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DECENTRALIZED RE-PLATFORMING: A CASE STUDY OF THREE FEDIVERSE INSTANCES

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Introduction

User interest in the Fediverse - a decentralized network of social platforms interconnected via protocols, of which the most widely used and recommended by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) is ActivityPub - has gained momentum after successive moderation crises in centralized networks. In 2023, Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter/X and the escalation of disinformation on the platform ignited debates about alternatives to the corporate model (Mac & Hsu, 2023). This movement reached a new milestone in January 2025, when Meta announced the suspension of fact-checking and the relaxation of content moderation, aligning itself with discourses that instrumentalize disinformation as a political strategy (Arya & Kanozia, 2025). The Fediverse, made up of autonomous instances (such as Mastodon, Pixelfed, PeerTube, Hubzilla, among many others), emerges not only as a space for resistance, but also as a laboratory for questioning: how can federated architecture - with its diversity of software, operating costs and governance models - ensure effective moderation without replicating the vices of Big Tech?

The answer involves analyzing the contradictions inherent to the ecosystem. If, on the one hand, decentralization makes it possible to customize moderation rules (each instance defines policies against hate speech or disinformation), on the other hand, fragmentation makes standardization and scalability difficult. Fact-checking, for example, requires human and technical resources that smaller instances don't always have, creating inequalities in monitoring. In addition, maintaining servers requires costs that vary according to the infrastructure - a challenge for the sustainability of micro-communities. These tensions reveal the crux of the problem: is it possible to balance freedom of choice (users migrating between instances) with the collective responsibility of combating network abuses, without centralizing power or burdening participation?

The migration to the Fediverse dialogues with the literature on deplatforming -

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traditionally associated with the coercive removal of users for violating rules (Martineau, 2019; Rogers, 2020) - but introduces nuances that require reframing. While deplatforming is a vertical act (platforms excluding agents), the current movement is horizontal: users and communities voluntarily leave toxic spaces, relocating to federated networks. This process, still little theorized, is close to what sparse studies call replatforming (Harrington, 2024), i.e. the strategic relocation of communities to alternative environments. However, we propose the concept of “decentralized replatforming” to capture the specificity of Fediverse: a collective but not centralized migration, mediated by open protocols (ActivityPub) and autonomous moderation rules. Here, user agency intertwines with technical infrastructure, creating an ecosystem where governance is both escape (from corporate platforms) and experiment (from alternative moderation models).

Methodology

To investigate the contradictions of decentralized replatforming, we adopted a mixed methodological approach, in line with critical platform studies (Gillespie, 2018; Plantin et al., 2018) and infrastructure ethnography (Star, 1999). Inspired by the concept of deplatforming as an act of vertical exclusion (Martineau, 2019; Rogers, 2020), we focused on the reverse movement: the horizontal migration of communities to the Fediverse. The choice of interviewing instance maintainers (and not general users as, for example, Neto, 2022) is justified by the premise that these actors embody the technical and political materiality of the federated network (Xavier, 2024). Their daily experiences with moderation, costs and governance offer insights into how decentralized replatforming operates in practice, tensioning ideals of autonomy with structural limitations.

The research is structured in two stages. The first is semi-structured interviews with three maintainers of heterogeneous instances of the Fediverse: Hubzilla.com.br (macroblogging), with a focus on privacy and interoperability; Bolha, a set of Brazilian instances of microblogging, macroblogging, imagesharing and videostreaming (at <https://bolha.io/english>); and MilpaAmerica.org (image sharing), a Latin American instance focused on anti-colonial visual culture. The selection seeks to cover a diversity of software and geopolitical contexts, reflecting the fragmentation inherent in the Fediverse, with a focus on initiatives in the global south.

The questions explore themes such as ethical dilemmas in cross-moderation (e.g. how to deal with hate content originating in other instances?); hidden costs of decentralization (e.g. volunteering vs. professionalization of moderation) and the impact of Meta (2025) policies on user migration, cross-referencing maintainers' narratives with theoretical categories (deplatforming, accountability, infrastructure as a political practice). Based on the analysis of the discussion of the interviews with a semi-structured script, the main points will be explored through in-depth interviews. The aim is to map how “decentralized replatforming” reconfigures power, agency and responsibility in digital communication.

Preliminary Findings

The first dialogues with maintainers of Hubzilla, Bolha and Milpa reinforce the hypothesis that the announcement of Meta (2025) catalyzes migrations similar to the backlash following Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter/X (Mac & Hsu, 2023). The difference lies in the destination: while in 2023 the movement was mostly directed towards microblogging alternatives (Mastodon), the current exodus points towards federated imagesharing platforms, such as Pixelfed - a software in the Fediverse on which we found little bibliography, which usually prioritizes studies on Mastodon (Zignani, Gait, & Rossi, 2018; Anaobi et al, 2023). This trend is illustrated by the case of Milpa, a Latin American image-sharing instance, whose traffic doubled after January 2025, attracting artistic collectives and anti-colonial activists; and by the growth of the first instance of the software, pixelfed.social, which grew from 30,000 users in December 2024 to more than 400,000 (February 2025), according to data from FediDB, a platform that contains Fediverse data. One hypothesis here is that if the Twitter/X case boosted adherence to other MicroBlogging platforms such as Mastodon, Threads and BlueSky, the current backlash against the announcement of the January 7, 2025 Target, and the consequent direct implication of Instagram, could boost adherence to other Imagesharing platforms such as Pixelfed.

The research, by focusing on maintainers of diversified instances, reveals that “decentralized replatforming” is not homogeneous: while Bolha attracts progressive Brazilian users fleeing hate speech, Hubzilla acts as a technical refuge for developers and activists critical of corporate surveillance.

The preliminary analysis also exposes conceptual tensions. If deplatforming (Martineau, 2019; Rogers, 2020) describes the vertical expulsion of political groups - mostly linked to the far right - the current phenomenon is marked by a horizontal self-expulsion: left and center communities abandon platforms they consider toxic, joining federated bodies out of ideological adherence. This requires a reframing of replatforming, traditionally associated with reactive group migrations (Harrington, 2024). In the cases studied, migration is motivated by mistrust in the policies of the Goal and not by coercive removal. The concept proposed (“decentralized replatforming”) captures this duality: it is both escape (from centralization) and construction (of alternative models), mediated by open protocols and local governance.

At last, preliminary data suggests that the sustainability of the Fediverse depends on resolving practical paradoxes. Two of these are the emotional cost of combating disinformation without automated tools, for example, and the difficulty of scaling moderation without centralizing power. These findings echo the central question of the research: how do we balance autonomy and collective responsibility in fragmented networks? A preliminary answer points to the need for support infrastructures - such as networks of instances that share fact-checking resources - while avoiding replicating the logic of Big Tech in a new disguise. Decentralized replatforming thus emerges not as a definitive solution, but as a field in dispute of ethical and technical experimentation in dispute.

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