

Digital Organizing: Executive Summary

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Layout and design
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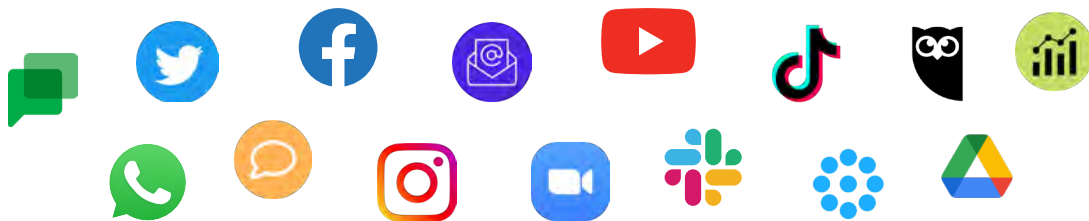
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In this suite of resources on digital organizing, we share information about the digital tools and strategies that are used by grassroots and community organizations. This series of accessible resources aim to provide guidance in digital organizing work. Digital organizing is defined as the practices and strategies used by grassroots and community organizing groups, that employ digital tools to engage, organize, and build political power online.

These publications are based on interviews with ten organizing groups and a review of available literature. When asked about the practices and strategies they use in digital organizing, respondents focused their reflections and recommendations on application software, referred to as “applications,” or “apps,” and the unique ways in which these apps can support community organizing and movement building. Organizers use apps to do everything from word processing, to communicating, organizing information, hosting events, and fundraising.



In *Digital Organizing: It's all about the apps*, we introduce the apps most often used by the interviewed organizers and provide summary information on the use and purpose for these apps.^a These include:

- **Social Media Apps:** Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube
- **Communications Apps:** email, texting/messaging, workflow apps (text messaging, WhatsApp, Google Chat, Slack), and Zoom
- **Work Delivery Apps:** Google Workplace, HootSuite and social media app analytics, and EveryAction.

^a We followed the lead of organizers and list apps by brand name in the first section and discuss apps with similar purpose, together when discussing strategies.



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In *Digital Organizing Strategies*, we present six strategies for using apps to advance community organizing. Within each strategy we describe implementation lessons from the interviewed organizers. These are summarized in the table below.

Organizing Goals	Strategies	Lessons
Build Power	Base Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide consistent engagement, which is as important as huge numbers. • Know which part of your organization’s base is on which social media apps. • Learn about the subculture of each social media app. • Remember social media is public!
	Building Narrative Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remember that apps can help your organization develop messages and gather statements quickly from your members. • Know that messaging information for social media can be a balancing act. • Create both an internal and external communications toolkit. • Create a shared calendar that aligns communications with other organizational work. • Execute cross-posting and tagging, which can help your team reach organizing targets.
	Inspiring Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create “activation seeds” in multiple places. • Create videos which are powerful. • Amplify your allies.
Build and Sustain Organizational Capacity	Choosing the right apps for your organization’s staff and base	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be honest about your organization’s digital expertise and be intentional about learning. • Consider cellular and internet reliability. • Use apps to democratize information access.
	Approaching digital organizing with curiosity, creativity, and flexibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create digital spaces which can expand diversity and engagement. • Bring your organization’s values and goals into digital spaces. • Build community across distance.
	Integrating digital tools and communications across the organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use digital tools across the organization, not just for one goal. • Communicate fundraising as essential and promote with frequent exchange of ideas. • Provide professional development on apps.



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We conclude this report on *Digital Organizing Strategies* with a reflection on how technology is always changing and evolving. The dynamic nature of digital organizing requires a growth mindset, being a constant learner, loving the challenge of something new but also collaborating with peers and creatively innovating new solutions; all are traits that abound in strong community organizers and organizations.

In addition to these two reports, we include the following series of “Digital Organizing Resources:”

[Digital Organizing Resource A: Interviewed Organizations and Networks](#)

[Digital Organizing Resource B: Research Design and Methods](#)

[Digital Organizing Resource C: Key Terms and Definitions](#)

[Digital Organizing Resource D: The Digital Divide in Community Organizing](#)

[Digital Organizing Resource E: Social Media Apps at a Glance](#)

[Digital Organizing Resource F: Understanding Generations](#)



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Digital Organizing: It's all about the apps

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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.





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](#).

^bNote, 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.

^cBetween 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.

^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.



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.

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:

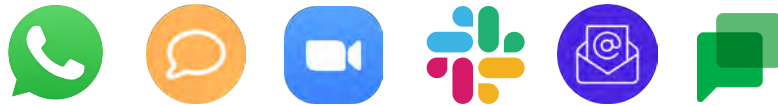
- Among surveyed U.S. adults, YouTube was the most used (81%).
- Among surveyed men and women who say they use YouTube, more men (82%) than women (80%) use the app.
- Among surveyed groups who say they use YouTube:
 - most surveyed adults under the age of 65 use the app.
 - more Hispanic Americans (85%) 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.

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

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- ¹⁰ Left, S. (2002, March 13). *Email timeline*. The Guardian. Retrieved April 18, 2022, from <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2002/mar/13/internetnews>.
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- ¹² Barron, S. (2020, March 5). *Everything you need to know about using Zoom*. Owl Labs Blog. Retrieved April 18, 2022, from <https://resources.owl labs.com/blog/zoom#:~:text=Zoom%20is%20a%20cloud%2Dbased,meeting%20recordings%2C%20and%20live%20chat>.

Digital Organizing Strategies

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Layout and design
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A Health Equity Foundation



Research Hub for Youth Organizing

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO **BOULDER**

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Introduction

This brief presents best practices and strategies for organizing online, based on interviews with ten organizing groups and a review of available literature. The companion report, [*Digital Organizing: It's all about the apps*](#), introduces the idea of digital organizing and shares the applications most used by community organizers. 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 Initiative. 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](#).

Scholars distinguish between two major components of social movement organizing: 1) those activities that build power to advance contentious actions, and 2) those that build and sustain organizational capacity.¹

In this report, we group findings by this distinction and in the following sections, we organize strategies accordingly. Across the interviews, we identified three main power building strategies in which apps are used: base building, building narrative power and inspiring action. We also identified three main capacity building strategies for using apps: choosing the right apps for your base, approaching digital organizing with curiosity, creativity, and flexibility, and integrating communications and digital organizing across all areas of the organization. The remainder of this report explains these strategies further.



Using Apps to Build Power

Researchers have long-studied online organizing.² Recent studies have addressed the many ways that digital tools can be integrated into the power-building process. In this study, organizers described: (1) how to use digital apps to build the base of people who work towards their same goals, (2) how to build the power to shift the public narrative towards the justice they seek, and (3) how to inspire action in their communities. In this report we share these strategies and the lessons learned from each. This information is quickly summarized in the table below.

Organizing Goals	Strategies	Lessons
Build Power	Base Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide consistent engagement, which is as important as huge numbers. • Know which part of your organization’s base is on which social media apps. • Learn about the subculture of each social media app. • Remember social media is public!
	Building Narrative Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remember that apps can help your organization develop messages and gather statements quickly from your members. • Know that messaging information for social media can be a balancing act. • Create both an internal and external communications toolkit. • Create a shared calendar that aligns communications with other organizational work. • Execute cross-posting and tagging, which can help your team reach organizing targets.
	Inspiring Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create “activation seeds” in multiple places. • Create videos which are powerful. • Amplify your allies.

Base Building with Social Media

Social media can be a powerful tool for base building. Typically, base-building is seen as a relational process that involves identifying and understanding people’s shared interests, aspirations, and everyday lives. Historically, these relationships were created with well-known strategies like door-knocking, holding local meetings, and hosting large events.^a Today, community organizers use social media to expand their base-building toolkit. Below are specific tips for using social media in base building.



Base building—Expanding the number of people 1) who are aligned with an organization’s goals, 2) are in direct communication with organizers, and 3) will take action on an issue.

Provide consistent engagement, which is as important as huge numbers.

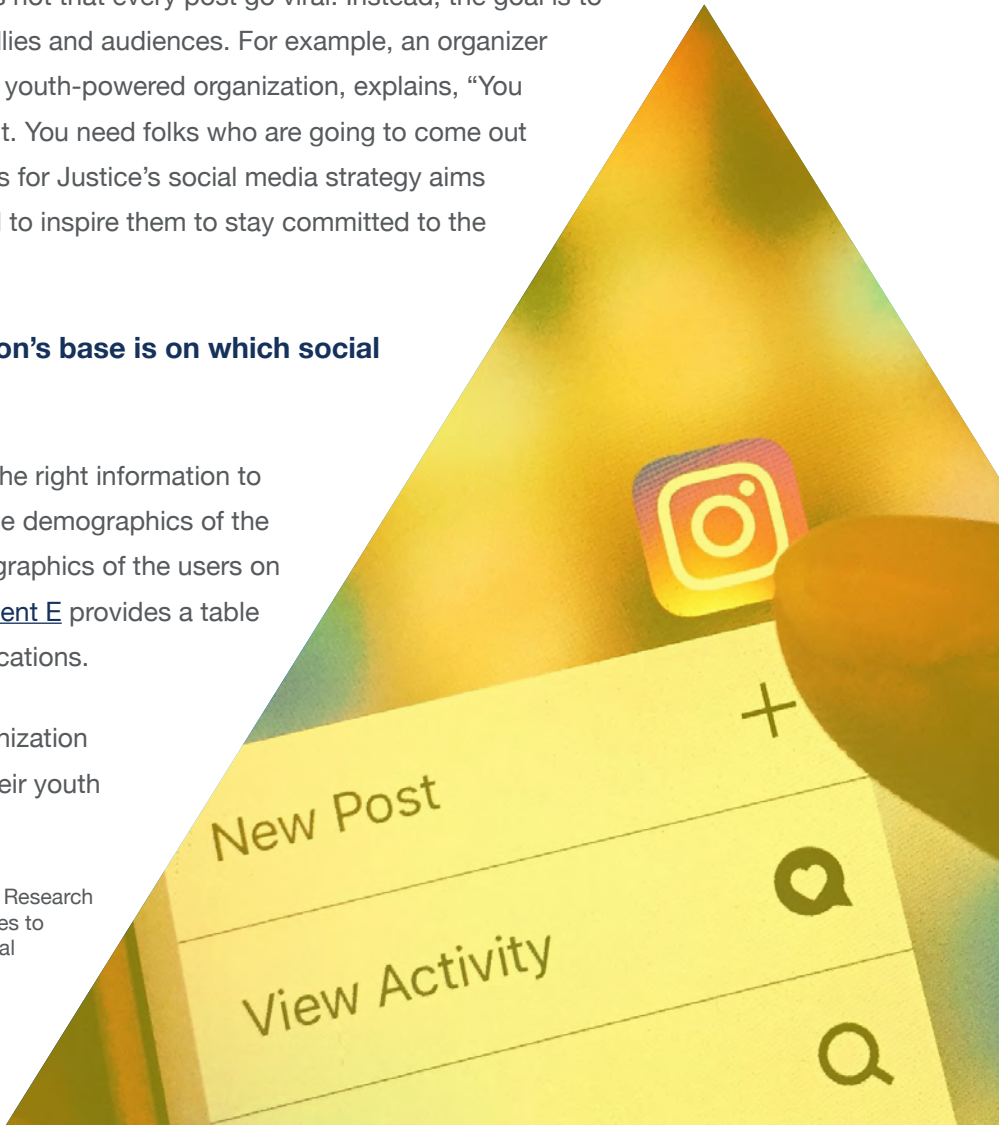
In the world of social media, people talk about a post as “going viral,” or reaching many people. “Going viral” is the result of numerous people sharing a post on social media apps with their contacts, who then share it again with their contacts. Having a social media post go viral is one way for community organizers to grab the attention of new potential members or to engage members in taking action. But organizers explain that the goal of a strong social media campaign is not that every post go viral. Instead, the goal is to consistently reach and engage specific allies and audiences. For example, an organizer from Californians for Justice, a statewide youth-powered organization, explains, “You don’t necessarily need a very high turnout. You need folks who are going to come out and then consistently return.” Californians for Justice’s social media strategy aims to catch the attention of known allies and to inspire them to stay committed to the struggle for education justice.

Know which part of your organization’s base is on which social media apps.

A strong social media campaign targets the right information to the right audience. It is critical to know the demographics of the organization’s base, as well as the demographics of the users on each social media app. [Resource Document E](#) provides a table with user demographics for various applications.

Student Voice, a national, youth-led organization uses **Instagram** to attract and engage their youth

^a This definition was informed and created from the Research Hub for Youth Organizing work with FCYO’s Pipelines to Power Initiative and featured in the third-year internal evaluation report submitted to P2P.



members in actions. They described **Instagram** as a great app for bringing new millennials and some Gen-Zers^b into their campaigns and the work of the organization. Said one organizer:

“Instagram is how we try to reach new students more than other applications. So, if we’re trying to get students to come to a campaign call, or fill out a survey, or do a call-to-action, that’s the application we use consistently.”—Student Voice

By comparison, Student Voice and Californians for Justice both use **Facebook** for fundraising because their **Facebook** “audience is mainly adults, teachers, college students who might be alumni of programs or the team.” These older allies are more likely to have money to donate to support their organization. Other interviewed organizations similarly used **Instagram** to reach youth members and Facebook to reach adult allies.

Language is another important part of targeted messaging. For example, Colorado Youth Congress shared this **Instagram** post in July 2021, as they were looking to engage new youth members in their programs. While the main photo is in English, the descriptive post is in both Spanish and English.



Twitter is useful in reaching multiple generations. According to a consultant with the Partnership for the Future of Learning, Twitter seems to have “millennial and Gen-Xers,” which situates it in the generational middle of Instagram (mostly Gen Z and millennials) and Facebook (mostly Gen X and Baby Boomers). For a description of these popular generational definitions see [Resource Document F](#).

^b In [Resource Document F](#), we provide additional information on the terms used for different generations, from Baby Boomers (57-75 years of age) to Gen A (9 years of age and under).

While organizations have long tracked the demographics of their membership, understanding the demographics of social media users is no simple task. Each social media app reports their own demographic trends. Unfortunately, these statistics are not comparable because each company designs and releases their own statistics for marketing and business purposes (summary information from the Pew Research Center can be found in [Resource Document E](#)). Importantly, interviewed organizers were clear that while social media research can be a strong starting point, it is only useful if the research can be integrated with the organization’s knowledge and understanding of their demographics (i.e., staff members and base) and social media use.

Learn about the subculture of each social media app.

Using social media to effectively reach, expand, and engage an organization’s base requires knowledge of the sub-culture of each social media app. Different kinds of media (e.g., text, pictures, video) are used in different social media apps. For example, organizations aiming to engage younger folks recognized the importance of understanding “meme culture” on applications like **Twitter** and **Instagram**. But there is a subtlety to using memes, as explained by organizers from Californians for Justice:

“Even that idea of identifying memes, like spending a lot of time thinking about what memes can we identify? What’s still hot and trending that isn’t going to – that’s going to translate well and not be too dorky, right?” – Californians for Justice

To the right is a meme, which includes an image and quote from a character from a popular TV show, that Student Voice posted to poke fun and criticize the placement of police officers in schools.

TikTok relies on content creators and “influencers” to attract attention, rather than relying on events or organizations. Producing successful content requires time, skill, and familiarity with the content.



Memes are images paired with text that follow a commonly understood joke structure.

According to Project VOYCE, using **TikTok** effectively starts by understanding that it is a youth-dominated online space. The Gen X program director at Project VOYCE talked about, among other things, a generational role distinction. They described it as ineffective for their organization's older leaders to post on TikTok. Rather, older staff were seen as being most effective in teaching younger youth organizers about the content of the work, i.e., education justice and healing, while empowering younger staff to use that knowledge to create effective TikToks consistent with the organization's message.

Another part of the sub-culture of each social media app is learning the amount of content to post. Organizers from Project VOYCE explained why they created a separate set of social media accounts for a civic-action campaign. They explained, "when we were working on the state policy, we really wanted people to be able to come back and see our work. [But] because... it's a highly saturated posting of... civics action content...we didn't want to overwhelm the main [Project VOYCE] page."

Undoubtedly, building familiarity with the subculture of online applications requires time to learn and navigate the apps, as well as noting the subtlety of engagement context by different groups. For more information about the different social media apps, see our companion report, [*Digital Organizing: It's all about the apps*](#), and [*Digital Organizing Resource E: Social Media Apps at a Glance*](#).



A **content creator** is someone who develops any kind of digital content – like video, photos, or text – either to advance their own identity as an influencer, their organization, and/or for profit. Influencers are one type of content creators. They are people with the ability to sway or influence hundreds of people by promoting or making recommendations on social media.

Remember social media is public!

Interviewed organizers drove home the message that social media feeds are **public!** Allies, opponents, the media, and the public at large can track an organization's work. An organizer from The Kentucky Student Voice Team spoke about purposefully keeping one project off social media until it was past the data collection phase so that political opponents didn't have the time to organize a counter-campaign. Instead, they engaged their base through private messaging, workflow apps, and shared drives.

Building Narrative Power

Apps are extremely useful in helping organizations build their narrative power. Cohesive messaging and stories can either maintain or disrupt the status quo. Organizing groups with narrative power can shape how people interpret and talk about major social issues addressed in their campaigns.^c

The Immigrant Rights Movement provides a well-known example of using narrative power to influence descriptive language and policies, over time. Young immigrants worked to shift public discourse from that of “illegal aliens” to “undocumented people.” These organizers went further and reshaped the narrative of young immigrants as “Dreamers,” hard working students who dream of accessing higher education.^d Even more recently, this same community of activists has worked to shift language again, this time from a narrow focus on high achieving students to reclaiming broader civil rights language, in the “Immigrant Rights Movement.”

Next, we describe the lessons organizers shared about using apps to build narrative power.



Narrative power is the power to influence stories that circulate in broader society.

Remember that apps can help your organization develop messages and gather statements quickly from your members.

Organizers often have very little time to develop a cohesive message around an emerging issue. Video meetings, shared but protected software spaces like a Google doc, and real time private messaging in apps like Slack or Google Chat, allow staff and organizational leaders to communicate their ideas quickly but also collaboratively, synchronously or asynchronously.

Once a cohesive message is developed, organizers can use the same tools to reach out to their base for public statements or testimony that aligns to the message. An organizer from The Kentucky Student Voice Team describes a time that the organization acted quickly to develop testimony when a state legislative committee attempted to overturn a school mask mandate during the height of COVID:

“We created a press statement that night – literally staying up until 2:00 a.m. -- writing press statements to release the next morning, which is when that committee was supposed to convene. And then... we realized, ‘hey, why don’t we just go to the capital and testify?’ So, I went to testify with another member of our team. And that was the first time we had met each other in person, but there was all of this online

^c This definition of narrative power is informed by the work that the Research Hub for Youth Organizing carried out with Funders Collaborative for Youth Organizing Pipelines to Power Initiative between 2018-2020.

^d We featured this example on building narrative power in the Research Hub’s Power Memo, a memo that was informed by our work with FCYO’s Pipelines to Power Initiative.

Valladares, S., Kirshner, B., and Trejo, B. (January 2019). Power memo. University of Colorado Boulder.

work preceding that. And it was probably the most convenient situation we were in, because we had everything, all of our resources were, in one space.”—The Kentucky Student Voice Team

Knowing that certain issues regularly jump into the news cycle, some groups proactively create Slack channels or Google docs, for example, for different topics. Staff generate potential messages aligned to the organization’s mission and goals, and then leaders can edit and revise them and add their own testimonies to the same channel or file. When a reporter reaches out to a member or staff, everyone can access both the topline message and direct quotes from community leaders. Using shared apps to create messages, particularly in advance, allows for democratic deliberation and creates an opportunity for more of the base to be quoted or mentioned publicly.

Know that messaging information for social media can be a balancing act.

Organizers explain that staying on mission in social media can be challenging for community organizing groups because social media favors sensationalized urgent messages rather than engagement in a long struggle. One strategy for addressing this tension is taking time as an organization to clarify the organization’s mission and non-negotiables. For example, knowing that a 501(c)(3) cannot endorse a candidate or specific legislation is made clear by law, but knowing how and when an organization wants to acknowledge an emerging issue outside of their areas of focus is much more nuanced. Another part of the balancing act is knowing that reposting any social media from official accounts will be perceived as an endorsement. So, it is important that the people making the decisions for the organizational accounts have a set of approved principles to follow. Organizers emphasized consistently staying true to an organization’s mission and values instead of posting simplified content that may get more attention but less long-term commitment.

Create both an internal and external communications toolkit

As discussed in the base-building section, social media apps are extremely useful for sharing messages. However, not every part of an organization’s base is active on social media, and not every message should be shared with the public. Thus, organizers explained they developed both internal and external communication toolkits in their work. The internal toolkits are saved in password protected spaces and organizers used email, text, and protected workflow apps to share them with multiple people at once.

External toolkits allow base members to easily access language and messaging that keeps organizational messaging cohesive. Unlike internal materials, these public-facing toolkits have less information and aim to keep messaging simple and clear. For example, they might include sample tweets for Twitter, text for Facebook, or a graphic for Facebook or Instagram for members and allies to post from their own accounts.

Create a shared calendar that aligns communications with other organizational work.

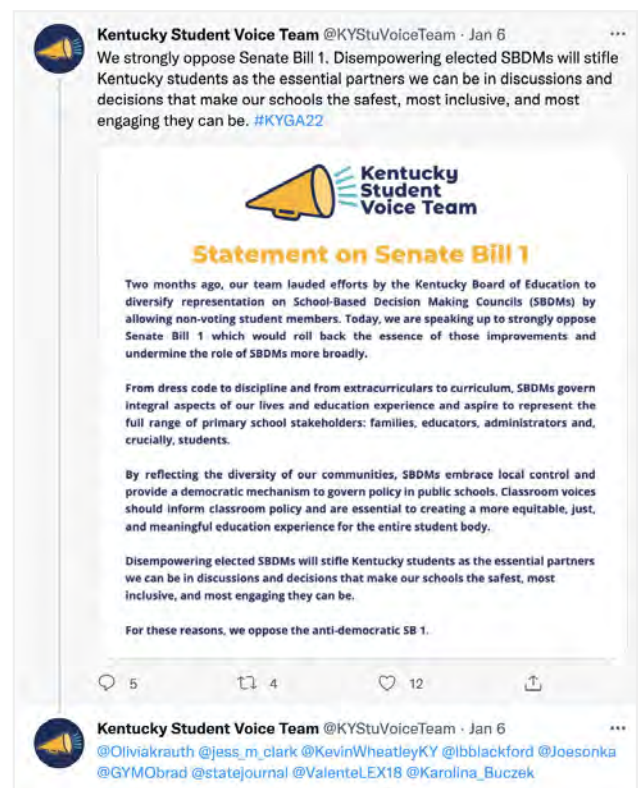
Organizers used a shared calendar app like Google Calendar to create and edit organization-wide communication calendars. Interviewed organizers explain that on a day-to-day basis it is important to be selective about how much you communicate with your leadership, your base, and the broader public. For example, at Project Voyce, organizers coordinate days of the week to communicate about different topics (e.g., program work versus political campaigns versus fundraising) on social media. This allows all parts of their team time to get external attention without overwhelming their target audiences. Additionally, the shared calendar allows organizations to align communications activities with the rest of the organization's work.

Execute cross-posting and tagging, which can help your team reach your organizing targets.

In the "Information Age," getting a message out to the broader public, to the media, or to elected officials requires that the same message appear in a variety of spaces. A critical strategy for amplifying messages is having multiple people cross-post the same message on different applications and in different venues. This requires that everyone (i.e., those reaching out to traditional print or radio media, allied community leaders, and/or elected officials, as well as organizers posting on social media) have access to and use the same shared toolkit.

Having a team of communications staff and volunteers (rather than a single person) who are ready to share a message with diverse audiences is also helpful. While a communications director can utilize known relationships with local media or elected officials, the broader team should include individuals with a large and influential group of followers on social media. The idea is that the information the organization posts will align with that posted by other members using their personal accounts. Importantly, organizers emphasize that the sub-culture of each social media app means that messages need to be unique and appropriate for the space, while maintaining a clear message and organizational vision.

The ability to tag the accounts of public officials, reporters, and others provides a powerful tool for community organizers to directly access and even get quick responses from people with social and institutional power. Staff at Californians for Justice shared that Twitter allows them to get the "ear of educators, of administrators, of policy people who are generating the [policy] content." Similarly, in the **Tweet** to the right from Kentucky Student Voice, we note that after tweeting their statement, Kentucky Student



Voice then immediately responds to their own tweet by tagging (entering the usernames/handles of) prominent education journalists in the state, to reach decision makers.

Inspiring Action

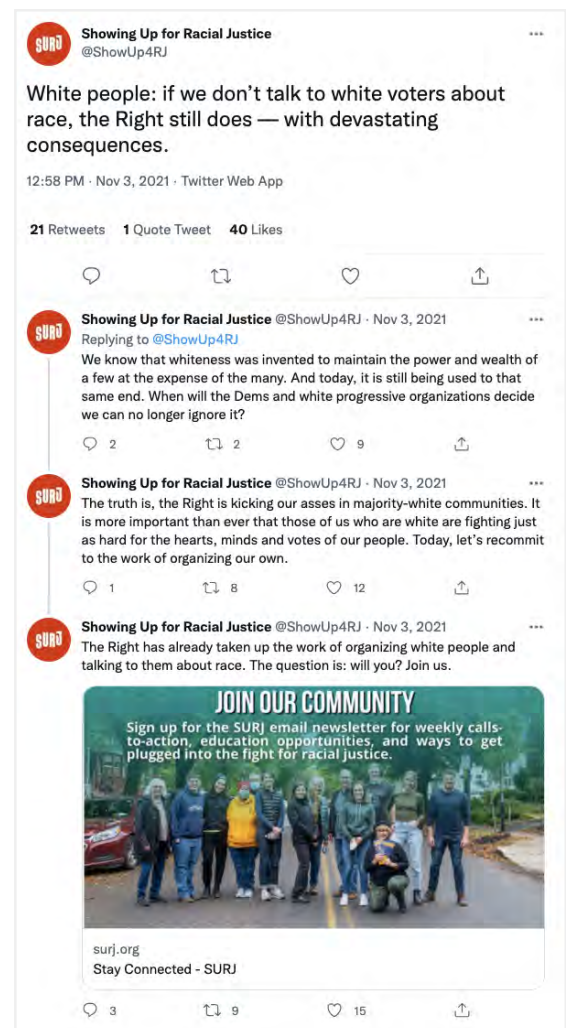
Community organizers aim to do more than just spread a message, they aim to inspire people to take collective action to change social injustice. Such action is long and hard and requires much more than a one-time act, conversation, or social media post. The following are strategies for inspiring action.

Create “activation seeds” in multiple places.

In her work, James³ discusses “activation seeds” or nodes of content, diversely placed, which maximize the possibility of recruitment and engagement. James found that it is possible to build personalized connections through engagement in online applications. These multiple activation points are the seeds for expanding an organization’s reach, identifying allies and supporters, and advancing both the short-term and long-term goals of an organization. Thinking about how these different activation seeds are connected is important. An organizer from Showing Up for Racial Justice explained how they did this when asking their base to sign up for a phone bank for a local sheriff election:

“...the first thing I would probably do is make a graphic for email. Send out the email for this phone bank. I would post it on Instagram, and I would post it on... Facebook and Twitter as well. But what I would also do is, people need to see something a couple of times. So, on Twitter I would have – spent a couple of days where I’m talking about the stakes of the race and stakes for that campaign and why it’s important, why people should care.”

As explained by Showing Up for Racial Justice, creating a narrative on **Twitter** about the importance of the issue helps people understand the “ask” of signing up for a phone bank. The Showing Up for Racial Justice Twitter thread here demonstrates how to provide context and urgency around an invitation to join their organizations.



Multiple touch points take intentional planning. An organizer from Together Colorado explained that their legislative campaign began by inviting people by email, social media posts, and a paid Facebook ad to a Zoom event. After the event, they used the same applications to get event attendees to sign up for specific tasks. This coordinated set of activities ensured maximum reach and participation.

Create videos which are powerful.

Videos that are professionally produced, videos quickly captured on a mobile phone, or recordings of previous events can reach different audiences with deeper information. A communications consultant from the Partnership for the Future of Learning pointed to the “massive subscriber lists” on YouTube, and a digital organizer from Together Colorado mentioned using other social media applications to direct people to YouTube content. In this sense, watching a video on YouTube actually becomes an action. People can learn about your organization by witnessing your work. Videos allow people to learn about your organization and then search for more detailed information online. It is important to think strategically about videos being stories that allow people to lean into your work, rather than explaining absolutely everything about a campaign or issue.

Amplify your allies.

True social movements are not about a single organization, rather they are about several organizations coalescing around an issue to create change. Organizations are working more and more strategically across networks to share information with allies. For example, as a network of many different organizations, the Partnership for the Future of Learning engages Ambassadors to share information about their own organization as it relates to a network priority. In addition, they have listservs across the network where each organization can share campaign and event announcements and ask allies to repost information on their own communications channels. The act of reposting an ally’s work takes little time and can help build the collective power of a movement. For example, here is a screenshot of a [video created by Alianza NORCO and shared via Facebook](#). The video thanks allies for collaborating on a campaign to help immigrants get driving licenses.



Using Apps to Build and Sustain Organizational Capacity

Apps are as useful for building and sustaining an organization as they are for building power. However, in the ever-changing technological world, it is hard to know which apps to use and when and how to use them. This section focuses on three major strategies and the lessons within them. In the table below, we show the strategies for building and sustaining organizational capacity.

Organizing Goals	Strategies	Lessons
Build and Sustain Organizational Capacity	Choosing the right apps for your organization's staff and base	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be honest about your organization's digital expertise and be intentional about learning. • Consider cellular and internet reliability. • Use apps to democratize information access.
	Approaching digital organizing with curiosity, creativity, and flexibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create digital spaces which can expand diversity and engagement. • Bring your organization's values and goals into digital spaces. • Build community across distance.
	Integrating digital tools and communications across the organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use digital tools across the organization, not just for one goal. • Communicate fundraising as essential and promote with frequent exchange of ideas. • Provide professional development on apps.

Choosing the right apps for your organization's staff and base.

From project planning to scheduling and communicating, there are many application options but not all of them will be right for your team. For example, some organizers reach their members by phone call or text because internet access is limited, while others use web-based messaging apps like WhatsApp to speak with members who don't have cellular access or have limited cellular data plans. Below we review some of the key lessons shared by organizers.

Be honest about your organization's digital expertise and be intentional about learning.

Take time to learn about the apps that leaders and members already have and how they use them. If they already use apps at work or in school, it will be easier to use these apps within an organization. If an organization's base includes lots of people who eagerly try out new technology, then the leaders might be able to consider more options than an organization with a less tech-interested base. Each app has its own strengths and limitations including cost, ability to work offline, security, style and design (see examples in [*Digital Organizing: It's all about the apps*](#)). It is important to think about and discuss the needs and strengths of staff and leaders before switching from one app to the other, to avoid unnecessary time and financial costs. Don't assume that everyone will switch apps easily, rather, build ownership of the selection of a new app. Several organizers shared experiences where one staff member wanted to try a new app but couldn't get the rest of the organization to use it.

Consider cellular and internet reliability.

Every community has different internet and cellular access, so it is important to know how issues of connectivity and access will impact the work of an organization and its leaders. An organizer from Showing Up for Racial Justice explained how issues of access led them to rely on Slack and social media which uses less data than Zoom. "...when I was working with coworkers in Appalachia, where they have less reliable Internet...they were extremely responsive on Slack or on social media, but maybe had a hard time getting on Zoom." Other organizers mentioned the lack of cellular access in urban neighborhoods.

Use Apps to democratize information access.

If used well and universally across the organization, apps can help democratize access to information. Organizers at Student Voice explained that shared access allows more people to engage in and feel ownership of the work. But it is also important to develop principles for how and when people are added to shared spaces like Slack or Google Drive or a donor database like EveryAction and to consider when or if people should have their access removed. Thinking about how to balance inclusivity and privacy is important, especially when considering private information or donations. Developing plans for what to do when someone violates the

security of an organization's shared space or is simply no longer volunteering with the organization, allows the group to be consistent in practice.

Approach digital organizing with curiosity, creativity, and flexibility.

Organizers are always developing new ways to approach the work of building power and capacity just as app developers are always developing new tools. Interviewees talked about approaching digital organizing with curiosity, creativity, and flexibility to maximize its potential. We share key lessons here.

Create digital spaces which can expand diversity and engagement.

Though COVID is the catalyst, and the change from in-person to online organizing is not without its challenges, interviewed organizers are finding the benefits. Organizers from Together Colorado and Student Voice, spoke about video and hybrid meetings to increase engagement across different communities and expand both the diversity and numbers of people engaged in their work. Together Colorado explains, "we're much more representative of the entire state now than we were when we had a lot more in-person meetings in Denver."

Bring your organization's values and goals into digital spaces.

Organizers aim to both create change around social issues and support the development of those with whom they work. During the pandemic Project VOYCE leaders applied this goal to their digital meetings, aiming to get work done, and to allow young people to connect:

"We really - deliberately actually - wanted to create our coalition through Zoom because we know that things are unstable and unpredictable right now. And we didn't want Project VOYCE to be another thing in their life that had to go from in-person to digital. We wanted to already be something that, if stuff goes left and we all have to do everything virtual, they're already in it with us, and we're already doing this work."

Also consistent with their organizational goals, Project VOYCE used Zoom to create healing spaces. In the words of one organizer, "We're still exploring what a healing-justice framework looks like in digital space. [Even though Zoom] hasn't been healing for many of the adults who are leading it." With rising mental health concerns for youth and adults, creating healing spaces online is a new strategy for creating spaces of support and renewal rather than burnout.

Build community across distance.

Since inception, the Internet has been an exceptionally powerful tool in helping people build relationships across distances. Organizers from Showing Up for Racial Justice and Kentucky Student Voice explained that this is still very much the case when using digital tools in organizing. Organizers from both groups described how Slack

channels provide a means of connecting with leaders and allies interested in the same issue regardless of geographic location. Similarly, many organizations have a “watercooler” channel on Slack that is meant for casual conversations that might happen beside the water cooler at an in-person office.

Integrate digital tools and communications across the organization.

Digital organizing is more than just communicating a message through social media. Effective digital organizing requires a team approach in thinking about how to use a range of apps across all areas of their mission. An integrated approach ensures that there is shared responsibility, an ability to shift with changing conditions, and long-term buy-in for online organizing. It also means that communications should not be isolated to one person or one team, rather everyone needs to be trained in how to use digital tools and how to communicate effectively.

Use digital tools across the organization, not just for one goal

As apps allow for more and more integration of data, there are new opportunities for leaders to break the traditional silos (e.g., education, organizing, human resources, development) of their organizations and work together. This applies not just to coordinating activities but also communicating about them externally. Social media also allows every member of the team to help communicate about their work. Having members of your team that have a large social media following is a new kind of capital for community organizations to creatively use.

Communicate fundraising as essential and promote with frequent exchange of ideas.

Californians for Justice organizers use Facebook for fundraising more than they use it to reach new youth members. Acknowledging that their approach to digital organizing is a classic communications perspective with audiences and that each platform has different audiences, Californians for Justice strives for an integrated approach across their work. “We want to be able to integrate a digital strategy in our base building and our leadership development work...[and] fundraising.” To the right, we provide one more example of how Together Colorado’s Facebook Post aims to drive traffic to their website.



Provide professional development on apps.

Organizers explain that it is valuable to take time to teach an organization's base and staff how to use new digital technologies. Planned training allows everyone to become a learner and normalizes the process of testing and exploring new technologies. The benefit is that new apps integrate into the regular work of the organization. Organizers at Alianza NORCO took time for their base to learn about using Zoom as their primary meeting app, which in turn, allowed Alianza NORCO to be successful across several campaign efforts.





Conclusion: The Dynamic Nature of Digital Organizing

Technology is always changing and evolving. Effective digital organizing requires a growth mindset, being a constant learner, loving the challenge of something new but also collaborating with peers and creatively innovating new solutions. These traits, fortunately, abound in strong community organizers.

When we set out to write this report, we thought that we could create a “how to” guide that would support organizers to quickly match their knowledge and needs to a specific social media, communication, or work productivity app. What we learned from organizers is that using apps well is much more complicated than simply identifying the right application. Understanding your organizational goals, your multiple audiences (among your base and your targets), and your technological capacity are key to successfully organizing online.

Using social media effectively, for example, may require proactively creating a variety of posts for different applications in a planned manner - rather than choosing the app whose demographic reach matches best to the majority of the organization’s base. It is helpful to experiment with different media, with different posts, and then make use of analytics from the apps or companion apps like HootSuite, to track impact.

Effective digital organizing requires integrating technology and apps across the different parts of an organization, building buy-in, and then working as a community to learn and innovate. This seemingly overwhelming task can be divided into manageable parts – an organization can start by selecting one of the strategies presented here, along with some of the lessons shared by their peers. To sustain the work of digital organizing long term, organizations must invest in leaders and

organizers. A constant reassessment of who can take on learning something new (perhaps based on roles, training, or interests) is also important, as context and people change. For example, the Human Resources and Fundraising Directors might collaborate to explore a new app like EveryAction, while the political action team might experiment by engaging a youth leadership board in creating TikToks that reflect campaign goals. There is an old saying that a database is only as good as the information you put into it. It seems the same is true across these apps– they are only as good as the people using them to innovate, create, and advance social change.



What we learned from organizers is that using apps well is much more complicated than simply identifying the right application. Understanding your organizational goals, your multiple audiences (among your base and your targets), and your technological capacity are key to successfully organizing online.

Endnotes

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Digital Organizing Resource A: Interviewed Organizations and Networks

We share gratitude with the community organizers who took the time to participate in these interviews. We encourage you to learn more about the work of each of these organizations.

Network	Geographic Scope of Work	Mission	Target Populations
Funders Collaborative for Youth Organizing (FCYO)	National	Brings together funders and youth organizers to make sure that youth organizers have the resources they need to fight for justice. ¹	Funders and youth organizing directors who are committed to leveraging youth organizing as a driver of social change.
The Partnership for the Future of Learning	National	Supports policies and practices that promote the strength, protection and advancement of education equity and meaningful learning. ²	Education and social justice leaders from over 300 organizations and 20 foundations.
Organization	Geographic Scope of Work	Mission	Target Populations
Alianza NORCO	Fort Collins	Strengthens and empowers immigrants in the community through “key services, civic education, leadership development and community organization.” ³	Immigrant communities, mostly focused on the Latinx immigrant population but including African and Asian immigrants, in Northern Colorado.
Californians for Justice (CFJ)	Statewide- California	Fights to improve the lives of communities of color, immigrant communities, low-income communities, LGBTQ communities and other marginalized communities through youth-powered organizing. ⁴	High school aged youth.

 Note: A **network** is a coalition of organizations. An **organization** is a single, defined group of people who share a collective identity, goals, and program of work.

Colorado Youth Congress	Statewide- Colorado	Drives transformative systems change by working with high school leaders across the political spectrum and from communities across the state including urban, suburban, and rural communities. ⁵	Young people in Colorado between the ages of 14-18.
The Kentucky Student Voice	Statewide- Kentucky	Promotes the collective power of youth across Kentucky by listening, training, and working with students. ⁶	High school students in Kentucky.
Project Voyce	Denver Metro Area	Partners with youth to address the root causes of inequity by cultivating transformational leadership and equitable youth-adult partnerships through training, employment and organizing. ⁷	Young people in historically marginalized communities in the Denver metro area.
Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ)	National	Engages white people in organizing for racial and economic justice by creating a network of groups and individuals across the country. ⁸	White people of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds.
Student Voice	National	Equips students as storytellers and organizers to advocate for educational equity in communities across the country. ⁹	Students in United States public schools.
Together Colorado	Statewide- Colorado	Organizes to place human dignity at the center of public life through non-partisan, multi-racial, multi-faith community organizing. ¹⁰	People of faith across the state of Colorado.

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- ¹ Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing. (n.d.). Our Mission. FCYO. Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://fcyo.org/about/our-mission>
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Digital Organizing Resource B: Research Design and Methods

This resource is part of a suite of publications 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 (BBP) strategy grantee partners. Data comes from interviews with ten organizing groups and a review of available literature. [Go to our website](#) for more information.

The research for this report is guided by the following questions:

- How can digital organizing be used to build, engage, and activate a base?
 - How do these uses differ by geography (urban vs rural)?
- What are the digital applications that are most effectively used by organizers across the nation and in service to various demographics?
- What are the most effective digital organizing strategies used by community organizers across the nation and in service to various demographics?
 - What digital applications, tools, and strategies are the best options for grantees of The Colorado Trust, based on geographic scope of work and unique questions of accessibility? (e.g., language, internet speed, communication hardware and software).

To answer these questions, the research team began with a broad search for literature with key words like “digital organizing,” “online organizing,” “online activism,” and “digital social activism.” This yielded several toolkits, journal articles, online articles, dissertations, and theses.

The research team also collected semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with members of ten organizations. Please see Digital Organizing Resource A: Interviewed Organizations and Networks for a list of participating organizations. Interview participants were selected for their organization’s knowledge and expertise in digital organizing, and their organization’s base and shared similarities with the Building and Bridging Power strategy grantee partners.

Interviews were recorded via Zoom and transcribed verbatim. Interview data were analyzed using grounded theory. The goal was to identify themes related to the use of specific organizing applications and strategies within those applications, paying attention to tactics used to build community power and strengthen organizational infrastructure.



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Digital Organizing Resource C: Key Terms and Definitions

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The following are key terms and definitions that are frequently referenced across the Digital Organizing suite of resources.

Application software (Apps)—Apps are the computer programs that make digital devices like computers and cell phones usable. Everything from the program used for word processing, to hosting an online event, to communicating, to organizing information, is considered an application. There are several different ways that applications can be classified. In this study we found that community organizers describe two major categories of applications: 1) Applications used for engaging community and building power, and 2) Applications used for building and sustaining the organization’s infrastructure. These categories of applications are not mutually exclusive, there are some apps (e.g., video conferencing applications or messaging apps) that can be used for both purposes.

Base building—Expanding the number of people 1) who are aligned with an organization’s goals, 2) are in direct communication with organizers, and 3) will take action on an issue. Typically, base-building is seen as a relational process that involves identifying and understanding peoples’ shared interests, aspirations, and everyday lives.

Broadband—The transmission of wide bandwidth data over a high-speed internet connection. Broadband provides high speed internet access via multiple types of technologies including fiber optics, wireless, cable, **digital subscriber line** (DSL), and satellite.

Content creator—Someone who develops any kind of digital content—like video, photos, or text – either to advance their own identity as an influencer or for the content of a company or organization. Influencers are one type of content creators. They are people with the ability to sway or influence hundreds of people by promoting or making recommendations on social media.

Devices—Devices are the digital technology you can touch. Twenty years ago, the primary device used for digital work was a desktop computer, or a high-end laptop. Since then, devices, or digital hardware have been in a state of constant evolution. Affordable devices like mobile phones, Chromebooks, tablets, and laptops have significantly expanded digital access. Even with notable inequalities, mobile phones are more accessible than ever.

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



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Digital strategies—We use this term to reference how people use different digital tools in their community organizing.

Digital tools—This term is inclusive of devices, software/apps, internet access, and the internet in its entirety.

GIF (Graphics Interchange Format)—A GIF is an image file format commonly used for one or more images or animations on the internet.

Going viral—A phrase used to describe something (often a message or post) that is spreading and reaching many people.

Influencer—People with the ability to sway or influence hundreds of people by promoting or making recommendations on social media. Influencers are one kind of content creator.

Internet—Throughout this report, we use the term internet to reference the infinite space that holds our collective digital global information network, some of which is accessible to the public and some of which is private or needs to be purchased.¹

Internet Access—The Cambridge Dictionary offers the following simple explanation, “the ability to connect to the internet.” However, the reality of community organizing in under-resourced communities and communities that are intentionally marginalized makes this “ability” far from simple to understand. Internet access by design is a utility that must be paid for whether provided through a mobile device contract, wired, wireless or satellite. Contracts between a company and an individual or paid for by a local government involve a cost to access the Internet. Because the internet is treated as a private utility and providers aim to make a profit, not every community has equal access to reliable internet services. Throughout this study we heard about challenges accessing the Internet especially in rural areas and low-income urban neighborhoods. Finally, the quality and cost of a digital device also significantly impacts the quality of internet access. See [Resource D: The Digital Divide in Community Organizing](#) for more information.

Memes—Images paired with text that follow a commonly understood joke structure.

Narrative power—The power to influence stories that circulate in broader society.

Post—A message published in an online space or newsgroup.

Software—Software or apps, are the computer programs that make the hardware usable. At the most general level, there are three types of software—system software, utility software and applications software.² This report focuses on applications software or Apps.



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Digital Organizing Resource D:

The Digital Divide in Community Organizing

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Applications are not the only digital tool used by community organizers. Across the interviews and the literature, there is significant discussion about the role of digital devices (computers, tablets, mobile phones), the Internet, and internet access.

Devices are the digital technology you can touch. Twenty years ago, the primary digital device was the desktop computer, or a high-end laptop. Since then, devices, or digital hardware, are constantly evolving. Affordable devices like mobile phones, Chromebooks, tablets, and laptops have also significantly expanded access. Even with notable inequalities, mobile phones are more accessible than ever.

Whereas the “digital divide” was often discussed as the growing gap between those who could access computers and the internet (the wealthy, middle-class Americans living in urban and suburban areas) and those who could not (under-resourced members of society, the poor, rural, elderly, and disabled portions of America’s populations)^a, the digital divide has more to do with access to the Internet.¹ The Internet or Web is the infinite space that holds the digital global information network.

Internet access by design is a utility for which payment is required. Whether purchased through a mobile device contract, wired, or paid for via wireless or satellite contracts between individuals and a company, or provided by a local government, the Internet costs money to access. Not every community has equal access to reliable internet services. As the Internet emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000, it was less profitable to run hundreds of miles of physical cable into rural parts of the country that served a very small number of customers. Many under-resourced neighborhoods were left unwired. While there was government intervention in some places, the true transformation took place when Wi-Fi, cable, satellite, and cellular access became commonplace.

Adults in rural areas have seen a rise in home broadband adoption since 2016, but they remain less likely than adults in suburban areas to have home broadband and less likely than urban adults to own a smartphone, tablet

^a This definition was borrowed from a project on addressing the digital divide by Stanford students. For a more detailed description go to <https://cs.stanford.edu/people/eroberts/cs181/projects/digital-divide/start.html>



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computer or traditional computer.² According to Pew survey responses , rural residents also go online less frequently than their urban counterparts. This is due to the current infrastructure that does not support consistently dependable broadband access in many rural areas. Broadband provides high speed internet access via multiple types of technologies including fiber optics, wireless, cable, DSL, and satellite. During the pandemic, the move to remote work and school brought the lack of reliable high-speed internet access to the forefront for school districts and other public serving institutions and organizations who work directly with rural communities. As schools, organizations and companies went virtual, they were forced to provide devices to students and families, but other organizations and companies have been under no obligation to do this. There is no clear path to systematically addressing issues of access to devices and high-speed internet access.

In this study, community organizers reported that acquiring devices is less of a problem than having access to tools that work reliably and that have the adequate memory, power, and ability to connect to the necessary apps for organizing. Some organizers are faced with Chromebooks with limited battery power, or old operating systems that make it hard to connect to the Internet. Reliable internet access continues to be a challenge for rural communities and low-income neighborhoods due to connectivity issues and hardware problems. This means community organizers need to be strategic in how they communicate and work with their base in relation to devices and technology.



In this study, community organizers reported that acquiring devices is less of a problem than having access to tools that work reliably and that have the adequate memory, power, and ability to connect to the necessary apps for organizing.”



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Endnotes

¹ *Some digital divides persist between rural, urban and suburban America.* Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (August 19, 2021) <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/06/10/blacklivesmatter-surges-on-twitter-after-george-floyds-death/>

² *Some digital divides persist between rural, urban and suburban America.* Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (August 19, 2021) <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/06/10/blacklivesmatter-surges-on-twitter-after-george-floyds-death/>

³ *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/>



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Digital Organizing Resource E:

Social Media Apps at A Glance

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Between January 25 and February 8, 2021, the Pew Research Center conducted a survey of U.S. adults and their use of social media.¹ 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. The table below shows demographic survey data for the applications mentioned in this report (i.e., YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok).

% of U.S. adults in each demographic group who say they ever use these apps.

	YouTube	Facebook	Instagram	Twitter	TikTok
Total	81	69	40	23	21
Men	82	61	36	25	17
Women	80	77	44	22	24
White	79	67	35	22	18
Black	84	74	49	29	30
Hispanic	85	72	52	23	31
Ages 18-29	95	70	71	42	48
30-49	91	76	49	27	22
50-64	83	61	29	18	14
65+	49	70	13	7	4
<\$30K	75	70	35	12	22
\$30K-\$49,999	83	76	45	29	29
\$50K-\$74,999	79	61	39	22	20
\$75K+	90	70	47	34	20

¹ Social Media Use in 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/04/07/social-media-use-in-2021/>



	YouTube	Facebook	Instagram	Twitter	TikTok
HS or less	70	64	30	14	21
Some college	86	71	44	26	24
College+	89	73	49	33	19
Urban	84	70	45	27	24
Suburban	81	70	41	23	20
Rural	74	67	25	18	16



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Digital Organizing Resource F:

Understanding Generations

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Generations	Born between...	In 2022 were between ___ years old	Represent ___ million people in the U.S.
The Silent Generation ^a	1928-1945	77-94	23
Baby Boomers	1946-1964	58-76	71.6
Gen X	1965-1979/80	42-57	65.2
Millennials (Gen Y)	1981-1994/6	26-41	72.1
Gen Z	1997-2012	10-25	68
Gen A	2012-present	0-9	48

Source: This table was created with data posted on The Kasasa Exchange <https://www.kasasa.com/exchange/articles/generations/gen-x-gen-y-gen-z#:~:text=Gen%20X%3A%20Gen%20X%20was,72.1%20million%20in%20the%20U.S.>

^a From Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silent_Generation#:~:text=The%20Silent%20Generation%20is%20generally,United%20States%20as%20of%202019



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