including "Social Media Use" data collected by the Pew Research Center, which looks at the use of apps across demographic groups.[c] Demographic data for all apps includes sex, ethnic groups, age, income, education level, and regions. For a complete table of the Pew data on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, see Resource Document E.

[b] Note, we only focus on applications that were mentioned by three or more organizations. For example, WhatsApp was mentioned by one organization and was therefore not included in this report.

[c] Between January 25 and February 8, 2021, the Pew Research Center conducted a survey of U.S. adults and their use of social media. In a nationally representative survey of 1,502 U.S. adults, the Pew Research Center found that the use of individual sites and apps varies across demographic groups.

Facebook

Founded in 2004, Facebook aims to help people connect with family and friends across shared interests. Community organizers use Facebook to share information with broad public audiences by "posting" photos, videos, and links to other digital outlets and apps. The business model of Facebook lies in both paid advertising and in collecting and selling user data.

According to a survey of 1,502 social media users conducted by the Pew Research Center:

- Among surveyed U.S. adults, Facebook was the second most used app (69%).

- Among surveyed men and women who say they use Facebook, more women (77%) than men (61%) use the app.

- Among surveyed groups who say they use Facebook:

  - the largest percentage of users are between ages 30-49 (76%).

  - more Black Americans (74%) and Hispanic Americans (72%) say they use the app, compared to White Americans (67%).

  - the largest percentage of users are in the $30,000-$49,999 income bracket (76%), compared to users in the $75,000 or more income bracket (70%), users reporting less than $30,000 (70%), and users with an income between $50,000-$74,999 (61%).

  - most users are among the college+ educated (73%) or those with some college education (71%), compared to users with high school or less education (64%).

  - both users in urban and suburban (70% respectively) America use the app, compared to users in rural America (67%).

Benefits to using Facebook include the ability to reach large numbers of people and the ability to advertise events. Limitations to using Facebook include the challenge of keeping up to date on how to best use the app to advance strategic goals. Increasingly, there are significant data privacy concerns with Facebook (now "Meta"), including digital data mining, the spread of "misinformation" (especially as related to the democratic aims of many community organizations), and the use of algorithms that restrict the types of information shown to users.

How Organizers Use Facebook:

- Create a "post," or "like" someone else's post.
- Create or join a group.
- Create or join an event.
- Publicize organizing events and amplify (re-post) traditional press coverage.
- Share longer and more detailed information when compared to other application formats.
- Promote engagement with news articles, think pieces, and blog articles that are related to the mission and vision of organizing groups.
- Communicate, engage, and connect with donors.

Twitter

The first Twitter message or "tweet" was sent in 2006.[d] Twitter is a short messaging service (SMS), also referred to as a "microblogging" service. Registered users can "post," "like," or "retweet" tweets.[3] Known for its tight content limits (240 characters of text, and 140 second of audio and video) the idea behind Twitter is to quickly provide snippets of news, ideas, and real-time information across a broad array of issues. Twitter is the program that made the use of # to organize topics and @ to directly tag a specific person in common.[4]

According to a survey of 1,502 social media users conducted by the Pew Research Center:

- Among surveyed men and women who say they use Twitter, more men (25%) than women (22%) use the app.

- Among surveyed groups who say they use Twitter:

  - the largest percentage of users are between ages 18-29 (42%).

  - more Black Americans (29%) say they use the app, compared to Hispanic Americans (23%) and White Americans (22%).

  - the largest percentage of users are in the $75,000 or more income bracket (34%), compared to users in the $30,000-$49,999 income bracket (29%), $50,000-$74,999 income bracket (22%), and users reporting less than $30,000 (12%).

  - the largest percentage of users are among the college+ educated (33%), compared to users with some college education (26%), and users with a high school education or less (14%).

  - more users in urban (27%) and suburban (23%) America use the app, compared to users in rural America (18%).

Organizers described Twitter as an activist space beneficial to building connections and sharing information with intergenerational allies. The short-form nature of "tweets," and the wide use of Twitter by the press, politicians, and grassroots organizations makes Twitter a good place to share organizing work quickly and efficiently. Another benefit of Twitter is the ability to target policy officials and media outlets.[e] As with Facebook, the potential to spread false or misleading information is one drawback to Twitter.

How Organizers Use Twitter:

- Send tweets readily about fast-moving work, like campaigns related to legislative sessions.
- Send multiple tweets in a "thread" about a certain issue to build understanding before presenting a specific campaign goal or ask.
- Connect with other activists and stay informed about social problems, related activism campaigns, and campaigns led by specific ally groups.
- Re-tweet other organizations' work to amplify the work of partners.
- Tag (@) politicians, members of the press, and other prominent people to draw attention to an issue.

[d] Accessed from https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/twitter-launches.

[e] Shen (2021) featured Twitter prominently in an analysis of social media's impact on social movements by illustrating how Twitter's algorithm helped to trigger and stimulate the discussion of the Black Lives Matter movement by giving out more related information to Black social media users.

Shen, Y. (2021). The impact of social media on social activism—Taking Black Lives Matter on Twitter as an example. Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research, Volume 631, pages 947-951.

Instagram

Instagram is a photo-sharing application launched in 2010.[5] Recently, Instagram has introduced "stories," which allow users to post pictures and videos and text for just a 24-hour period. Additionally, "reels" have recently been introduced, which allow users to post longer videos.

According to a survey of 1,502 social media users conducted by the Pew Research Center:

- Among surveyed U.S. adults, Instagram was the third most used app (40%).

- Among surveyed men and women who say they use Instagram, more women (44%) than men (36%) use the app.

- Among surveyed groups who say they use Instagram:

  - the largest percentage of users are between ages 18-29 (71%).

  - about half of surveyed Hispanic Americans (52%) and Black Americans (49%) say they use Instagram, compared to White Americans (35%).

  - the largest percentage of users are in the $75,000 or more income bracket (47%), compared to users in $30,000-$49,999 income bracket (45%), $50,000-$74,999 income bracket (39%), and users reporting less than $30,000 (35%).

  - the largest percentage of users are among those with a college+ education (49%), compared to users with some college education (44%), and users with a high school education or less (30%).

  - more users in urban (45%) and suburban (42%) America use the app, compared to users in rural America (25%).

Overall, Instagram is described as welcoming to newcomers and viewed as an effective tool for base building, especially for recruiting millennials (ages 25-40) and Gen-Z (ages 9-24) demographic groups. For a popular breakdown of generations see Resource Document F.

How Organizers Use Instagram:

- Post permanent photos and videos related to organizing campaigns using the "post" function, or post temporary photos and videos related to organizing campaigns on Instagram "stories".
- "Like" and comment on other organizations' posts and stories.
- Re-post an ally organization's content, or jointly post photos and videos related to shared campaigns.
- Post screenshots of posts from other applications—such as particularly popular tweets— to increase engagement.

TikTok

Launched in 2018 in the United States, TikTok is an application where users post short videos up to three minutes in length.[6] Content creators on TikTok post videos with captions, often including hashtags (#). Video subject matter varies widely, for example from pets and fashion to social issues.

According to a survey of 1,502 social media users conducted by the Pew Research Center:

- Among men and women who say they use TikTok, more women (24%) than men (17%) use the app.

- Among surveyed groups who say they use TikTok:

  - the largest percentage of users are between ages 18-29 (48%).

  - more Hispanic Americans (31%) and Black Americans (30%) say they use the app, compared to White Americans (18%).

  - the largest percentage of users are in the $30,000-$49,999 income bracket (29%), compared to users reporting less than $30,000 (22%), and users in the $50,000-$74,999 and $75,000 or more income brackets (20%).

  - the largest percentage of users are among those with some college education (24%), compared to users with a high school or less education (21%), and a college+ education (19%).

  - more users in urban (24%) and suburban (20%) America use the app, compared to users in rural America (16%).

Interviewed organizers explain that TikTok has an algorithm (automated formula) for highlighting information for users that is particularly sensitive to people's political interests, so it is useful to find new supporters aligned to an organization's mission. However, creating TikTok content is challenging and time consuming.

How Organizers Use **TikTok:**

- Post videos up to 3 minutes in length with text, audio, and visual features.
- "Like" videos to show their support.
- "Duet" other organization's videos so that an original video can be reshared with someone else's content (usually a reaction or commentary) in a frame next to the original video.
- Watch videos that show up on their "feed" that are based on a sensitive algorithm that cater to users' interests.

YouTube

YouTube is a video sharing application that was founded in 2005.[7] YouTube users can upload video content on any topic that they'd like, and generally, they can feature longer content than videos on other social media applications. YouTube is known for its "streamers" or "YouTubers" — people with larger followings who regularly post content on particular topics.

According to a survey of 1,502 social media users conducted by the Pew Research Center:

- Among surveyed U.S. adults, YouTube was the most used (81%).

- Among surveyed men and women who say they use YouTube, more men (82%) than women (80%) use the app.

- Among surveyed groups who say they use YouTube:

  - most surveyed adults under the age of 65 use the app.

  - more Hispanic Americans (85%) and Black Americans (84%) use the app, compared to White Americans (79%).

  - the largest percentage of users are in the $75,000 or more income bracket (90%), compared to users in the $30,000-$49,999 income bracket (83%), $50,000-$74,999 income bracket (79%), and users reporting less than $30,000 (75%).

  - the largest percentage of users are among the college+ educated (89%), compared to users with some college education (86%), and users with a high school or less education (70%).

  - more users in urban (84%) and suburban (81%) America use the app, compared to users in rural America (74%).

Organizers use YouTube with other applications, mostly to house media content related to an organization's mission.

How Organizers Use **YouTube:**

- Post videos that communicate to non-local allies what is happening on the ground. For example, YouTube was integral to the Arab uprisings.[8]
- Post videos for training new organizers in a safe, cost-effective way.[9]
- House longer video content about an organization's mission that may be accessed by linking or embedding YouTube videos on social media pages or websites.
- Because YouTube can collect massive subscriber lists, YouTube can be a powerful tool in organizing on a broad scale.
- Recording, then posting videos of face-to-face conversations between organizers, community members and others.
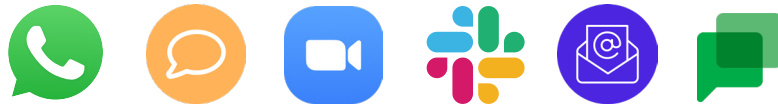
Communications Apps

Communication plays an important role in the internal and external capacity building for community organizations. During the pandemic, communication apps for email, texting, workflow, and video meetings became even more important for internal and external coordination, decision-making, and organizing public actions. The next sections describe organizers' use of communication apps.

Email

Email is a powerful tool for communicating easily and asynchronously.[10] There are many different applications that house email addresses, including Gmail, Outlook, and iCloud. Email is a reliable way for organizers to communicate with one another. Email serves as a touch-point for members of the base who like to follow regular activities and news—particularly for members that are not active on social media. Email databases also allow organizers to maintain a private list of folks that can be updated in real time.

How Organizers Use **Email:**

- Reach out to members, send newsletters and other updates.
- Send requests for engagement in organizing events or volunteer activities.
- Software like MailChimp allows organizations to send bulk formatted emails, stay in touch with members over time and track stats like open and forward rates.
- Send messages and documents to other team members or groups of team members.
- Communicate asynchronously about organizational issues to decrease the need for in-person or video meetings.

Texting and Workflow Apps

At its most basic level, text messaging refers to short digital exchanges of text, pictures, gifs, or memes, both of which combine text and images. Text messaging can occur on cell phones or on specific text messaging apps like Google Chat and WhatsApp.[f] More recently, a series of workflow apps integrated messaging into workflow management. Several organizers mentioned the app Slack. Slack features multiple different group conversation "threads," (sequences of messages linked together) created by a team, which lends itself to having specific texting conversations. Threads can be used to build community and execute logistical, and organizational tasks. Unlike social media, which is open to the public, team members must be invited to join Slack.

How Organizers Use Text Messaging, WhatsApp, Google Chat and Slack:

- Effectively communicate with members of their base.
- Check in with members to remind them about events and meetings.
- Communicate and share information with voters—like voting or registration reminders.
- Reach people in individual texts and group texts via Wi-Fi rather than using phone numbers.
- Message each other quickly and/or organize conversations by topic to reduce the amount of email each person must read.
- Work together in real time even while remote.
- Quickly check with teammates throughout the day in much the same way people peek into each other's offices.
- Build community in Slack threads designated to host conversation about less serious topics, or topics not central to the work of the organization.

[f] Notably around the world, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, WeChat, Viber, LINE, Telegram, and IMO are the top messenger apps, in order of most used (Inc. 2018). It might be worth community organizers exploring this broader list of apps.

The Top 7 Messenger Apps in the World- Connect with your audience on the messenger apps they use most! Inc. (2018) https://www.inc.com/rebecca-deczynski/dominos-customer-pickup-incentive-labor-shortage-staffing.html

Zoom

The pandemic dramatically increased the number of large online events hosted by organizers and others.[11] Though a few organizers mentioned using Google Video, Zoom was by far the most mentioned app for regular meetings between organizers. Zoom is an online video conferencing tool that allows organizers to hold one-on-one virtual meetings, group virtual meetings, and webinar-style meetings or events.[12]

How Organizers Use **Zoom:**

- Use video calls to check in, make decisions and get work done.
- Build strategic relationships with other organizations and allies.
- Create a stable community-building space during times of uncertainty.
- Eliminate the need to travel for meaningful participation in meetings, which is important in rural areas as well as under-resourced urban areas.
- Host online video events to share information about an organization's legislative priorities or a series of events to reach an educational goal.
- Host online meetings or events to make organizing activities more accessible to people with multiple competing priorities.

Work Delivery Apps

As with many organizations, community organizations write reports and memos, create public materials, track budgets, and gather day-to-day information. Organizers relied mostly on Google apps, which include documents, spreadsheets, survey forms, and presentation slides, hosted in virtual storage known as "Google Drive." Organizers also used Google Calendar to execute this work.

Additionally, multiple organizers spoke about using social media analytic tools like HootSuite to help them understand the performance of their social media presence, help plan and adjust for future posts, and fine tune their digital organizing practices to reach target audiences more efficiently. Finally, organizers also talked about using non-profit specific management apps like EveryAction to support their fundraising and relational organizing efforts. In this section we provide a summary and quick description of each app.

Google Workplace

Google Workplace (formerly Google Suite) is a collection of apps, each of which can have a specific purpose in an integrated collaborative digital environment. These apps include: Docs (word processing), Drive (shared file storage), Sheets (numerical spreadsheets), Forms (information gathering), and Calendar (event scheduling). The predominance of these apps seems to be connected to the fact that they are free, they are designed for collaborative work, and they work across multiple devices (phones, tablets, and computers).

How Organizers Use **Google Workplace Apps:**

- Create shared documents, spreadsheets, and slides that can be edited by multiple members of a team at the same time.
- Coordinate individual team calendars and develop a coordinated organizational calendar.
- Create shared folders to keep deliverables and other products organized and accessible to all team members.
- Quickly survey organizational staff, members, or the public.
- Support the continuity of an organization's mission by using shared Google folders to serve as a library of institutional memory.

HootSuite and Social Media App Analytics

HootSuite is a social media management website that includes scheduling functions and various analytic tools. In addition, organizers download analytic data directly from each social media application to understand how followers engage with each post.

How Organizers Use **HootSuite:**

- Schedule the release of future social media posts.
- Access analytic data and suggestions for timing posts for optimal engagement.
- Access analytic data related to post engagement to understand which posts are performing well.

How Organizers Use **Social Media App Analytics:**

- Track likes, shares, comments, and clicks on social media posts.
- Understand the performance of their social media presence, and plan for future posts.
- Adjust digital organizing practices to reach target audiences more efficiently.

EveryAction

EveryAction is a management app that helps organizations manage email lists and donor information. In addition, Outreach Circle is a tool within the app that has a peer-to-peer texting application that makes it easy for volunteers, activists, and donors to support their favorite cause, campaign, or organization. Tools like EveryAction can serve to streamline digital organizing activities and house information about an organization's staff and members for quick access.

How Organizers Use **EveryAction:**

- Create an organizational database of leaders and members.
- Organize donor information, and process donations.
- Track and update email addresses for email blasts and action alerts.
- Create sign-up forms.
- Track participation at events.
- Conduct relational organizing in a digital space.
- Communicate with leaders and members by texting.
- Develop organizational fundraising requests and action alerts that individuals can send to family members and allies.
- Translate for speakers of languages other than English, and for those with specific literacy needs.

To learn more about the strategies used to advance community organizing, go to *Digital Organizing Strategies*.

Endnotes

[1] Byron, M.M. (2012). *The challenge of social media—and role of YouTube—for grassroots organizing* (UMI No. 1522051) [Master thesis, Department of Media Arts of Long Island University, Brooklyn Campus]. ProQuest Dissertation & Theses Global.

Valenzuela, S. (2013). Unpacking the use of social media for protest behavior: The roles of information, opinion expression, and activism. American Behavioral Scientist. Volume 57, Issue 7, pages 920-942.

[2] *Social media use in 2021*. Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (April 7, 2021) https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/04/07/social-media-use-in-2021/

[3] Twitter. (14 April 2022). In Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twitter.

[4] Twitter. (14 April 2022). In Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twitter.

[5] Blystone, D. (2022, March 29). The story of Instagram: The rise of the # 1 photo-sharing app. Investopedia. Retrieved April 18, 2022, from https://www.investopedia.com/articles/investing/102615/story-instagram-rise-1-photo0sharing-app.asp.

[6] *A brief history of TikTok and its rise to popularity*. Film & Corporate Video Production Company Singapore. (n.d.). Retrieved April 18, 2022, from https://www.big3.sg/blog/a-brief-history-of-tiktok-and-its-rise-to-popularity.

[7] McFadden, C. (2021, June 14). YouTube's history and its impact on the internet. Interesting Engineering. Retrieved April 18, 2022, from https://interestingengineering.com/youtubes-history-and-its-impact-on-the-internet.

[8] *The role of social media in the Arab uprisings*. Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (November 28, 2012) https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2012/11/28/role-social-media-arab-uprisings/.

[9] Byron, M.M. (2012). *The challenge of social media—and role of YouTube—for grassroots organizing* (UMI No. 1522051) [Master thesis, Department of Media Arts of Long Island University, Brooklyn Campus]. ProQuest Dissertation & Theses Global.

[10] Left, S. (2002, March 13). *Email timeline*. The Guardian. Retrieved April 18, 2022, from https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2002/mar/13/internetnews.

[11] Graham, S. (2021, April 22). *The future of virtual and hybrid events in a post-pandemic landscape*. G2 Research Hub. Retrieved April 18, 2022, from https://research.g2.com/insights/virtual-events-in-a-post-pandemic-landscape.

[12] Barron, S. (2020, March 5). *Everything you need to know about using Zoom*. Owl Labs Blog. Retrieved April 18, 2022, from https://resources.owllabs.com/blog/zoom#:~:text=Zoom%20is%20a%20cloud%2Dbased,meeting%20recordings%2C%20and%20live%20chat.