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GROUPS ARE EASY, FEDERATING IS HARD

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Introduction

When Elon Musk took over Twitter in October 2022, many users immediately sought out a place of refuge, and Mastodon was seen as one early candidate. Mastodon is part of the Fediverse, a decentralized network of social media services. Fediverse software is free and open source, and servers can be run and maintained by the community. There are exceptions – in 2021, Truth.social was discovered to be running on Mastodon software (Kan, n.d.). Still, federated social media does allow users to organize themselves into servers or “instances,” and the ActivityPub networking protocol that it uses provides a key set of functions that connect those servers to one another (*ActivityPub*, n.d.). A user of Mastodon is exposed not only to content posted on their home server but also other servers as well. Users of Slack have the relatively easy job of establishing a group, but on Mastodon users have to manage internal group dynamics while also federating (or defederating) with other groups.

Many considering a move from Twitter to Mastodon were confused about how decentralized social media works. They seemed ill-prepared for the labor required to establish, join, or maintain a federated community. So, it wasn't all that surprising that some users immediately deemed it to be little more than a collection of “silos” (Richard H. Ebright [@R_H_Ebright], 2022). This concern is of course central to much Internet research, which has long addressed the issue of echo chambers and filter bubbles (Colleoni et al., 2014; Flaxman et al., 2016; Terren & Borge-Bravo, 2021). Mastodon users choose a “home” instance, and it was unsurprising that many users were concerned that federated systems would suffer from atomizing forces. What was perhaps more surprising were responses by those who openly professed ignorance about Mastodon and then also proceeded to dismiss it. Philip Lewis of *Huffington Post* is one example: “I don't know enough about Mastodon but if people have to operate on specific silos or servers, then that doesn't seem particularly useful to me” (philip lewis [@Phil_Lewis_], 2022). This kind of reaction signals something important about a narrowed network imagination amongst some users, a narrowed imagination that is not shared by all.

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A Narrow Network Imagination

On Mastodon, users engage in labor-intensive federating practices – they manage both the internal dynamics of their home server and that server’s relations to other servers. Groups are relatively easy to create, but federation can be quite difficult. Federation is not only about how individuals connect to one another but also about how groups connect to one another. This requires a set of practices for managing group-to-group connections, and the skeptical view of Mastodon is evidence that such practices are foreign to many. This skepticism narrows what many people think a social network is or what it can be, and that limited imagination is not just about social networking software. In many social situations, groups are cut off from one another and are encouraged to remain so. The siloing of Discord servers should be seen alongside a host of other social formations. Both online and off, organizing a group is much easier than federating. In labor organizing, labor laws box in unions. In the U.S. and a number of other countries, secondary strikes - one labor union striking in solidarity with another - are illegal, meaning that unions are forced to remain focused on their own membership’s narrow concerns rather than working in solidarity with other unions (*The Right to Strike*, n.d.). Property tax policies and “Not in my backyard” (NIMBY) activists stand in the way of fair housing construction, maintaining static boundaries between neighborhoods rather than organizing in broader coalitions. NIMBYs rely on the enforcement of longstanding zoning laws that maintain housing segregation (McElroy & Szeto, 2017). These barriers to federation shed light on the confusion of new Mastodon users, confusion that is not really about a new user interface.

Federating Practices

Robert Gehl and Diana Zulli argue that Mastodon relies on a shared “political and social worldview,” and they suggest that this worldview was tested when many servers decided to defederate from Gab, a far-right social media platform, after the January 6 attacks on the U.S. Capitol. This decision isolated the far-right server and ensuring its disconnection from most other servers (Gehl & Zulli, 2022). However, January 6 is an interesting case to consider when it comes to federating practices. If Gab failed to effectively federate on Mastodon, the groups that stormed the Capitol seem to have succeeded in the difficult work of federation. The attack was the result of a far-right federation that included the Proud Boys, the Oath Keepers, The Three Percenters, and others. These groups have different internal dynamics, but they were still able to organize alongside one another. Research has indicated that after January 6, those groups have focused even more on offline organizing methods (Holt, 2022). January 6 was a federating project that relied on using digital platforms, but the next attempt at far-right federation may not be as visible or trackable in digital spaces. This suggests that researchers should focus not only on federated social media but also on federating practices.

Conclusion

Some are out of practice when it comes to federation, as evidenced by the response to Mastodon. But others are actively engaged in such practices. While many suffer from a narrowed network imagination, others are actively engaged in the difficult work of federation. By expanding our research lens beyond the Fediverse to federating practices, we can better understand not only the confused responses to federated social

media but also the evolution of organizing practices across a range of social and political situations.

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