

Unifying the Movement Building and Service provision poles

From the beginning, May First/People Link has struggled to understand what a movement technology organization is.

A movement technology organization is not merely a service provider. The service provision relationship is too superficial and often in conflict with the deep relationships any one movement organization needs to have with the rest of the movement.

Similarly, a movement technology organization can't be just about ideas and discussion. We need to be knee-deep in technology, providing proof of concept through our infrastructure that we can build autonomous systems that support movement success.

Nonetheless, our history has gone through various periods in which the emphasis on service provision has been pitted against the emphasis on movement building - in competition for funding, framing of initiatives, and meeting agendas. This tension has been central to our decisions and actions over the years.

Charting how we move forward to form our coop bylaws and simultaneously expand the organization requires us to understand both of these roles and how they have been expressed in our organization's history.

Starting with a bang

May First/People Link began in 2005 with about 80 members and two or three servers.

We began providing two services that immediately resonated with the movement: Email lists that could send unlimited messages (during a time when corporate providers put heavy restrictions on mass email) and automatic installation of the Drupal web site software, which was the fastest growing platform to build a web site within the movement.

In addition, from the beginning, we were heavily involved in movement work.

We took a leading role in organizing the technology volunteers for the 2007 US Social Forum. This role led to a seat on the 2010 US Social Forum National Planning Committee as we continued guiding the forum's technology and political work.

In addition to our formal roles in the US Social Forum, our movement work included publishing a book (The Organic Internet) which helped define our view of the relationship between the Internet and the movement as well as our Internet Rights workshop, a software-based exercise allowing small group discussions in multiple languages and multiple locations to build a list of Internet rights collaboratively and in real time. We organized these workshops all over the world, including one simultaneous session in New York, Montreal, Guatemala City, and Belem, Brazil.

Through this period our membership grew to about 500.

Struggle

Soon after the 2010 US Social Forum, we underwent tremendous change. Three significant events happened:

- We launched a volunteer support team of technologists, that met on the first Saturday of each month (2010).
- We became an informal (no by-laws or written governing documents) membership organization with our first membership meeting and elected Leadership Committee (2011).
- We partnered with Laneta - a long time alternative Internet provider in Mexico which launched us as a bi-national organization (2011).

In addition, although it was not clear at the time, the movement in the US was also experiencing a significant change.

- The Occupy Movement exploded. Unlike the US Social Forum process which provided strong opportunities for building on a history of movement organizing practices, the Occupy Movement was hard to build on and eventually collapsed, leaving very little behind.
- The US Social Forum process continued, with MF/PL heavily involved, but it lacked the momentum of the 2007 and 2010 events.
- From a technology perspective, many activists in the movement were becoming disillusioned with Drupal due to the high maintenance costs while other service providers were offering similarly easy ways to set things up. In addition, the ability to send mass email was becoming common place. Corporate services like Google, Facebook and Twitter essentially took over the left. We had no response to these trends.

The support team, however, continued to grow, sometimes attracting 10 to 15 people each Saturday to come together and talk about and support May First/People Link infrastructure. The support team helped implement a number of important projects that stabilized and expanded our technology infrastructure.

In addition, we had some successes in integrated movement and infrastructure work. For example, in 2011, we launched a one-year People Of Color Technology Training program that paired members of our support team with movement organizers interested in building their core technology skills and sharing their experiences of racism and other forms of exclusion and oppression within technology circles.

However, the support team also inadvertently contributed to a division. It developed a group of technologists who were mostly white and male and who were primarily exposed to one aspect of the organization: the service provision. Members of the support team naturally began to understand the organization as a service provider.

Meanwhile, the elected Leadership Committee continued to develop. In contrast with the support team, it has always been the most diverse body of the organization, with 1/3 of the members from Mexico and always more than half people of color and women. The demographics of the Leadership Team are closely in line with the demographics of our membership and the movement as whole, making the support team's homogeneity a stark misrepresentation.

These developments took place at a time when our role in the movement, technologically and in all aspects, was uncertain, leaving us with an unclear vision of our future.

Problems came to a head during the summer of 2014 when members of the support team protested the inclusion, by request of the Leadership Committee, of a popular education exercise to explore of oppression.

The ensuing rift was one of the ugliest periods of May First/People Link's history. While contributing factors included racism, sexism, and difficulties stemming from language and cultural differences, one important factor that emerged was the nature of our organization.

Are we a service provider or a movement organization? And by extension, should decision making power lie in the hands of our members or the technology workers?

In October, in recognition of the severity of the crisis, the Leadership Committee cancelled the annual membership meeting and scheduled a Leadership Committee meeting in Mexico for January of the coming year. The full Leadership Committee plus all support team members involved in the conflict were invited to attend.

In November, four Leadership Committee members declined the invitation and resigned, and our two part-time support team staff gave notice, indicating a desire to leave the organization (but agreeing to continue work until a replacement could be found).

In January 2015, the remaining Leadership Committee members came together. We evaluated what had happened, and based on that evaluation began a one year task to formalize the nature of our organization through a series of documents. The process continued throughout 2015, and included a specially organized one-day workers summit where everyone who has volunteered for the organization was invited to scrutinize the draft documents and help finalize them.

In November, 2015 the documents were presented to the full membership and approved overwhelmingly (see <https://mayfirst.org/en/official-documents/>).

Forward

Since 2015, the movement work has re-gained focus. Starting with a strong collaboration with the Media Action Grassroot Network and the Center for Media Justice, May First/People Link launched the Technology and Revolution campaign in 2017 which has transitioned into the Technology Congresses (see <https://techandrev.org/>). This campaign is designed to make technology a critical part of the movement's strategy - not what tools we should use, but how to wrest control of technology development from capitalism itself.

In addition, we are founding members of the Radical Connections Network, a group of mostly people of color, women and gender non-conforming technologists that are building toward a movement technology conference in May, 2019.

In Mexico, we have organized many workshops on how to use the technology services of May First/People Link. In addition, we organized several Technology and Revolution sessions, including a huge 60 person gathering of US, Mexican and Latin American activists in Mexico City in November 2017.

The Leadership Committee has devoted most meetings to discussing the movement work, and the weekly strategy team has also devoted most of its time and energy to building these movement campaigns.

Unfortunately, while the service provision aspects of the organization have been expertly maintained, the lack of leadership has had a toll. Last summer, we put together a dramatic plan to re-organize the infrastructure (<https://support.mayfirst.org/wiki/infrastructure-2018>), a process that is in development and will need a lot of support to be fully realized.

The question that remains now is: how do we develop the service provision technology work, but in a way that builds on and is integrated with the movement work?