

Five questions worth asking about any technology

or anyone asking for your information

These questions grew out of work with Indigenous communities navigating decisions about which technologies to adopt, which platforms to trust, and what data sovereignty means day to day. The pattern of extracting data from communities without meaningful consent or benefit is not new — it just has new tools. These five questions do not require technical expertise. They require the same critical attention Indigenous nations have always brought to agreements and terms.



QUESTION 1

What does this actually cost, and who is paying for it?

“Free” usually means someone is paying with something other than money. Most of the time, that something is your data. When a product does not have a clear business model you can name, you are probably inside the business model. This is not paranoia; it is how most free apps, platforms, and services work.

Before you sign up, try to answer: how does this company make money? If you cannot figure it out in two minutes, that is information.



QUESTION 2

Who controls this, and what can they do with your information without asking you again?

Terms of service are written to protect the company, not you. Once you have agreed, most platforms can share your data with advertisers, sell it if the company is acquired, hand it to law enforcement, or change their privacy policy with minimal notice.

Do not just ask “is this secure right now.” Ask: who can get to this later, and under what circumstances? We do not yet know the full extent of how data can and will be used. That uncertainty is itself a reason to pay attention now.



QUESTION 3

What happens to your information if this company disappears, gets bought, or gets a subpoena?

Companies get acquired, go bankrupt, and face legal demands. None of those events require your permission. Data collected to show you ads can end up in a law enforcement database, a competitor’s servers, or a company that did not exist when you signed up.

Consider what you are putting in: messages, location history, health data, browsing behavior. Then ask whether you would be comfortable with it in the hands of whoever buys this company in five years.



QUESTION 4

Can you leave, and take your stuff with you?

This is a question about power. Platforms that make it easy to export your data, delete your account, and move on are telling you something. Platforms that make leaving confusing, slow, or incomplete are telling you something too.

Before you go deep with any tool (years of notes in it, your contacts connected, your medical history stored), find out whether you can get out. Not because you plan to, but because the ability to leave is what makes staying a choice.



QUESTION 5

Who was this built for, and who is an afterthought?

Every technology was designed with a particular user in mind. That choice shapes who it serves well and who it fails, exposes, or ignores. Facial recognition built primarily on white faces fails darker-skinned people, and gets deployed in policing anyway. Health apps built without disabled users create barriers to access. Platforms that did not think carefully about trans users expose people who assumed they were safe.

You do not need to audit the company's diversity report. Just ask: does this seem like it was built by people who thought about someone like me? If the answer is no, factor in the risk.



You do not have to answer all five perfectly before you do anything. But asking even one of these before you click "agree" puts you in a different position than most people, and that is the point.

Zam DeShields, LLC