Designing Community Self-Governance with CommunityRule

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CommunityRule is a simple web application designed to facilitate the authoring, sharing, and evolving of group governance structures. This position paper outlines the rationale and early experience of its development.

1 MOTIVATION

For all the hopes and claims about the democratizing power of the Internet, it is remarkable how poorly equipped the tools for online community are for facilitating democratic governance. This paper describes one attempt to change that: a simple Web application called CommunityRule.

I have been involved in supporting the development of democratic, cooperative ownership over online platforms, starting especially with calls for "platform cooperativism" in 2014 [5]. Founders of co-op startups need appropriate technologies for facilitating democratic governance, and they soon discover the inadequacy of available tools. I experienced this problem firsthand, for instance, in what should have been the straightforward job of moderating a 500-person discussion list for the platform co-op community. In attempting to address an issue with an a controversial list-member, it became clear that the standard email-list software we were using had no mechanisms for democratic decision-making. As a list owner, I had all the power to remove and silence members. That was the default, as it is in nearly all software for online communities. If we wanted to practice democracy of some sort, we would have to figure that out ourselves, against the grain of the software.

This experience absorbed time and emotional energy that seemed far beyond what the issue at hand deserved. It also set me on a research agenda around the absences of democratic infrastructure available to online communities. I have since explored the history of what I came to call the "implicit feudalism" of online community software—those absolutist defaults I encountered on the email list [2]. For online peer-production communities in particular, such as those producing open-source software, I have sought to more clearly diagnose the "tyranny of structurelessness" that so often reigns in the power vacuums that implicit feudalism exposes [4]. I explored exceptions like Wikipedia, whose democratic processes were largely extraneous to the affordances of its MediaWiki software, and Python, which was able to replace its longtime "benevolent dictator" with an elected board by repurposing its bespoke system for proposing code revisions. The exceptions, as remarkable as they were, proved the rule of the feudal default.

The problem with the mailing list became resolvable when, essentially by fiat, I and the other administrators adopted the Contributor Covenant, a code of conduct used in many open-source projects. It outlined a process by which we were able to remove the offending member. In order to ratify the decision, we improvised a vote through a online form. We still did not really have a system for making decisions, or choosing decision-makers, but I was impressed with how the brief Contributor Covenant helped us solve a problem that was otherwise vexing. It made me wonder whether other plug-and-play governance tools might help communities find their way to democratic accountability more easily and quickly than Wikipedia and Python.

2 INITIATION

My explorations in online governance led me into a nascent research collaboration called the Metagovernance Project. I began meeting others who saw the same problem as I had stumbled into. Some were working in the realm of blockchain design, others in multiplayer games. Some were developing prototypes like PolicyKit, which uses APIs to add decision-making tools to popular platforms such as Reddit and Slack [6]. Several of us crafted an ambitious proposal for what we called Modular Politics, a "governance layer for the Internet" that would enable users across platforms to design, share, and connect their various mechanisms for self-determination. We hoped that, by creating a shared standard for governance processes, users would be able to rapidly accelerate their innovations and expand their imaginations around the practice of democracy. But implementing what we envisioned would be a heavy lift. I grew impatient, and I began building a prototype of my own.

CommunityRule is an effort to create a glimpse of Modular Politics in action—a means of authoring and sharing governance practices across communities. I built an app at communityrule.info that included:

- A Create tool enabling users to outline basic governance processes for their community
- A public library of user-generated Rules that users could "fork" and modify into a Rule of their own
- A Markdown export tool to facilitate importing a Rule into a software project's Git repository
- A set of pre-written, editable templates, based on common practices in informal communities

My hope was to do for structures of power and decision-making what the Contributor Covenant did for clarifying expectations of participant conduct: put sensible processes closer at hand. Unlike the vision for Modular Politics, CommunityRule does not automate governance processes such as elections or referendums; it would require communities to figure out how to implement their Rules. I hoped, however, that giving users the experience of designing and sharing their processes in natural language would whet their appetites for more sophisticated tooling.

3 EXPERIMENTATION

In the spring and summer of 2020, CommunityRule became a project of my Media Enterprise Design Lab (MEDLab) at the University of Colorado Boulder. We began introducing it to two main types of communities: open-source software projects [3] and mutual-aid networks that had arisen out of the Covid-19 pandemic [1]. For instance, CommunityRule was used to guide a "Governance Readiness Working Group" for Sustain Open Source Software, and our lab conducted national webinars for the Mutual Aid Hub network. The Contributor Covenant project added a CommunityRule-authored GOVERNANCE.md file in its GitHub repository.

The original version of the platform was entirely text-based. The Create tool presented the user with a set of questions, each under one of five headers. The user was to respond to the question in complete sentences, as in the published version the questions would disappear. (Users often did not do this.) Several dozen Rules appeared on the Library,
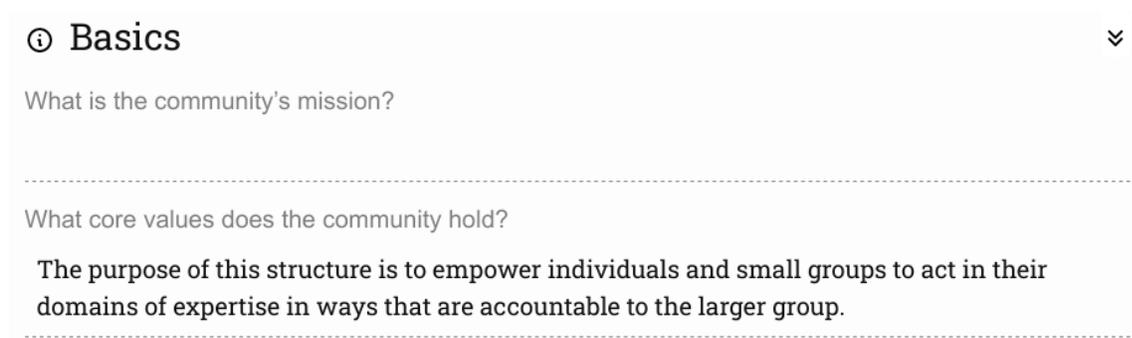
Fig. 1. The text-based Create tool.

most of them not instigated by MEDLab. In private meetings with mutual-aid groups, we used the Create tool as a questionnaire to guide the conversation.

Later in the summer, encouraged by collaborators in the Metagovernance Project, I developed a visual editor as part of the Create tool—potentially in order to replace the text-based questions. Now, in addition to answering questions, users could drag-and-drop pre-specified modules of governance practices (e.g., Judiciary, Proportional Representation, Ritual), or custom ones, and specify what they mean in context. These modules could be nested in each other. The modules link to explanatory pages. As with the text-based version, the results could be published to the Library or exported as a Markdown file.

To date, no user-generated module-based Rule has been published to the Library without my instigation. Although I find the module-based authoring process easier, it appears that others may not, and I have not yet conducted any systematic study on the matter.

The results of MEDLab's outreach efforts remain unclear as well. The response from both mutual-aid and open-source communities has been mixed—a few enthusiastic individuals combined with general lukewarmness. Of the two mutual-aid groups that filled out our questionnaire, both expressed maximum (5/5) willingness to recommend the tool to others. But while CommunityRule has been a compelling exploration for me, I don't believe it is yet equipped to fill the governance vacuum among online communities—if I am correct in that diagnosis in the first place.

4 ITERATION

The direction of future work on CommunityRule is not obvious to me. I would like to develop the module-based editor to the point that it can fully replace the text-based editor, and I would like to have a more interactive tool for helping users choose a template with which to begin. I have a long to-do list of glitches.

A further goal is to work toward convergence between CommunityRule and the aforementioned PolicyKit tool, which enables groups to computationally implement decision-making processes in popular community platforms. Perhaps CommunityRule could become an authoring tool that enables users to visually and intuitively design those processes. And perhaps, with the higher stakes of computational enforcement, users might be more enticed by taking part in the art of authoring—and sharing and learning from others.

Despite the middling progress so far with CommunityRule, I persist under the dual assumptions that, first, the governance tooling for online communities is woefully inadequate and, second, better governance tools could facilitate

The 41 Community (Draft)

Shared house - complex sublet to 10 lodgers and guests

- **Ownership** An organization is controlled through rights of possession by one or more owners.
  - **Transparency** Important information is widely available.
  - **Autocracy** One person holds sole decision-making authority over a certain domain.
    - **Consensus** A shared set of agreements underlies all future ones and is harder to change than other agreements.
      - **Delegation** Participants allocate their power to a specific representative for a fixed period or a specified role.

Fig. 2. User-created Rule made with the module editor.

an explosion of innovation in democratic practice. The prospect that these assumptions are true makes me believe that CommunityRule and its ilk are deserving of further development.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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