

RESEARCH · VERIFICATION INFRASTRUCTURE

# Acting in the Cracks: A Note on Verification Infrastructure

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## ***TL;DR***

Public institutions used to be the only place to verify who you are, what you own, and what you've earned. That role is decentralizing, slowly and organically, because the institutions are too big to move at the speed people actually need.

Institutions feel permanent. They aren't. They are recursive routines built by people, dollars, tuition, and time. The community built them. The community can build new ones in their cracks.

This paper says where the cracks are, who is filling them, and how institutions worth saving can be saved by partnering with the people doing the filling.

## **The thing I keep noticing**

Last year I tried to pull a deed for a property I was selling. Standard registry lookup. The county records office had a website. The website routed me to a third-party portal. The portal wanted forty dollars for a document I had the legal right to inspect for free.

I was a licensed real estate professional with two decades of experience. I gave up after twenty minutes.

A normal person on their lunch break has no chance.

That's what an institution looks like when it has been quietly routed around. Not closed. Not failed. Just made unusable by anyone who hasn't already paid a gatekeeper.

I've watched this pattern in five domains over ten years.

## Hegemony, plainly

The reason the routing-around feels disorienting is that institutions are designed to feel inevitable. That feeling is hegemony, the cultural reflex that mistakes accumulated routine for natural law.

The records office didn't always charge forty dollars for a deed. Someone built that toll. Someone wrote the procurement contract. Someone signed it. Someone collects the fee. None of that was decreed by the universe. It was a sequence of small decisions, accumulated, that now feels like the way things have to be.

It isn't. Institutions are recursive routines. They are built by people, paid for by dollars and tuition and tax revenue, kept running by the cohesion of the communities they serve. Once you see them as constructed, you stop bowing. You start asking which routines work, which don't, and where the cracks are.

This paper is about the cracks.

## Where the institutions are leaking

**Records.** Public access to public records is, in practice, gone. The records exist. The doors don't open without a lawyer or a paid title service.

**Credentials.** A diploma mill used to be a fringe scam. The same model (pay a fee, get a credential, no one checks) has been adopted by entire categories of professional certification. The market didn't kill the scam. It scaled it.

**Identity.** Three or four private platforms now handle most identity verification in this country. Not because the state delegated it. Because the state stopped doing it well enough to compete.

**Reputation.** Online review platforms (Google, Yelp, Zillow agent reviews) have replaced the licensing board as the actual mechanism by which professional reputation is made and lost. The board still issues the license. The platform decides whether anyone hires you.

In every case the institution didn't lose. It was quietly routed around.

An earlier paper of mine on public-private partnerships made the structured-handoff case: when public institutions cannot move at the speed the population requires, the private sector or the community fills the gap, and a formal partnership structures the transition. This paper is about the unstructured version. What happens when the partnership doesn't form, and the community fills the gap anyway.

## The leverage

Most institutional analyses miss this part: institutions are nothing without the community that constitutes them.

Universities exist because students show up and tuition is paid. Licensing boards exist because professionals submit to them. Records offices exist because the public agrees to treat their records as authoritative. The community is not the institution's customer. The community is the institution's substrate.

When the substrate redirects, the institution decays. Not because anyone attacked it. Because the cohesion that held it up has moved.

This is good news. It means the leverage is not in fighting the institution. It is in noticing where the community has already begun walking elsewhere, and helping pave the new path with rigor.

## The desire path

Walk across a university quad and you'll see them. The official sidewalks go around the perimeter. The path worn into the grass goes diagonally across the middle. People are not protesting the sidewalks. They are not lobbying the grounds department. They just have somewhere to be, and the grass is faster.

Some universities eventually pave the desire path. Some don't. The students walk it either way.

That is what is happening to verification infrastructure right now. The official routes still exist. They are slow. They are expensive. They are designed for an era when there were no alternatives. Technology made an alternative cheap, and people are walking the new path because the new path works.

## The bullfighter

The desire path is the passive picture: people walk, ground compacts, paths form. There is also an active picture, and it is worth naming.

The institution is the bull. Bigger. Stronger. Cannot be overpowered.

The operator working in the cracks is the bullfighter. Not the bull's enemy. Not the bull's victim. The dance partner. Finesse comes from familiarity. Familiarity comes from the dance. Done well, the bullfighter harnesses the bull's strength without trying to subdue it. Done badly, the bull wins. Both outcomes are possible. The risk is real.

What this looks like in practice: the operator becomes an exoskeleton. The community originally scaffolded the institution from inside. Over time, accumulated routine pushes the community outside, and the original builders feel like outsiders to the structure they

built. The exoskeleton position is reclaiming the scaffold from outside, adding structural support to the institution from the position of the community that built it in the first place.

Not fighting the bull. Becoming its frame.

## What's filling the cracks

Two things, mostly, sometimes together.

**Technology.** Open APIs, blockchain registries, verifiable credentials, decentralized identifiers. Most of these started as ideology projects. They survived because the underlying functionality turned out to be useful regardless of the ideology. Estonia runs national identity on this infrastructure. Several U.S. states are piloting blockchain land registries. The W3C verifiable credentials standard is being adopted by mainstream universities for diplomas that cannot be falsified. The infrastructure is becoming boring. That is the surest sign it is going to stick.

**Community.** Volunteer networks doing verification work that institutions stopped doing, at speeds and prices the institutions can't match. Open-source mapping has overtaken proprietary maps in many regions. Stack Overflow built a global professional reputation system that hiring managers trust more than degrees in some fields.

The two together form a mesh. The institution is one node. The technology platform is another. The community network is a third. None of them are sufficient alone. Each is load-bearing. The cohesion is what holds the mesh together, and the cohesion comes from the community on every layer.

## Three responses

When an institution leaks and a parallel system rises in its cracks, three responses are possible.

**Resist.** Defend the monopoly. Lobby. Wait. Around year five, discover that the parallel system has accumulated more credibility than the institution has. By then, partnership is no longer offered.

**Compete.** Build a competing version. Rarely works. Institutions are slow and the parallel system is already entrenched.

**Bridge.** Adopt the parallel system's standards. Partner with the community running it. Re-route authority through the new infrastructure. This works. It is also the rarest response, because it requires the institution to admit publicly that something else is doing part of its job better.

The bridge is the consulting practice. It is not advocacy. It is reading the field a few years ahead of the people running the institutions and helping them position before the transition becomes a *fait accompli*.

## Three examples of bridge in practice

A regional historic society partners with a public university to publish its primary records on an open standard. It does not lose authority. It extends authority into the format the next generation of researchers will actually use.

A county recorder's office adopts an open API rather than a single-vendor portal. It does not lose its function. It makes its function relevant for another fifty years.

A credentialing body adopts the W3C verifiable credentials standard. Its diplomas become impossible to falsify, and graduates can carry their credentials anywhere in the world without re-verification. The institution gains relevance. The graduates gain mobility. Everyone wins except the diploma mills.

The pattern generalizes. In every case the move is the same: pave the desire path that the community is already walking.

## The lineage

The pattern is older than the technology. When official institutions stop serving the community that built them, parallel infrastructure shows up. It always has.

George Counts argued in 1932 that public institutions either reform or get replaced, and that the replacement does not wait for the institutions' permission. Myles Horton built the Highlander Folk School the same year, in the Tennessee mountains. Highlander trained Rosa Parks. Highlander trained the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. None of that work happened inside an accredited institution. It happened in a parallel space that took ordinary people and their questions seriously when the official institutions would not.

Highlander was not an attack on the universities. It was the community reclaiming a function the universities had stopped performing: taking ordinary people and their questions seriously enough to do real work with them.

The blockchain registry and the open-API records system are the contemporary descendants of the folk school. Same operation. Different decade.

## The walking

The institutions that mediate proof (of identity, of ownership, of credential, of standing) are entering a long transition. The ones that navigate it well will continue to matter. The ones that do not, won't.

That outcome is structural. The only variable is which side of the line each institution ends up on.

Eduardo Galeano had the right image. The utopia is like the horizon: you take ten steps toward it, and it moves ten steps away. The point of the utopia is that it keeps you walking. Anyone who promises to deliver you to the horizon is selling you something.

Verification is not arriving at a destination. It is decentralizing in slow motion, healing itself in the cracks. The work is to walk with it intelligently, in good company, and to help the institutions worth helping pave the desire paths before everyone else has

finished walking them.

That is the work. That is what acting in the cracks looks like in 2026.

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*Companion essays trace the same operation at smaller scales: [The Pencil Routine](#) at age six, and [The Idea Canopy](#) at the scale of an architecture for a life.*

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## ABOUT THE WRITER

John F. Long writes from Newport County on the South Coast of Massachusetts and Rhode Island. MPA, Roger Williams University. Two years of doctoral coursework in higher education administration at UMass Dartmouth. The practice underneath the writing is real estate ([johnlong.realestate](http://johnlong.realestate)) and

verification infrastructure ([longfamilyarchive.com](http://longfamilyarchive.com)). The writing sits at [johnlong.io](http://johnlong.io) as the canonical surface for the body of work on citizenship and its material preconditions.

The body of work is structured as a quartet of citizenship surveys (time, ground, voice, currency), with [The Periscope](#) as the catalyst essay, [The Map](#) as the compressed survey, [The Absent Presence](#) as the meta-frame, and [Acting in the Cracks](#) as the applied note. The full reading order is at [/the-index](#).

Reader correspondence is welcomed; see [On Correspondence](#).

