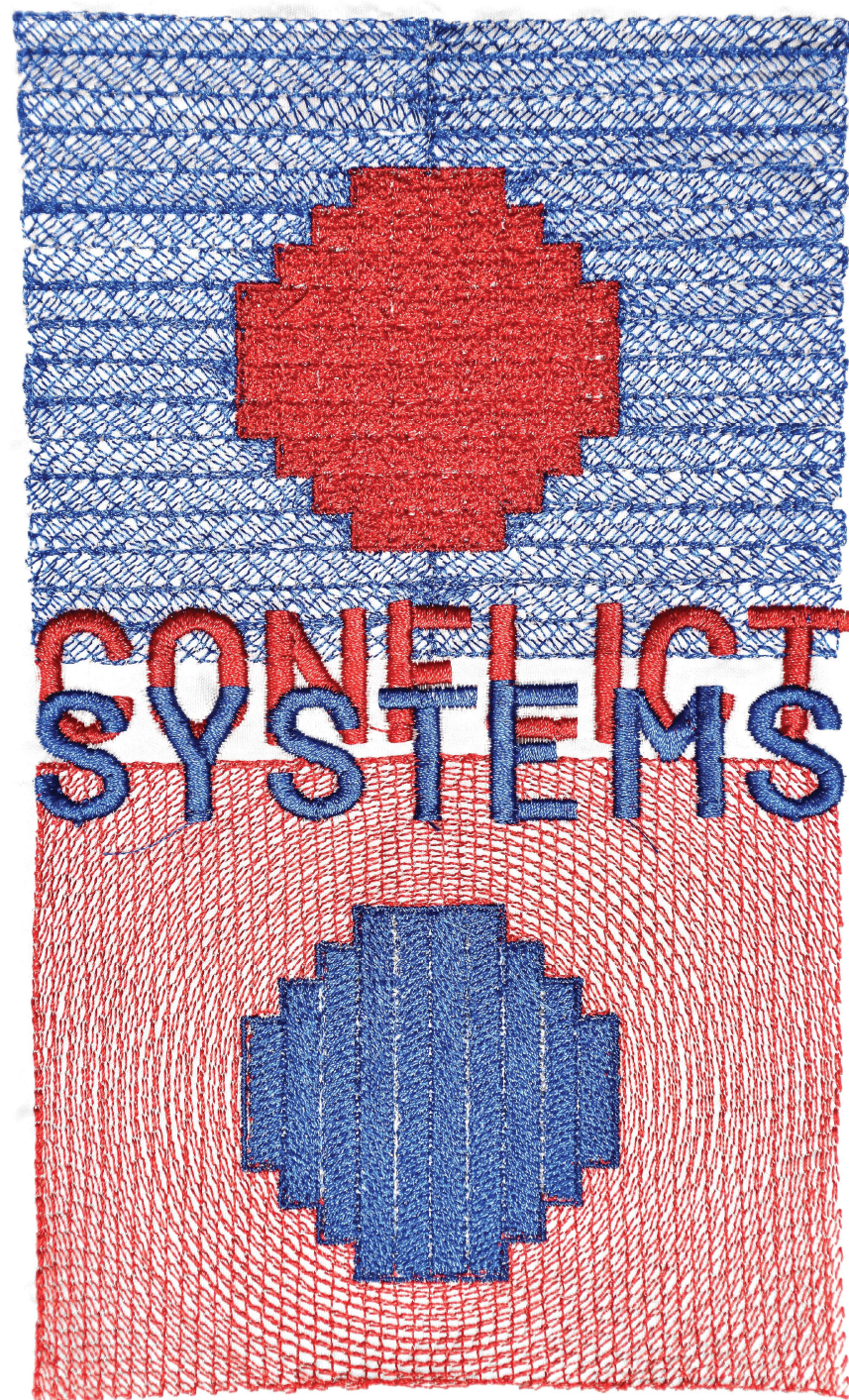




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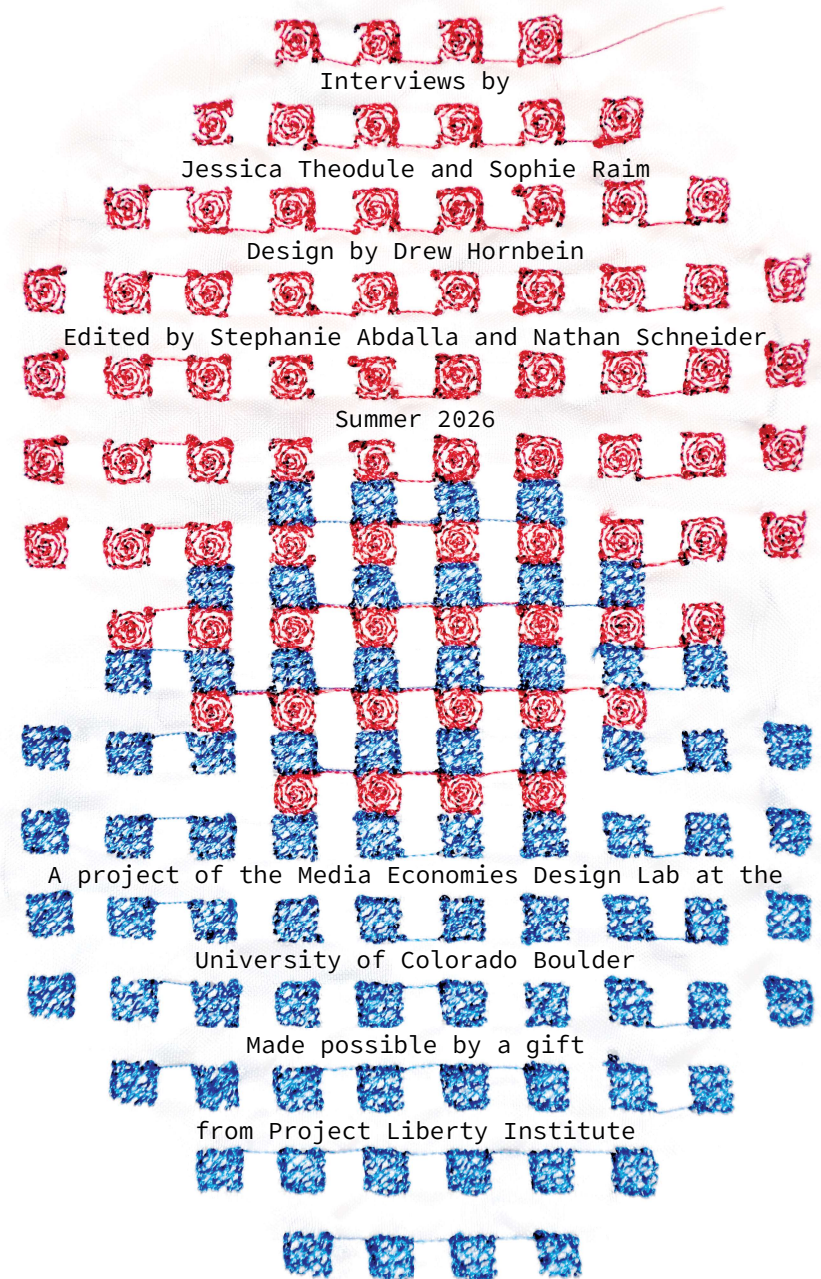
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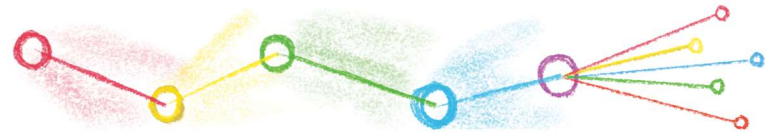
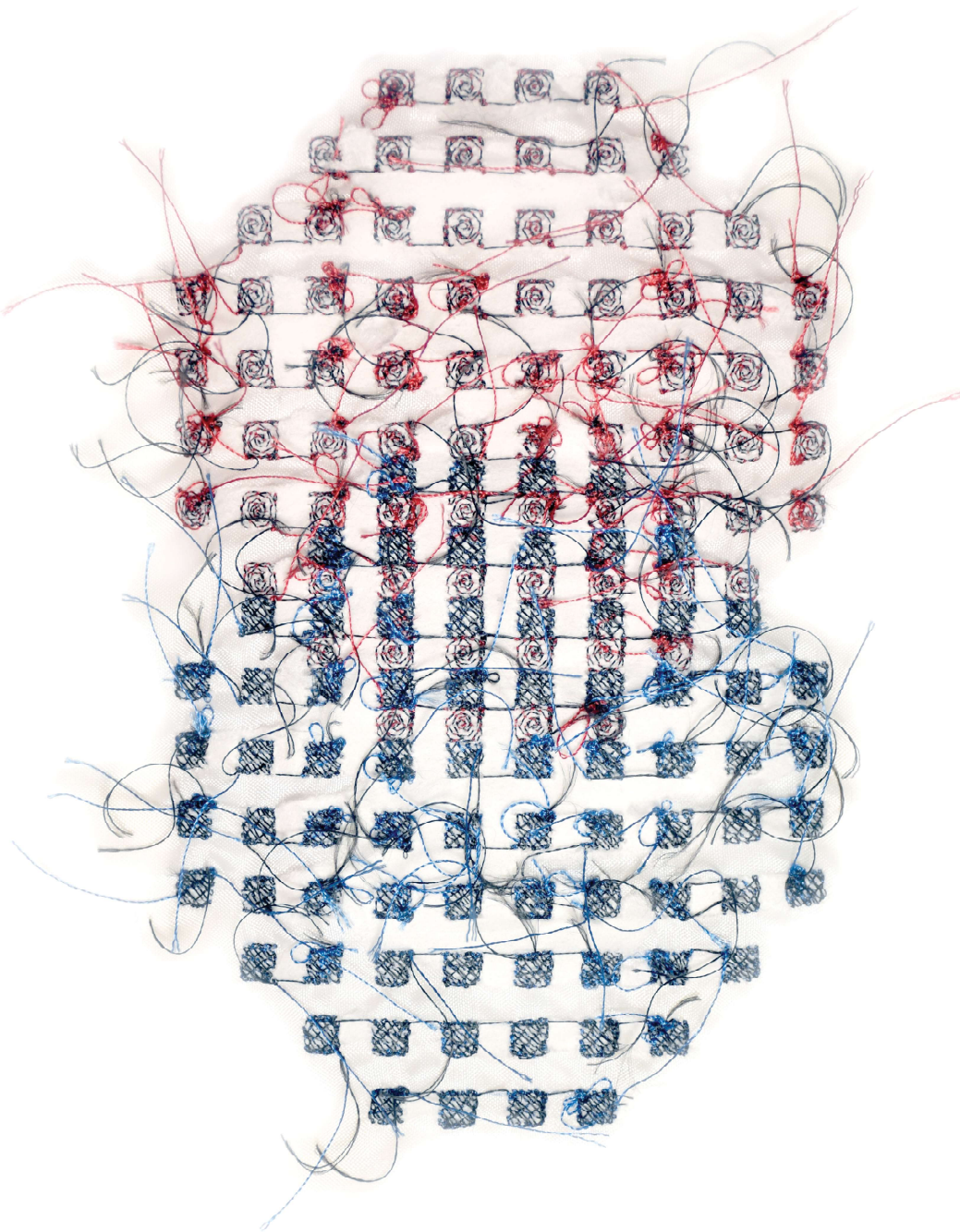
This booklet is an outgrowth of the Online Dispute Systems Workshop held at the University of Colorado Boulder on March 12, 2026. We are grateful for the participation of all who attended: Amy Hasinoff, Andy DiLallo, Coraline Ada Ehmke, Dorothy Howard, Dr. Kay Coghill, Daniel Shipley, Federico Ast, Federica Carugati, Gabe Freeman, Júlia Martins Rodrigues, Jenny Liu Zhang, Kadallah Burrowes, Liz Barry, liz porter-merrill, Leander Roth, Raphael Arar, Sohyeoh Hwang, and Thomas Escobar. Special thanks to Jadyn Turbeville, who made sure the workshop ran smoothly.

The workshop built on earlier research co-led by Dorothy Howard and Nathan Schneider, along with Coraline Ada Ehmke, Rajatava Karmaker, Antoinette Kendrick, Júlia Martins Rodrigues, and Sierra Rodriguez.

We are grateful for the financial support and collaboration of the Project Liberty Institute, with special thanks to Jeb Bell, Sophie Raim, and Jessica Theodule.

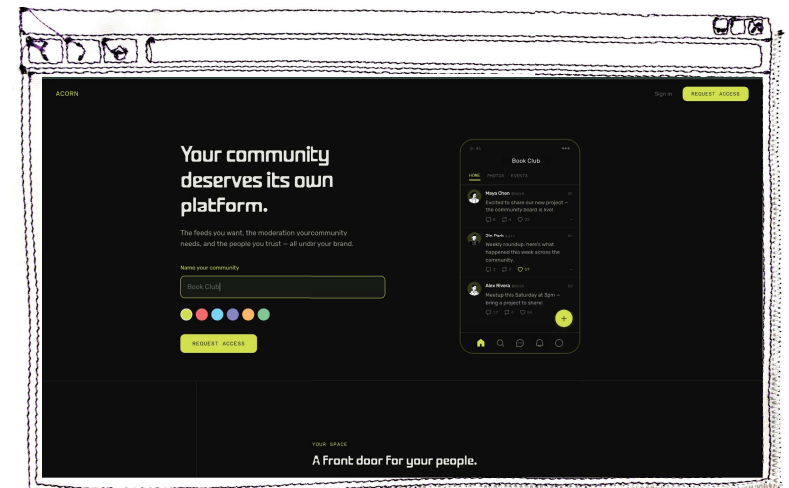
Special thanks to the Denver Public Library's IdeaLab for their embroidery machines.





The platform's implementation has required intensive human labor: a global team of fewer than eight volunteer moderators manually reviewed more than 41,000 posts in a year. To support this work, Blacksky developed Acorn, a new community management platform that integrates emotional check-ins for moderators, embedded policy definitions, escalation pathways, and structured session controls to protect moderators' wellbeing.

As Blacksky's Head of Community, Dr. Kay Coghill played a central role in expanding moderation labels, refining policy language, and shaping Acorn's trauma-informed design. Their contributions strengthened the platform's ability to respond to harm while sustaining the people doing the work.



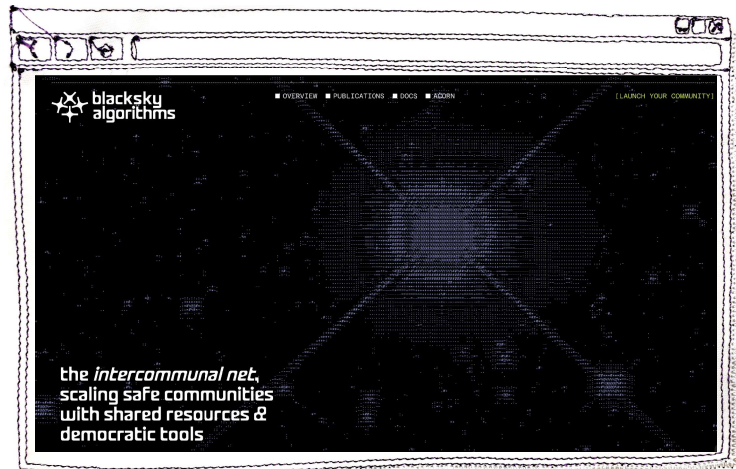
Blacksky's evolution demonstrates that future conflict-system design must be community-driven, transparent, emotionally sustainable, and grounded in the lived realities of those most targeted by online harm.

<https://blackskyweb.xyz/>

Showcase

Blacksky Algorithms

Blacksky Algorithms helps create virtual third spaces where community members democratically govern the recommender algorithms and moderation policies. Founded by technologist Rudy Fraser in 2023, it began as a project to build infrastructure and curation tools for Black users of the AT Protocol, many of them previous users of the “Black Twitter” community. It soon expanded into its own data hosting server with independent terms of service, community guidelines, and open-source infrastructure allowing users to leave other apps like Bluesky while keeping all of their followers/following, media, etc. This shift allowed users to migrate into an environment shaped by collective governance rather than corporate platforms.



Blacksky's core tenets—self-governance, self-determination and communalism—are enacted through the People's Assembly, a democratic polling system built on Polis. Any community member can propose new features, moderation labels, or policy changes, and the community's vote determines how the platform evolves. This participatory model has guided major decisions, including expanding moderation categories beyond anti-Blackness and misogynoir to address intercommunal harms and emerging forms of abuse.

THIS BOOKLET CONTENDS that many recent sites of community building, especially online, have lacked the tools and norms for the practice of conflict. Many reasonable expectations that go by names like due process, justice, accountability, or mediation are unavailable or not even considered in emerging communities. The platforms that communities rely on treat conflict as a corporate liability, not a chance to strengthen relationships.

THE INVITATION WE OFFER is for design, for skill-building, and for tool-sharing. We gather here the ideas of people with experience and expertise that ranges from social-movement facilitation to digital court systems, from user-experience design to family law. Where these perspectives meet, there is the chance to cultivate far healthier systems for supporting conflict in the spaces where people find each other today. Drawing together many lineages of knowledge and the lessons of recent research, this gap is an opportunity.

IN WHAT FOLLOWS, you will find starting points for thinking about the design and practice of conflict systems in emerging community spaces. We define conflict systems as *infrastructures for norms and processes to support interpersonal conflict*. Our goal is to spur further experimentation and research; what we know best is how much more there is to learn. But along the way you will encounter voices and projects that also show there is much to build on. The only inevitability about conflict is that where people gather it will arise. Everything else is what we do with it.

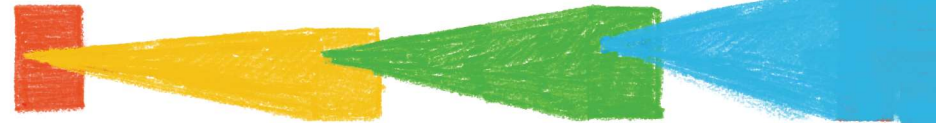
Showcase

Small Hassles Court

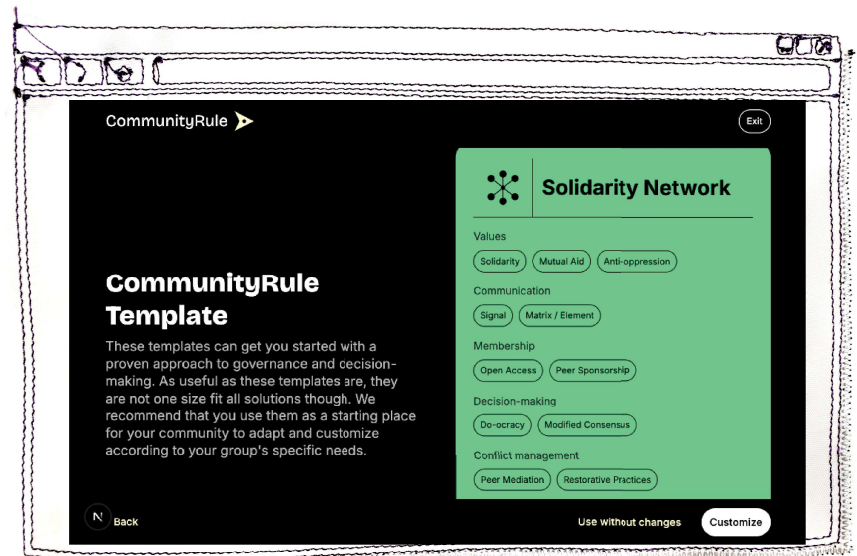
Small Hassles Court is a whimsical online minigame designed to help two people navigate everyday interpersonal conflicts through self-reflection rather than judgment or punishment. As part of Plot Twisters—a volunteer game design collective founded in 2019—the project lives within *Twisterland*, a larger experimental game world focused on emotional literacy, journaling, and personal narrative building. Created by digital product designer Jenny Liu Zhang in collaboration with Amanda Curtis, Joanna Rivera Carlisle, Kyle Thompson, and Annie Litherland, and supported by Metagov's Governable Spacemakers Fellowship, Small Hassles Court addresses what the team sees as a missing layer in online governance: a dedicated space for practicing interpersonal self-governance around “small hassles” such as miscommunications between friends, partners, or collaborators.



The game reimagines the courtroom as a playful, non-hierarchical environment. There is no judge, no punishment, and no enforced verdict. Instead, two players of equal power enter a medieval-styled court facilitated by an overworked dragon named Harry, who guides them through structured rounds of reflection and negotiation. Players select avatars



Implementation centers on flexibility rather than prescription. Groups can start from templates and presets, customize language to fit their context, and ultimately produce a shareable operating manual—exportable as a PDF, Markdown file, or link. The system is also being designed with partial machine-readability in mind, anticipating future governance needs in open-source communities facing floods of AI-generated contributions.



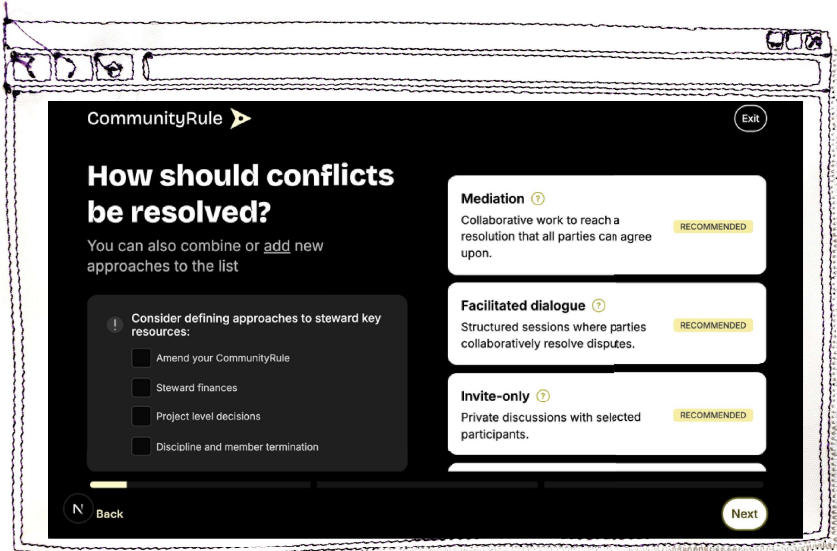
The key lesson CommunityRule offers for building conflict systems is preventative clarity. Formalizing governance early is not bureaucracy but care: it reduces escalation, preserves trust, and gives groups shared reference points when disagreements arise. By helping communities decide *how* they will decide—before pressure hits—the project supports resilience without sacrificing autonomy.

<https://communityrule.info/>

Showcase

CommunityRule

CommunityRule is a governance-building tool designed to help grassroots, horizontal organizations define how they make decisions, handle conflict, and operate together *before* those systems are tested by crisis. A project of the Media Economies Design Lab, led by the community fellows Daniel Shipley and Andy DiLallo, CommunityRule emerges from long experience in mutual aid, cooperatives, and activist groups—spaces where participants have repeatedly seen informal norms collapse into burnout, meeting fatigue, and escalating conflicts.



The core idea behind CommunityRule is to make it easy for groups to adopt a basic, values-aligned governance structure. Based on six months of interviews with cooperators, mutual aid groups, and subject-matter experts, the latest version of the platform guides groups through making implicit governance patterns explicit. Users answer questions about their organization's size, maturity, and goals, which power a simple recommendation engine. In response, the tool generates tailored guidance on decision-making, conflict management, membership, communication norms, and values.



that reflect their emotional state, tag the nature of the conflict from their own perspective, and use a series of prompts—such as articulating assumptions or proposing compromises—to better understand each other. Resolution may take the form of a concrete agreement, but it can also mean mutually accepting differences and exiting cordially.



Implementing this approach required careful design constraints. The team deliberately limited the scope to minor conflicts, drawing on research in negotiation, narrative practices, and restorative and transformative justice while translating those ideas into accessible, contained game mechanics. A key lesson that emerged was distinguishing between solutions and resolutions: emotional clarity and empathy are treated as successful outcomes even without a final agreement. The project suggests that rehearsing these micro-acts of deliberation, nonviolent communication, and deescalation can strengthen the relational muscles needed for healthier conflict systems at larger scales.

<https://smallhasslescourt.com/>

Missing systems

Online spaces are notoriously bad at conflict, and the usual response has been to blame the victims. Users, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, have been accused of being overly censorious or reactive. The term “cancel culture” emerged from Black Twitter as a practice of self-defense, only to become co-opted by cultural elites as a caricature against attempts to hold them accountable. Calls to remove offenders from online spaces, or even jobs and institutional recognition, might seem extreme as a consequence of a single statement or action. But what other options are there?

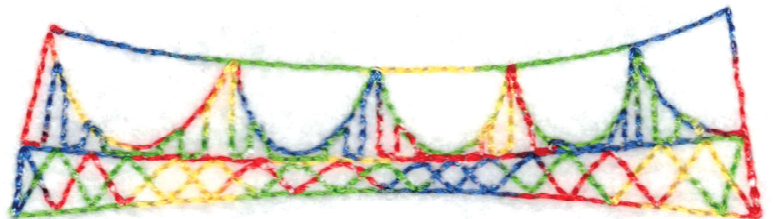
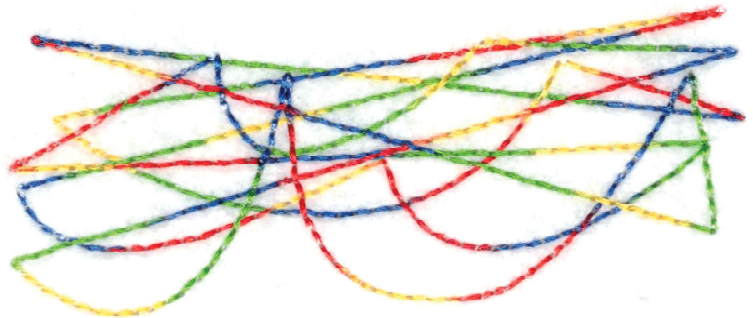
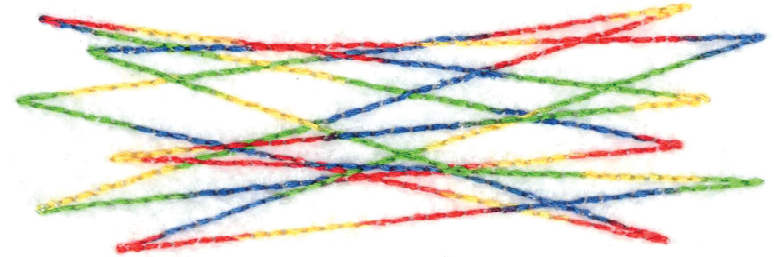
The reality is that systems for addressing conflict and harm are few and far between in many spaces where people gather and organize today.

Part of the reason why is a story called “implicit feudalism.” Starting with the earliest online platforms, even before the internet and the web, servers were designed to be controlled by technically savvy admins, not ordinary users. The admins ran the servers out of their homes or companies, and whoever owned the machines and paid the modem bill wanted total control. Later, when social media became big business, entrepreneurs and investors wanted to keep that control for themselves. When users created their own communities on platforms, the reward for free moderation labor was close-to-absolute power. The platform companies never bothered to create features to support collective self-governance among users, including conflict systems, and users became accustomed to this. We didn’t notice what was missing.

adrienne maree brown, *We Will Not Cancel Us: And Other Dreams of Transformative Justice* (AK Press, 2020).

Meredith D. Clark, “DRAG THEM: A Brief Etymology of so-Called ‘Cancel Culture,’” *Communication and the Public* 5, nos. 3–4 (2020): 88–92, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2057047320961562>.

Nathan Schneider, “Implicit Feudalism: The Origins of Counter-democratic Design,” in *Governable Spaces: Democratic Design for Online Life* (University of California Press, 2024), <https://luminosoa.org/books/m/10.1525/luminos.181>.



Systems are teachers

The point of conflict systems is not to replace human skills with technologies or procedures. Systems are at their best when they teach us lessons that make us freer and more creative. Helpful tools are the ones that not only make life easier but help us learn.

Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*
(Harper & Row, 1973).

So far, digital systems have tended to teach us the wrong lessons. They have taught that you can have community without preparing for conflict, and that the only responses to conflict are pile-ons and call-outs. These lessons, in many contexts, have spilled over from online spaces to everyday offline interactions. We see this with particular acuity in political life, where politicians in physical rooms together are speaking as if their real audience is their social-media followers, not the people right in front of them.

What we want to do is solve that particular conflict, but I think what's actually happening is the way we are affecting and influencing each other and gaining skills to be together in community with greater capacity, acknowledging the developmental aspects of governance technology.

Liz Barry - Executive Director, Metagov

Conflict systems design is an opportunity to teach better lessons. Like apps for driving directions or exercise-tracking, conflict systems can guide us toward better habits and help us learn skills we might not otherwise gain. The tools we use are always teaching us, and we should design them to teach us well.

The means of managing conflict, however, should be a basic expectation in any community. One of the famous design principles that Elinor Ostrom noticed among diverse groups managing common resources, for instance, is “graduated sanctions.” Plainly, this means that in the case of rule violations, there are consequences that fit the offense. The community recognizes those consequences as more or less fair and legitimate. Whether this takes the form of a court, an assembly, a mediation circle, or an HR inquiry, mature communities of virtually all kinds at least

Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

attempt to establish systems for appropriate sanctions. Yet such systems are rarely available online.

Among skilled practitioners of conflict facilitation today, it is common to advise moving conflict offline wherever possible. A leading guide for community accountability processes, Mariame Kaba and Shira Hassan's *Fumbling Towards Repair*, warns against applying its lessons in digital settings. Although many of these practitioners are sophisticated and effective users of social media, they stress that the popular platforms are designed in ways antithetical to guiding healthy conflict processes. Platforms encourage endless disagreement and instant gratification in

Mariame Kaba and Shira Hassan, *Fumbling Towards Repair: A Workbook for Community Accountability Facilitators* (Project NIA, 2019).

pursuit of user engagement; they do not offer the focused, care-oriented, distraction-free spaces for listening that community accountability requires.

When harm does occur on mainstream platforms, they respond with self-defense. Companies want problems to disappear from view of users and shareholders. This results in content moderation practices that users tend to experience as opaque and arbitrary. There is usually little explanation of rule-enforcement actions, and users may even find themselves subject to “shadow-banning” moderation without knowing it at all. Conflict that arises among users is irrelevant to platforms until it

violates the platforms' own rules; if anything, endless conflict provides valuable data for generating ad-targeting profiles of users.

The absence of robust conflict systems causes harm. It harms individual users who have limited recourse against other users who subject them to abuse. If an abuser succeeds in abusing without crossing the platforms' lines, what can be done? Perhaps the abuser is in a different jurisdiction, so external legal recourse is not realistic. Perhaps the community moderator—probably overworked and under-resourced—didn't fully understand the situation but acted anyway. The abuse becomes compounded with malpractice.

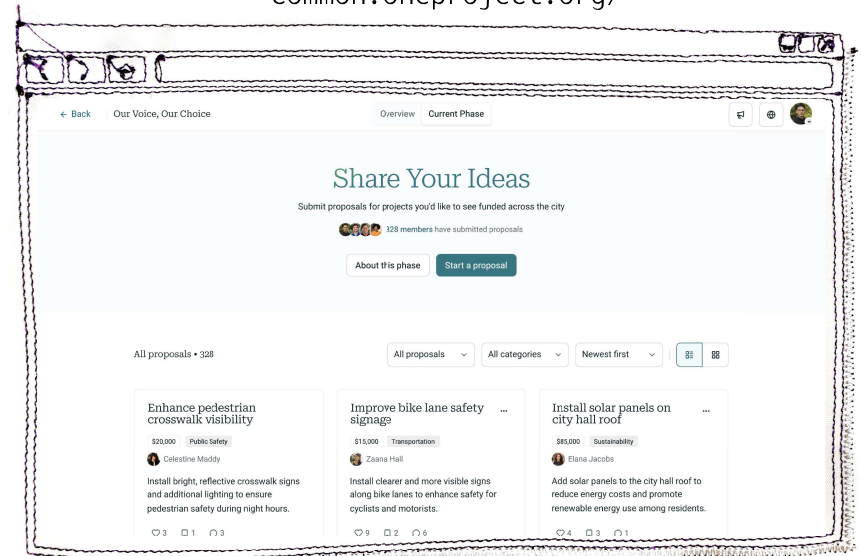
Sarah Myers West, "Censored, Suspended, Shadowbanned: User Interpretations of Content Moderation on Social Media Platforms," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 11 (2018): 4366–83, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818773059>.

Nick Couldry and Ulises Ali Mejias, *The Costs of Connection: How Data Is Colonizing Human Life and Appropriating It for Capitalism, Culture and Economic Life* (Stanford University Press, 2019).

When there are not systems for managing conflict, the harms can spill over into society as a whole. Every individual experience of harm is a problem for society. But when those harms compound, and there are no adequate systems to guide and absorb them, they tear the fabric of social trust. Opaque moderation practices on platforms, even if well-meaning, have resulted in a widespread backlash, even to the point of fueling authoritarian political movements. If institutions like platforms can't be trusted, perhaps a leader can be. If communities seem rife with censoriousness, meting out punishments for thought-crimes against an unwritten orthodoxy, the cause of justice itself can seem futile. It is no accident that some of the world's leading politicians today wear experiences with online censorship as a qualification for power.

surface different forms of disagreement, from value conflicts to binary opposition. A key lesson has been learning to treat complex processes as chains of smaller decisions rather than monolithic workflows.

<https://common.oneproject.org/>



Showcase

Common

Common is the platform for participatory decision-making, built for communities, governments, and organizations that want people to have a real role in the economic decisions that shape their lives. Common is built by One Project, a nonprofit advancing economic democracy. Where most tools start at the vote, Common starts earlier: with a community grounding decisions in shared goals, so everything that follows is accountable to what they set out to achieve. From goal-setting through deliberation, voting, and tracked outcomes, Common supports the full arc of decision-making in one place.

Common was built because participatory governance is foundational to an economy that works for everyone, and running it shouldn't be this hard. Common replaces the disconnected stack of forms, spreadsheets, and voting tools, giving organizations one place for every phase and a transparent record that proves participation shaped real results. Each cycle builds on the last, so institutional memory compounds, community trust grows, and democratic decision-making gets easier over time. Common is already live across six regions and five languages, with more than \$2.4 million collectively allocated by the communities using it.

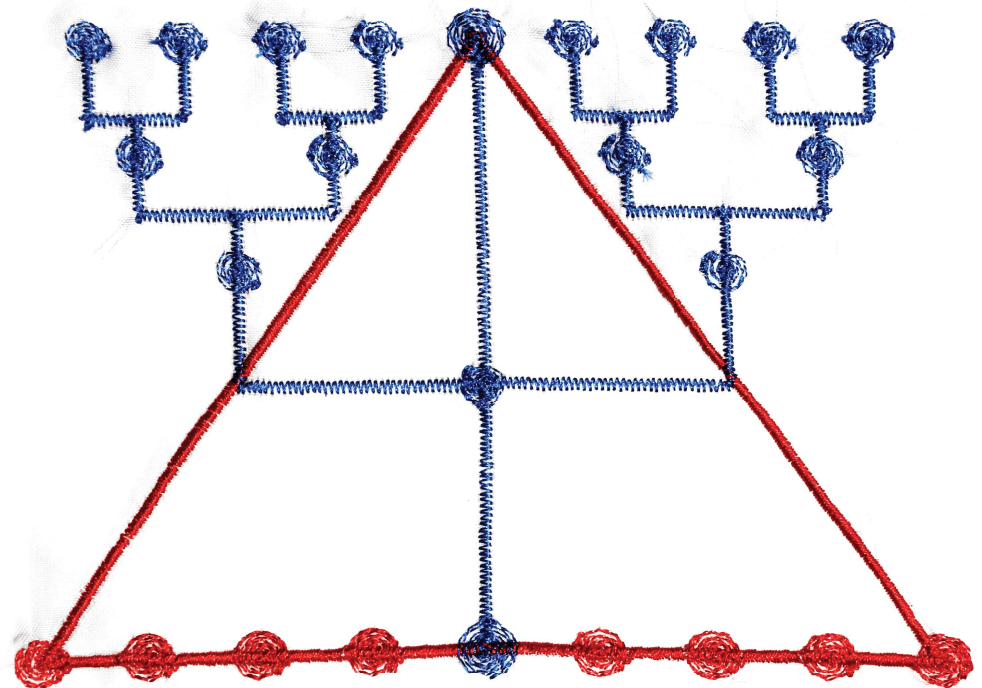
The longer arc points toward a coordination layer for collective well-being, where communities directly govern land, labor, capital, and information. Decision-making is the practical entry point. The wider vision is what these pilots are building toward.

Implementing this vision has required grappling with the complexity of democratic processes themselves. As the platform's head of design, Raphael Arar has helped surface a recurring four-phase structure (input, review, decision, and sharing results) while recognizing that deliberation cuts across phases rather than functioning as a single step. Different decision types, such as direction-setting, selection, and ratification,

We need to reinvent how we solve disputes, because our current systems are not a solution for lots of people, especially from emerging countries.

Federico Ast - founder and CEO, Kleros

The lack of conflict systems has benefited those who can seek power or revenge by other means—through their wealth, their political connections, or their proximity to tech elites who control the switches for community spaces. These people know how to fill a vacuum. But for those who live far from the tech hubs, with little wealth or voice, there is no external recourse. And yet these are people who probably know best how to build healthy conflict systems in community spaces. The lack is an opportunity.



Beacon

Beacon is a long-running attempt to address a persistent gap in digital community governance: the lack of dedicated, humane infrastructure for handling codes of conduct, conflict, and community harm. Conceived by Coraline Ada Ehmke, a veteran software engineer best known as the creator of the Contributor Covenant code of conduct, Beacon emerged from a decade of observing how governance norms in online communities had evolved faster than the tools meant to support them. While codes of conduct became nearly ubiquitous, enforcement and remediation were still being managed through ad-hoc combinations of email threads, mailing lists, and shared spreadsheets—often leaving moderators overstretched and communities vulnerable to abuse and burnout.

Originally designed in 2019 as a mobile-first web application, Beacon aimed to give communities a configurable, end-to-end system for sharing their codes of conduct, receiving reports via email or text message, investigating cases, and managing remediation workflows. The system emphasized privacy, security, and accountability, centralizing sensitive communications while meeting reporters “in the moment” with a low-friction reporting experience. At the same time, Beacon deliberately introduced safeguards to prevent false reporting, brigading, or moderator overload. Its design incorporated personas ranging from harmed community members to bad actors and exhausted moderators, shaping workflows that reflected real conditions of conflict.

Despite a successful MVP, a private beta with major open source communities, and early grant support, Beacon stalled due to funding loss, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the rapid decay of its technical dependencies. Reviving the project exposed further challenges: obsolete architecture, excessive complexity, and ethical misalignment with parts of its original technology stack.

Rules are not set in isolation. They are set by communities within ecosystems. But there's a lack of shared vocabulary or language about what community governance practices actually are, what processes look like, and how we should talk about them.

Sohyeon Hwang - Postdoctoral Associate, Princeton University

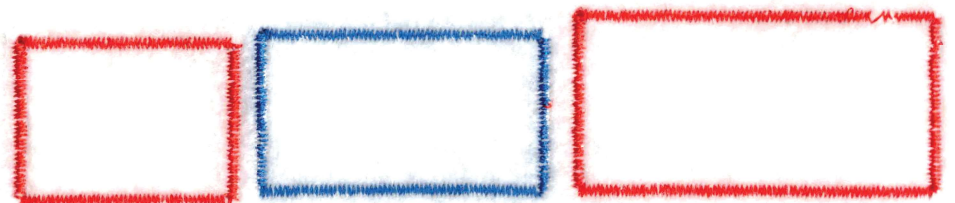
Ecosystems

No community should be entirely on its own when conflict occurs. Corporations have to see their conflicts in light of employment law and corporate law, for instance. Subgroups of a larger movement have to remember that how they handle conflict will reflect on the broader movement. Online communities typically overlap considerably with other communities on the same platform or around the same topic.

When we're looking in the online space, it's tempting to be like, “Oh, we can just create a tool and, like, make this better,” but if we don't also address the underlying systems, then I don't think we're going to make a lot of progress on the actual problem.

Amy Hasinoff - Associate Professor, University of Colorado Denver

Any conflict system should specify what happens when the conflict exceeds the capacity of the community. Is it referred to the legal system? Should an outside facilitator be invited in? Conflict systems are always intertwined with others, and they should be designed accordingly.



Right now, the field of dispute systems has people from different areas who are experts in parts of the problem but don't have the whole picture, so we've been talking past each other. The development of healthy dispute systems requires that we overcome this barrier and develop a shared language between experts from different areas.

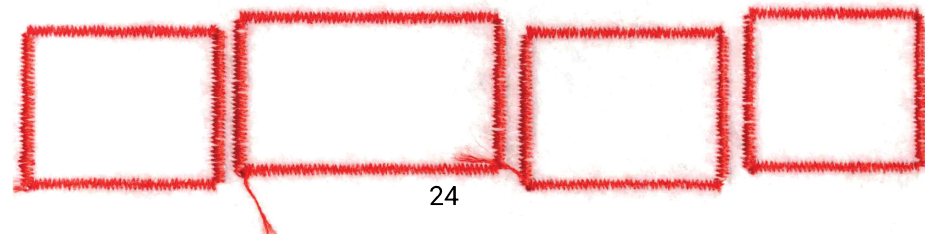
Gabe Freeman - trust & safety consultant

Culture should be a resource, not an obstacle. It carries lessons born from experience, and old lessons can be more powerful than any new system design. Systems should make space to invite in participants' cultural resources, rather than checking them at the door. But when the conflict is over cultural difference itself—as it often is—the system must also be ready to help people bridge their divides.

Norms

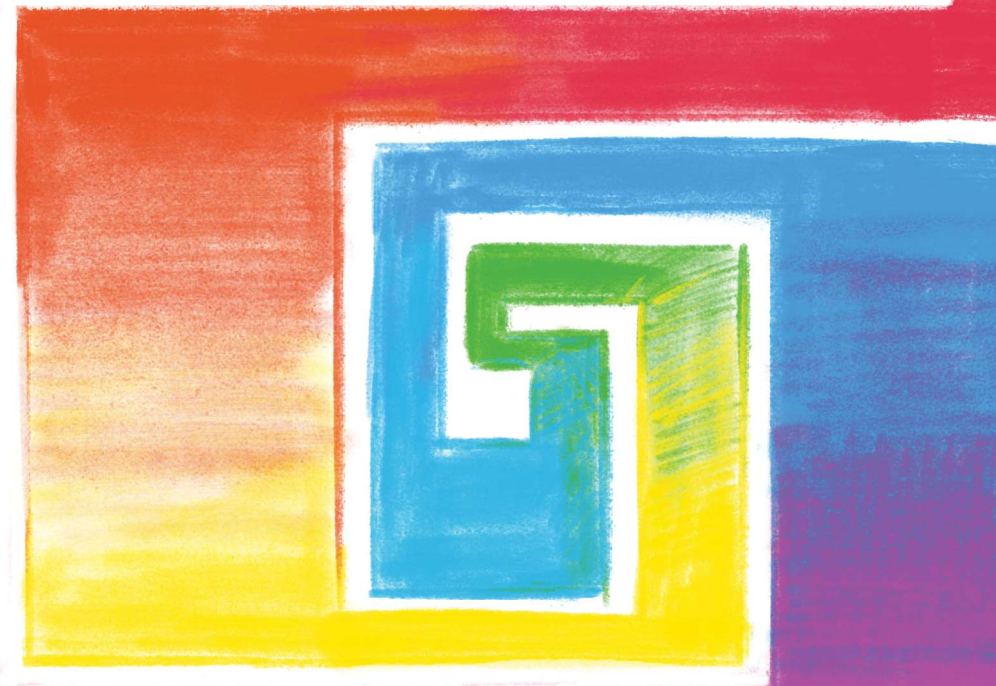
Norms are the kind of culture that we can build in the short term, in particular contexts. These are the expectations that communities can teach about conflict, even when a conflict isn't happening. Are we competitive or collaborative? Do we encourage people to be principled or compromising? Do we trust in relationships or in well-specified protocols? Are we comfortable offloading work to AIs? What does it mean for a space or process to be accessible to all?

It often matters less what the norms are than that they are shared, more or less. Part of a conflict system is the norm building that happens outside the times when conflict seems most acute.



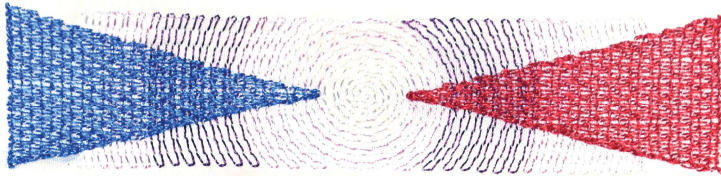
The renewed vision reframes Beacon as a decentralized, self-hosted, ethically licensed platform for all digital communities, governed collaboratively by its users. In this next phase, the project emphasizes shared stewardship, participatory design with practitioners, and governance models that distribute responsibility rather than centralize it. The project's central lesson is that conflict systems must balance care, accountability, and practicality—and that community governance requires sustained infrastructural investment, not just shared values.

<https://github.com/EthicalSource/beacon>



Designing for conflict

The spaces where communities form and gather are changing rapidly, and this has produced an opening. It is time to skill up in conflict systems design.



The money that was once spent trying to commodify our relationships is now, with the turn to AI, making a play for commodifying thought itself. Meta's Mark Zuckerberg has testified that he no longer sees his company as primarily a social media network so much as an engine of entertainment and personalized content. Why bother managing relationships when your business model can go straight to the brainstem? Perhaps with big tech less interested in the "social graph," it is possible to build the social spaces that might actually be healthy.

Meanwhile, we have seen the collapse of "trust and safety" bureaucracies at social-media companies that flourished in the wake of the 2016 US election. Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter, and the layoffs that followed, sent a signal: it's okay to fire the people trying to keep the platforms safe. With the start of the second Trump administration, it became de-facto national policy that social platforms had to slash the closest thing they had to conflict management teams. Whatever you thought (or didn't think) about the corporate trust and safety apparatus, it is gone. Communities need to fill the gap for themselves.

Filling the gap does not require starting from scratch. All our diverse traditions from around the world carry experience with conflict. Often those traditions have been suppressed or neglected by what seems legitimate and modern. But we can turn to them again.

Conflict systems should be able to tell the difference. Sometimes a quick decision needs to be made, while other times a process needs to unfold over a longer duration to be done right. Perhaps there is a process—like an appeal or an objection—that switches the mode from fast to slow, or the other way around.

Sometimes what we need is to give each other a month to breathe, collect ourselves, to process our emotions, and to sit with them before we can really come to a table to be vulnerable enough to have a conversation with someone about a conflict. I don't see that kind of human touch, that kind of empathy, being put into the tooling that we've been talking about.

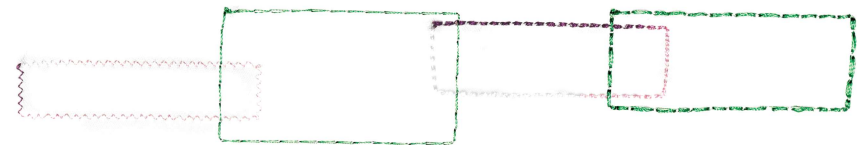
Coraline Ada Ehmke - Executive Director, Organization for Ethical Source

Whatever the processes look like, they should set participants' expectations appropriately. Don't leave people expecting fast resolution of a long process, or expecting deliberation and care in a fast process. Be sure people understand why the system is working the way it is.

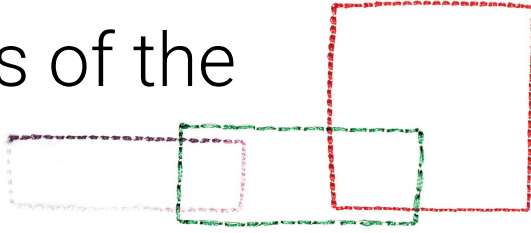
Culture



Different cultures train people in very different relationships to conflict. Some encourage loud arguments and short memory, while others teach conflict suppression except in highly ritualized outbursts. And much more. If systems are intended to serve people from diverse cultural backgrounds, they should be flexible enough that communities can adapt the tools to their expectations.



Dimensions of the challenge



To whet the appetite of future conflict systems designers, let's explore some of the challenges they will face.

Scale

Conflict systems will look very different depending on the size of the community. In a larger community, they likely need to be more structured and bureaucratic to be perceived as fair; in a smaller community, relationships and mutual trust might do more of the heavy lifting.

Oftentimes, we think that first you have to have trust before you can be vulnerable. Instead, we kind of flipped it around where the first step is actually being vulnerable, and from that, you're able to build up trust.

Thomas Escobar - CEO, Type2Fun Foundation

Conflicts happen at all kinds of scales, and systems need to be equipped for handling them wherever they do. Often it is best to address conflict in as small and local a scale as possible, but doing so is inappropriate when the conflict has far-reaching consequences.

Time



Some conflicts can and should be addressed quickly to keep them from spreading. Others need time to develop. Time itself can be a salve, turning what once seemed like an urgent crisis to water under the bridge.

We must figure out what are the systems we can put in place to enable people to resolve disputes and make decisions together that don't look like the ones that we're familiar with.

Federica Carugati - Senior Lecturer, King's College London

As the failures of criminal-justice systems have become more evident, a growing movement has turned to older legacies in search of alternatives. "Restorative justice" typically means seeking more relational forms of conflict resolution as a kind of sidecar to courts and prisons; if the process fails to work, participants may then go back to court. "Transformative justice" tends to bypass criminal justice altogether, seeking responses to conflict and harm entirely in the context of communities; in this light, every conflict is an invitation to consider whether the community needs change to make harm less likely in the future.

In both contexts, people are re-developing their skills as conflict facilitators, and re-discovering that serious conflict need not be the purview of government officials alone.

Restorative justice and transformative justice are really about uplifting and empowering humans while also creating safe containers to be our messy, beautiful human selves. It is about radical accountability. Justice isn't a process; it's a feeling. This is relational work—conflict and violence transformation must be done at both the individual-introspection and inter-personal levels, and it must address community and state-level violence as well.

*liz porter-merrill - Director of Restorative Justice Law & Practices
Office of the State Public Defender*

Many of the biggest problems with online life could be addressed if we just remembered what we've learned from non-digital spaces. Public libraries, unlike Google, do not use your reading history to sell you products. Cafes and parks create room for discussion and debate without broadcasting everyone's words to everyone else. Court systems require accusers to describe precisely the nature of the offense and match the restitution to it. We typically expect that schools, infrastructure, police, and transit will be governed locally—not controlled by some distant corporation, like social media are.

Ejeris Dixon and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, eds., *Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement* (AK Press, 2020).

Creative Interventions, *Creative Interventions Toolkit: A Practical Guide to Stop Interpersonal Violence* (2012, 2018), <https://www.creative-interventions.org>.

The design of healthier conflict systems can begin by learning from traditions that are much older than the internet. How did our ancestors make sure that everyone involved felt heard? How did they create checks on bias and support truth-seeking? Where did those designs fall short?

New_Public, *Civic Signals* (New_Public, 2022), <https://newpublic.org/signals>.

Sarita Schoenebeck, Oliver L. Haimson, and Lisa Nakamura, "Drawing from Justice Theories to Support Targets of Online Harassment," *New Media & Society* 23, no. 5 (2021): 1278–300, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820913122>

Some aspects of conflict systems design will also require confronting more novel challenges. How do you deal with conflicts among anonymous users spread all over the world? What reason do people have to participate in a healthy conflict process when there is no threat of legal consequences? How can people have hard conversations without the benefits of in-person interaction? Addressing these kinds of questions might require devising strategies that are unique to online contexts.

Athenian courts—rewards jurors for aligning with the majority decision. This structure allows Kleros to resolve cases quickly and cheaply, often within days and for only a few dozen dollars.

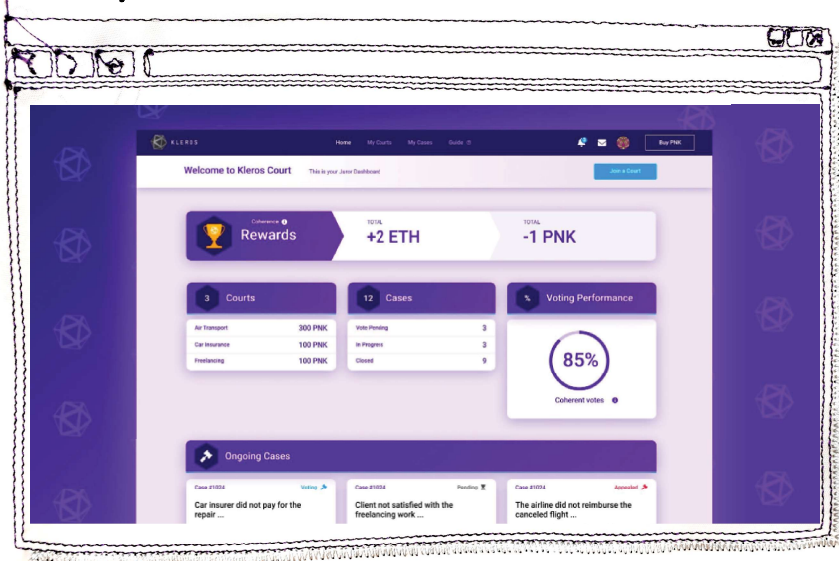
Implementing such a system entails significant challenges, including designing incentives that promote honest judgment and determining which disputes are appropriate for decentralized adjudication. The project has expanded to cover use cases ranging from e-commerce and insurance claims to e-sports and metaverse-based interactions. Recent experiments explore hybrid systems that integrate human jurors with AI agents, revealing both the promise and limitations of automated decision-making, especially when interpretations diverge. Kleros' experience suggests that future conflict systems may need layered approaches—combining AI, human crowds, and traditional courts—to balance speed, cost, context, and moral reasoning in digital governance.

<https://kleros.io/>

Showcase

Kleros

Kleros is a decentralized dispute resolution system designed to address conflicts arising in a rapidly expanding online and cross-border economy. Founded in 2017, the project emerged from a simple but increasingly common scenario: individuals contracting with strangers across countries—such as a client in France hiring a developer in Argentina—without a practical way to resolve low-value disputes when something goes wrong. Traditional legal systems are often too slow, expensive, or jurisdictionally complex for these cases, leaving many online disputes effectively unresolvable.



Kleros offers a blockchain-based alternative that combines smart contracts, cryptocurrency escrow, and crowdsourced arbitration. Parties agree in advance that, if a dispute arises, funds locked in a smart contract will be released according to a ruling by randomly selected jurors. These jurors, drawn from a pool of token holders, independently review the evidence and vote. Blockchain infrastructure provides traceability and tamper-resistance for evidence, jury selection, and vote counting, while a game-theoretic incentive system—loosely inspired by ancient

The complexity of people's life, mental health, and economics all factor into how we interact online.

Dorothy Howard - MLIS Candidate, Pratt Institute School of Information

When people do conflict well, it can be a chance to deepen relationships more than ever before. Conflict systems design can build solidarity across borders and diverse experience. At a time when governments are often failing to uphold basic standards of human rights and dignity, community spaces can show that a better way is possible.

More troubling kinds of conflict systems are on the rise as well. For instance, the startup Objection.ai is creating a private, AI-driven court that would enable wealthy people to punish news organizations for publishing reports about them that they don't like. This is just part of a wider trend: platforms are increasingly offloading conflict management to automated systems that bypass that attention, care, and collaboration that are necessary to turn conflict into a chance for stronger relationships.

Healthy conflict systems could be the norm. In any community, online or off, there could be a code of conduct and the means of enforcing it in a way that their members will perceive as fair. In online contexts, there could be tools dedicated to facilitating conflict that are set apart from other spaces. If smaller communities don't have capacity for conflict yet, they could delegate facilitation to others that do. Perhaps more than anything else, communities should be sure to make clear what happens if a conflict becomes more than they are equipped to manage.

There is no single conflict system that will work for every group and context. This kind of design is inherently attentive to context. It is not a problem to be solved once and for all but a challenge to enter and to keep on exploring.

WHAT ARE THE INFRASTRUCTURAL INGREDIENTS FOR HEALTHY SYSTEMS?

Healthy conflict systems do not emerge automatically from good intentions. They depend on infrastructure: shared expectations, accessible processes, and material resources and support for the difficult work of being together across disagreement. Before a crisis arrives, these are some of the infrastructural ingredients that can help communities navigate conflict in ways that strengthen relationships.

Clear rules and enforcement policies

Participants should understand what kinds of behavior are expected and what processes exist for when boundaries are crossed. Ambiguity tends to benefit those with the most power, while transparent expectations can make participation feel safer and more legitimate. The goal is not exhaustive regulation but clarity around how the community responds when conflict occurs. Communities should also make clear what kinds of consequences are possible, who is responsible for carrying them out, and what opportunities exist for appeal, repair, reconsideration, and, especially, transformation.

Having structures is really helpful to make sure that everybody's on the same page about expectations and what happens if they aren't met. But structures don't always need to be rigid or formal in order to be effective. For example, in conflict resolution protocols, it can be helpful to outline opportunities for involved parties to discuss in a safe conversational space rather than escalating directly to "judicial" processes that dole out punishment.

Kadallah Burrowes - Research Fellow, MEDLab

Support for diverse cultural practices

A rigid process that assumes one "correct" way of engaging conflict can reproduce exclusion rather than resolve it. Healthy systems make room for different communication styles, traditions, and forms of accountability while still maintaining shared commitments to dignity and participation.

The content of this page was informed by Spring Up—see their resources here: <https://www.timetospringup.org/resources>

Setting up infrastructure and telling people they have options increases their sense of psychological safety in the space and their sense of efficacy—that they can be the one to take a step or self-advocate.

*Leander Roth
Mythematician, Spring Up*

Set-aside spaces for conflict outside normal channels

While online spaces are known for fast-moving chats and public timelines that encourage performance, escalation, and audience capture, there must be room for dedicated spaces for mediation, facilitated dialogue, or slower deliberation that can help participants focus on listening rather than winning a dispute. Just as societies create courtrooms and council chambers, digital communities need environments intentionally designed for conflict transformation. Creating boundaries around where and how conflict unfolds can make difficult conversations more focused, accountable, and humane, and it can lead to unexpected solutions.

Using the metaphor of the orange, a traditional way of mediating conflict assumes that each part is deserving of half of the orange. But, maybe, through more conversation, we can find out that one part needs the orange to make juice, and the other needs the peel to make candy, so both could have 100% of the part of the orange they needed.

*Júlia Martins Rodrigues
Associate Director, MEDLab*

Facilitation resources and training

No system works without people who know how to use it. Communities need members with the skills to de-escalate tension, recognize power imbalances, guide difficult conversations, and support repair processes. And these capacities should not belong only to experts or authorities—the more communities distribute conflict literacy among participants, the more resilient they become. Therefore, beyond investment in tools, healthy systems require investment in education, mentorship, and practices that help people build confidence in navigating disagreement.

Escalation if the conflict exceeds the space

Some conflicts exceed the capacity of a group's existing systems and require outside facilitation, legal intervention, or support from broader networks. Healthy systems acknowledge their own limits and make clear what happens when conflict cannot be adequately addressed within the community itself. Knowing when and how to seek additional help is part of responsible governance.