Data Transfer

Initiative

2023
Annual
Report
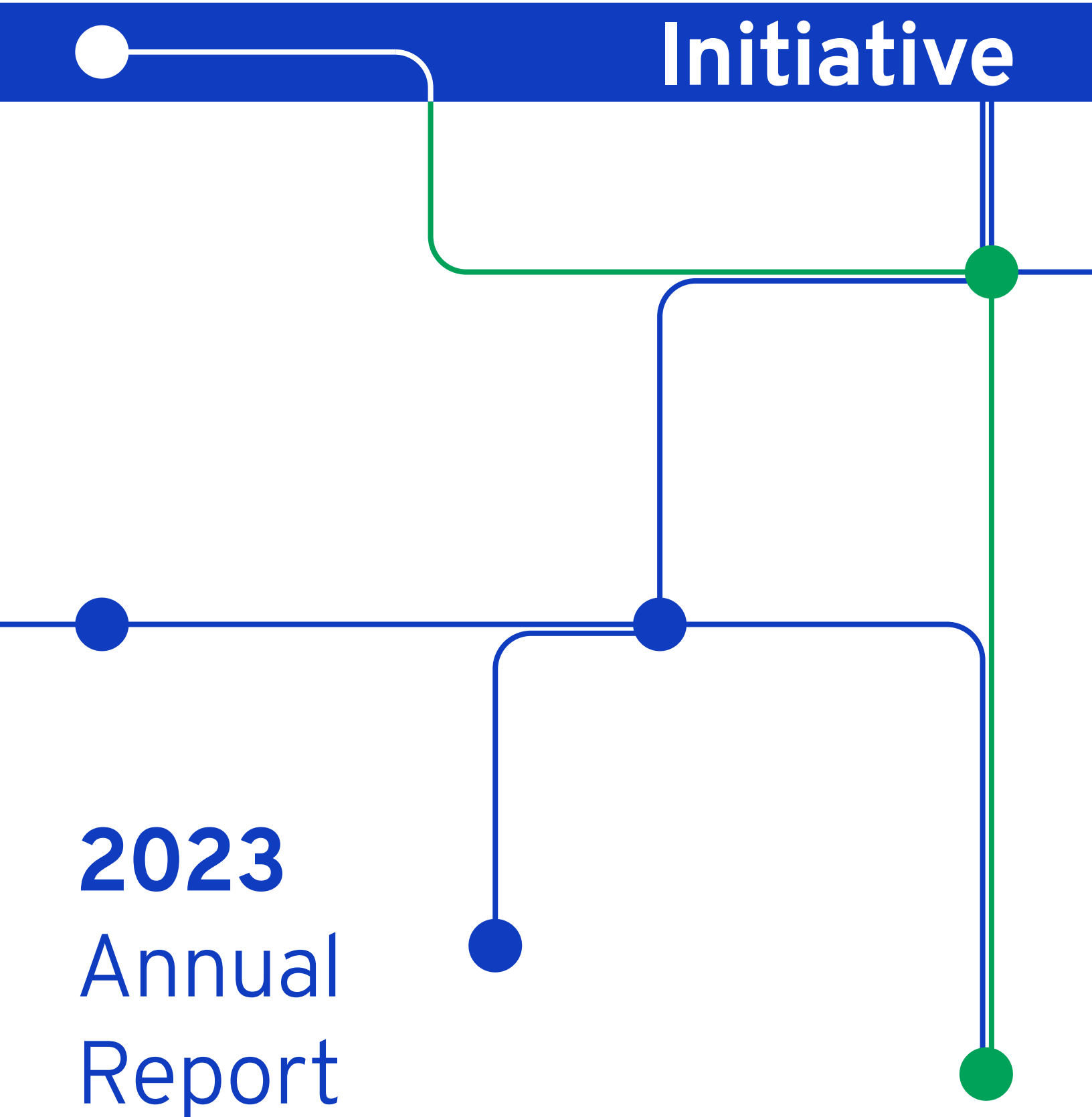
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From the Executive Director

The mission of the Data Transfer Initiative, as adopted in this year's official meeting of the board of directors in March, is to "Empower people by building a vibrant ecosystem for simple and secure data transfers." Each and every word in that mission carries meaning – but I'll spare you the exegesis, for now at least.

The year 2023 was, for all intents and purposes, DTI's first. DTI was incorporated as the Data Transfer Project, Inc. in mid-2022 by its inaugural board of directors, consisting of one representative each of the three founding partners: Google, Meta, and Apple. On January 9, I joined as DTI's first full-time employee, led the rebrand to DTI, and put this ship in motion.

This is our "launch" year. But we didn't start slow. Already, DTI is recognized as a unique, expert resource on data portability in multiple sectors – governments, industry, and civil society. And our ceiling of impact will only continue to grow.

We hired a team this year, including our Director of Policy Delara Derakhshani and our Chief Technology Officer Lisa Dusseault, supported by a few outstanding specialist consultants. We produced original writing on data portability, showing our value not only as a convenor and partner, but as a leader in our own right. We assumed stewardship of the open-source Data Transfer Project, alongside our partners and the code's maintainers – and we broadened the landscape for technical work on data transfers with the exploration of new technology verticals and new ways of engaging people in portability.

Neither technical nor policy work on portability can succeed in a vacuum. Collaborations are among our highest priorities. This year, DTI hosted a mini-conference of fediverse developers to explore migration and related issues. We co-hosted a virtual hackathon with Inrupt. We kicked off an effort to build a shared framework for trust in third-party data transfers. And I joined the steering committee of a project led by AcademyHealth exploring the use of transferred data for medical diagnosis research.

I am greatly looking forward to what next year brings – I expect further growth in partnerships, output, and visibility, alongside our first in-person event in Washington, D.C. on **February 29, the Data Transfer Summit: Empowerment through Portability**. I hope you can join us there, and along our journey as we work to build data transfers as a foundation in principle and in practice for individual empowerment, freedom and choice.

Cheers,

Chris Riley
Executive Director
Data Transfer Initiative

1. Building an identity

You only get one chance to make a good first impression, or so the saying goes. 2023 was DTI's "launch" year – we hired our first staff, three full-time employees complemented with specialized contract support, and we took our first external action as an organization. Throughout the year, we introduced this organization to many new audiences, and our goal was to impress upon them all our expertise and our efficacy. We consider this identity building to be our primary goal for the year – and we consider it to have been successfully executed.
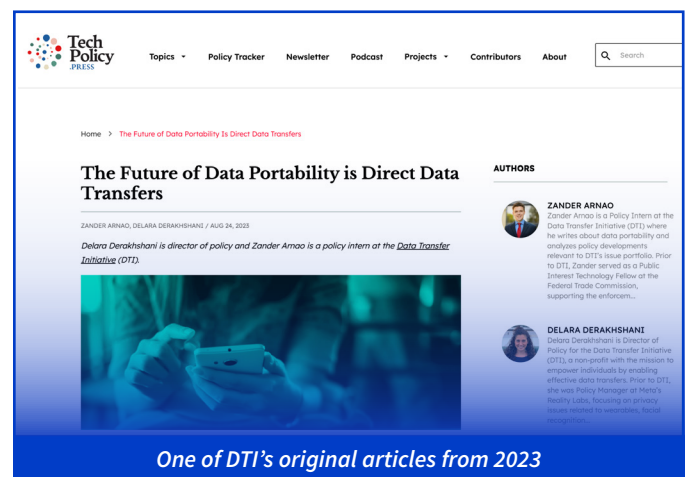
Our target audience is not yet the general public. While we plan to establish a visible DTI presence for internet citizens in 2024, the initial focus of our identity building work was on those stakeholders who contribute to data portability in practice and in governance: industry actors principally in the U.S. and Europe, civil society organizations, and policymakers.

From early on, our presence as an authority on data portability was sought out. Chris joined his first event as Executive Director on January 19, on day #11: a workshop hosted at Stanford, where he participated in a conversation led by legal academics and contributed a unique perspective working with portability technologies. (Check out the output of that event on SSRN.)

This was followed throughout the year by invitations to speak for the entire DTI staff. Some of these, such as the European Commission's workshop in Brussels on May 5, offered direct platforms to connect with key government officials shaping the future of portability regulation. Others, like Delara's Georgetown Law University talk and Lisa's PyBay presentation, introduced DTI to new audiences.

We paired public speaking with extensive networking and relationship building, and with the publication of substantial written output under the DTI name, including a policy white paper articulating core principles, a series of original posts on Tech Policy Press, and a new DTI newsletter/blog with biweekly output.

> **"** As Chris is fond of saying, data portability is an issue everyone supports, but no one prioritizes. DTI is stepping up to fill that gap, and is already well recognized and appreciated in the role."

DTI's Executive Director Chris Riley presenting to the European Commission

One of DTI's original articles from 2023

2.Progress on core initiatives

In Q1 2023, we articulated separate "policy" and "technology" strategies for the year ahead. Considering the rapidly changing nature of our issue space, as well as the growth of our organization, we planned for change. We assumed we would adapt our vision over time, and indeed, our tactics changed over the course of the year in order to optimize our impact. Yet our direction did not change, and we consider our work on both policy and technology fronts to have been successful.

From our "Data Potability" event in San Francisco.
Photo by Tantek Çelik (https://tantek.com).

Policy: We set out four goals for our policy agenda in the launch year:

Goal	Progress
1 **Balance** – broaden and balance our relationships	• investments in key jurisdictions, • engage with different kinds of stakeholders • building a foundation of broad understanding • exploring new policy ground
2 **Engagement** - increase particularly in EU and US	• Developed routine engagement with EU policy makers • Started engaging with US policy-makers • Established our identity as a key partner on portability
3 **Thought leadership** - establish	• Published original, substantive thinking • Describe and grow the intellectual common ground • Generate value for partners
4 **Resource** - have our expertise sought out	• Invited to join W3C and SocialWeb WG • Consulted for academic articles • Asked for opinion by policy-makers

By and large, we delivered on all of these fronts. Some of the specific tactics we had originally planned for did not pan out; for example, we did not engage in advocacy regarding the Data Act, as it was well along by the time we began operations and we determined other matters would take higher priority. Similarly, we had imagined that there might be more domestic U.S. activity on portability, which would have given us opportunity to submit analysis to legislators or to write op-eds and other material in the press; however, other issues took center stage.

We engaged extensively with stakeholders working on data portability, with a notable focus on those working toward understanding and implementation of the Digital Markets Act in the European Union, a law which we have determined to be of central importance for the future of our work and of data portability. We've remained heavily invested in the EU, yet grown our scope further: We submitted our core policy principles to the Personal Information Protection Commission of the Republic of Korea, and produced a legislative landscape analysis of current and proposed laws touching on data portability in Europe and the United States.
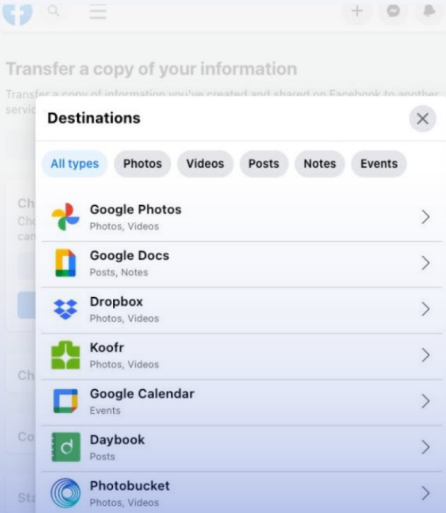
Technology: Our technology roadmap includes a clear "Keep the Lights On" category of activity, in the form of supporting DTI partners building open source direct data transfer tools. We spent significant time throughout the year engaged in this endeavor. While we did not launch new transfer tools this year, we have some queued up for release early next year.

We met regularly with engineers and product leads at our partner companies, and began cultivating several new collaborators and partners for DTP-powered transfer tools. We also catalyzed initial collaboration around two new technical directions, one through an open "microconference" drawing new voices and perspectives into our technical community.
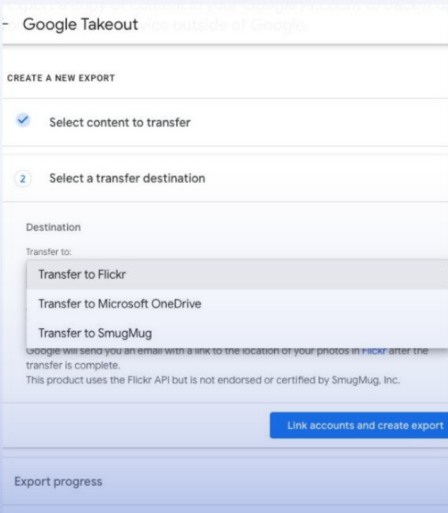
Our initial vision for technology growth was to launch a DTI-hosted instance of the open-source Data Transfer Project code. We did not spin up such an instance, after determining that its practical utility would have been quite small. Instead, we initiated a new workstream to build a "Portability Map" that we believe will give us great insights into user demand and value for portability products, and will play well to our strengths as an organization. We're eager to carry that work forward into 2024.
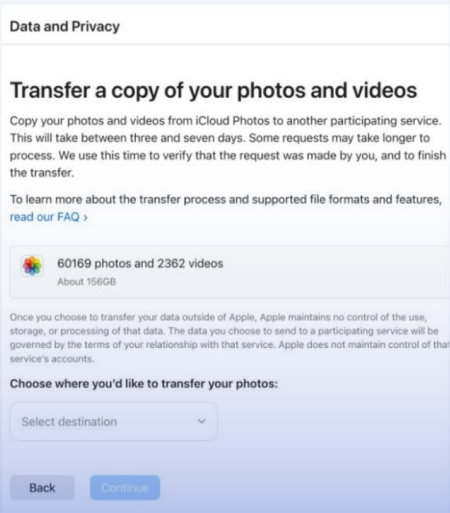

A screenshot of current Data Transfer Project offerings by DTI partners

3. Measuring impact

In October, we wrote a post laying out our initial thinking on metrics to measure DTI's impact. In that piece, and in general in how we evaluate our work, our focus is often less on the outcomes we seek to achieve, which are fairly straightforward: more portability tools, more effective public policy, and a healthy organization. We similarly aim to look beyond our precise tactics, what we tackle day-to-day. Instead the critical middle layer is our primary lens for review: the capacities we seek to build up through our work that put us in a position to deliver for our outcomes.

We have identified five core capacities that reflect the connective tissue between our activities and our goals:

1 *Improved public knowledge of data portability* – supported through public speaking and writing, and through networking and relationship building;

2 *Active and engaged allies and partners* – primarily through 1:1 and small group meetings with other organizations, which took place several times per week across the team;

3 *Positive DTI brand and reputation* – grows from both public visibility / thought leadership efforts, and from our engagements and networking, as a reflection of both our output and our organizational values;

4 *New explorations for data transfer products and infrastructure* – led both through direct leadership such as the aforementioned miniconference, and through collaboration with existing partners to build on the capacity for more portability; and

5 *A healthy community of contributors and collaborators* – built through the same tactics as the other capacities, but reflecting different utility by unlocking greater shared capability for future action.

> " Data transfer takes two (at least!), and we are proud of the work we've done alongside our partners and with many others to deliver impact towards our mission."

The AcademyHealth Collaboration

Long before someone walks into a doctor's office, they turn to Dr. Internet – using search engines, social media, and web browsing to learn what others have written about what they're feeling. AcademyHealth is providing grants to support medical researchers seeking to collect internet activity signals from patients through data portability and study that data for clues that might lead to earlier diagnosis. Chris is proud to serve on the Steering Committee of this effort.

For DTI, this is not only a way that we can build tools to deliver positive impact, it's also a way to help illustrate that data transfers are incredibly valuable. Data portability is about more than just consumer choice – it unlocks new ideas and opportunities, of which we are just starting to scratch the surface.
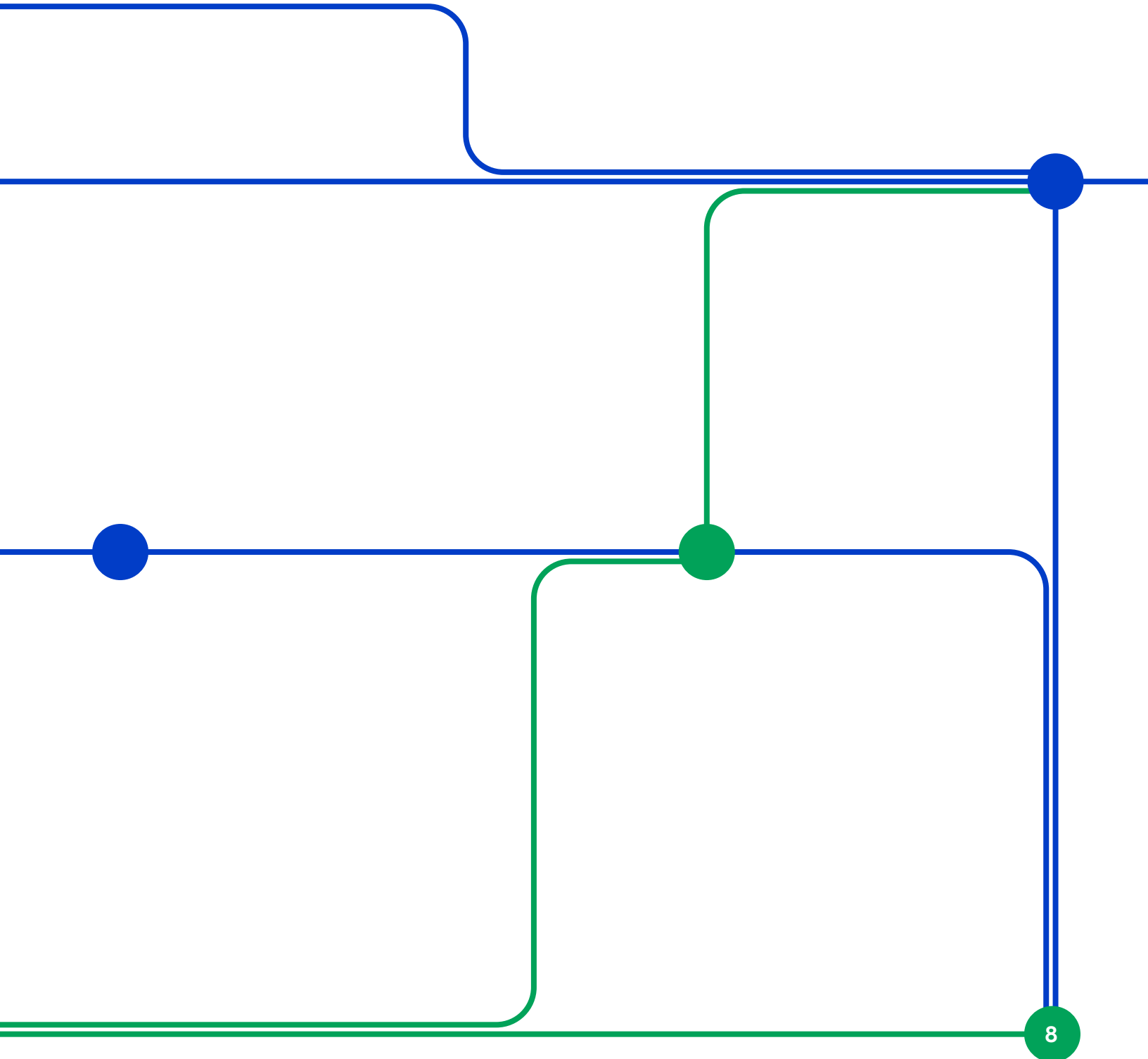
One category of activities in which we engaged substantially in 2023, perhaps more so than we had anticipated, is collaboration. We joined the European Internet Forum as a non-profit associate member early in 2023, and the World Wide Web Consortium effective 2024. We participated in a number of joint projects, such as our virtual hackathon for social networks with Inrupt and our partnership in the AcademyHealth effort to improve medical diagnoses through the contribution of individual internet activity data. Other collaborations reflect our own initiation, including the previously mentioned fediverse event as well as an active current effort to build a shared framework for trusted, safe third-party data transfers.

4.Looking ahead

In 2024, we're eager to continue this work. We'll be expanding our scale and scope of technical work, producing more original portability written work, and shipping new kinds of outputs, including a "portability map" and our first hosted in-person event. We hope and expect to make positive contributions to key portability regulatory implementations, including but not limited to the Digital Markets Act in the European Union, and to bring more companies and services into the growing data transfer ecosystem.

And we hope you'll join us in our journey. You can sign up for our emails here.

DATA TRANSFER INITIATIVE

https://dtinit.org/