



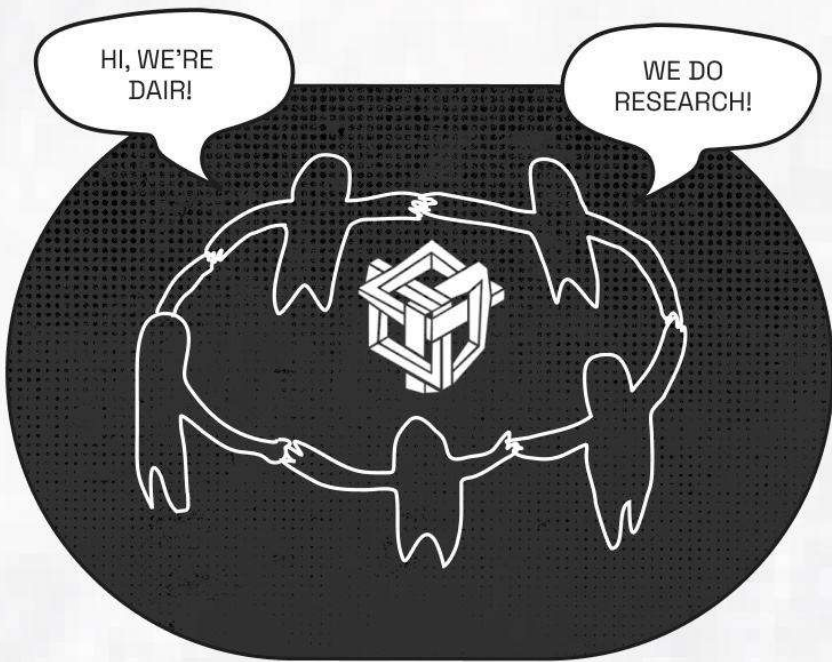
*towards
truly
community
centered
research*

OUR RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY

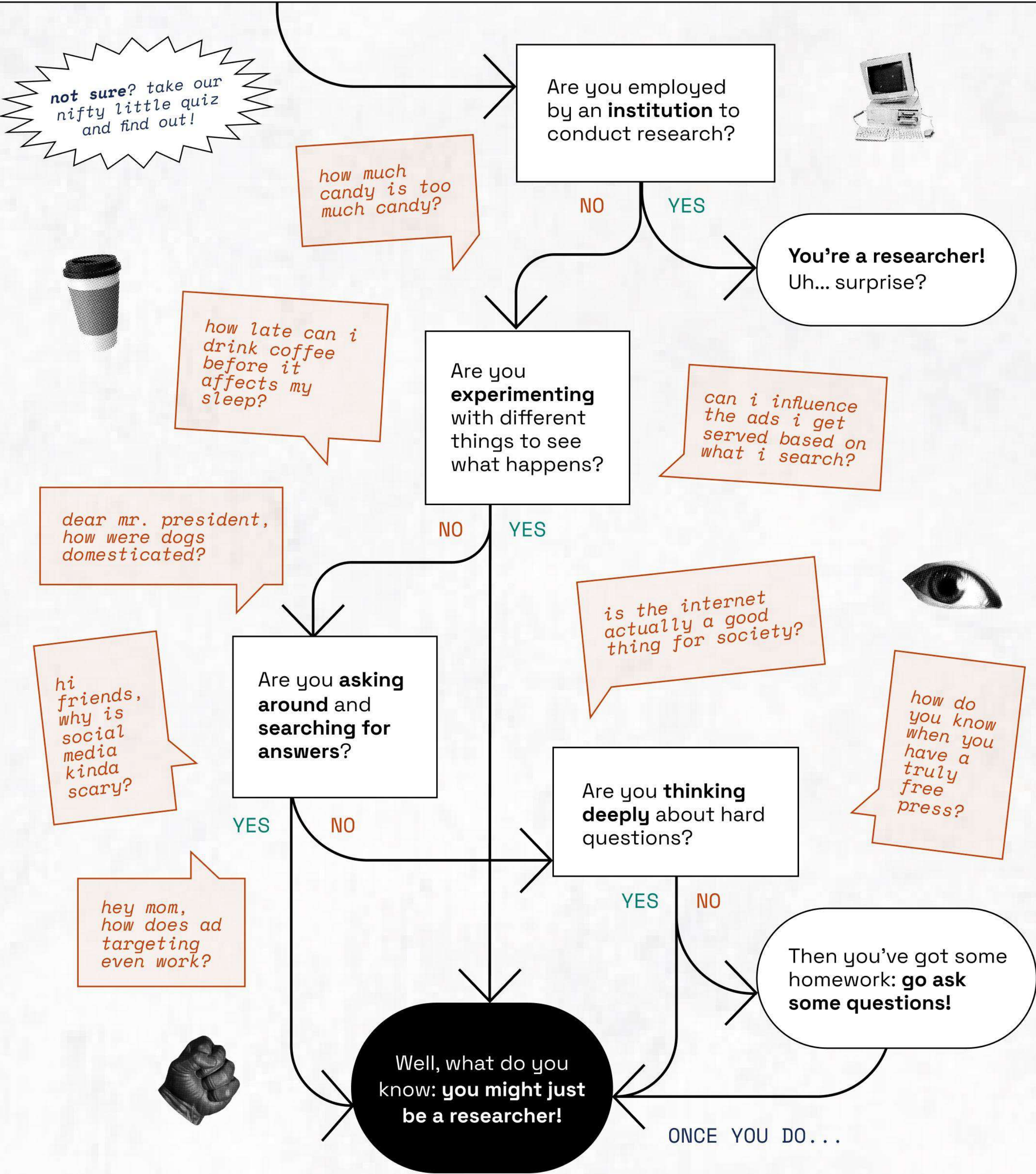
THE DISTRIBUTED AI RESEARCH INSTITUTE


Welcome! This zine is about questions we ask ourselves to do better research. But to do that, we have to start by asking: **What even is research?**

Research isn't just taking measurements, running surveys, and writing papers. Research can be a lot of things. In fact...



Wait a minute. You. Yes, you. Might you be a **researcher**?





Often when people talk about “doing research”, they’re talking about one very particular thing: traditional academic research conducted within universities.

But **other forms of research are happening all around us**, if you know where to look:

research is happening when a group of workers is recording overtime violations;

it’s happening when people gather online to document their experiences living with a chronic illness;

it’s happening when people cultivate medicinal plants over generations.

Oftentimes, university researchers can end up “parachuting” into communities doing their own research, **extracting their knowledge as a resource** and **claiming any resulting accolades as their own**.

(There’s just no separating it from its roots in 17th century European colonialism, after all.)

In defining a research philosophy, we want to encompass the breadth of all of what research can truly be. To do that, we must start by redefining research **radically**— that is, **at its roots**.

how do we collaborate?

With so many kinds of research happening in so many ways, there are endless opportunities for us to **help each other in our work**. This is especially important for those of us studying social issues.

But forming collaborations between different kinds of researchers can be challenging.

If you're from a traditional academic background, you may be trained to **center your own priorities, norms, and ways of thinking** so much that you unknowingly reproduce these patterns of exploitation and extraction.

And if you're coming from a non-traditional background, you may not think of your work as "research" at all. While there's nothing wrong with that, thinking of your work as research might open you up to new tools and ways of thinking.

How do we address these dynamics to form partnerships that benefit everyone? Well, we don't have any answers, but we wrote this research philosophy to ask ourselves **questions** to help us **connect, communicate, and unravel the power dynamics** keeping us from helping each other.

Hi, we're collaborators!

But let's not get ahead of ourselves: before you can form collaborations, **you need somebody to collaborate with!** How can you tell when a research collaboration might be a good match?

Here's one way we think about it. Wonder if there might be a fruitful collaboration in store? You can ask yourself:

1. Are you already studying the same thing in different ways?
2. Are you both concerned about the same problems?
3. Do you have complementary skillsets?

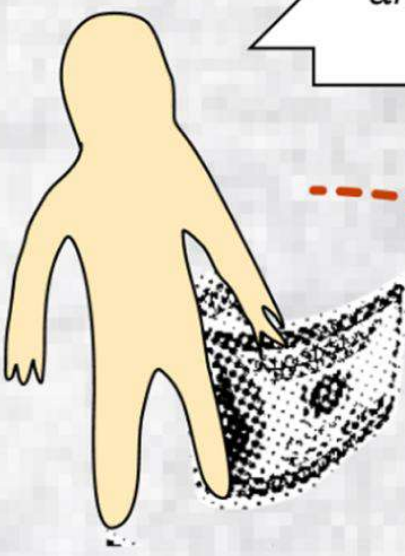
*If your answers are mostly "yes", this might be a **partnership** just waiting to happen!*

When researchers come together, **inside or outside of academia**, we can make some real magic!

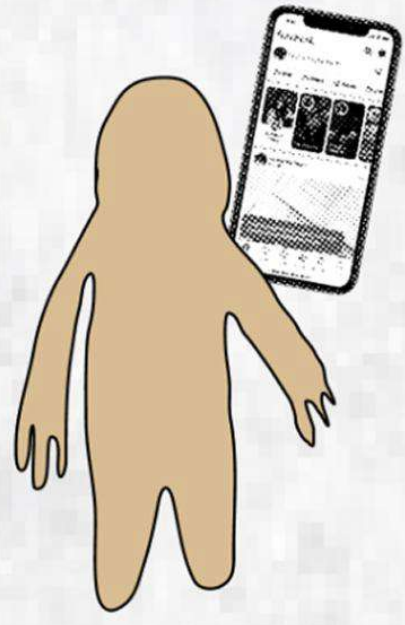
your turn!

***match the
collaborators!***

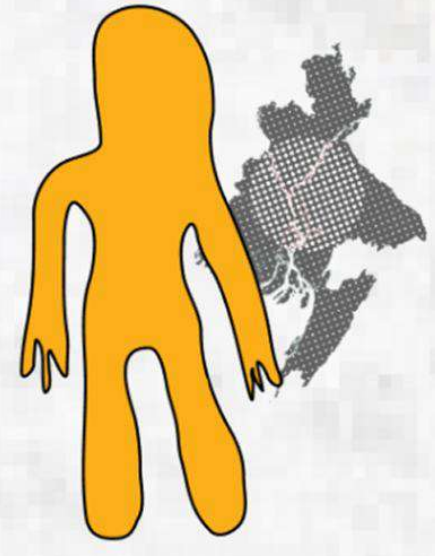
Here are some examples
of people doing different
kinds of research. Match
pairs of people to make
research partnerships!



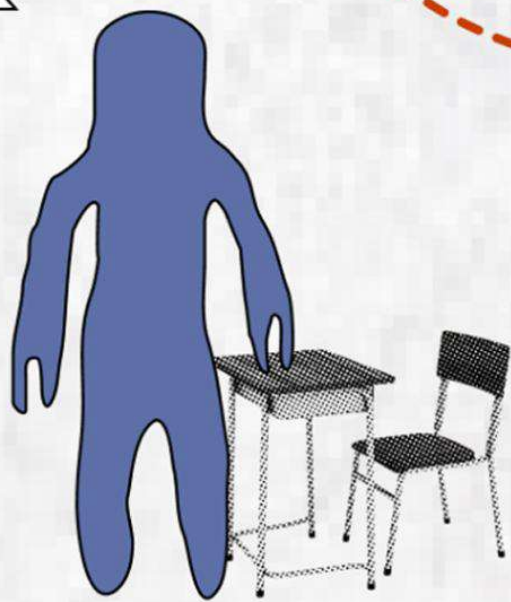
My union just started a campaign to collect wage info from our whole shop. We're pretty sure people are being paid unfairly.



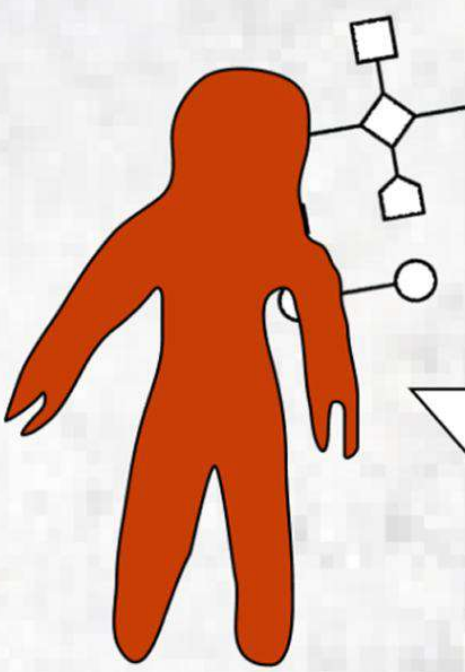
I'm a social media content creator. I wrote a guidebook for other content creators on how to optimize for social media algorithms. It's what everyone uses now!



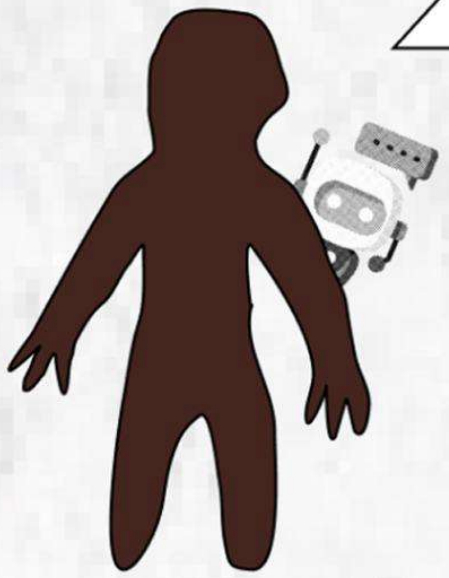
I'm writing a graduate thesis on wage discrimination in Bangladesh.



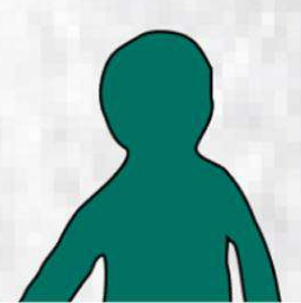
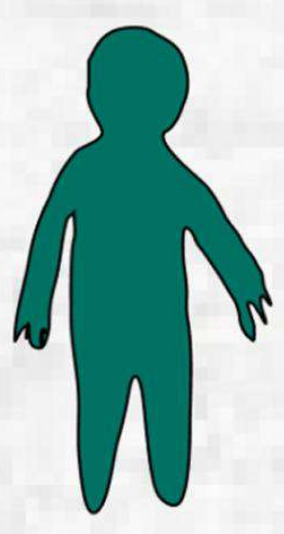
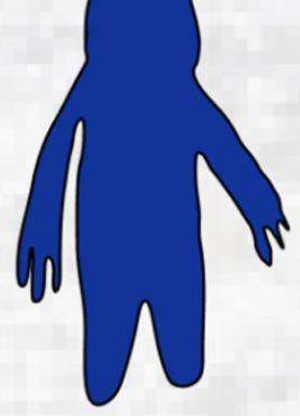
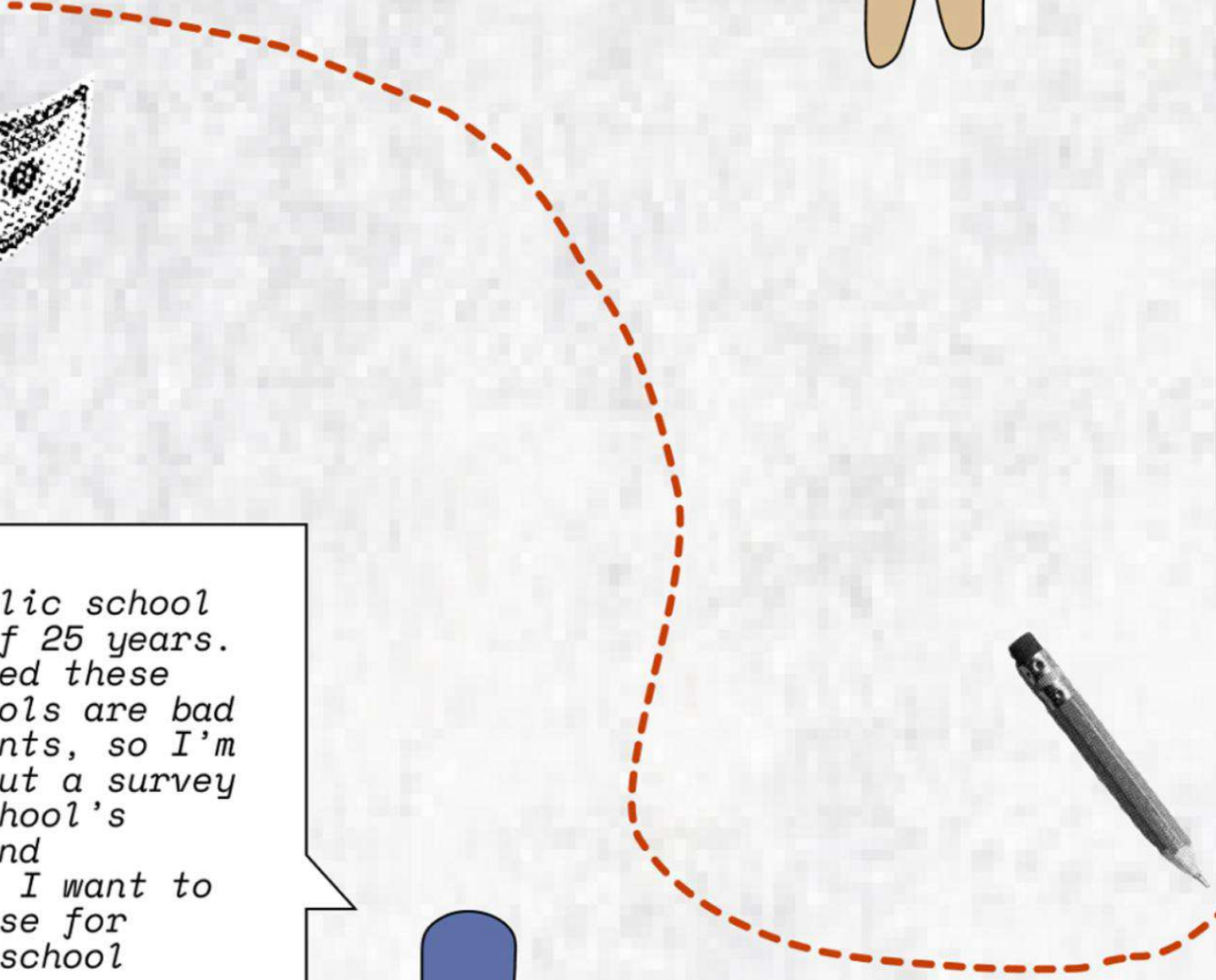
I'm a public school teacher of 25 years. I'm worried these new AI tools are bad for students, so I'm sending out a survey to our school's parents and teachers. I want to make a case for changing school policy.



I write papers about the impacts of social media algorithms. I'm really interested in how people shape their content to "game the algorithms".



I'm a school board member working on a budget for the upcoming school year and we're deciding how much to spend on new technology. I'm doing some reading about how chatbots impact kids' learning outcomes.



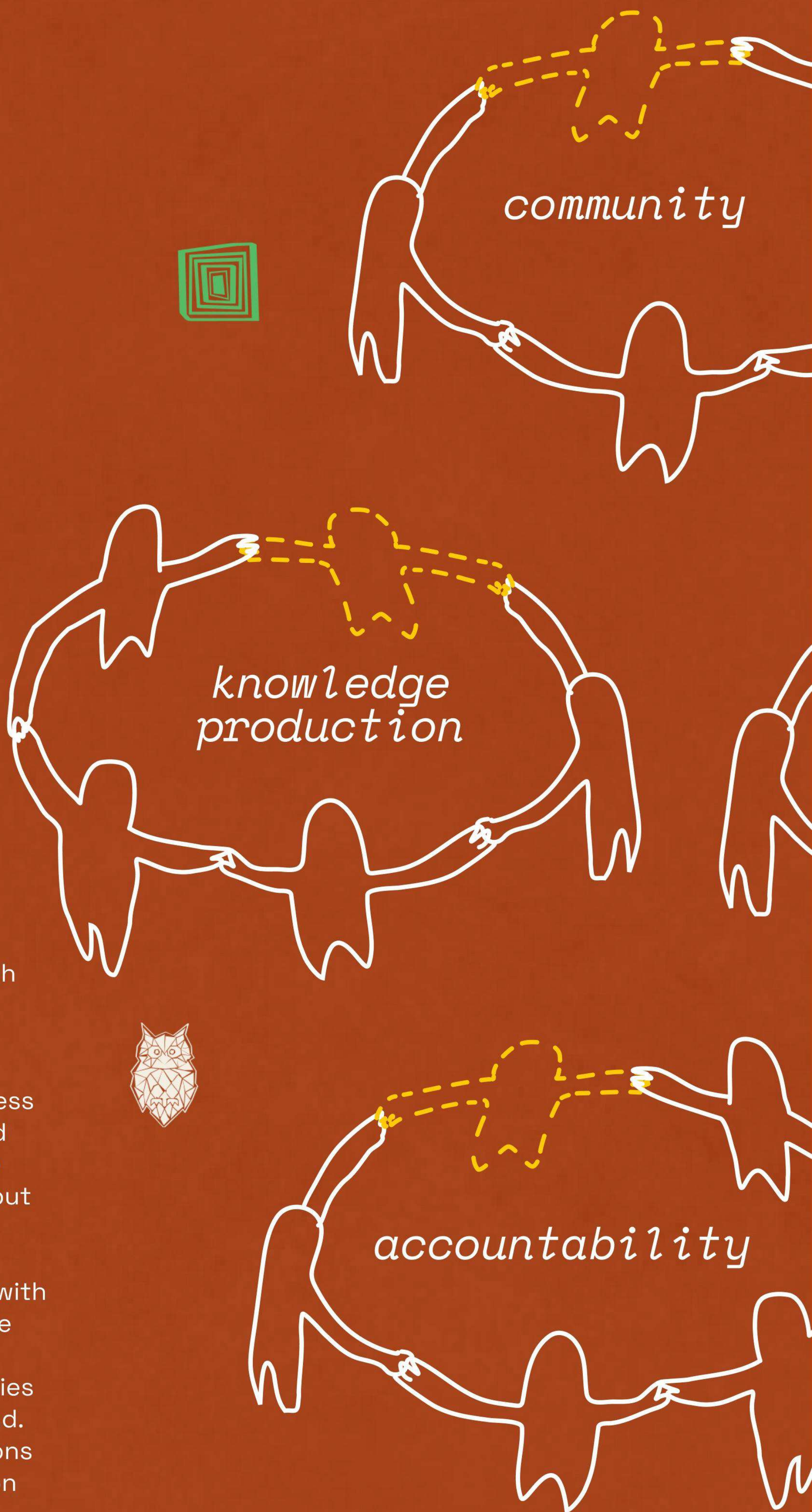
our research philosophy

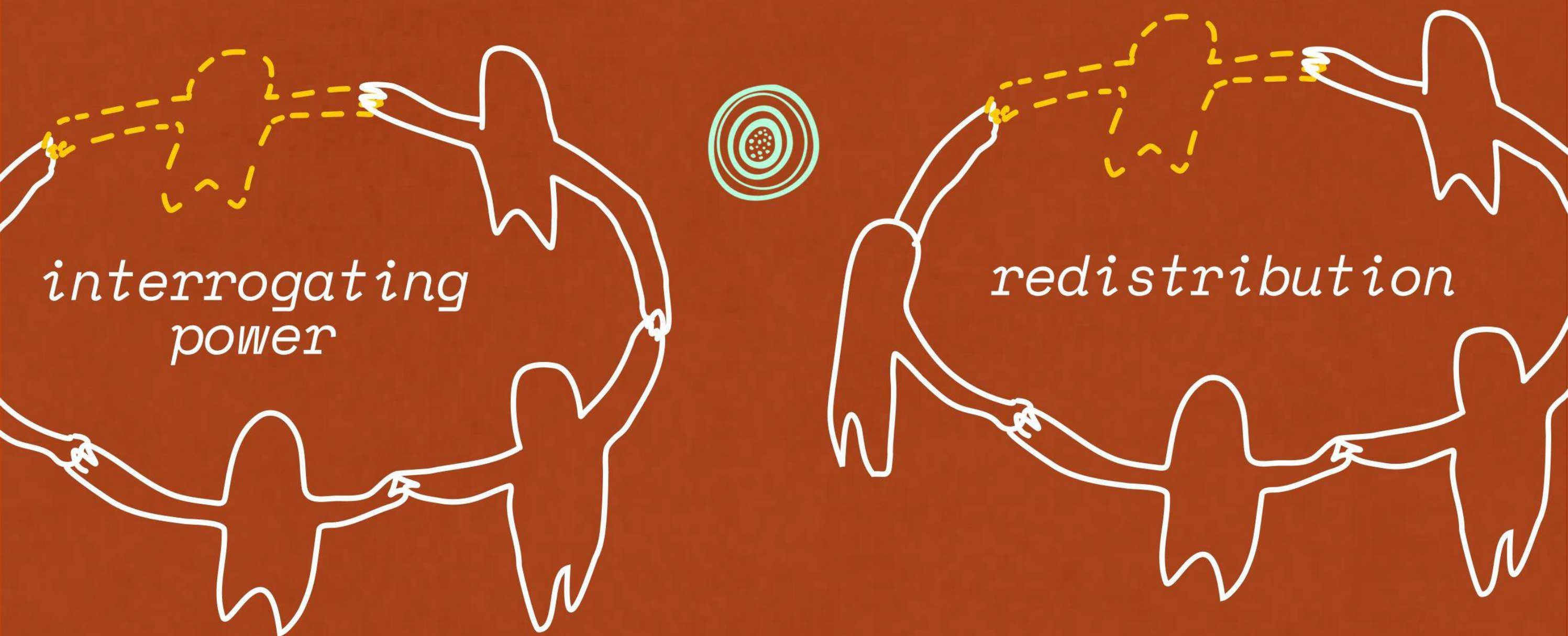
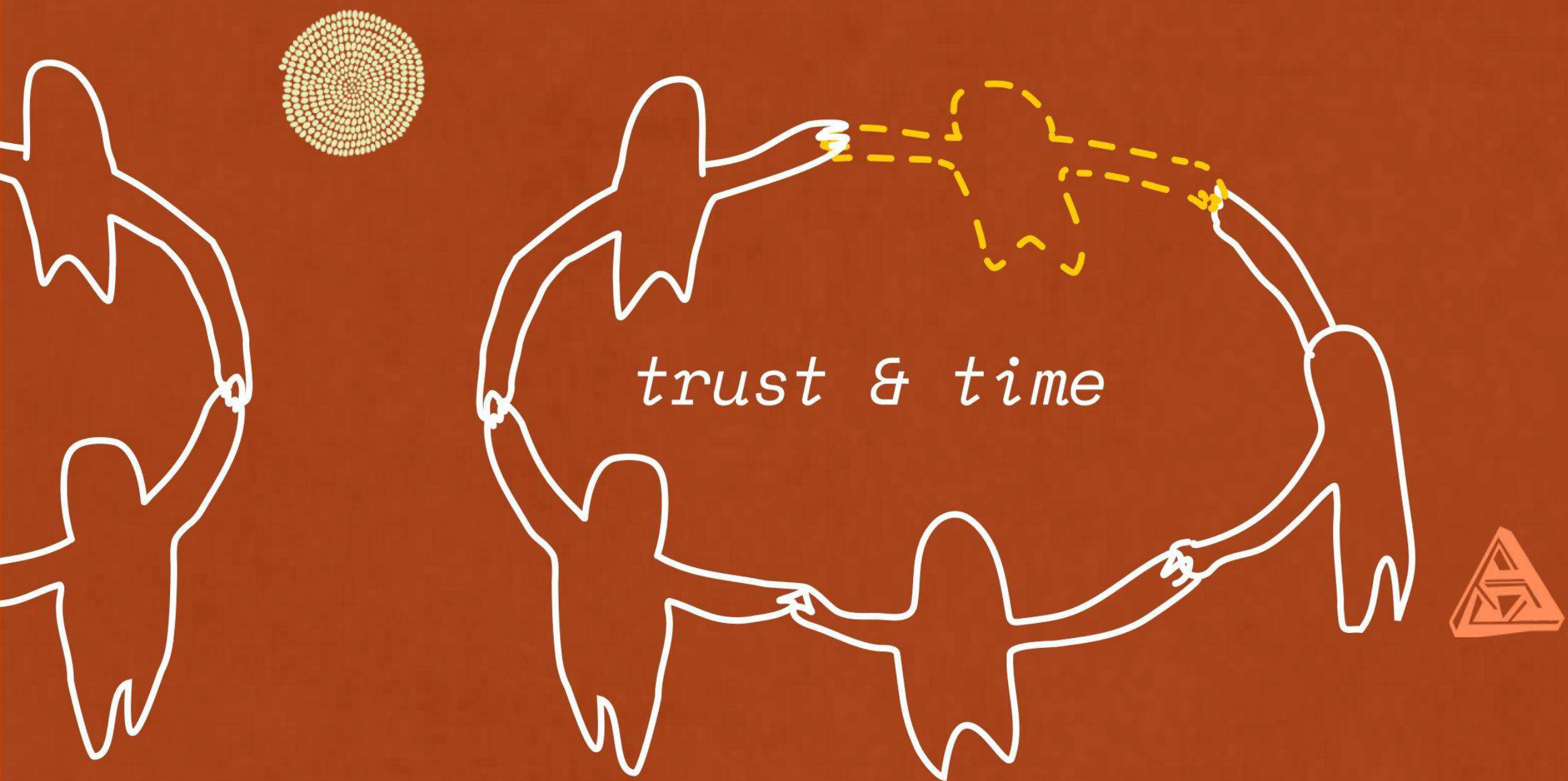
Throughout this zine, we'll take you through the seven pillars of our research philosophy, as they stand now.

They'll always be in a process of growth, negotiation, and redefinition. That's why we define them, not as rules, but as questions.

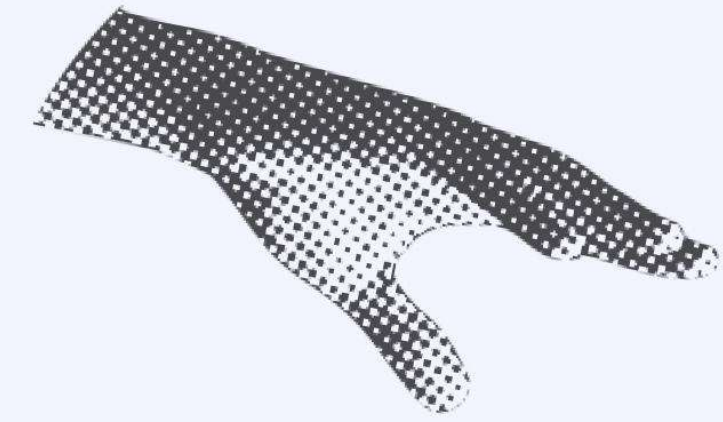
They were initially written with partnerships between more traditional academic researchers and communities outside of academia in mind. But we hope these questions might open up conversation among **all** researchers.

Take them not as a template, but as a **provocation**.

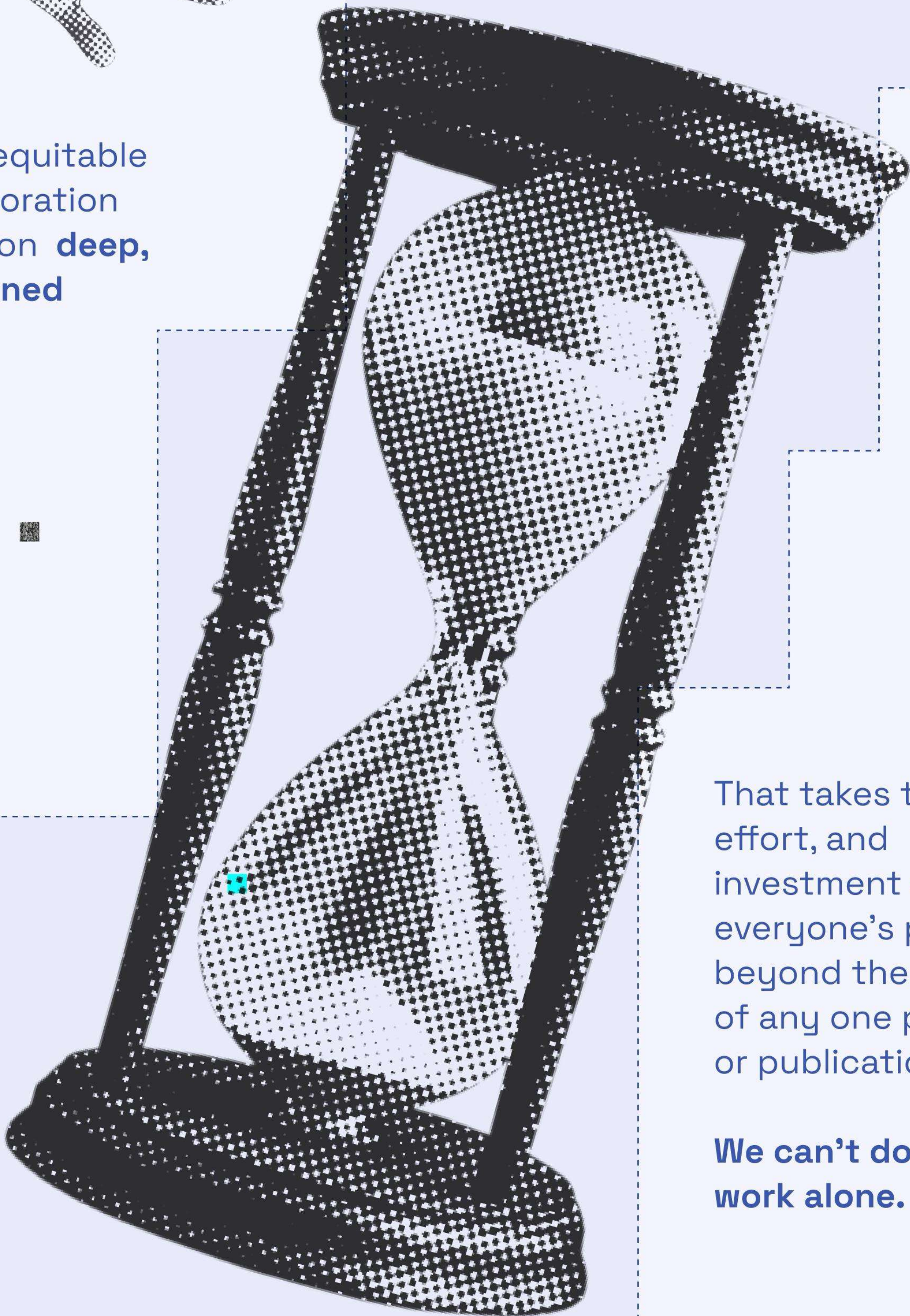




2. *trust+time*

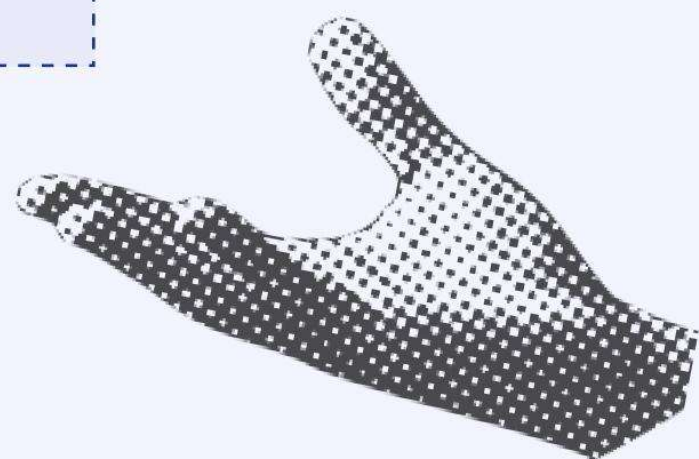


Truly equitable collaboration relies on **deep, sustained trust.**

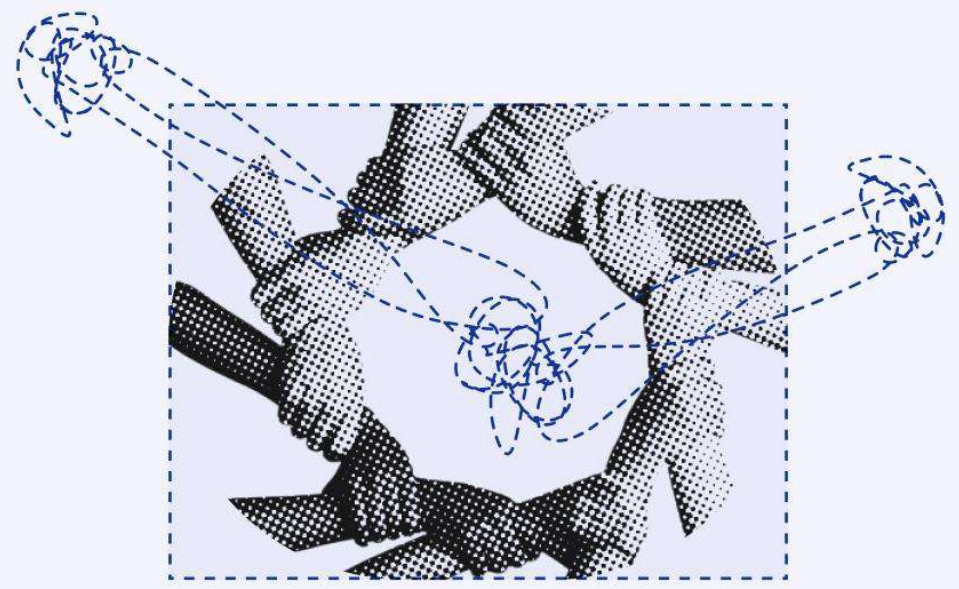


That takes time, effort, and investment on everyone's parts, beyond the scope of any one project or publication.

We can't do this work alone.

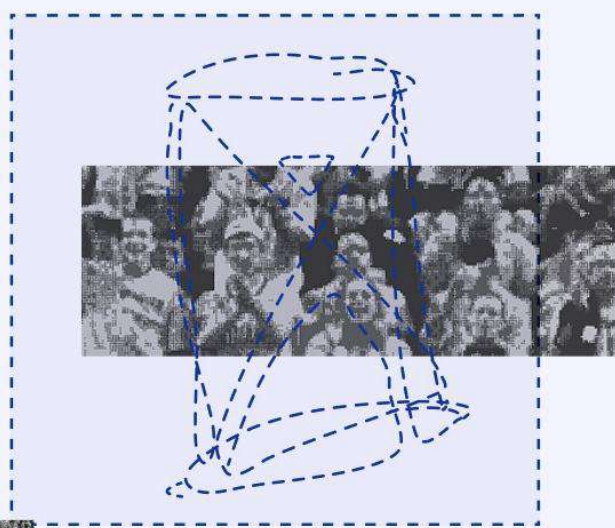


we ask ourselves:

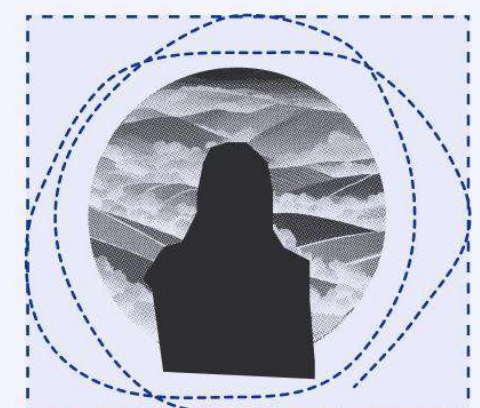


How are we **engaging** with collaborating communities? For how long?

What **trust** is being placed in us, implicitly and explicitly? Are we honoring that **after** our findings are published?

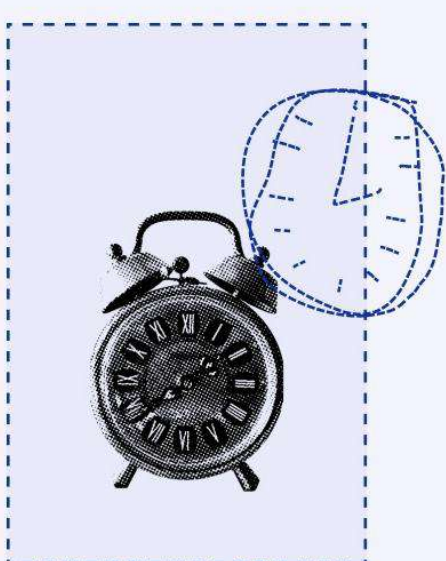


How are we making sure **collaborating communities** can shape the research process?



How do we ensure communities can **access and use** our findings?

How do we balance research questions and community needs with limited resources and time? How do we move **beyond that binary**?



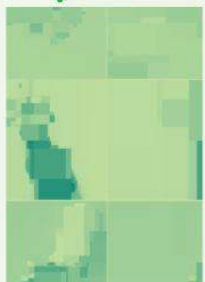
Is our research project set up in a way that gives us the time and structure to establish **meaningful relationships with collaborators**?

What are we doing to **earn trust**?

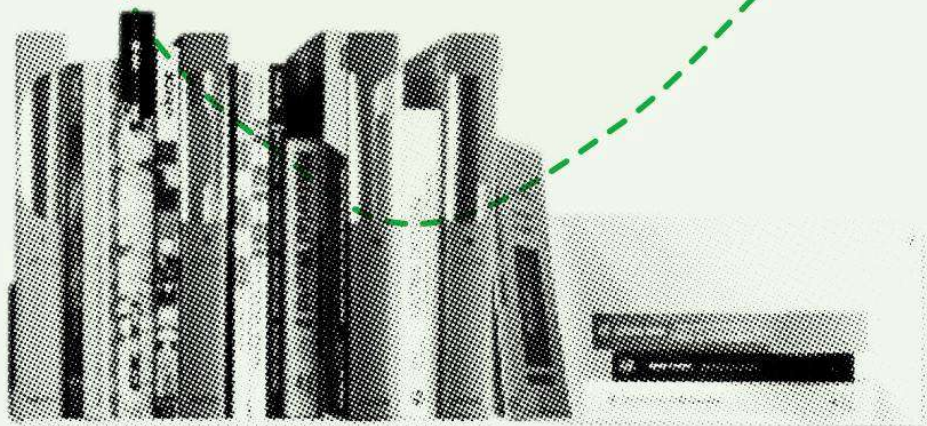
What might we be doing to **erode it**?



3. *knowledge production*



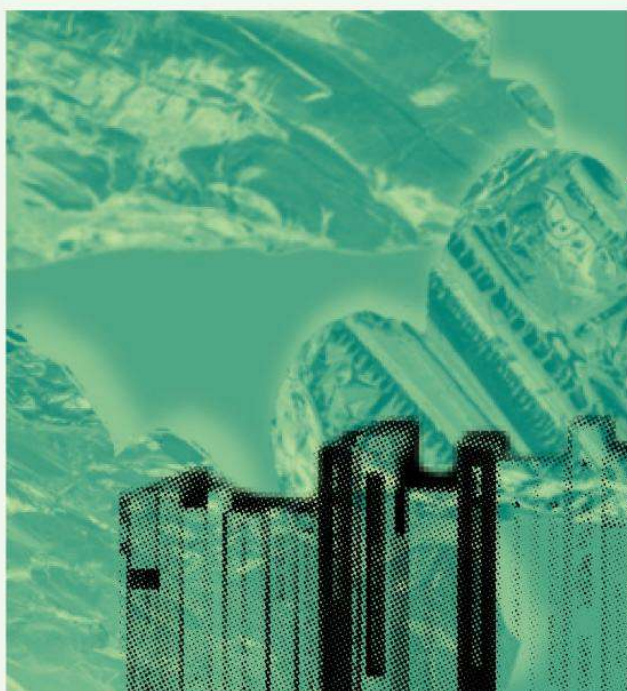
There are **many ways** of knowing, studying, and understanding the world.



Research can happen just as much in an organizer's living room as a university lab.



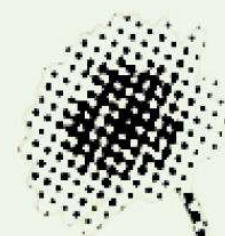
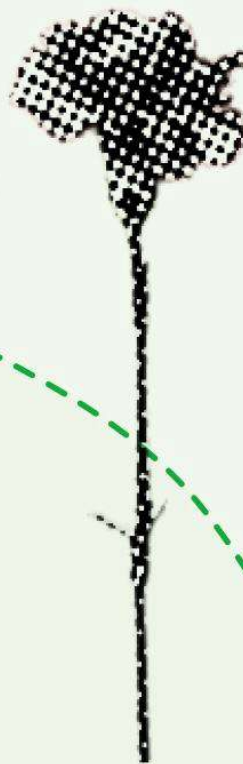
We can weave together many forms of research towards the **collective co-construction of knowledge**.



we ask ourselves:



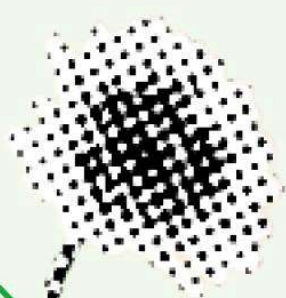
Whose **expertise**
do we trust?



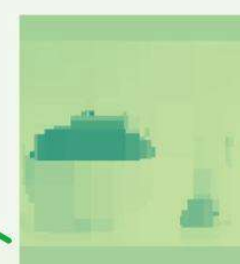
How is our research
helping **fight**
injustice?



Who are we
learning from? Who
are we **citing**?



What forms of
research do we
legitimize as “**real**
knowledge”?



How does our research prompt
critical **conversations** and
support **community organizing**?



4. *redistri- bution*

Participation in research should happen in relations of **reciprocity**.

Research participation is a **form of labor and knowledge transfer**.

Thus, research participation should happen in the context of **mutual support**, where financial resources, platforms, and opportunities are **shared between researchers and community collaborators**.

we ask ourselves:

How can we funnel financial resources to **scholar-activists** already doing the work?

How are we **compensating** community collaborators? What do they get out of our research?

Are community collaborators getting the **same funds, acknowledgement, opportunities, and respect** that we get from research?

How does this project uplift **local activists, researchers, and journalists** who have been working on the ground for longer?

Where do our resources come from? **Where do they end up?**

5. *accountability*

Research should be materially shaped by **practices of accountability** that move it towards alignment with its stated goals, commitments, and values.

Our work should always happen in a **network of feedback** from community collaborators, peers, and trusted mentors.



we ask ourselves:

How are we empowering others to **hold us accountable** to our values and commitments?

How can we foster dialogue between our research questions and the **community's needs and experiences**?

Who is the **primary recipient** of our research contributions?

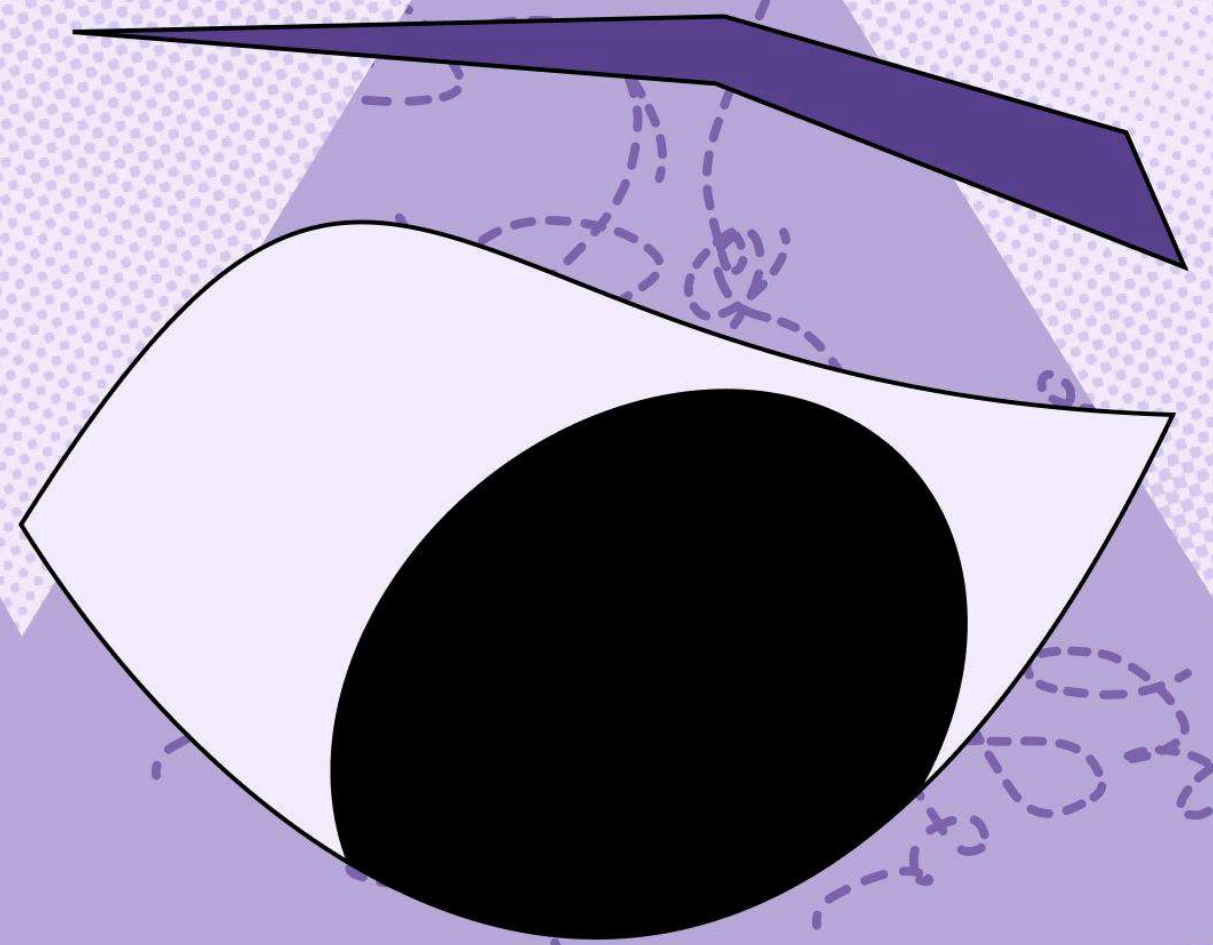
Are our research outputs broadly **accessible**?

Who do we **hold ourselves accountable** to?



6. *interro- gating power*

Understanding why people and communities “**on the margins**” are broadly excluded from AI development, and how this affects all of us, requires **interrogating power**.



In AI research, decision makers and tech elites need to be **studied and questioned**.

we ask ourselves:

Whose **power** does our
work question?

What **power structures** is
our work legitimizing?

How can our research
interrogate tech and
research **elites**?



Is our research helping
community collaborators **ask
questions themselves** instead
of being interrogated?

7. *imagination*

To build a better

technological future,

we need to **dream**

beyond existing systems

towards **futures**

that may seem impossible now.

we ask ourselves:

Are we giving ourselves **space**
to imagine otherwise?

What kind of **imaginaries** is our
research encouraging?

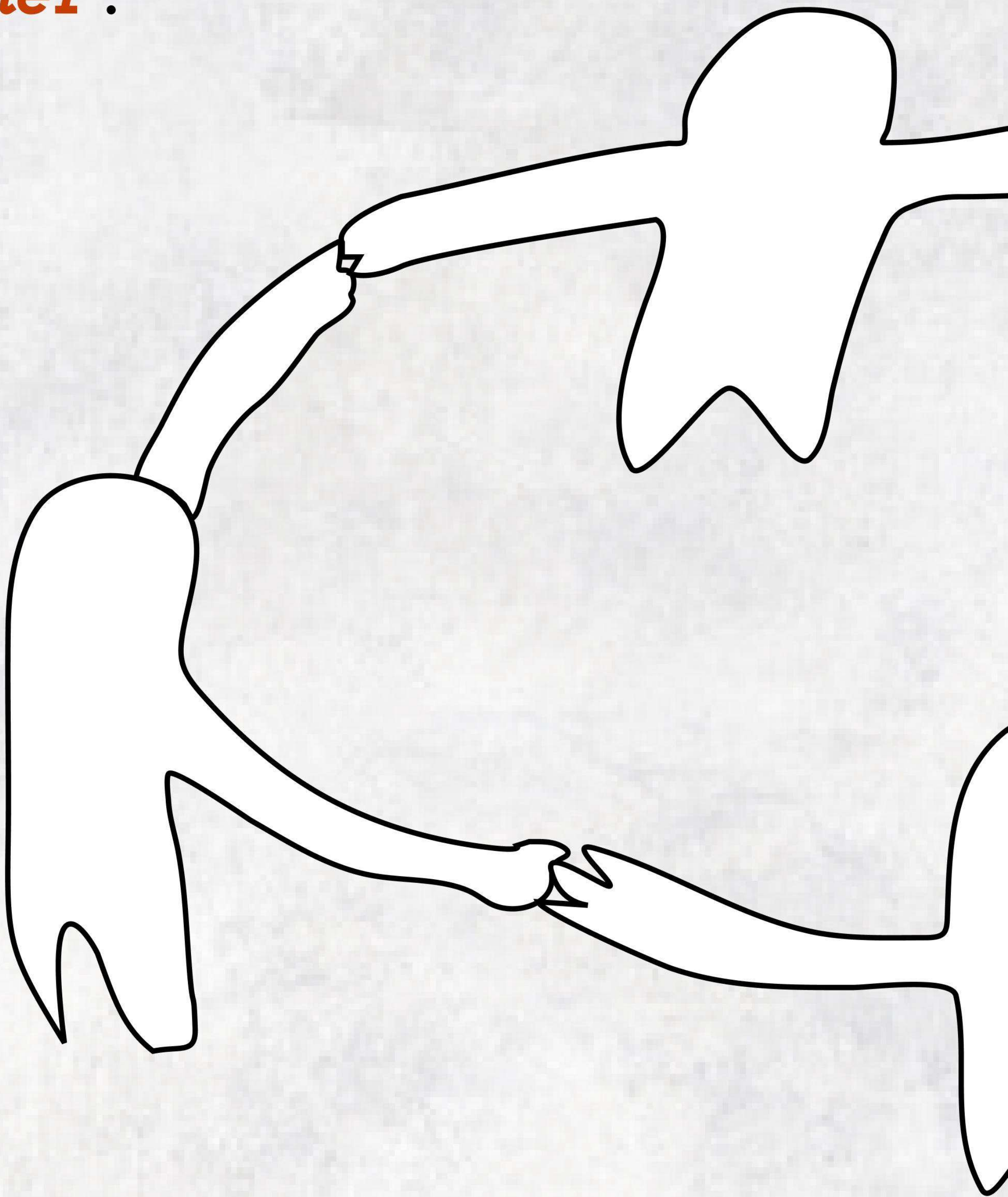
What **horizons** is our research
reaching towards?

How is our research helping
to **question** the status quo?

What **assumptions** are we
making about the future?

Whose **imagination**
are we living in?

At the end of the day,
research is better when
we do it in community,
together.



This isn't just a call
to question, rethink,
and reimagine. It's a
call to action.

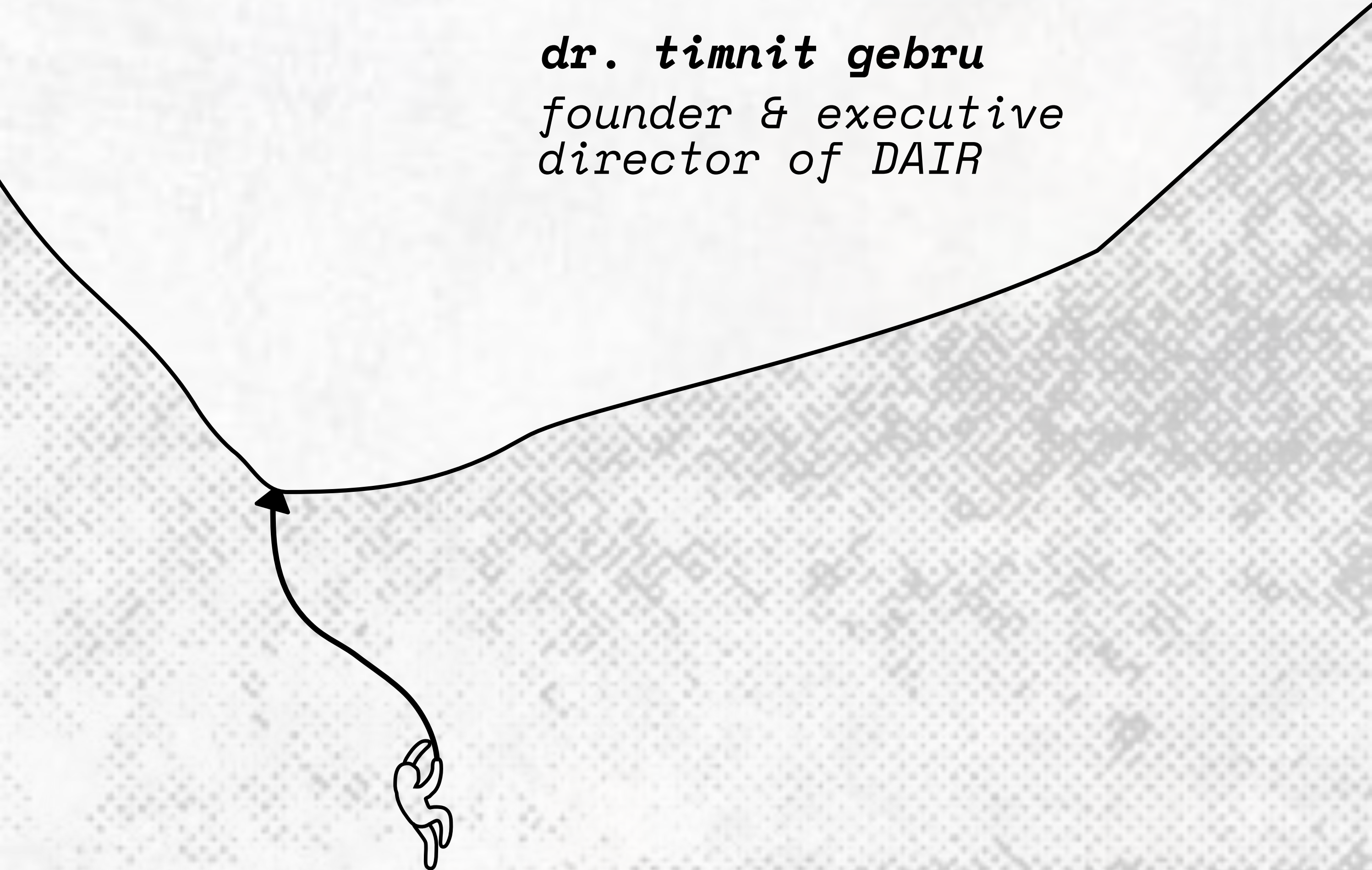


Won't you join us?

*AI needs to be brought back **down to earth**.*

It has been elevated to a superhuman level that leads us to believe it is both inevitable and beyond our control. When AI research, development and deployment is rooted in people and communities from the start, we can get in front of these harms and create a future that values equity and humanity.

***dr. timnit gebru**
founder & executive
director of DAIR*



dair-institute.org

DESIGN & ILLUSTRATION BY PAULINE WEE
CONTENT & RESEARCH BY DYLAN BAKER

- COMMUNITY
- TRUST & TIME
- KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION
- REDISTRIBUTION
- ACCOUNTABILITY
- INTERROGATING POWER
- IMAGINATION