

Implicit Feudalism

The Origins of Counter-democratic Design

There is a peculiar kind of structure that appears when online life takes institutional form.

In a statement published on November 30, 2020, ten Black Lives Matter chapters in the United States and Canada declared, “It is time for accountability.”¹ The statement raised questions about what had become of the chapters’ parent organization, the Black Lives Matter Global Network. It noted that Patrisse Cullors, who first posted the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag on social media in 2013, had become both the sole board member of the network and its executive director. The chapters’ statement was concerned with transparency and participation surrounding the direction of their shared movement, as well as their own lack of financial support. The following year, Cullors stepped away from the organization. But a strange fact remains, a flagrant deviation from the norm of nonprofit board governance: in the waning days of 2020, a year when Black Lives Matter had become a historic anti-racist uprising across the country and the world and absorbed tens of millions of dollars in donations, its flagship organization had only a single board member.

Consider, then, a very different sort of singular leader. On February 1, 2012, Mark Zuckerberg issued a letter to investors ahead of the initial public offering for Facebook, the company he founded out of his Harvard dorm room. In it, he introduced “the Hacker Way,” Facebook’s “unique culture and management approach” based on being “open,” “meritocratic,” and willing to “move fast and break things.”² What the letter did not explain to investors, however, was the fact that the company had instituted a dual-class stock structure, ensuring that even after the public offering, Zuckerberg would retain majority control. Contrary

to the norms of Wall Street, but following some other internet companies like Google, the founder would remain in charge indefinitely.

That word *founder* evokes the scene of a foundry, the precursor to the startups' dorm room or garage, the dreary place of technological invention. In a foundry, metal becomes pliant under heat, red-hot and liquid. But when it cools, the metal turns solid. Founders solidify too. They stay in place, even against the longings for a decentralized protest movement and the will to power of institutional investors. In Groups on Zuckerberg's Facebook, power works the same way: if you start it, you keep it. In Black Lives Matter, the logic of a hashtag became the governance of an organization. The politics of the foundry holds its shape in the politics forged there.

A DARK PATTERN

This chapter considers how online platforms train users to interact with each other through certain widespread interface designs. I argue that an *implicit feudalism* informs the available options for community management on the dominant platforms for online communities. It is a pattern that grants user-administrators absolutist reign over their fiefdoms, with competition among them as the primary mechanism for quality control, typically under rules set by platform companies. These practices emerged from particular technical conditions dating to early social platforms. They have since bled into widespread social and political norms. But implicit feudalism is not a necessary condition.

I do not use *feudalism* in a historically precise sense, as there is much to distinguish online communities from the medieval European regime of land tenancy and its lord-vassal relations. Rather, I use the word metaphorically to describe concurrent communities across a network, each subject to a power structure that is apparently absolute and unalterable by those who lack specific permissions.³ I do not for the moment mean to focus on ways in which the digital economy appears to be fostering a new feudalism of wealth inequality, though the economic dimensions will become more relevant as the argument develops. Implicit feudalism is primarily a matter of software design. It is a habit: a familiar way of doing things, along with the technical debt from past designs, around which business models have grown. I also recognize the pejorative connotations that the word generally carries. It may be true that many of the feudal practices considered here have been sensible and efficient; they may be especially appropriate at certain stages of a community's life cycle, such as early on, or at moments of transition. But I cannot completely hide my disappointment in the phenomenon or my bias for something more democratic.

By *implicit* I mean that while platforms may not explicitly proclaim or seek to practice some old-world feudal ideology—to the contrary, many claim participatory and inclusive ideals—a feudalism lurks latent in the available tools that

guide and limit user behavior. Despite what the tools are supposed to do, they steer us toward something else. Implicit feudalism places unnecessary limits on the possibilities available to communities, curtailing the cultivation of online democracy. An expectation typically associated with democracy, for instance, is that those subject to an authority have the capacity to transfer the authority to someone else. Even this, in our online lives, is a rarity. The mechanisms necessary for many basic democratic processes are missing under the regime of implicit feudalism.

Democratic practices can emerge among feudal technologies. Administrators may feel rhetorical or social pressure to respect the values of community members in how they exert their otherwise absolute authority. Feudal networks can thereby exhibit forms of accountability that political scientist David Stasavage calls “early democracy,” resembling the councils and assemblies of hereditary chiefdoms.⁴ Communities may repurpose features like emojis and polls to carry out decision-making functions. But under implicit feudalism, inclusive governance requires clever adaptations of available feature sets, against the grain of the user interface. Consequently, empirical studies have concluded that nondemocratic practices are the most likely outcome in online communities, seemingly in keeping with the sociologist Robert Michels’s 1911 prediction that human societies naturally drift toward an “iron law of oligarchy.”⁵ Yet upon examining what the available tools allow, the observed oligarchic outcomes begin to seem preordained. Implicit feudalism has forestalled social and political questions of how community governance might otherwise occur.

To clarify the concept, I adopt a media-archaeology approach, which looks to artifacts of the past whose traces appear in the infrastructure of the present. Specifically, this means probing the ways that technical contexts of early online communities organized—and still organize—the realm of the possible. In the past, we can also find means for raising new questions about the assumptions of the present. According to Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka, “media archaeologists . . . construct alternative histories of suppressed, neglected and forgotten media that do not point teleologically to the present media-cultural condition as their ‘perfection.’”⁶

I undertake a close examination of historical documents, the machines and cultures that accompanied them, and the afterlives of both in the machine-mediated practices that surround us today. Early on, feudal governance catered to the technical circumstances of the platforms, as well as to the offline legal forms of ownership and control over their hardware. Corporations found benefits in encouraging centralized control among user communities. Those benefits then informed the designs of later technologies, later business models, and later cultural norms. Artifacts of even pre-internet experiments are still buried in the soil upon which online cities have been built, still lodged in their foundations.

What kind of concept is implicit feudalism? One way to think of it might be as a species of social-media affordance. According to a comprehensive literature

review on the topic, social-media affordances are “the perceived actual or imagined properties of social media, emerging through the relation of technological, social, and contextual, that enable and constrain specific uses of the platforms.”⁷ Implicit feudalism enables its admins’ authority while constraining what users in general can practice and even devise. Yet it falls short of affordance status to the degree that it is not something people ordinarily perceive or imagine. Social-media platforms do not advertise implicit feudalism as a feature; users do not often demand or notice it. Rather, it lurks in what the affordances lack, a negative space outside users’ experience with platforms. When we do notice it, implicit feudalism appears as a disaffordance: a field of actions that platforms seem to inhibit. But in typical online life, it is merely a willingness to accept and a failure to question systems with impoverished feature sets.⁸

I hope this chapter aids in unraveling that acceptance. Noticing implicit feudalism is the first step toward making it less ubiquitous. I follow in the footsteps of the “#darkpatterns” campaign among user-experience professionals, which seeks to dissuade peers from disingenuous techniques that “trick users into doing things” against or without their will.⁹ Dark patterns might sneak a monthly subscription into what users assume is a one-time donation or encourage sharing excessive personal information or make simple acts like unsubscribing unreasonably hard. Compared to these, implicit feudalism is a creature of habit more than of malice.

Let me add to the conceptual cauldron the classic distinction of economist Albert O. Hirschman between the signals of “exit” and “voice” in organizational life.¹⁰ Exit is the capacity to depart, such as by quitting a job or shopping with a competitor; voice is the capacity to make change from within, such as by lobbying one’s city council for a local policy change or filing a complaint about a defective product. If one doesn’t like how an online community is being run, one can complain, too, but one’s primary recourse is exit—to choose another community or create another in an open market. Yet, as in other kinds of markets, the social costs of exit can be higher than they appear from a purely technical standpoint.¹¹ The button to leave is always there, but actually using it might incur personal or professional costs. It might mean losing friends or access to one’s culture.

Online spaces do support certain kinds of voice. They excel at chatter. Social media have facilitated a golden age of complaint against every imaginable authority, from corporations and politicians and teachers to the overworked volunteers trying to moderate posts from a thousand strangers. Seth Frey and I have therefore argued for the need to refine Hirschman’s distinction with a more hair-splitting one: to distinguish *effective* from *affective* voice.¹² Affective voice can be heard in the maelstrom of online emotion and persuasion that flows so freely. It is at least the appearance of freedom; users can speak out and affirm each other into virality. But they must wait for admins or whoever else holds the keys to act on their complaints. Effective voice, meanwhile, is the voice that the peasants lack under feudalism, the instrumental power to change something, whether the nobles like

it or not. We defined the effective sort of voice as “individual or collective speech that brings about a binding effect according to transparent processes.” This might be the ability to vote out an admin, for instance, or to form unions among users or to require that moderators have to follow rules like everyone else. These are basic features of so much institutional life in democratic societies, at least before it all went online. There, for most of us, effective voice is mostly absent.

This chapter presents a genealogy of implicit feudalism in online communities, chronicling its emergence among particular network structures before and during the early internet. These appear to feed directly into the designs of more recent platforms for online communities, from collaboration tools to corporate social media. From there, implicit feudalism shapes our practices of governing and problem-solving, seeping outward from technical particulars to our social worlds.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

The excavations that follow reveal a sequence of software designs, together with the technological and cultural norms that accompanied them. The choices of examples are selective—genealogically significant, I argue, but inevitably incomplete. Similar patterns also occur in video live-streaming, question-and-answer platforms, multiplayer gaming, and productivity software, but I do not dwell on them here. I neglect, for now, parallel stories that occurred outside the US software industry, such as state-led social networks in Europe and the social platforms behind China’s “Great Firewall.” But even within these relatively narrow bounds, there is much to unearth.

Progenitors: BBS, Usenet, and Email Lists

Online bulletin board systems first appeared in the late 1970s, offering computer hobbyists outside academia and military-funded research centers their first experience of digitally mediated community.¹³ The internet did not yet exist. BBSes typically resided on a single user’s computer at that user’s home, running one or another variant of specialized, customizable BBS software. Users’ computers could log in through a phone line, post messages and files, and download content others had posted. The user who hosted a BBS became known as a “sysop,” short for “system operator.” Interviewees in a film called *BBS: The Documentary* testify to the intimacy of the sysop experience. One sysop describes lying in bed and being able to infer what users were doing on the BBS from the sounds of the computer on the other side of the room. Many sysops thus regarded users as guests in their homes, resulting in both generous and domineering behaviors. “This bulletin board is in my house,” a sysop in the film imagines declaring, imitating his more prudish peers. “I will not have any swear words on it!”¹⁴

With hospitality came power. As a sysop, says one informant, “you could do whatever you wanted.” Says another, “At the end of the day, it is the sysop who is

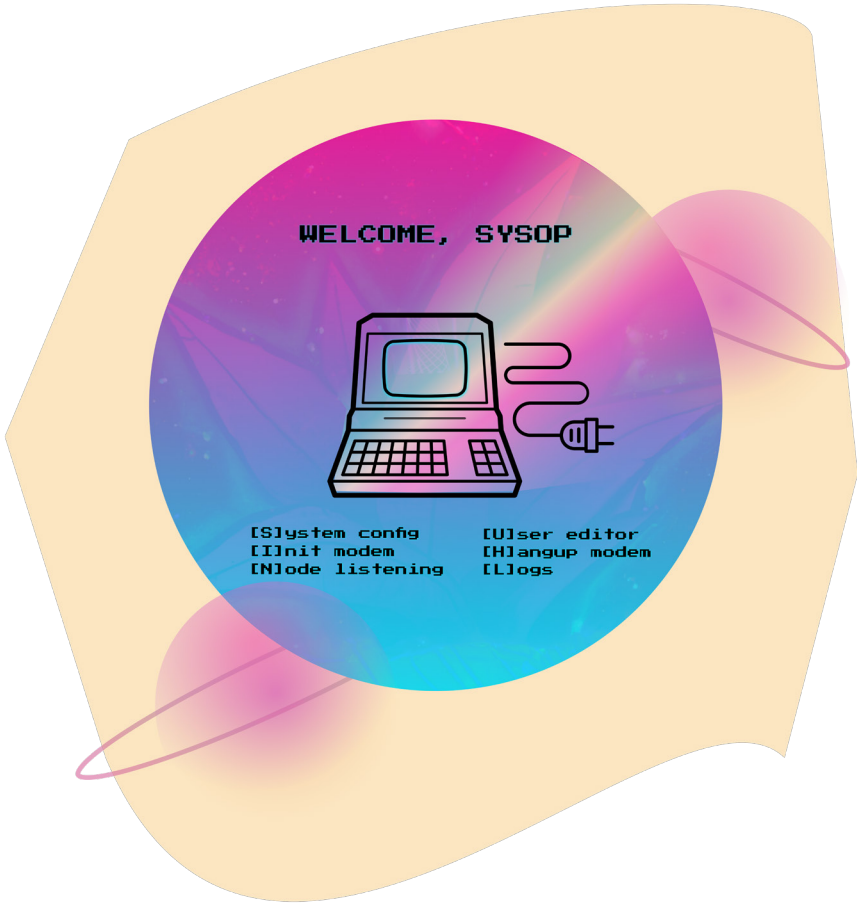


FIGURE 2.

the ultimate judge, jury, and executioner”; after all, the sysop could say, “If you don’t like it, get off my computer, get out of my phone lines!” All rights emanated from the sysop.¹⁵

Media historian Kevin Driscoll recounts how sysops found themselves becoming not just hosts but lawgivers through their unique relationship to the system: “They were the makers and enforcers of social policy. Ultimately, the sysop possessed a form of total authority because they lived under the same roof as the host PC. In a moment of frustration, the sysop could always pull the plug and shut down the whole system.” While a sysop’s absolute power stemmed from the power to terminate the community, users had power of their own stemming from the option to exit—to leave one BBS for another: “If a user or group of users found themselves in an unresolvable conflict with a sysop, they were always free to

depart and create their own system. The freedom for users to leave the system created a check on sysops' power and created a sense of mutual accountability within the community."¹⁶

The first specification for BBS software describes the system operator (not yet a sysop) as a technical functionary, performing maintenance on the machine and using special message-deletion privileges in cases of user carelessness.¹⁷ But before long, the not-under-my-roof spirit infused the feature set of BBS software, granting sysops close-grained authority to sanction and censor users. There were also more democratic options available, such as the ballot-counting votemgr program for the FidoNet BBS network. The OneNet network of BBSes went so far as to have a constitution and board structure; the founder, Scott Converse, once told me the story of when the members voted him out of power.¹⁸ But for the most part the ownership of the non-virtual hardware bled into virtual feudalism.

One important motivation for sysop absolutism was legal liability. However fun it might be to imagine virtual spaces as indifferent to the world outside, BBS guides came with frequent reminders that the owner of the machine could face consequences for what the users posted. Even *The Anarchist's Guide to the BBS* admits, after sympathizing with those who might want to talk about "bombing the local embassy of some country that you don't like," that "the bottom line is that you may well be responsible for anything that happens on, or as a result of, your board."¹⁹ Such concerns made it a norm for sysops to verify even pseudonymous users with phone calls or mailed documents, ensuring that their control over the virtual system could extend to users' offline identities.

A case in point was LambdaMOO, an all-text online world where users interacted with each other in the rooms of a virtual house. LambdaMOO became notorious for being host to a "rape in cyberspace," a prolonged case of textual sexual assault that Julian Dibbell recounted in a *Village Voice* feature.²⁰ Crises of bad behavior resulted in forays into user governance, such as a petition-based system for setting and enforcing rules. But handing users power began to unnerve the administrators of this social experiment—which was housed at Xerox PARC, a corporate research entity. In 1996 the admins announced that they were "reintroducing wizardly fiat" with veto power over user self-governance, due to the realities of non-virtual jurisdiction: "So long as the MOO is located on a single RL [real-life] machine at a single RL site subject to RL laws and liabilities, there will be those deemed responsible for the use of that hardware."²¹

In realizations like this, we find a formative moment of implicit feudalism. Regardless of whatever limitless possibilities seem to exist in virtual space, if that space lives on someone's server, then the possibilities end at what that someone, together with the legal regime where they live, will tolerate.

In 1980, another approach to networked community appeared in the form of Usenet.²² Like a BBS, it was a forum for asynchronous content-posting. But rather than residing in a sysop's home, Usenet distributed its "newsgroups" among

interoperable servers, typically hosted by universities or corporations. A vibrant, even anarchic culture emerged among users, as they reveled in the opportunity to create communities far beyond the telephone area codes that typically circumscribed BBSes. But as the host organizations took stock of the free-for-all inhabiting their computers, they sought to establish discipline.

The structure of Usenet's network had developed into a hierarchy, with most Usenet providers relying on a small number of central servers to circulate content. The central sysadmins became known as the "Backbone Cabal," and they instituted the disciplinary reform. In the "Great Renaming" of 1986, Usenet's major public spaces came under the authority of an organization eventually known as the Big 8. The Big 8 still governs key sections of Usenet. There is a voting system for adding new newsgroups, though this political process is not binding over technical power; in some instances, sysadmins have simply refused to carry newsgroups approved by a vote.²³

The board of the Big 8 is self-perpetuating, meaning that current members choose future members. Similarly, moderators of particular newsgroups choose their own successors according to processes specified in a Big 8–approved group charter or, if there is a break in the line of succession, by the Big 8 board. Once chosen, a moderator's power is much like that of a BBS sysop. According to one Big 8 documentation page:

Who can force the moderators to change their policies?

- Nobody.

Who can force the moderators to obey the group charter?

- Nobody.²⁴

The document continues:

Why won't you give us more help with our group?

- The group belongs to the moderators and the users.
- Usenet is not structured in such a way that outsiders can intervene.

Usenet's governance was robust enough to foster a popular set of online communities that, more than the homebound BBSes, served as a virtual public square both before and after the rise of the internet.²⁵ The circumstances of operating on a shared network and taking up shared server space required governance mechanisms capable of at least some collective decision-making. But at the level of most user experience, feudalism reigned. One study of Usenet's evolution used that language explicitly: "The system's initial democracy and egalitarianism had been replaced by a feudal structure, in which system administrators deliberately, if self-mockingly, referred to themselves as 'barons' (and to users as 'serfs')."²⁶

Among people with access to the ARPANET and the early internet, email was the "killer app"—the use case that made the technology truly useful. As email became a medium for communities, it became another site of implicit feudalism.

By the mid-1980s, the email discussion software ListServ began replacing Usenet on university systems.²⁷ It enabled institutional sysops to fully control the media of conversation. Other email-list programs, such as Sympa and Mailman, emerged later in the 1990s. Google Groups, both an email-list platform and a gateway to Usenet, appeared in 2001.

Email lists can take many forms, ranging from announcement lists to moderated or unmoderated discussion lists. But implicit feudalism governs every major email-list system. Lists have particular admins or moderators, beginning with the list founders and followed by whomever they appoint. Organizations such as universities can oversee the lists they allow on their servers, much as the Big 8 board does for Usenet. But beyond that, email-list software grants list admins full authority over such matters as list membership, posting rights, and documentation about the list's purpose and policies.

The feudal power structure inculcates cultural norms. According to a widely circulated post on a computer-security email list, "Mailing lists should be run as an autocracy with the admins/owners as the rulers and the charter as the law." The author regards the notion of "self-moderation" among users as an "ill-considered and badly implemented mockery of a democratic process [or witch hunt, depending on your perspective]."²⁸ By this account, sure: the autocracy in a well-developed list may have a constitution-like charter that lays out certain rights and responsibilities. But any such feature is extraneous to the software and the power it assigns. If a charter places an obligation on the moderators, only those same moderators can enforce it. This is by design, in order to protect the administrators of the servers on which the software runs and their bosses who own those servers. Feudalism, once again, is a practical outgrowth of underlying conditions.

Concurrent with the development of asynchronous discussion spaces were more synchronous community tools, which fall under the general rubric of "chat." These date, for instance, to features in the educational PLATO system that gained traction in the early 1970s.²⁹ One of the most important, persistent examples is the Internet Relay Chat protocol, or IRC, first developed in 1988; in addition to its widespread use among technologists and hobbyists of various stripes, IRC prefigured many aspects of more recent, centralized, and commercial chat platforms like Slack, down to its channels marked with a hash symbol.

The organizational structure of IRC resembles that of Usenet, with networks of independently operated servers providing access to a shared set of resources.³⁰ IRC gave rise to a system of network operators and channel operators, or chanops, the latter of which have moderation privileges over particular chat rooms akin to those of sysops and email-list admins—setting basic rules and enforcing them by removing users. Although in principle anyone can create a new network or a channel on a public network, in practice most IRC activity occurs among a small number of the largest networks. Channels with iconic names tend to become canonical, making exit rarely feasible; quilters will always

drift to #quilters, regardless of its moderators' track records. Within channels, IRC permits the additional possibility of bots, or software-defined users that assist operators in tasks useful for an always-on, synchronous system—ranging from issuing reminders about a channel's topic and rules, enforcing those rules, or even merely staying in a channel to prevent another user from claiming control over it. These bots presaged aspects of more sophisticated algorithmic governance in the implicit feudalism to come.

Beneath all the early networks were the flows of power in computer systems themselves. The networks reiterated the structure of their technical substrates. The design of UNIX-style operating systems, for example, prioritizes the pursuit of modular neutrality, which media scholar Tara McPherson likens to the social systems that perpetuate racism through the intentional blindness of compartmentalization.³¹ All user permissions derive from those granted through the “root” user—a professional administrator if it is a corporate system or else simply the computer's owner. Tools such as the popular database software MySQL use the language of “master” and “slave” to describe relationships in the software.³² When machines turned into servers on a network, the root-master monarchy became the networks' politics. As people began to make communities on these networks, creating and producing on them, the computer's way of granting power through permissions became the default social order.

Contributors: Commons-Based Software and Wikipedia

An often-celebrated source of democratic promise in internet culture is what Yochai Benkler dubbed “commons-based peer production”:³³ users coming together online as peers to collaborate on projects. Especially remarkable is how the Free Software and Open Source movements—which I will refer to collectively as *open source*—produce billions of dollars' worth of software each year that anyone can freely access and modify. The success of projects such as the Linux kernel and Wikipedia indicate that peer production is capable of producing scalable, reliable infrastructure. Yet democracy is only occasionally part of the process.

The Linux governance model centers around founder Linus Torvalds, who wrote the first version of the software while still a student in 1991. He is popularly referred to as the project's “benevolent dictator for life,” or BDFL.³⁴ In theory, anyone can contribute code to Linux, but Torvalds holds ultimate power over what ends up in the releases. Notwithstanding a 2018 sabbatical “to learn how to stop being an asshole,” as one journalist put it,³⁵ he has remained in power all along. His role in perhaps the most influential open-source software project is indicative of how implicit feudalism has helped produce a culture of explicit dictatorship. This occurred more as a result of omission than ideology. Most open-source communities have avoided explicit governance, regarding it as a distraction from writing code. The result was a cascade of power vacuums, which implicit feudalism stood ready to fill.

Git is the version-control software that Torvalds first built in 2005 to manage the development of Linux. It enables developers to track revisions in a project and integrate the changes from many contributors. It has since become the ubiquitous collaboration tool for open-source projects. On its own, Git seems to break the norm of implicit feudalism. No one developer's version is intrinsically canonical, so every user becomes in some sense an admin, a first-class citizen. But this means that Git leaves a power vacuum. Developers must eventually choose a canonical version of the code to be the basis of any official release. Somehow they need to fill the vacuum and decide which version to publish. Torvalds filled the vacuum for Linux with his BDFL status—quite simply, he decides which version is canonical and which community contributions it includes. Linux and many other projects employ email lists for the discussion and decision-making. The implicit feudalism of the list supplies the politics that Git lacks. Whoever controls the list controls the software.

Today, Git is most widely used through hosted platforms, particularly GitHub, a commercial service that Microsoft purchased in 2018 for \$7.5 billion. GitHub embeds Git into a social network that fills the Git power vacuum. A familiar access and permissions system identifies “owner” and “collaborator” roles for any project. The creator of a new project begins as its owner and remains so until assigning someone else to that role and relinquishing it. External users can also “fork” a copy of the project, edit it, and either submit their changes back to the original or attempt to release a competing version. Exit is therefore at least in theory possible, and users can make their voices heard by posting in discussion threads called “Issues.” But the effective voice lies with the owner and the owner's delegates. Unlike Git on its own, GitHub establishes a canonical version of the code for any given project, managed by its permissions system. GitHub fuses Git with a feudal governance model.

Widespread abuses of power in open source—for instance, Linus Torvalds's notoriously rude treatment of developers—helped give rise to codes of conduct for software projects that seek to limit the scope of acceptable behavior and specify the responsibilities of admins.³⁶ At first, leaders of prominent software communities rejected the idea that more explicit rules were necessary, but the persistence of developers like Coraline Ada Ehmke forced projects to recognize that power vacuums were not acceptable, particularly as cases of sexual harassment mounted.³⁷ Linux itself has adopted Ehmke's now-popular code of conduct, the Contributor Covenant, and GitHub encourages project owners to adopt a code of conduct as well. Using a code of conduct on the platform, however, depends on the project owner's willingness to adopt, abide by, and enforce it.

Less feudal approaches are evidently possible. The Debian Project, which produces an important Linux-based operating system, self-governs as a kind of liberal democracy.³⁸ Its Debian Constitution specifies procedures including the election of a “project leader” by Debian's developers. Skilled developers join the

organization through a detailed and meritocratic on-boarding process. But in its formal republicanism, Debian has been mainly an outlier. Much commons-based software development occurs under the power of a particular benevolent dictator or a hierarchical company.³⁹ Democratic arrangements appear only occasionally, usually among more developed software communities such as Debian and the Apache Software Foundation, whose developer-members elect their nonprofit organization's board. Apache has a rule for its hosted projects: "No dictators or corporate overlords are allowed."⁴⁰ Perhaps it helps that both Debian and Apache operate on a nonprofit basis, rather than being beholden to corporate imperatives, although Linux operates through a nonprofit foundation, too.

In perhaps the most famous example of online peer production, the nonprofit encyclopedia Wikipedia operates through a sophisticated system of self-governance among active volunteers. Wikipedia also possesses a benevolent dictator in the person of founder Jimmy Wales, who prefers the metaphor of "constitutional monarch."⁴¹ Wales oversees a complex of tiered roles, open participation, and electioneering from a "founder's seat" on the Wikimedia Foundation board, although his powers have diminished over time after several cases of overreach.⁴² Any user, in principle, can ascend the ranks of influence and position—holding such roles as "administrator," "steward," and "bureaucrat." Users are elected to these roles by their peers. The outlier on English Wikipedia is the role known as "Jimmy Wales." According to the website's documentation, "Jimmy Wales holds a special role in the governance of the English Wikipedia, due to the central and vital stake he had in its founding. This authority is used on an ad hoc basis, when other decision-making structures are inadequate or have failed in a particular situation."⁴³

One of the "Five Pillars" of Wikipedia is that "Wikipedia has no firm rules," but contributors have assembled a formidable assortment of policies on dozens of subjects. Aside from some external email and chat forums, most of the platform's governance occurs on the editable pages of Wikipedia itself, formatted according to certain norms. It is a remarkable instance of "eating your own dog food"—an organization using its product in the process of making that same product. Wikipedia's governance also exemplifies how much extra work it can take to depart from the dominant pattern of implicit feudalism.

The open-source software underlying Wikipedia, MediaWiki, is in principle available for others seeking to replicate the famous encyclopedia's success. However, without long-cultivated norms around the use of "Talk" pages and a complex system of permissions and roles, the software itself offers little in the way of democratic tooling. Like most Web-based platforms, a new deployment of MediaWiki grants privileges solely and completely to its administrator. It is not therefore surprising that in a study of 683 MediaWiki-based deployments on the commercial platform Wikia, most use cases tend toward oligarchic governance.⁴⁴ Without Wikipedia's deliberate cultivation of democratic and bureaucratic process,

the software facilitates a long tail of feudalism. Governance on Wikipedia itself has drifted toward less inclusivity and dynamism over time.⁴⁵

In principle, the power vacuums that software designs leave open could allow for diversity and healthy self-governance. But as feminist activist and scholar Jo Freeman famously observed, a “tyranny of structurelessness” frequently arises—one in which the absence of an explicit hierarchy in a system results in an hidden, difficult-to-alter hierarchy imported from external social forces.⁴⁶ Freeman’s essay, first written for feminist “rap groups” of the early 1970s, has found an afterlife among those in tech culture who recognize tyrannies of structurelessness around them. As Zeynep Tufekci puts it, “The tyranny of structurelessness has merged with the tyranny of platforms.”⁴⁷ If groups do not develop intentional “democratic structuring,” Freeman argued, informal power structures will form, usually reinforcing existing hierarchies and privilege. The notion that “anyone” can contribute to and even co-govern an open-source project—a notion sometimes referred to as “do-ocracy”⁴⁸—fails to recognize that not everyone is equally equipped with the free time, knowledge, and incentives to participate. Power vacuums can produce the most entrenched feudalism of all. Among the “base assumptions” of the San Francisco feminist hackerspace Double Union is that “meritocracy is a joke.”⁴⁹

The Rise of Platforms

As Facebook’s public relations apparatus was beginning to come to terms with the platform’s contested role in the 2016 US election, Mark Zuckerberg issued a lengthy essay called “Building Global Community.” In it, he indicated a turn toward emphasizing “meaningful groups” over the user-curated political news that was making Facebook notorious. Recognizing the limits of the company’s regulatory capacity, he mused about the opportunity to “explore examples of how community governance might work at scale.” The essay contains various nods to US political pieties, including a quotation from Abraham Lincoln; at the time, some observers speculated that Zuckerberg might be considering a run for the presidency.⁵⁰

At least from a technical perspective, the rise of globe-spanning corporate networks presented an opportunity for departing from implicit feudalism. No longer was a community’s virtual space sitting in somebody’s house or on a university server; now, the infrastructure was in the hands of companies that described their product as “platforms.” The term bears a claim to neutrality, to simply providing an empty stage for users to fill.⁵¹ Seemingly, the platforms created a new layer of abstraction: compared to earlier systems, communities form at a greater remove from the servers. In 1996, the US Congress passed the Communications Decency Act, whose Section 230 protected platforms from most liability for user behavior.⁵² The companies could control the platform layer, while enabling communities to govern however they liked. Yet implicit feudalism persisted, even as platform founders preached democracy.

Facebook is the world's largest private social-media network, with around 3 billion active users. It has enabled communities to form with its Groups feature since 2005, the year after the website first appeared. Reddit also began in 2005, and by 2008 the social-news platform came to be organized around user-created and user-governed groups known as "subreddits." Reddit's active-user population is an order of magnitude smaller than that of Facebook, which still places it among the top ten US networks. In many respects, the two platforms are quite different; Facebook emphasizes users' "real names" and mutual connections, while Reddit tends to rely on individualized, pseudonymous identities marked with reputation-based "karma." Both enable significant degrees of local control among user communities, in distinct ways. They have become spaces of tremendous creativity and democratic practice. Nevertheless, both adopt and further advance the pattern of implicit feudalism inherited from earlier networks like BBSes and email lists, despite lacking many of their predecessors' technological constraints.

Why do feudal defaults persist on large platforms? A Facebook Group doesn't reside in its creator's house. A subreddit doesn't consume the computing resources of its moderators, only that of Reddit itself. It is no longer so obvious that the founder of a community should have dictatorial say over it. The norms and design elements of implicit feudalism are no longer a matter of technical necessity. But they became a business model.

Managing online communities can be hard, thankless work, involving negotiations with an often tiny minority of disruptive users and reviewing potentially traumatic content so that others don't have to.⁵³ One of the first large commercial platforms, America Online, began appointing "community leaders" in the early 1990s to moderate its chat rooms and message boards in exchange for reduced cost of access, providing compensation for what was generally perceived as volunteering. But some of these people recognized that their efforts were generating real profits for the company and began to protest; the program drew scrutiny from the Department of Labor as under-compensated work.⁵⁴ Since then, platforms have avoided such gray-area compensation. Instead, the allure of implicit feudalism has served as another kind of compensation to incentivize the labor of community management. Rather than criminally low wages, platforms offer moderators the perk of unchecked power.⁵⁵

An exception that proves the rule among social platforms is Slashdot, an early social-news website with a tech-savvy user-base. As Slashdot grew during the late 1990s, it developed a complex system of moderation (and "metamoderation") based on a "karma" score—the term Reddit would later adopt.⁵⁶ As users accrued karma from other users, they gained the power to moderate and evaluate others' moderation decisions, producing a basically functional, Wikipedia-like culture of responsible voluntarism. Reputation became a kind of compensation. Slashdot thus employed a fluid system of mutual endorsement rather than a Debian-style electoral republic, but it similarly showed that an open, dynamic system of user

empowerment could manage the content on a large platform in ways that generally satisfied its users. Perhaps such a model was even too responsible, failing to produce the kind of provocation and engagement that commercial social networks thrive on.

One mechanism of apparent self-governance that appears in both Facebook and Reddit is the ability for non-moderator users to evaluate fellow users' posts—on Facebook with the Like button and its various affective sub-options and on Reddit with “upvotes” and “downvotes.” These tools allow users to mutually decide which content is more worth each other's attention and thus which should rise to the top of the group's feed. The platforms also allow users to add comments, which have amplifying effects as well. But the most definitive powers of amplification (elevating messages to the top of a group's feed) and sanction (ejecting posts and users) are reserved for those with administrative roles, who gain their authority by appointment and succession deriving from the group's founder. Interviews with admins on both platforms reveal that they rarely consult with non-admins on decisions about how to use these powers. Ordinary users' evaluative tools thus seem to operate as assists on behalf of admins, as well as the companies' business interests, more than as a means of shared governance.⁵⁷ The strongest form of effective voice for ordinary users remains that of exit: to leave a given Facebook Group or subreddit for another or to start a new one.

Facebook and Reddit implement advances in implicit feudalism over earlier paradigms. For instance, rather than merely offering blank text fields for rule-making, as in MediaWiki and GitHub, these platforms have developed structured rule-making interfaces for group admins. Artificial intelligence tools, such as Facebook's “false news” detector and Reddit's programmable AutoModerator,⁵⁸ offer to streamline the labor of moderating content. Analytics dashboards present admins with detailed reports on the activity of their groups, in effect gamifying the admin role toward maximizing user usage. Such tools add to the panopticism and potency of implicit feudalism's repertoire.

Feudal community governance has become a norm in the governance of platform companies themselves. This is most evident in the power Mark Zuckerberg retains over Facebook through its dual-class stock structure. To extend the metaphor of feudalism: if admins are ladies and lords, Zuckerberg acts as a monarch, who holds similarly absolutist powers over the rules by which his nobles operate, even without appearing to interfere in their fiefdoms directly. Zuckerberg also rebuffs shareholder proposals to put constraints on his authority. Yet Facebook has meanwhile engaged in “democracy theatre,” such as its 2009 user referendum on proposed changes to its terms of service.⁵⁹ For users' votes to be binding, the company stipulated that 30 percent of its over 1 billion users at the time would need to participate—a scale equivalent to the entire US population. As one might expect for an unprecedented process on a decision about complex legal language, well under a single percentage point of the quorum was reached.

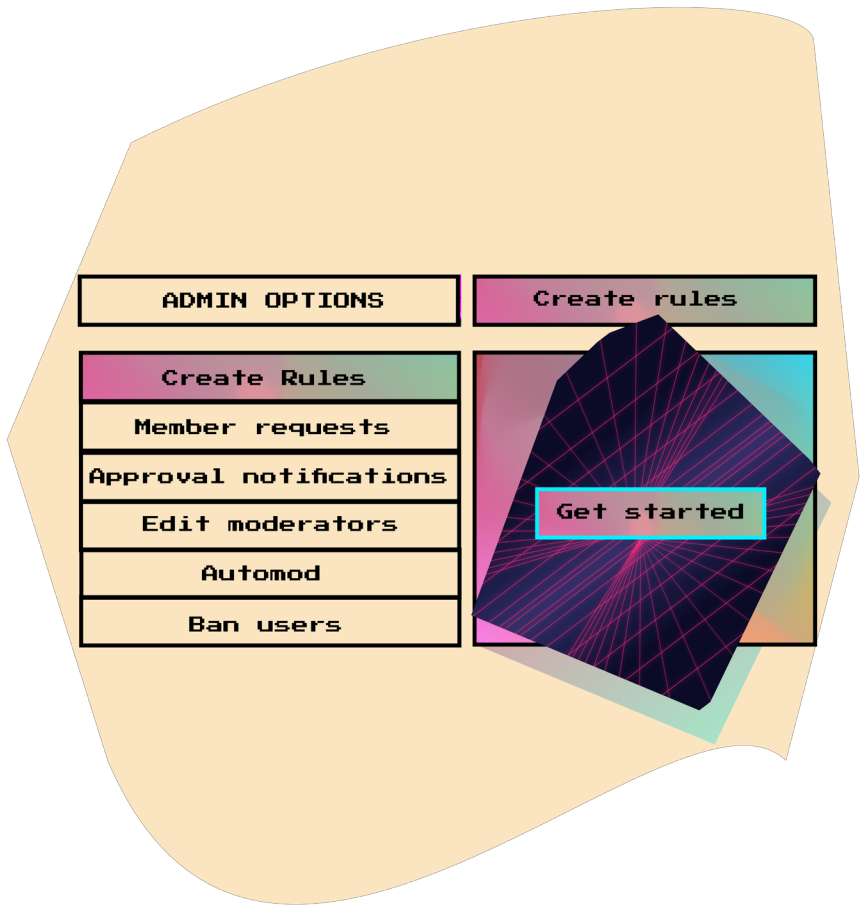


FIGURE 3.

The company shrugged, called the vote “advisory,” and proceeded with the rule change as it saw fit.

Reddit’s corporate edifice has had its own brushes with a kind of democracy, such as in the 2015 “Reddit revolt,” when moderators galvanized by crackdowns on toxic behavior during the Gamergate controversy turned on the company. They switched their subreddits to private en masse, resulting in a widespread blackout of the platform’s content and the resignation of interim CEO Ellen Pao. With the victory, however, came heightened enforcement of site-wide policies that brought about more conformity between the platform’s policies and moderator policies at the subreddit level.⁶⁰ The moderators can lord over their fiefdoms, but they face consequences if they try to band together against the monarchy.

Conway’s Law is a celebrated truism in software development: technical systems tend to resemble the communication structures of the organizations that create

them.⁶¹ Among companies like Facebook and Reddit, the influence has seemed to go the other way. The communication structures of technical systems informed what seemed plausible and practical for the architecture of corporations. Implicit feudalism made its way from the server permissions and the online community to the boardroom.

The centrality of implicit feudalism to online experience has at times wavered, only to return again. In a follow-up missive to “Building Global Community,” Zuckerberg pivoted from a vision of Facebook as a community-oriented “meaningful” space to that of a “privacy-focused” platform for private chat and “intimate” group exchanges.⁶² It was a retreat from his aspirations two years earlier for “global community.” Already, Facebook-acquired platforms WhatsApp and Instagram were making gains against the company’s namesake product. The photo-sharing app Instagram did not initially enable persistent groups; WhatsApp permits them within the logic of chat, as opposed to Facebook’s forum-like threaded discussions. Zuckerberg appeared to be learning from China-based WeChat and TikTok in enshrining networked individuals rather than a network of communities as the rubric for platform society. TikTok in particular has shown the possibility of targeted advertising based on personal viewing habits alone, without need for a social graph.⁶³ This shift trades feudalism—which presumes community, however hierarchical—for platform-mediated experiences, apparently detached from any particular kind of politics. But politics seemed likely to return with Zuckerberg’s next pivot in renaming the company as Meta, proposing to provide the infrastructure for entire immersive worlds. Meanwhile, ascendant community platforms such as Slack and Discord explicitly imitate the social software that gave rise to implicit feudalism—down to the “#” marking channel names following IRC and Discord’s “server” nomenclature for its virtual groups. As corporate teams and mutual-aid activists alike adopt these tools as the basis of their organizing, feudal designs continue to grow in influence.

FEUDAL DEFAULTS AND THE POSSIBILITY OF VOICE

Implicit feudalism has reigned over the dominant platforms for online communities so far, from the early BBSes to Discord. Peer-production practices surrounding open-source software and crowdsourcing also exhibit it. In summary, implicit feudalism’s recurrent characteristics include

- control over communities residing in an individual or a small group,
- authority deriving from founders and their appointed successors,
- opacity of policymaking and decision-making processes,
- suppression of user voice as a basic privilege of authority,
- user exit as the most forceful means of dissent, and
- sole recourse to platform owners in disputes.

While these made a specific kind of sense in the context of a BBS running in a sysop's home, that is not necessarily the case in the context of a global, multibillion-user platform like Facebook. One can just as easily imagine implicit democracy operating there as implicit feudalism. Yet the feudal pattern has by and large been written into the default behaviors of online-community platforms. Feudal powers became part of the business model, incentivizing the unpaid labor of moderation and community building. Some communities, like Debian and Slashdot, have bucked the trend and painstakingly crafted more democratic processes. But most seem to have simply gotten used to feudalism, developing their cultures and expectations around it.

Under this regime, the possibilities for community governance are constrained. Opportunities for affective voice enable users to feel heard enough to impart a fleeting satisfaction, but those opportunities rarely include the force of effective power. As anthropologist Christopher Kelty puts it, in twenty-first century digital cultures, "participation is more often a formatted procedure by which autonomous individuals attempt to reach calculated consensus, or one in which they experience an attenuated, temporary feeling of personal contribution that ends almost as soon as it begins."⁶⁴

Governance defaults in offline domains present an instructive contrast. Even quite autocratic governments at least carry out performances of democratic institutions, such as elections and judicial oversight, because those practices have come to stand as prerequisites for legitimate authority. Regulators expect public corporations and nonprofit organizations to have governing boards that represent specific stakeholders—generally shareholders and donors—together with certain transparency requirements. Civil-society organizations such as industry associations and fraternal societies often practice at least a semblance of choosing leaders by a ballot among members. Although these mechanisms of offline participatory governance can mask oligarchy or autocracy in practice, their ubiquity makes it striking that no major online community software platform offers purpose-built features to support them. Adopting conventional democratic mechanisms online requires working intentionally and persistently against the grain of implicit feudalism.

The fact that implicit feudalism is so ubiquitous does not necessarily justify its ubiquity. It is not uniquely effective for building communities. The number of subreddits with only a handful of subscribers far exceeds those that have attracted large followings. A study of user-run servers for the game *Minecraft*—a technical arrangement that resembles a BBS of old—found that the median lifetime of a server is eight weeks, and more than half of admins never recruit any committed community members.⁶⁵ High failure rates may not be a bad thing; online communities are relatively low-risk environments, with minimal startup costs and minimal consequences of demise. But users do not have a high opinion of moderation on the dominant platforms.⁶⁶ There would likely be benefits to greater

institutional diversity,⁶⁷ including community-centered, democratic mechanisms. Albert O. Hirschman predicted that while exit-based organizational designs excel in producing variety, choice, and innovation, voice-based designs confer greater commitment and stability. A study of the GameCenter online community, for instance, observed that when the platform's "benevolent dictator" became less active over time, subgroups developed unexpected resilience.⁶⁸

Debian and Wikipedia do not exist in isolation. They act in concert with different kinds of regimes, playing distinct and complementary roles. Hirschman's exit-voice framework predicts that different institutional logics will serve different purposes, often in concert; they are not substitutes for each other. Simply replacing feudal governance with democratic governance anywhere and everywhere could create as many problems as it solves. Instead, the exceptional cases considered here reflect conditions of institutional diversity. That diversity takes several forms.

One form is onion-like. Debian, for instance, is not a standalone operating system; it holds a particular location in a layered ecosystem. The Linux kernel, with its rigid dictatorship, lies at the center. Debian holds a critical middle space, with its democracy enabling a slow but inclusive development process that supports even older machines with limited commercial value. Above Debian sits Ubuntu, a popular operating system supported by a for-profit company, Canonical, whose founder and CEO Mark Shuttleworth uses the online handle *sabdf1*, or "self-appointed benevolent dictator for life." Ubuntu benefits from the inclusiveness of Debian but funnels it into a more streamlined operating system with a faster release cycle.

Participatory self-governance appears to flourish at certain niches in the software supply chain, but it may not be as well suited for others. It appears to be more likely to emerge under organizations like nonprofits or user-owned cooperatives. Already we see, from BBSes to Facebook, and in nonprofit-owned projects like Debian and Wikipedia, that community governance tends to mirror the underlying platforms' ownership structures, along with their technical infrastructures.

A second form of diversity is the combination of different power structures into one—the idea of "mixed constitution," argued for in antiquity and adopted as a "separation of powers" by the authors of the US Constitution.⁶⁹ Both Debian and Wikipedia combine electoral processes with meritocratic barriers in order to ensure that leaders are not just popular but exhibit a high level of expertise. Usenet combines some aspects of shared governance in its board with considerable autonomy among the newsgroups. Integrating multiple governance mechanisms not only helps prevent any one entity from becoming too powerful, but it enables participants with heterogeneous skill sets to make their voices heard. Some users might bring technical skills, while others bring social skills, and they may each need their own pathways for finding effective voice in their shared community.

Thirdly, governance diversity can unfold over time. The community that produces the Python programming language had a benevolent dictator, Guido van Rossum, for almost thirty years. When van Rossum abruptly resigned from the role in 2018, Python developers undertook a process to find a new governance model.⁷⁰ They proposed a staggering set of possibilities, ranging from a new dictatorship to utter structurelessness, along with various boutique systems for tabulating votes. For a community of designers, it was a feast. This process was possible, in no small part, because the developers had a social infrastructure that mitigated the inertia of implicit feudalism: the Python Enhancement Proposal system, set of processes and tools designed for proposing and adopting changes to the programming language. As a system the community perceived as both familiar and legitimate, it helped fill the power vacuum and ushered the community from a radically divergent range of possibilities to a rather sensible, conventional result: the adoption of an elected, five-person “steering council.” Without the benefit of existing decision-making practices, the habit of monarchy might have persisted, or something even less sensible might have replaced it.

For Python the end of feudalism took decades, plus a sudden disruption. That need not be the fate of others. Feudal patterns have their usefulness in certain times and places, but that does not mean they should be as ubiquitous as they have become.

“THESE TOOLS ARE OFTEN BLUNT AND SENSELESS”

The more I have learned to notice implicit feudalism, the more I see its effects. A person I have known online and off, someone I long considered a mentor, came under criticism for speech and behavior that many of us in his community objected to. Call him Miguel, though that is not his name. As Miguel experienced pushback, hostility, and lost work opportunities, he named the problem as “cancel culture.” This is a label of reaction, an anxiety voiced most often among cultural elites about the threat of being “canceled”—co-opting language that began as vernacular for mass shunning on Black Twitter.⁷¹ Miguel shared heartfelt and frustrated tales of injustice. I agreed with his critics, for the most part, and at times did so publicly. But when a letter circulated calling for “disassociation,” I couldn’t sign it.

What does disassociation mean? It is no clearer than canceling. Canceling is at least a playful reference to ill-fated TV shows, not a letter that you are asked to sign. How long would disassociation last, and how completely must it be performed? Could I still ask Miguel about his family from time to time, or cite the work of his that still informs mine? What if he somehow repented? There was no specified pathway to reconciliation or repair. This, I realized, was in keeping with how online life had taught us to self-organize: to rally in excess, to engage to the

max, with none of the precision or specificity that stakeholders with actual power expect of each other. This is affective voice without effective voice. There was no dispute-resolution system to turn to, no way of challenging Miguel's admin status across multiple social-media spaces where his community gathered. As he protested about cancellation, he habitually removed his critics from those spaces, while they had no such recourse themselves. Some simply left on their own, but that meant leaving a community that had mattered to them. Ironically, these were communities devoted to the practice of co-governing shared resources. But the practical politics that the commercial platforms inscribed in them was feudalism.

In her book *We Will Not Cancel Us*, adrienne maree brown observes the temptation and futility of the call-out practices that have become so endemic online: "Right now calling someone out online seems like first/only option for a lot of people in the face of any kind of dissonance." She goes on: "The tools of swift and predatory justice feel good to use, familiar, groove in the hand easily from repeated use and training, briefly satisfying. But these tools are often blunt and senseless."⁷²

Anxieties about cancel culture should instead be anxieties about the fact that there is no better recourse, that people feel powerless to address conflict in a proportionate, deliberate way. We couldn't just vote Miguel out and thank him for his service, or submit a complaint to a mediation process. To the extent that cancel culture has become a term of derision, perhaps the blame should fall not on the crowds for their excesses but on the systems that leave them little choice.

I have argued that implicit feudalism has become a nearly ubiquitous pattern embedded into the software for online communities, to the point that even apparent exceptions prove the rule. Implicitly feudal designs incline communities, like dark patterns, toward the iron law of oligarchy. These designs have specific, sensible historical origins but unnecessary persistence. Meanwhile, implicit feudalism has initiated users into a willingness to accept the exit logic and affective voice of their online fiefdoms without the effective voice of democratic participation. Perhaps the drift toward oligarchy would not be such an iron law without feudal software nudging us that way.

Recognizing implicit feudalism can have explanatory virtues. Whitney Phillips, for instance, came to recognize her study of online trolling as "a critique of dominant institutions" as much as of "the trolls who operate within them";⁷³ as with cancel culture, bad behavior may become worse in the absence of infrastructures for accountability. What other aspects of online life arise from that absence?

Implicit feudalism doesn't just lurk in the software; it reflects, expresses, and promulgates certain kinds of political habits. These habits began in spaces that appeared merely virtual, ancillary to the real politics happening in real life. But the politics of everyday online life has spread beyond the screens because it was never really contained there in the first place.

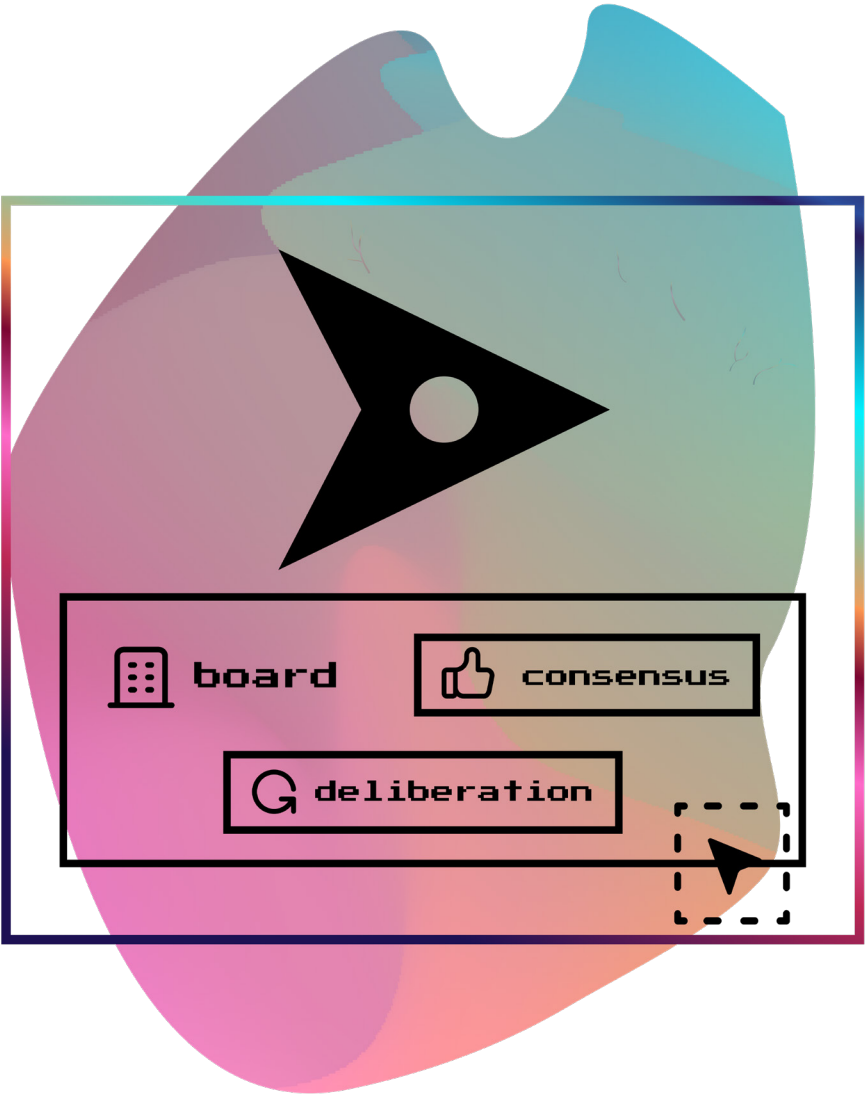


FIGURE 4.

PROFILE

CommunityRule

communityrule.info

Having shared rules in a group is important. They help members know when a decision is really a decision. When conflicts arise and people's relationships alone aren't enough to handle them, it helps to have a clear process for what to do. But traditional bylaws are too formal—and even too expensive to produce if lawyers get involved—for most online communities.

CommunityRule is a Web app that allows users to design their communities' rules interactively. We developed it, first, through a series of consultations with mutual aid groups that formed during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as with open-source software communities. These helped inform our designs, and we tried to help the groups think through their processes as well.

The first version of CommunityRule was simply a series of questions that users could answer, in writing, about how their community should work. The current version enables dragging and dropping governance modules and nesting them inside each other. Modules can be configured and customized.

CommunityRule enables users to publish their rules to a public library where others can learn from them. Rules in the library can be forked—copied and modified as new rules. We have also developed a set of simple templates, reflecting several basic organizational designs, that rule authors can use as a starting point. After noticing that users found these templates useful, in 2021 we published a set of them in a free print and online booklet.

Implicit feudalism thrives on an absence of rules; admin power fills the void. More democratic communities need ways to describe the rules they want to use. CommunityRule is an attempt to imagine interfaces that make governance arrangements easy to design and understand.