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

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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 all domains** has seen new tech initiatives - including non-computational domains such as policy. Meanwhile, 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 techno-solutionism; **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

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

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

insufficient interdisciplinary **training**; professional ass'ns and ad hoc groups can offer **mentorship** and community

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

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