beyond big tech:
advocacy technologists in mission-driven civil society organizations

lauren m. chambers | lauren@ischool.berkeley.edu

summary

A new kind of tech worker is contributing materially to mission-driven projects from within nonprofit advocacy groups. These interdisciplinary professionals reflect shifting values and new orientations of power around tech and policy.

questions

- **who** are the tech experts working inside mission-driven nonprofits?
- **how** do they operate in their roles?
- what might they tell us about the shifting **relationship between tech and advocacy**?

background

Over the past two decades, civil society, government, and academic work **across domains** has seen new tech initiatives - including non-computational domains such as policy. Mean-while, the **techlash** soured Big Tech's public image and interest in **public interest tech** has grown.

methods

- 23 semi-structured video **interviews**, Mar - Oct 2024
- recruited individuals who (1) worked for an **advocacy organization** and (2) had **tech skills or expertise** used in service of advocacy
- prioritized domains which have **historically not been data- or tech-oriented**
- reflexive thematic analysis

results

career pathways

homegrown critical technologists
- came of age alongside the internet (80s/90s)
- entire careers devoted to sociopolitical uses of tech

sociotechnical converts
- began careers in civil society, law, or organizing
- came into tech through sociopolitical work
- (or vice versa)

sociotechnical natives
- in their 20s & early 30s
- left college with technical training
- immediately sought sociopolitical work

patterns of practice

translating
"back and forth" between advocacy **goals** and technical **implementation** — shining light into **black boxes**; seeing past Big Tech's smoke & mirrors

interrogating
resisting **hype** and magical thinking (esp. in the genAI age) — rejecting technosolutionism; **centering people** and problems

introspecting
dedication to meaningful and **value-aligned** careers, despite lower pay — critically evaluating their own **impact**, workplaces, and their roles in society

trailblazing
uncertain paths behind and ahead; lack of professional pipeline — "a team of one;" **isolation** and limited collaboration or mentorship

implications

1. advocacy technologists are occupying a **critical niche** in advocacy work as boundary-crossers & knowledge brokers

2. these workers **reject Big Tech's status quo** as part of a broader movement (inc. labor organizing)

3. rarity of cross-disciplinary **training**; professional associations or ad hoc groups can offer **mentors & community**

4. computational strategies **bolster advocacy**; critical eyes **check the tech sector** and its effects on society

5. importance of studying and supporting **tech workers beyond the private sector**

UC Berkeley School of Information

IRLE Institute for Research on Labor and Employment

UC Berkeley Center for the Study of Law and Society

AFOG UC BERKELEY