



What Does a Truly Ethical Tech Platform Look Like?



We live in a world where most digital platforms are engineered to extract: our time, our data, and our attention. Whether we're messaging a loved one or uploading a file for work, the unspoken deal is always the same: your attention, personal data and financial loyalty in exchange for convenience. Surveillance is baked into today's digital economy. You typically can't opt out, can't inspect what's happening and can't control what's happening to your data. Over time, that erodes more than just privacy – it wears away trust, dignity, and the sense that digital life is really ours. But what would a platform look like that was built not to extract, but to protect?

Over the last years working in human-centric data interaction, I've researched the ways in which today's platforms exploit us and our data. Digipower uncovered how Google and Facebook exploit their market position to compel other companies to surveil us. In my thesis Chapters 8-10] I revealed how our agency is diminished and our behaviour controlled in service of greater surveillance and platform power. Our MyData paper this year highlights the trend of user disempowerment across the industry.

With Iain Henderson, I've been exploring the slippery slope towards a dystopian future where corporate-serving AI systems shape our lives. But let's look at this the other way, what is the Holy Grail? What does a 'good' digital platform look like? Could platforms that serve their users first lead to a more utopian future? What if data wasn't just protected – but private by design? At MyData, I encountered many exciting and emergent offerings in this space, but in this article, I want to focus on one particular example: a little-known but powerful European platform called Geens NPO.

A Case Study in End-to-End Thinking

Geens' platform wasn't built for advertising or growth hacking. Unlike many American commercially-shaped platforms, it emerged in a fully European context, where laws like the GDPR and the Digital Marketing Act help instill a different ethical landscape, where privacy is valued and civic questions about how technology could serve communities without exploiting them are more easily explored. Geens offers a modest-looking suite of tools – file storage, messaging, forms, and digital signing – but what's striking is not what it can do, but how it works under the hood.

Everything is encrypted client-side. Not just files and messages, but metadata too. There are no back doors. No admin access. No tracking. The servers don't know what you're doing, and neither do the people who run them. It's privacy by design, end to end, from the ground up.

This is a refreshingly across-the-board design principle at work. It makes the platform suitable for environments where trust isn't optional: legal defence teams, pastoral counselling, whistleblower networks, and activist groups. But more than that, it offers a living, market-ready example of what it means to treat digital agency as a first principle, not an afterthought.

Remember the Postal Service?

To understand the fundamental difference about how a private by design system like this works, consider sending a letter in the post. When you send a letter in a sealed envelope, no-one opens and scans the contents before it's delivered. The envelope is your guarantee that only the recipient reads what you wrote. Contrast that with recent revelations about popular platforms like Google Gemini reading your WhatsApp messages, or WeTransfer changing its terms to allow AI to scan uploaded content. These systems aren't postmen. They're more like photocopiers that file away your letter before delivering it – just in case it becomes useful to them later. Even WhatsApp itself, while your messages cannot be read by Meta, allows Meta to see who you are messaging, and when. This information can be collected and analysed. This is the equivalent of the post office keeping a note of the addresses on the front of all your letters. In the Gemini and WeTransfer cases, it's worse still; it's someone standing behind you and reading over your shoulder while you write.

These sorts of surveillance actions are technically impossible in an end-to-end encrypted system like Geens'. Messages and files are encrypted everywhere, and, better still, data doesn't actually travel. It is kept in one place, and the act of sharing data with another person allows them to access it, rather than increasing risk by creating a copy. This also has the advantage that this access could be revoked later. The difference isn't technical. It's philosophical. It's about whether you're building a delivery service, or a surveillance infrastructure in disguise, which is sadly how most digital platforms operate. In today's landscape, ethics is often added as an afterthought, as icing on the cake. In the postal model, delivery is the goal. In the surveillance model, data is the product. Geens's structure shows what it looks like when ethics is the cake. Privacy isn't a toggle – it's a default. Control isn't conditional – it's built into the architecture.

Ethical Design means Better Protection

Ethical tech is often framed as a UX problem or a branding statement. But at its core, it's decided at the infrastructure level. As Lawrence Lessig famously said, code is law. Philosopher Foucault explained that design is political. And the political, behaviour-enforcing designs of many of today's systems require data sacrifice and betrayal of one's own privacy, just to get the job done. It's important with any platform to consider: Who owns the system? Who can see the data? What can be inferred? Could this system be abused?

Geens' legal structure (a Belgian nonprofit, which can't be sold or subsumed into an adtech empire) and their platform's technical model (end-to-end encryption, white-labellable infrastructure, and near-zero-knowledge architecture) guarantees a rare level of privacy and data safety. In the absence of strong and effective legal protections against tampering like those that protected our postal correspondence in the physical world (GDPR and newer data laws are poorly enforced and don't go far enough), technical designs and organisational constructs can go some way towards offering safety to users.

That doesn't mean Geens NPO is perfect or universal. It's not trying to replace WhatsApp, OneDrive or Google Docs. It's simple, principled, and niche – and maybe that's exactly what makes it worth noticing. It doesn't just protect privacy; it builds it in, structurally, legally, and architecturally.

Multiple Selves, Multiple Roles

One of the more human touches in Geens' system is how they handle identity. Most platforms treat you as a single user with a single account. But that's not how life works. We play different roles in different communities –volunteer, employee, board member, friend – and the boundaries between them matter.

Geens lets users create distinct “roles” within their account, each with separate identities, data, and permissions. I've talked about the importance of computers recognising the different hats we wear in our lives before. It's vital that systems recognise that digital identity is plural and context-dependent. For people working in complex or sensitive environments, that separation is a critical safeguard.

Boards and working groups can use “Rooms” – private collaborative spaces –to review documents, track decisions, and assign tasks, with immutable audit logs for accountability. Complex or interrelated organisations can go further by offering self-contained and secure white-labelled private spaces to partners or sub-groups. Researchers or NGOs can spin up secure forms (GeeForms) to gather data in the field, with optional anonymity and encrypted uploads. It's clear that the development team has embodied this privacy-first thinking throughout the product.

Glimpsing a More Ethical Digital Future

This article isn't a sales pitch. But this isn't theory, vapourware or a half-baked idea either; it's robust and market-ready. I've seen Geens in use in production with top pharma and accounting firms as well as trialling the features for myself. (BTW, I was pleased to see that individuals can get lifetime access for €20!). And what I can say is this: As we like to say in Britain, It does exactly what it says on the tin. What I saw is a tangible real-world example that shows us today what a better, more ethical digital future looks like. It's a different way of building – and thinking about – digital platforms. Today's dominant model is extractive, even when cloaked in slick design or greenwashing language. But alternatives do exist. They just often live in places we're not looking: in small NGOs, community infrastructure, underfunded research labs, or civic tech collectives.

In my thesis [Chapters 7,10], I argued that the world needs to rethink human data relations. People need systems that allow them to see, understand and harness their personal data. This is a huge contemporary challenge, and like literally every system on the market, Geens has more work to be done in these areas, no doubt. But the platform has its own SDK, meaning that you start with Geens' secure and ethical technical foundation and build out exactly the system that you need. The groundwork is done for you.

More fundamentally, this approach circumvents the entire other side of human data relations needs that I wrote about. You don't need to be included in data-based decision making and have oversight over how your data is used when such practices are literally impossible due to the privacy-by-design architecture. For me, that's a huge step forward towards the better human-centric future I have advocated for.

I for one would love to live in a world where this kind of ethical approach to handling our sensitive company or personal data isn't niche – it's normal. If you've ever felt uneasy about where your data goes, who can read your messages, or what you're agreeing to with one more click of “accept all,” platforms like Geens NPO are a breath of fresh air, not because they're perfect, but because they are proof that principled alternatives exist. And maybe principles are the most important feature of all.