

The Sunbird

Signal Dispatch Thread DIY Guide
& How to Foster Autonomous
Organizing for Palestinian Solidarity

The need for platforms for anonymous coordination of diverse and creative movements exists wherever hearts yearn for liberation and freedom.

The best way to combat the repression of social movements and to empower ourselves to act is to eliminate the distinction between organizer and organized. We believe that no individual or organization in Austin speaks for the entirety of the Palestinian resistance; consequently, we wanted to create a space that could empower everyone who feels ethically called to respond to the ongoing genocide to take action, announce events, and share live updates.

We are normal people who live normal lives, but we take digital security very seriously. We don't have specialized skills. What we have set up is something anyone can do.



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As billionaires have clamped down on social media¹, secure group messaging platforms like Signal have moved to the fore as spaces for discussion and organizing. In this interview, organizers in Austin, Texas describe how they established Sunbird, a Signal account that runs an announcements-only thread to enable participants in the Palestine solidarity movement to share news and coordinate horizontally.

This model represents an alternative to centralized, top-down leadership models, showing how a movement can scale up without losing its decentralized, egalitarian character.

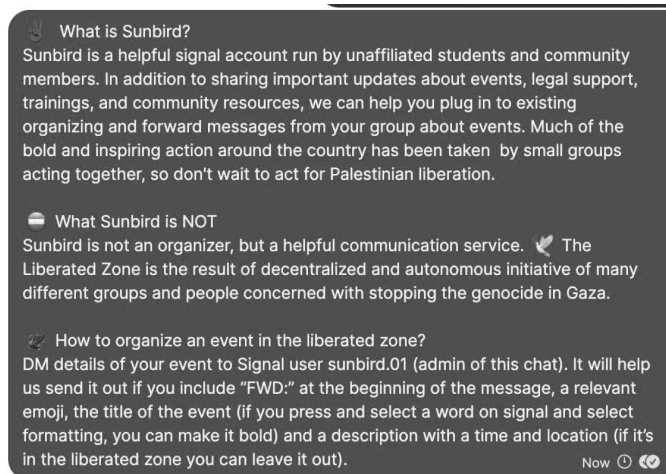
To skip directly to a step-by-step guide to establishing your own announcements-only Signal thread, go directly to page 15

Tell us about Sunbird.

Sunbird was started on April 24 by a group of unaffiliated students and community members in Austin, Texas. Our intention is to serve as an anonymous, real-time announcement and coordination platform to foster greater participation and activity from everyone who is involved in the struggle for the liberation of Palestine.

A principle that we hold dear is diversity of tactics. Everyone should be able to plan and promote events and share announcements while retaining their anonymity. In the current climate of repression, in which public organizers are being targeted all around the country, this is especially important. Here in Texas specifically, the 5th circuit ruling in McKesson v. Doe criminalizes organizing protest-related activities.

Sunbird is a creative technological solution to this problem. We draw inspiration from decades of movement infrastructure going back to Indymedia², the origins of Twitter as TXTmob³, and the work of the Riseup⁴ collective, not to mention anonymous partisans in Ukraine, Hong Kong⁵, and elsewhere who have creatively used Telegram groups to similar effects.



An example announcement explaining the sunbird dispatch

Notes

- 1 <https://crimethinc.com/2022/12/09/canary-in-the-coal-mine-twitter-and-the-end-of-social-media>
- 2 <https://indymedia.org/>
- 3 <https://crimethinc.com/2022/10/28/the-billionaire-and-the-anarchists-tracing-twitter-from-its-roots-as-a-protest-tool-to-elon-musk-acquisition>
- 4 <https://riseup.net/>
- 5 <https://crimethinc.com/2019/09/20/three-months-of-insurrection-an-anarchist-collective-in-hong-kong-appraises-the-achievements-and-limits-of-the-revolt>
- 6 <https://crimethinc.com/2024/04/21/it-is-an-honor-to-be-suspended-for-palestine-dispatches-from-the-solidarity-encampment-at-columbia-university>
- 7 <https://crimethinc.com/2024/04/23/report-from-within-the-cal-poly-humboldt-occupation-the-occupation-of-siemens-hall>
- 8 <https://apnews.com/article/google-israel-protest-workers-gaza-palestinians-96d2871f1340cb84c953118b7ef88b3f>
- 9 <https://crimethinc.com/2024/04/25/day-one-university-of-texas-austin-students-take-the-lawn-a-report>
- 10 <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/newsfeed/2024/4/25/po-llice-arrest-student-protester-trying-to-negotiate-peaceful-disbandment>
- 11 <https://crimethinc.com/2017/03/27/burner-phone-best-practices>
- 12 <https://signal.org/>
- 13 <https://support.signal.org/hc/en-us/articles/6829998083994-Phone-Number-Privacy-and-Usernames-Deeper-Dive>

5 **Take yourselves seriously.** We are doing this because we want to stop the genocide in Gaza and because we are revolutionaries who believe in the liberation of Palestine and all oppressed peoples. The least you can do is take your historic task seriously: spend the extra time it takes to format things nicely, write clearly, treat every communication with the respect it deserves. The political culture in the US that treats “activism” as an unserious hobby undermines our movements and often results in people treating the political projects they value deeply with less care than the work they do for the careers they hate or the degrees they don’t really care about.



Professors, students, and supporters demonstrating at the University of Texas Austin campus on April 25, 2024

Why did you establish Sunbird?

Sunbird was created in the wake of the internationally coordinated economic blockades of April 15. When students established encampments at Columbia⁶ and then elsewhere⁷, it became clear that in order to ensure the longevity and widest possible ownership of the movement locally, there was a need for an anonymous switchboard to potentiate fearless and confident participation.

The best way to combat the repression of social movements and to empower ourselves to act is to eliminate the distinction between organizer and organized. We believe that no individual or organization in Austin speaks for the entirety of the Palestinian resistance; consequently, we wanted to create a space that could empower everyone who feels ethically called to respond to the ongoing genocide to take action, announce events, and share live updates.

What scale is Sunbird operating on?

Sunbird is a platform for the Pro-Palestine, anti-genocide movement in Austin, Texas specifically. The need for platforms for anonymous coordination of diverse and creative movements exists wherever hearts yearn for liberation and freedom. We are inspired by similar projects elsewhere, but Sunbird is a special and unique solution deep in the heart of Texas. The power of Sunbird lies in our attention to and participation in our local context; rather than seeking to scale up this project, we encourage people to establish similar experiments with switchboard-style announcement threads elsewhere. We have heard that movements around the country are exploring creating platforms inspired by Sunbird.

We grew rapidly during our first few days, quickly hitting the 1000-person limit for Signal groups. To address this, we initially started a Telegram channel, as Telegram has better support for larger groups, but we ended up returning to Signal, establishing a second announcement channel that mirrors the content on the first. Downloading Signal in order to keep up to date with Sunbird was the first time many movement participants had installed an

encrypted messaging application on their phones; Signal threads already existed for supply coordination, jail support, and other core functions, so sticking with Signal was easier than changing platforms. Though numbers fluctuate, there are currently approximately 1200 people across both announcement groups, a number that represents a sizable percentage of the most active and committed participants in the local pro-Palestine, anti-genocide movement.



State troopers and other violent mercenaries prepare to attack students on the University of Texas campus on April 29, 2024.

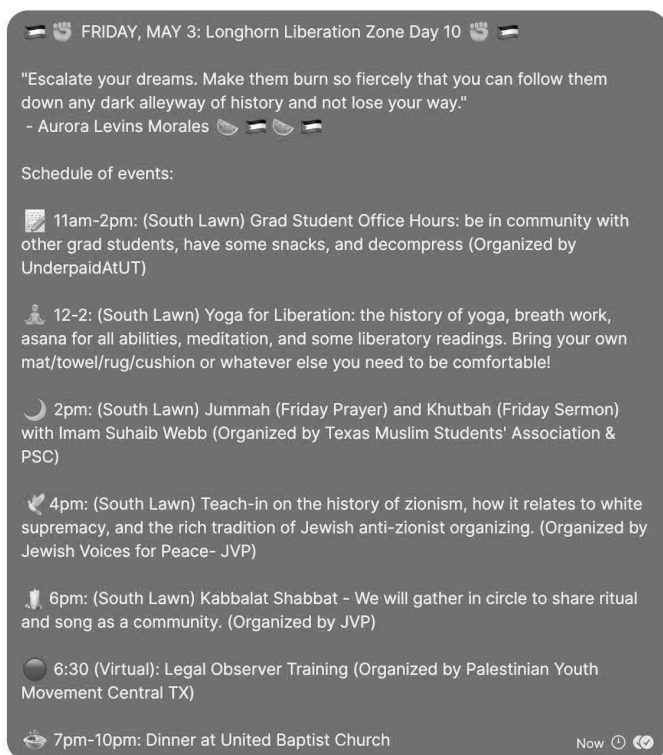
Why did you choose Signal?

There are two major benefits to using Signal. First, the messages are end-to-end encrypted, which means that Signal (the company) does not have access to them. Only you and the person on the other end can access the messages. This makes Signal different from texting and social media. Second, while you need a phone number to make an account, following a recent update, it is now possible to withhold your phone number from the people you message. This is very important for those who prefer to remain anonymous, because your phone number can be used to connect your messages to you.

What principles can make a switchboard service like Sunbird successful?

- 1 **No one way works.** Our movements are powerful when everyone takes initiative. This means that we post events and messages from everyone in the movement, seeking not to monopolize or centralize control but to proliferate a sense of empowerment and participation. While the power of running a platform might make sectarian decisions to exclude certain groups seem appealing, over the long run, this sort of control and exclusion runs contrary to the goal of the platform and could undermine trust in it.
- 2 **Tell no lies, claim no easy victories.** We work hard to verify all the information we send out. In some cases, this has meant following up to verify that jail support forms calling for confidential information or fundraisers for medical support were being hosted by trusted groups—that they were not honeypots or scams. Overwhelming people with poorly written, factually dubious messages is a surefire way to lose the respect and attention of movement participants.
- 3 **Don't Panic, Stay Tight, We're Gonna Be Alright.** In high-stakes protest scenarios, fear and panic can rapidly sap a crowd of confidence and undermine the bravery, determination, and resolve necessary to keep everyone safe and accomplish goals. While Sunbird played a crucial role providing live updates, we made an effort to keep our announcements factual. At some points, we held off on posting information (like confirmed gatherings of police far away from campus) that might instill panic rather than equipping people to act.
- 4 **No Police Orders.** The police have megaphones, guns, chemical weapons, and the backing of the courts and the prison system. They can announce their own orders and to enforce them. While other announcement threads reposted police dispersal orders or the ever-shifting rules of university bureaucrats, we chose to not amplify the messages of our enemies.

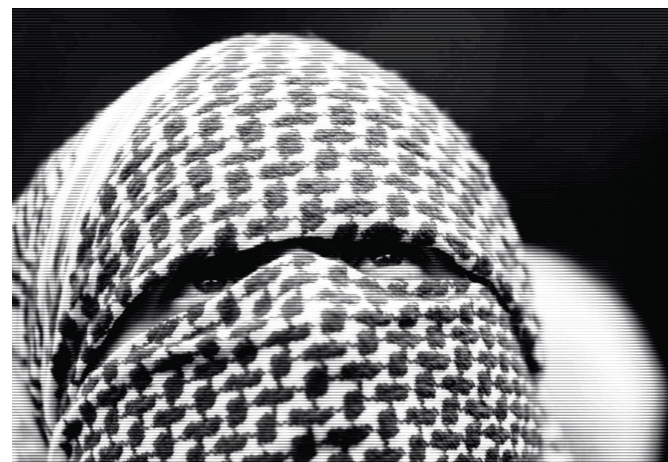
- **Synthesize reports on police, university employees, and Zionist presence.** Follow SALUTE protocols (specifying the Size, Activity, Location, Unit, Time, and Equipment of groups as applicable). Avoid spreading fear or rumors.
- **Send clear, well-written messages.** Put effort into good formatting and add emojis for readability. This will convey that your account is serious and trustworthy.
- **Clearly distinguish the messages you draft yourselves from messages forwarded to you.** We include "FWD:" at the beginning of all forwarded messages and "Sunbird here!" at the beginning of messages that we author.
- **Avoid linking to sites like Instagram and Twitter.** We are actively trying to create alternative platforms to the exploitative and empty ones offered by Meta and Elon Musk.



An example of an announcement on Sunbird.

We live in the age of surveillance capitalism. Big tech is actively working with governments and private security companies to monitor and undermine individual activists and entire movements. We see this in the shadow bans on Instagram and Twitter, the firing⁸ of pro-Palestine employees from Google, and the well-documented collaboration between law enforcement and tech companies.

We are normal people who live normal lives, but we take digital security very seriously. We are not technological or cryptography experts. We don't have specialized skills. What we have set up is something anyone can do.



Anonymity is an important part of the Sunbird model.

How does Sunbird work?

We use Signal to coordinate, as well as encrypted documents in Riseup and Cryptpad. We work in shifts, since we receive up to hundreds of messages a day from different individuals, organizations, and journalists. To make sure that we all understand what is happening while any one person is away, we keep detailed notes, message drafts, and the text of frequently sent messages in a cryptpad.

We set up our Signal groups to only allow admins to post messages. This way, users can keep up with important developments and event information without being bogged down by chatter. All of the announcements in the group are aggregations of group member submissions. Though we edit for clarity—and we would have weeded out content by those opposed to Palestinian liberation had we ever received it—we welcome shared resources and announcements that movement participants believe would benefit others.

We don't forward everything we receive. We avoid posts that would sow fear and disinformation; these can function as a form of self-repression, doing the work of the state. We work to verify all information that we send. We happily forward messages from many organizations in our role as a sort of “switchboard,” but we are not affiliated with any one organization. Our focus is on hyper-local announcements rather than nationally- or internationally-focused graphics, news, and content, though we do include some virtual events that movement participants submit.

How does Sunbird interface with larger established organizations?

In many movements, there are large, well-funded organizations that, despite their good intentions, undermine movements when they try to establish a central role as the single or authoritative voice of the movement. Just as resistance movements in Palestine collaborate to enable diverse forms of political action to take place alongside each other, we see Sunbird as encouraging a plural and diverse movement not monopolized by any one group. In places where a single organization has been able to establish itself as the “authoritative” voice of the Palestinian movement, this often undermines independent initiatives. These organizations can limit the bravery, ferocity, or creativity of movements, as the organizers are too cautious, unprepared, or incapable of directing those initiatives.

By using an anonymous switchboard-style model instead of the centralized model we have seen in the past from groups like the ANSWER [Act Now to Stop War and End Racism] coalition or

- 9 Dispatch trusted friends to actions and events to send you live updates via text, photo, and video.
- 10 Don't burn out! Add admins as needed, take breaks sometimes, and be transparent with the group about posting hours, response times, and the like. It's OK to match your posting frequency to upticks and lulls in movement activity.



Police use chemical weapons to attack protesters at the University of Texas on April 29, 2024.

Share some tips for writing Signal announcements.

- **Use a calm, helpful tone.** Sunbird was not just a source of information; during high-intensity moments, it was a source of reassurance. Responding to direct messages in a timely manner instills trust in those messaging Sunbird with requests and submissions.
- **Forward a wide range of submissions.** Include those from larger organizations and individuals while maintaining a focus on live local events and updates; steer away from analysis, national or international news, fundraisers, and the like (all of which have ample platforms in other spaces).

- 5 Set up a separate Signal group for admins. This is a good place to discuss message framing, workshop tricky submissions, and generally figure out how to stay on the same page. Determine a setting for disappearing messages that is long enough for consistency and short enough for security (we set our timer to one day). Utilize riseup pads as secure ways to draft messages, keep track of important contacts, paste old messages for reference, and keep lists such as supplies offered/supplies needed.
- 6 Set up the announcement thread with your burner number as the group admin and adjust the settings so that only admins can send messages to the group. Put a description of the function of the group and instructions for sending submissions (including your admin account's Signal username) in the description of the group.
- 7 Advertise your group! We created small flyers with a description of the group's function on one side and a QR code on the other. Friends of ours passed these out at large rallies and marches, explaining what Sunbird is and actively guiding people in downloading the app and setting up a Signal account. Our group's growth started slowly, then snowballed as more people added their friends. Eventually, we reached the 1000-person Signal group maximum capacity and started a second mirror group to which we forwarded all the messages posted to the first group. If you do this, be sure to link successive groups in the initial group's description so folks can easily send it to their friends.
- 8 Start sending messages! There are a few that we would send at least once a day: "What is Sunbird?" "How to hide your phone number and create a username," and "How make an announcement or submit an event to Sunbird." We sent out daily schedules comprised of submitted events, supplies needed at the encampment, and requests from people wanting to connect with others to get organized.

PSL [Party for Socialism and Liberation], we protect all organizers—regardless of organization—from being held responsible for the activity of the movement as a whole. This is especially important in Texas in the wake of McKesson vs. Doe.

What has Sunbird enabled people to do?

During the first violent crackdown on students and community members, on April 24⁹, Sunbird sent out live announcements to help keep students safe as state troopers called in from Houston violently attacked a planned rally. Sunbird facilitated the distribution of a jail support hotline phone number and circulated updates on police movements and other developments, helping students to remain calm amid the worst state violence seen on campus in decades.

The original organizers of the rally tried to work with police to disperse the crowd¹⁰ when the police declared it an unlawful assembly. After the police arrested the student organizers who were trying to de-escalate the situation and end the protest, the crowd became significantly bolder, leading to a several-hour stand-off in which the state troopers were eventually forced to withdraw from campus. After the students successfully expelled the police from the campus, they declared the South Lawn a "Liberated Zone."



A student paints a sign at the South Mall on April 25, 2024.

The courage and intelligence of the crowd in these moments—as well as the care, commitment, and initiative of ordinary students who were transformed by their experiences—represent an important corrective to the inertia one often finds in larger organizations.

Over the following days, Sunbird became a crucial element of infrastructure for students and others who wanted to organize events in the Liberated Zone. We invited everyone to submit event announcements, which we circulated on their behalf. We ourselves organized no events in the Liberated Zone, but we received event submissions from dozens of people and organizations, including a Popular University organized by the student organization that had planned the original protest on April 24, a talk from a doctor who had recently returned from medical mission in Gaza, and a call for musicians to participate in a jam session—not to mention reading groups, live call-ins with other student encampments, art makes, meetings for various newly-formed groups, and workshops on direct action, protest first aid, digital security, and the legal system for protesters.

We helped coordinate large supply runs for the Liberated Zone, helping off-campus supporters figure out the on-the-ground needs for food, water, art supplies, literature, and shade. We also helped put people in touch who took on the responsibility of storing these materials every night and bringing them back to the Liberated Zone each morning.

Many people told us that they would not have felt comfortable planning things without the anonymity, support, and encouragement that Sunbird provided. It often occurred that people would message Sunbird with an idea, saying something like “I think students/alumni/artists should...” In response, we encouraged people to organize events themselves and to use Sunbird to promote them. This approach to political organizing contrasts with the narrow vision of political change that is common among non-profit organizations and authoritarian political groups, which seek to maintain tight control on who participates in a movement and how. For our part, we believe that movements are stronger

Start Your Own Announcements-Only Service on Signal

- 1 Obtain a burner phone¹¹ and set up Signal¹² on the burner. Use Signal settings to hide the phone number and set up a Signal username. To assist people in contacting you, post your Signal username¹³ in your profile byline.
- 2 Assemble a few trustworthy friends who are willing to take turns as admins. This is the hardest part. These individuals must be reliable, good writers, and willing to sit in front of a screen during entire shifts. The group of admins must be large enough that everyone can take breaks so as not to burn out, while being available to offer second opinions or review message drafts; but it should be small enough that everyone can trust each other and the identities of the admins won't be widely known. Because of state repression, maintaining the admins' anonymity is of utmost importance. This is not something to discuss freely or in public organizing spaces; the admins' identities should only be revealed on a need-to-know basis.
- 3 Install Signal desktop on the admins' laptops (this is currently limited to five devices). Have each admin send the QR code from their Signal desktop to the person holding the burner phone to link their device to the same Signal account. If you already use Signal desktop, you can download Signal Desktop Beta to use for your own personal device and link your shared admin account to the more secure and stable Signal Desktop app.
- 4 Set up shifts. Shorter shifts are better during high-activity periods when admins must be monitoring messages constantly. During lulls, day-long shifts are feasible.

How do you anticipate that the model you are employing might be repressed or coopted? Do you have any ideas for how people like you might deal with such challenges in the future?

This model cuts against the impulse to manage or consolidate. Our commitment to the principles outlined above sets Sunbird apart from established organizations. We have gained much of our influence by being calm and faithful cheerleaders of initiatives of all kinds. We sincerely want the movement to win. Established organizations want a megaphone for themselves, not a switchboard for everyone, so a model like this would probably feel like a waste of time compared to the larger reach available via social media. Our wager is that the movement itself requires a reliable switchboard that platforms many kinds of initiatives and trusts the creativity and intelligence of the participants. Without this advantage, we suspect that competing sectarian announcement threads would quickly fade into irrelevance or be eclipsed by better models.

Because of their centrality to movements, announcement platforms of all kinds receive a lot of attention. Since October, we have seen state and non-state actors go to great lengths to identify organizers in the movement for Palestine. Though it remains to be seen exactly what forms of repression will emerge in response to this cycle of movement activity, we want to reiterate that anyone employing this model should take precautions to do so anonymously, following good digital security practices and only working with a small number of trusted comrades.



Packing up signs after a protest at the University of Texas campus on April 25, 2024.

when people are able to determine for themselves how to contribute their particular talents, experiences, capacities, and specialized knowledge; the role of organizers should be to encourage autonomous initiatives.

Through Sunbird, University Baptist Church, which is located just off campus, declared itself a sanctuary space. Initially imagined as a police-free space for student protestors fleeing violence, over the course of a few weeks the UBC space became a robust movement space with nightly dinners, workshops including media and legal trainings for those who had been banned from campus, and a place to store materials that could not be kept on campus overnight. The church held a nightly dinner for almost three weeks before switching to a weekly dinner. Arrestees from April 24 and 29 have used this space as a place to heal and plan as they face legal charges and pending disciplinary action. Here, Sunbird helped not by seeking to impose any one vision of organization, but by encouraging and promoting different local initiatives, in this case helping to put the pastor of the University Baptist Church in touch with people who had been contacting Sunbird looking for a space to hold workshops.

The first meeting of graduate students concerned about Palestine was announced via a message through Sunbird and took place in the Liberated Zone. No one there acknowledged being the person who posted the call, but within an hour, over 30 graduate students had formed a new robust organization with plans to coordinate graduation day actions and to draft a letter from the grad students to UT Austin president Jay Hartzell. As of today, the letter has well over 1000 signatures and graduate students are continuing to talk into the summer about how to use or withhold their labor to continue to pressure the university in the fall.

On April 29, we were contacted by students who were planning to set up an encampment. We were able to send out live updates during a second violent crackdown by Texas state troopers on UT campus, which led to the largest mass arrest in Austin since the anti-apartheid movement and the largest mass arrest with charges in this city's entire history. Receiving live updates from

people on the ground, Sunbird was able to help many people quickly mobilize to join and defend the students. We also shared announcements about post-arrest support logistics, including a jail support vigil that ran for nearly 48 hours as the arrestees were released.

On Commencement Day, several student walkouts took place at graduation ceremonies while other actions occurred around campus. All of these were announced on our Signal channels or described in live updates we received from students in attendance.

These are just a few examples of the events that Sunbird facilitated over the past month. Some of them were organized by established groups, but a large number of the events submitted to Sunbird were organized by individuals or informal groups that had just met, many of them new to organizing.



Demonstrators stand with linked arms to protect a solidarity encampment at the University of Texas, calling attention to the university's relationship with defense companies on April 29, 2024.

Have there been any similar efforts in Austin since Sunbird got started? How have those fared? Can those efforts show us anything about how best to use this model, or what it is best for?

Yes. Both larger organizations and autonomous initiatives have started announcement-only Signal groups clearly inspired by Sunbird or attempting to compete with it.

In the group started by a larger organization, several admins were using their legal names, a practice we would caution against as it can allow the state to target organizers. Furthermore, a group like this can easily become limited in perspective, since it is not informed by submissions from other participants in the movement.

In general, it appears that the groups set up to compete with Sunbird were not able to last as long or experience as much success as we did because they did not adopt the principles we used to run Sunbird. The messages they posted were often poorly formatted, included conflicting or alarmist information, and did not foster the same sense that users could directly participate and interact with the admins. This was acceptable if you only wanted to receive announcements from organizers telling you what to do, but many found this a disempowering experience.

On the other hand, when smaller autonomous initiatives such as the church canteen or the organized arrestees have started announcement threads, it has been clear that the announcements are specific to those entities. In these cases, the model that Sunbird provided as an announcement-only thread was adopted, becoming part of a more broadly shared strategic intelligence across social movements in Austin.