

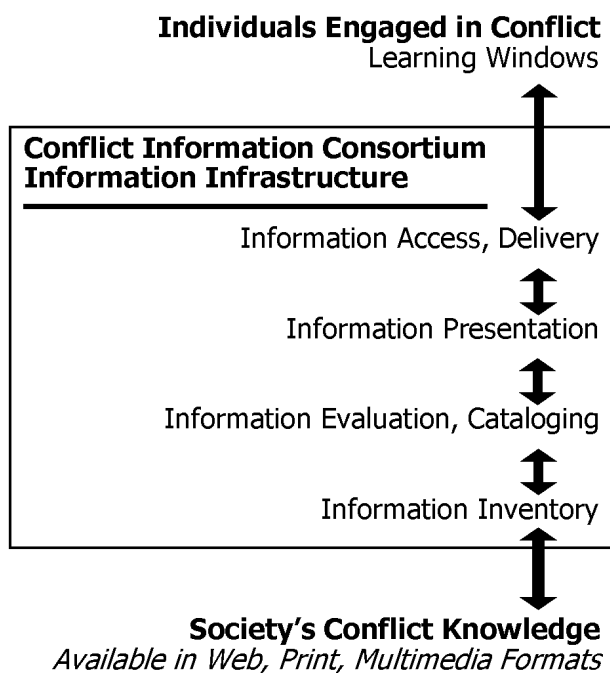


Providing Conflict Information Systems That Promote More Constructive Approaches to Conflict

Consortium Information Infrastructure

The Key to Making it All Work

Key to the success of current and future generations of Consortium projects is the continual maintenance and upgrading of its underlying information infrastructure. (See figure.) The system is built around a two-way transfer of information, in which the flow of queries from individuals facing conflict challenges is matched by a countervailing flow of information which answers those queries.



Starting at the bottom of the figure, the foundation of the Consortium infrastructure is a systematic and increasingly broad *inventory* of conflict-related information available from Web, print, and multimedia sources. Next, there are the processes through which we *catalog* and *evaluate* that information by topic and type of information. This allows us to distinguish sources that provide first-rate information on some topics and only mediocre information on others.

The next challenge is to find or, if necessary, create *presentations* of each idea that explain, as clearly as possible, how each idea could be applied to the user's specific situation. Such presentations must be able to work within the time constraints of user learning windows and be sufficiently interesting to compete in an overloaded information environment.

The final component of the Consortium's infrastructure is its *information access* tools that enable users to easily find, within the Consortium's vast resource catalogs, information that can make a difference to them. For users who know exactly what they want, we offer powerful search systems. For people who don't really know what they are looking for, we provide and continue to develop suggestion, instruction, and even consultation systems.

The sections below highlight, for each of these four areas, work that has been done to date and ongoing initiatives for which we need financial support.

Information Inventory

Over time, the scope of Consortium information projects has expanded from our relatively narrow roots in dispute resolution to cover the much wider and more interdisciplinary scope of conflict transformation and peacebuilding. We identify resources using classic literature search techniques, updated as appropriate to utilize computer-based resources and search systems.

Consortium literature searches have been supplemented by a series of collaborative, topic identification conferences and mini-grants which, together, have involved over 150 practitioners and scholars. Also key have been the personal recommendations of many of the experts involved in Consortium projects.

Still, given the enormous volume of useful information and limited financial resources available for projects like this, purely manual resource identification systems are no longer workable. The Consortium has, therefore, developed and now operates a series of automated resource identification systems (based on custom software written by the Consortium) that continually

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search conflict-related publishers for new material. We are now seeking funds to continue to operate and refine these systems.

Information Evaluation and Cataloging

For any given topic, there are more resources available than anyone could ever use. They are often highly duplicative, of varying quality, and applicable to subtly different situations. Consortium system users seldom have the time and the skills to deal with this information overload on their own. To help, the Consortium provides and continues to upgrade procedures through which resources are evaluated and classified by topic. These include:

- **Manual Coding**

Earlier in the Consortium program, when print-based information dominated, Consortium research assistants manually cataloged and keyword-coded resources using a conflict-focused classification system that we developed. These catalogs, which also include short resource descriptions, now contain tens of thousands of citations.

- **Automated Coding**

The continuing transition to Internet-accessible information has dramatically simplified the cataloging task by making it possible for software to index every word on every page. This, in turn, makes it possible to use computer algorithms and the Consortium's custom software to code and rank resources according to the extent to which they address particular topics. While we continue to maintain our earlier citation/keyword-based systems, the transition to the newer, full-text-based systems is well underway.

- **Next Steps: Expert Systems**

The coding and evaluation of the enormous volume of information in the Consortium's resource catalogs is a classic task for computer-based expert systems that combine the insights of Consortium experts with the computer's ability to execute repetitive tasks. The Consortium is seeking funds to increasingly integrate such features into our systems.

- **Editor Evaluations**

The ability of even the most sophisticated automated systems to accurately rate the importance and usefulness of particular works, is, unfortunately, limited. There will always be a need for expert human editors. While inevitably more expensive, this approach relies on subject matter experts to identify the most useful resources in their areas of expertise. For over 300 topics, the Consortium has recruited experts to prepare short lists of recommended resources. We are now trying to raise funds to continue and expand this effort.

Information Presentation

Great ideas are of little value unless they are presented in ways that can be quickly and easily understood by people who are in a position to apply those ideas. It is also imperative that the information be presented in formats that are sufficiently interesting to successfully compete with incessant demands on everyone's attention.

This, unfortunately, is a major information bottleneck. While there are a great many sources for most of the field's key ideas, these ideas are, unfortunately, often presented in inscrutable and inaccessible academic jargon; expensive, proprietary training programs; and hard-to-find sections of hard-to-find books and articles. Especially elusive are materials appropriate to varying user backgrounds, the needs of specific user situations, and, especially, non-academic user learning styles.

Improving this situation is now a major focus of the Consortium. Our goal is to identify (and, where necessary, write or produce) materials for an increasingly comprehensive learning resource library. For each of the field's key ideas, we want to produce a collection of "learning objects" starting with short, simple, multimedia, high-interest materials designed to provide general audiences with quick overviews of key ideas. We want to supplement these with a series of increasingly in-depth articles, abundant examples and illustrations, learning exercises, and links to original source materials.

Our goal is to develop learning objects that can be used online or by instructors in traditional face-to-face settings. More detailed information about these learning objects is available from the Consortium and is embedded in our new CETR (Computer Education and Training Resource) systems.

Information Access

The last component of the Consortium system is a collection of information access tools designed to make it easy for different types of users to quickly and affordably obtain information that will make a difference in their particular situation. To do this, we provide and continue to develop:

- **Search Systems** – for users who know what they're looking for.
- **Suggestion (or Consultation) Systems** – for users who need and would appreciate a few suggestions. These include, for example:
 - Nested Browse – "virtual" bookshelves and complete lists of resources.
 - Readiness Checklists – designed to provide people involved in ongoing conflicts with lists of "things to think about" and options for mid-course corrections.
 - "Cookbooks" – designed for people just entering into potentially conflictual situations and offering step-by-step suggestions on how to proceed.
 - User Guides – Special editions focused on specific user group needs (e.g. journalists, human rights workers, those engaged in transitional justice projects).
- **Instruction Systems** – for users who would like an instructor to guide them through short, task-focused training or longer, general educational programs. Here we provide:
 - Online instruction.
 - Educational resources for use by instructors in other face-to-face programs.

Summary

All of this has resulted in a powerful and relatively easy-to-maintain system, capable of supporting a broad range of current and next-generation conflict information projects.