

PERVASIVE

LABOUR

UNION

FED UP!

#13

Editors' Note

Lidia Pereira

Welcome to the thirteenth issue of the Pervasive Labour Union zine! Much delayed, the preparation of this issue was one of the most labour intensive and interrupted by unforeseen obligations so far; from lost databases to moving houses, I've had it all.

And so, it is with great pleasure and a significant degree of relief that I announce that the issue on federated social networks is finally out. The history of the Fediverse¹ is complex and full of nuance. Within the context of this editor's note I have, however, too little space to recount it all in vivid detail. As such, here is a short summary I have compiled to the best of my abilities: According to a "People's History of the Federation"² and "A Quick Guide to the Free Network"³, this is an history that begins with the StatusNet⁴ platform being established around 2008. The protocol implemented in order to achieve communication between servers and projects was OStatus⁵. Eventually StatusNet split into pump.io⁶ and GNUSocial⁷, the latter which was forked into postActiv⁸. In 2016, the now popular microblogging project Mastodon⁹ joined the Fediverse game. Running parallel to these developments, the macroblogging social network Diaspora¹⁰ appeared in 2010. While Diaspora has its own federation protocol (diaspora), macroblogging social networking projects such as Friendica¹¹, Hubzilla¹² and Socialhome¹³ have also implemented it. Of these, Friendica and Hubzilla have also implemented the OStatus and ActivityPub¹⁴ protocols. Nowadays, the Fediverse is expanding as more and more of these projects are implementing ActivityPub as one of their federation protocols. However still limited by how the protocol is implemented by the project's developers, these developments allow for the federated constellation to grow and promise to offer users a bigger choice, not only regarding which software to use - Pleroma¹⁵, Mastodon or both? -, but also regarding which instance/s (i.e.: servers running the software) to sign up for.

When the open call for the current issue was launched, I formulated some questions. An updated list of these follows: - What are the requirements of a 'true' alternative? - Which protocols can and are being developed to achieve interoperability between the different alternatives? - How are these protocols being implemented? Who is behind their development? - What are the social, economical and political forces at play within this realm and how to engage with them? - How do questions of scale, trust and governance influence the development of these projects?

There are, of course, still many unanswered concerns, unsolved complexity, nuances, discussions, debates and disagreements. Still embedded within capitalist power structures, the development of alternative social networking infrastructures without intersectional anti-capitalist politics and militancy will only further reproduce systemic power imbalances. Failing to account for governance structures and the "social" in social networking - who gets to make decisions? who gets to participate? who gets to participate in decision making? etc - these hopeful developments will never be more than techno-solutionist fantasy.

To help us further navigate these topics, I am very happy to present this issue's contributors:

Martin Schotten was inspired by his positive first experience on Mastodon to produce a visual poem, "short like a toot" (for those not in the know, a toot is a post on Mastodon).

Eliot Berriot, developer and project maintainer of Funkwhale¹⁶, focuses his contribution on the need for democratic governance when developing alternative social media projects, an hard to tackle but urgent matter that goes beyond the technical and pragmatic aspects of trustworthy alternative tools.

Luke Murphy's contribution addresses the ActivityPub protocol in more detail, especially some of the criticism it faces for ambiguous specifications regarding issues of security, which results in privacy and trust concerns that AP developers have been trying to address.

Eugen Rochko, Mastodon's creator who is also a developer and maintainer of the project, makes the case for decentralized networks, stressing their better capacity to adapt, foster diversity, escape censorship and challenge power asymmetries. Julia Janssen's concerns with the ever expanding impact of the multi-billion dollar data business on people's everyday lives led

early stages contributed a lot to the platform. One of the most interesting spaces to understand where Mastodon is going is the issue tracker⁹: this is where plenty of users, not necessarily developers, request, discuss, and criticize features.

1: <http://networkcultures.org/makingpublic/conference/>

2: <http://varia.zone/>

3: <https://xmpp.org/>

4: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mastodon>

5: <https://fediverse.party>

6: <https://gnu.io/social/>

7: <https://joinpeertube.org/en/>

8: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bulletin_board_system

9: <https://github.com/tootsuite/mastodon/issues>

her to practically investigate ownership over own's personal data by creating a system called 'data stocks', as well as developing an experimental installation comprising games, experiments and visuals called The Attention Fair.

Gui Machiavelli's networked fever dream takes the reader on a vivid, sensorial journey through the federated digital and all that lies in between, on top of, next to, inside and outside of, etc.

A piece of mail art arrives to us from Inge Hoonte in the Netherlands and Louisa Bufardeci in Australia, inviting us to experiment and play with established protocols.

Partido Interdimensional Pirata invites us to apostatize from 'asocial networks of mass-surveillance', proposing different strategies, approaches, solutions and alternatives in order to achieve this.

And, last but not least, Silvio Lorusso's report of a conversation between Roel Roscam Abbing and Florian Cramer about federated publishing highlights the nuanced history and development of Mastodon's techno-social infrastructure, as Abbing and Cramer discuss its communities and respective codes of conduct, the political ambiguity of safe spaces, what privacy means within this context and other issues such as governance and underrepresented communities in free software projects.

Contributions by:

Eliot Berriot, Eugen Rochko, Gui Machiavelli, Inge Hoonte and Louisa Bufardeci, Julia Janssen, Luke Murphy, Martin Schotten, Partido Interdimensional Pirata, Silvio Lorusso

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Exceptions:

Eliot Berriot's contribution is licensed under CC-0¹⁸.

For Julia Janssen's contribution, the following should be applied:

"Copyright (C) 2019, Julia Janssen

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Partido Interdimensional Pirata's contribution is licensed under the Peer Production License¹⁹.

- 1: <https://fediverse.party/>
- 2: <https://wiki.freedombone.net/view/welcome-visitors/view/a-peoples-history-of-the-fediverse/view/introduction>
- 3: <https://medium.com/we-distribute/a-quick-guide-to-the-free-network-c069309f334>
- 4: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/GNU_social
- 5: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/OStatus>
- 6: <http://pump.io/>
- 7: <https://gnu.io/social/>
- 8: <https://www.postactiv.com/>
- 9: <https://joinmastodon.org/>
- 10: <https://diasporafoundation.org/>
- 11: <https://friendi.ca/>
- 12: <https://hubzilla.org>
- 13: <https://socialhome.network/>
- 14: <https://www.w3.org/TR/activitypub/>
- 15: <https://pleroma.social/>
- 16: "Funkwhale is a community-driven project that lets you listen and share music and audio within a decentralized, open network." see: <https://funkwhale.audio/>
- 17: <https://www.gnu.org/licenses/fdl-1.3.en.html>
- 18: <https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/>
- 19: http://p2pfoundation.net/Peer_Production_License

pointed out that defederating caused quite a stir among inhabitants of the fediverse, as it goes against the principle of openness and unlimited interconnection that are the hallmark of web and free software ideology. One way to motivate the implementation of silencing and blocking at the instance level can be summarized as "we don't have to read your bullshit".

"If silencing and blocking is possible, isn't there the risk of creating the equivalent of an organic supermarket, of elitism, of leaving the territory unguarded?", asked Florian Cramer, suggesting that it is important to "stay with the trouble". Roel's response was that federated networks and proprietary platforms are not mutually exclusive. However, the safe spaces provided by a specific instance allow to strategize and to produce a different techno-social imagination.

The issue of privacy was also raised by Cramer, who spoke of synchronization while being reminded of ⁸. Roscam Abbing clarified that privacy on Mastodon shouldn't be understood in the classical sense of a private communication channel as it doesn't implement any end-to-end encryption. This is because Mastodon has been conceptualized as a publishing platform where most messages are publicly readable. This makes Cambridge Analytica-style mining is still possible. It also means that direct messages can be potentially read by admins, just like on the major commercial platforms.

Cramer and Abbing discussed the "composition" of the people involved in a project like Mastodon: not necessarily male engineers rooted in computer science but often designers and media people with a particular attention to user interface (Mastodon looks much better than the average free software project) as well as communities typically underrepresented in free software development such as people of color, queer, etc.

The questions from the audience revolved around the notion of governance. Roscam Abbing responded that the development of the project is currently based on the "benevolent dictator" model, as the creator of Mastodon has the power to take final decisions (in fact there have been Mastodon fork-tryouts, where the main focus has been a different form of governance). Furthermore, not all labour that goes in the project is acknowledged: work that is not code is often rendered invisible. This has led to disenfranchisement from queer and POC communities that in the

PeerTube⁷) that are able to communicate with each other thanks to underlying federation protocols such as ActivityPub or OStatus.

Roscam Abbing is one of the admins of a Mastodon instance called post.lurk.org and dedicated to media, free software and the politics of technology. [Post.lurk.org](https://post.lurk.org) currently hosts 129 users and is invite-only (you can get in touch with the admins on <https://talk.lurk.org/>). Roscam Abbing explained Mastodon stands in a too a long tradition of projects that reimplement the features of proprietary applications but in free and open source software. Mastodon initially emerged as a fork of GNU Social and was driven by a dissatisfaction towards social media like Twitter. Particularly in the wake of silencing techniques and the harassment campaigns that went through the hashtag #gamergate and the election of Trump. The urgency was that of modifying the software stack and to build organizational techniques to create safe spaces for targeted communities.

In order to join Mastodon, a user needs to pick up an instance, which might be confusing at first given the sheer diversity among the existing ones. Picking one instances doesn't mean you can't communicate with other ones, however. They do however form their own distinct communities with rules and guidelines. Roscam Abbing highlighted the presence of code of conducts on many of these instances as well as shared customs, such as stating one's pronouns in their bio. These codes of conducts are meant to communicate to potential visitors on what that community considers (un)acceptable behaviour.

In this respect, Cramer remarked that safe space doesn't necessarily mean progressive or left-leaning, but it can also be a zone that purposefully breeds far-right sentiments and ideas. From this point of view, Mastodon can be seen as "the perfect technology for distributing a troll farm". In fact federated social media share a common ground with the interests of a subset of 4chan users, in particularly the board /g/ where free software and alternatives to commercial media are often discussed and promoted. Similarly interest in these networks can also be linked to cyberlibetarianism.

There are several ways to preserve a sense of safety within an instance. For example, other servers can be silenced (users will still be able to get their content in their personal timeline) or fully blocked, in a process called 'defederating'. Roscam Abbing

Federated Utopia

Martin Schotten



Getting our hands dirty

Eliot Berriot

We can communicate in real-time across the globe, with billions of people. We've designed and build complex systems and networks used by billions of computers to exchange information and make decisions.

Yet, having a productive discussion with a handful of individuals is still one of the most frustrating experience for the vast majority of people I know.

When was the last time you reached consensus in a discussion involving people with conflicting opinions? How long did it take? Did you enjoy the process?

When we think about alternative social media and commons in general, we tend to focus on the technical and pragmatic issues.

We build the software, the user interface. We design and standardize new protocols to enable decentralized, federated and peer-to-peer communication. We try to seduce new users, to market our alternative, to raise awareness about privacy issues.

Really, we're doing our best. At the same time, we're blind when it comes to the most glaring problem.

Governance is the only issue

The only reason we're building alternatives to centralized and proprietary platforms such as Facebook is that the people and companies designing and maintaining those platforms are failing us. Their business models dictate their governance models which in turn dictate our (bad) user experience.

Still, when we start working on alternatives, we forget to acknowledge the importance of governance. Most of the time, decision power ends up in the hands or one or few individuals who started or maintain such projects. We blindly trust and praise those heroes, whatever they are doing, or not doing. New, divergent or conflicting opinions are being dismissed for the sake

Federated Publishing: Roel Roscam Abbing in conversation with Florian Cramer (Report)

Silvio Lorusso

This article was originally published here: <http://networkcultures.org/makingpublic/2019/05/20/federated-publishing/>

A public conversation on federated publishing took place during the lunch break of the final day of the Urgent Publishing¹ conference. Florian Cramer, reader in 21st Century Visual Culture/ Autonomous Practices at Willem de Kooning Academy, asked Roel Roscam Abbing a few questions on federated networks, their origin, and their techno-social implementation.

Roel Roscam Abbing is a researcher and artist who works on networks, infrastructures and the politics that inform them. He's a founding member of varia², a space for developing collective approaches to everyday technology located in Charlois (Rotterdam). Varia hosts and employs a series of federated networks, such as one based on XMPP³, an open standard for messaging.

Cramer and Roscam Abbing started by explaining what is a federated network and why it matters nowadays. Federation allows diverse entities to preserve some internal rules while still being able to communicate with each other. In this way they are able to maintain a certain degree of autonomy. Roscam Abbing pointed out that federation is not new, email and the web being old examples of it which are still in use. However, in a landscape characterized by an increasingly vicious centralization and by users' growing awareness of their needs and the limitations of generalist platforms, federation acquires new meaning and relevance.

The subject of the conversation then became Mastodon⁴, a Twitter-like federated social medium. Unlike Twitter, Mastodon is comprised of multiple community-owned "instances", that can define their own rules, modify user interface, etc. Mastodon itself is part of a bigger network called the Fediverse⁵, which includes different applications (such as the older GNU Social⁶ or the recent

Mutual aid

As any apostasy must be collective to be effective, we propose to gather and help each other to abandon capitalist networks, and flee to libre and communitary ones to keep finding ourselves in the cyberspace, with no exploitation, with no manipulation, with no harassment.

Let's apostatize together!

Disclaimer

There're other alternatives that are distributed, anonymous and encrypted. The apps and nodes we can recommend here are only few, selected with a criteria of security and freedom for the people. Nevertheless, a communication media for left-libertarian organization of actions systematically suppressed by the state and its institutions is only possible with a little more effort. Do you think your affinity group, collective, party or movement will want to have and use better technologies for communication?

You can contact us... there's no interdimensional magic, but there's much to learn, teach, and even develop.

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We're also in the process of apostatizing P)

Twitter: [@PartidoPirataAr](https://twitter.com/PartidoPirataAr)

Facebook: Partido Pirata Argentino

1: To know more about Collective Apostasy: <http://apostasias.com.ar>

2: Nearly \$ 350.000.000 USD at the time of writing.

of moving forward, and this is not acceptable if our end goal is to provide sustainable alternatives.

To be fair, democratic governance suffers from a paradox. Lots of projects are started by individual and grow organically, attracting more users and contributors, which eventually form a community.

But no one can build a democratic governance alone, before the community exists. Building one after the community is formed is hard, and increasingly harder as the community grows: designing a democratic decision process when there is no such thing in place, well, it's as fun as it sounds. Hence the paradox: you can't design your governance when it's easy, and at the same time, the longer you wait, the harder it gets, and the most you need it.

We miss the tools and skills

On top of that, we humans usually lack the necessary tools, skills and education to have productive discussions and decide collectively. Even for trivial scenarios, like finding a place to eat with a dozen friends, we're struggling to solve the problem at hand in a way that is both efficient and satisfying for everyone.

We should be prepared and educated for that. The situation may be better in other countries, but at least in France, the school system does not care about those skills, at all. We're not taught to work together, to express ourselves in a relevant and non-violent way, to summarize our thoughts and ideas to make them accessible to various audiences, to share and accept constructive criticism, to moderate a discussion and ensure it is productive...

We are taught to fear and follow authority, to work alone, to silence divergent opinions, to mock difference, to seek approval and fear criticism.

Given that, it's not surprising entire generations are struggling with anything that involve collective decision making, and instead accept to rely on a few leaders to make the decisions.

It's time to learn

If we continue the way we are headed, building alternatives to centralized and capitalist services, as fast as we can, focusing on the tech and products and ignoring the need for explicit,

democratic governance, we're going to fail. Alternative *tech* in itself is required, but not enough to build an alternative *service*.

It's time take a step back, to slow down and let people hop on the train. To do that, we have to educate ourselves, to consciously think about the decision process and the power dynamics at work inside the projects we're using or working on, establishing, documenting, tweaking or fixing those processes when needed.

Moreover, we have to develop a real culture of governance, that will help communities to overcome the same issues. I don't believe we can automate governance or attain democracy through tech, although, used wisely, tech can help. We can and should, however, share our tips, tricks, stories, successes and - especially - failures in order to develop this culture.

If you're a project maintainer, and your project does not have any explicit rules and processes for democratic decisions in place, consider starting a discussion with your community to address this problem. It does not have to happen overnight (and it probably shouldn't anyway). Any step you will make in that direction will pay off and remove some load and pressure from your shoulders.

In your communities, avoid treating project maintainers as heroes or benevolent dictators. Hero narratives have serious consequences for the supposed heroes, and pave the way to burn-out, depressions and other severe mental health issues. They are also toxic for the project and community well-being. As you may know, there is a very thin frontier between a hero and a villain.

Finally, don't be afraid to engage respectfully but firmly in discussions regarding topics that matters to you, to offer help, ask for guidance, take ownership.

Keyboards are fine, but if we're to grow something beautiful, we need to get our hands dirty.

Credits

This essay was heavily inspired and motivated by a talk entitled "Organisational Processes in Decentralized Software, given by Natacha Roussel and Zeyev, during Fosdem 2019¹. Especially, the

Alternative media

While we always propose to abandon capitalist networks, we also understand that they're currently the most massive platforms for public opinion. This turns them into spaces for struggle.

The strategy we have in these cases is to keep these networks, but at the same time, also publish in free and communitary networks. In this way, people that are migrating to them can keep up with the news. It also prevents the effect of joining a new space but abandoning it immediately because "there's no one to talk to".

For organizations

We've found that some collectives are using Facebook not only for public communications, but also for self-organization and decision-making. As Audre Lorde said "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house!" This means that even as Facebook provides groups, in its social model there's no room for horizontal organization. To Facebook, we're only individuals shouting opinions at each other.

There're other tools crafted for horizontal organization and consensus decision-making, like [Loomio](#). Loomio has been inspired by Occupy and it happens to be free software also. At Partido Interdimensional Pirata we've used it and we invite every collective to use it.

Regular uses

Sometimes we want to remove ourselves from capitalist network, but we can't because we'll left behind our affects, families, works, studies...

For these cases, we propose using alternative apps, so our devices won't betray us by giving away information we aren't publishing by ourselves. We can still participate, but more than less in our terms, instead of the ones imposed by corporations.

Tinfoil for Facebook or *Twidere*, by instance, are free software apps that allow us to access these capitalist networks without the official, gigantic and treacherous apps.

#LetsApostatize from mass-surveillance asocial networks

Partido Interdimensional Pirata

To **apostatize** is to renounce a (religious, political, etc.) belief. Collective Apostasy¹ is a grassroots campaign directed to people who were baptized at birth so they can collectively renounce to this sacrament. The objective is to stop being a statistic that the catholic church uses to interfere in public policy. Thanks to the baptism registry, the catholic church considers that 90% of Argentinians are catholic and for that they receive public funding, estimated at \$ 13.000.000.000 ARS¹ per year.

To apostatize from asocial networks of mass-surveillance doesn't mean to abandon every form of gathering, keeping ourselves informed, sharing or having interesting discussions. There're other social networks that are libre and communitary.

We propose several strategies and scenarios. If you were thinking about leaving Facebook (and Twitter, and Google, etc.), keep reading :)

Drastic

If you're fed up and you don't want to know anything else, you can close your accounts and come with us to the Fediverse.

The Fediverse is a network of interconnected communication nodes, that is, they federate. To talk with someone who's on Facebook, you need a Facebook account, and the same for Twitter, and for every other platform. In the Fediverse you just need to pick one of the many nodes, the one that looks more friendly, more trustable, and through it we can talk with every other.

Networks like Diaspora*, GNU Social, Mastodon, Friendica, Hubzilla, and others, are different software that allow any community to self-administer a node. If before this ability belonged only to corporations, now every collective can have it's own network and federate it with the rest.

"hero narrative" terminology and analysis owe a lot to Zeyev's interventions. The video for the talk should be published soon².

Many thanks to Maloki and all the contributors to the Florence (also known as Fork Together) project, who got their hands dirty and contributed to raise awareness about the need for democratic governance in the Fediverse space.

Finally, thanks to Mélanie for the proofreading!

1: https://fosdem.org/2019/schedule/event/organisational_processes_in_decentralized_software/

2: <https://video.fosdem.org/2019/UD2.218A/>

Fedidrama: this section is non-normative.

Luke Murphy

The success of federated social networking requires a widely adopted common protocol for server to server communication. If we ask today "which protocol", it's clear that ActivityPub (AP) must be considered, as nearly all communities with 100 or more servers listed on the-federation.info use software that implements the protocol.

AP has seen wide adoption and is increasingly being chosen by new federated software implementers. This building momentum is based on the effort and energy of a broad and decentralised movement that wishes to challenge the current paradigm of online social networking.

However, like its predecessors, OStatus and Pump.io, there is criticism of ambiguity and negligence in the specification. Diaspora* (251 servers, 684,294 users) developers have so far declined to implement AP citing ambiguity as their main concern. The "Security Considerations" section is marked in its entirety as "non-normative" and for implementers this has come to mean: "figure it out yourself". Some have understandably reacted with dismay: "can we just delete the entire Fediverse, try again, and actually care about security this time?", @puckipedia@puckipedia.com.

AP implementers are faced with numerous difficulties. Attempting to encode the ideas of a community's notion of social interaction with such ambiguity can result in an incompatible dialect of AP.

While diversity of AP implementation will always be a fact due to the differences in software, the incompatibilities in messages passed from server to server may result in a failure to uphold expectations of trust and privacy.

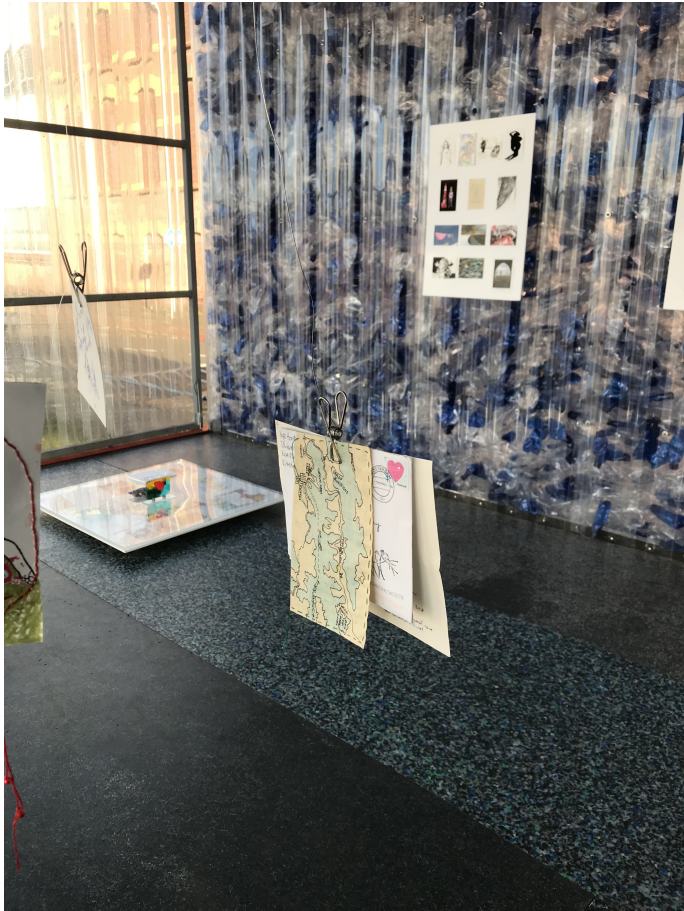
For example, if a content privacy policy specific to one community must be implemented and the AP specification does not provide a formalised way to describe it then the policy may not be honoured when messages arrive at another server. Private messages may be treated as public messages.

she was a little baby, is 9 now. We've been sending each other cards and gifts in the mail for years.

"Mail and its sweet content are so... heart warming." I wrote Louisa, "But I wonder if this communicates to other people?" To which she replied, "Let's do it! xxx"

It was very interesting to see that our brains were so aligned that we made such a similar image! I wrote Louisa a letter on the inside of the paper, vaguely visible through the thin material, and drew the Queen Charlotte region in New Zealand, where I biked around during my stay on that side of the world. Louisa has been working with imagery and outlines from clouds, and the spaces between them. From our bird's eye view, the islands below seem to mirror the sky above quite well.

V-mail displayed all the works submitted, and auctioned them to raise money for their future projects. A really nice way to crowdfund, with the makers donating work, the audience buying art and everyone involved supporting the organization. In line with other typically roundabout conceptual collaborative mail art conventions, we decided to send each other a message by way of the venue in Hengelo. We put instructions on our mail, for the buyer/donator, asking them to complete the work by sending the addressed mail to me in Rotterdam, or to Louisa in Australia. Our letters raised some questions with the curator, who thought we were asking them to return the mail, which they explicitly stated they wouldn't do as the cards would hopefully be sold. After emailing back and forth, she got really excited about the idea, and displayed our works next to each other, already meeting, before arriving on our doorstep.



These cards are made by Louisa Bufardecì (Melbourne, AUS) and Inge Hoonte (Rotterdam, NL) for the V-mail art show in the Stork Pavillion in Hengelo during International Women's Day 2019. On a Saturday afternoon in February, I suddenly really felt like doing a mail art project, so I looked for some opportunities to send things to. The closest deadline was V-mail, and I'd been wanting to do a project with my friend Louisa, so I asked her to join. She lives in Australia, and I visited her for a few weeks last year, after not having seen each other for 8 years (except via Skype). Louisa, her husband and I became friends in grad school in Chicago, and we all lived in Brooklyn the years after that. Their daughter Gena, my goddaughter, who I'd last held when

The opposite is unfortunately also possible: privacy requirements of one community can be considered dangerous by another. As explained by @kaniini@pleroma.site in "The Case For Blind Key Rotation", activists who require plausible deniability are at risk when implementations require irrevocable authentication signatures.

Proposals for improved security measures are already being discussed. The efforts of @cwebber@octodon.social's work in progress "PolaPub" document, the OCAP-LD W3C draft and @kaniini@pleroma.site's "What would ActivityPub look like with capability-based security, anyway?" suggest a backwards compatible approach to delivering a well established and powerful security design.

A promising vision of such a process is described in "ActivityPub: Good Enough for Jazz" by @jdormit@mastodon.technology where a parallel is drawn between the development of HTTP and AP: a community consensus process which can deliver improvements to the protocol.

However, with the W3C reputation in question (approval of digital rights restriction recommendation scandal) as well as new focus on the SOLID platform, it is not clear whether they'll play a central role in the next iteration of the protocol.

Online forums such as socialhub.network are creating a space for such discussions and the possibility of a community-based "ActivityPubConf" is already on the horizon.

Despite the unknowns and in opposition to the walled gardens of the Twitters and the Facebooks, the federated social networking project continues to show great promise. As @cwebber@octodon.social warned us in the closing of the FOSDEM 2019 ActivityPub panel: "The Fediverse is people, it's people!".

Why does decentralization matter?

Eugen Rochko

This article was first published as a Mastodon blog post¹.

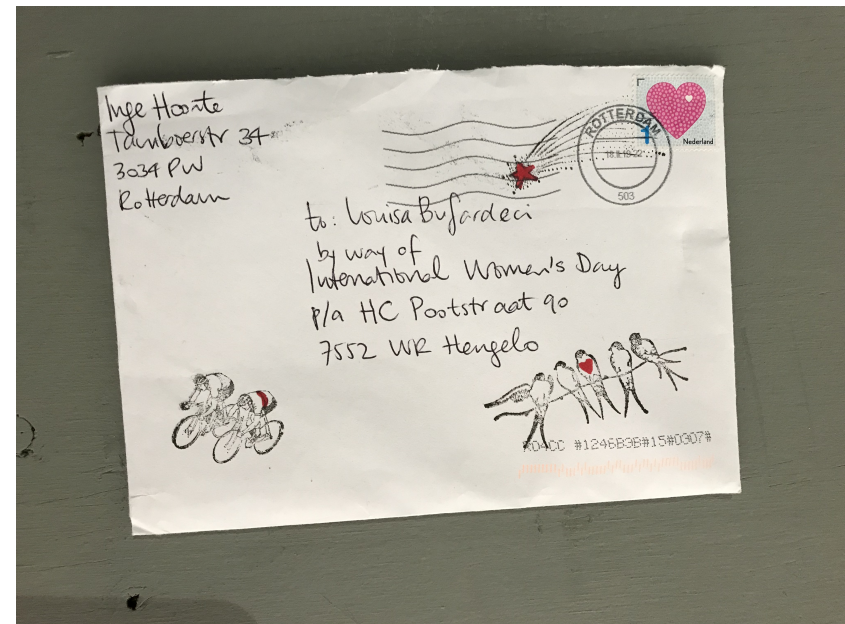
I've been writing about Mastodon for two whole years now, and it occurred to me that at no point did I lay out why anyone should care about decentralization in clear and concise text. I have, of course, explained it in interviews, and you will find some of the arguments here and there in promotional material, but this article should answer that question once and for all.

decentralization, noun: The dispersion or distribution of functions and powers; The delegation of power from a central authority to regional and local authorities.

fediverse, noun: The decentralized social network formed by Mastodon, Pleroma, Misskey and others using the ActivityPub standard.

So why is it a big deal? Decentralization upends the social network business model by dramatically reducing operating costs. It absolves a single entity of having to shoulder all operating costs alone. No single server needs to grow beyond its comfort zone and financial capacity. As the entry cost is near zero, an operator of a Mastodon server does not need to seek venture capital, which would pressure them to use large-scale monetization schemes. There is a reason why Facebook executives rejected the \$1 per year business model of WhatsApp after its acquisition: It is sustainable and fair, but it does not provide the same unpredictable, potentially unbounded return of investment that makes stock prices go up. Like advertising does.

If you are Facebook, that's good for you. But if you are a user of Facebook... The interests of the company and the user are at odds with each other, from which the old adage comes that if you are not paying, you are the product. And it shines through in dark patterns like defaulting to non-chronological feeds (because it's hard to tell if you've seen everything on the page before, it leads to more scrolling or refreshing, which leads to more ad impressions), sending e-mails about unread notifications that



My dear Louisa / My friend Inge

Inge Hoonte and Louisa Bufardecì



don't actually exist, tracking your browsing behaviour across the internet to find out who you are..

Decentralization is biodiversity of the digital world, the hallmark of a healthy ecosystem. A decentralized network like the fediverse allows different user interfaces, different software, different forms of government to co-exist and cooperate. And when some disaster strikes, some will be more adapted to it than others, and survive what a monoculture wouldn't. You don't have to think long for recent examples-consider the FOSTA/SESTA bill passed in the US, which turned out to be awful for sex workers, and which affected every mainstream social network because they are all based in the US. In Germany, sex work is legal, so why should sex workers in Germany be unable to take part in social media?

A decentralized network is also more resilient to censorship-and I do mean the real kind, not the "they won't let me post swastikas" kind. Some will claim that a large corporation can resist government demands better. But in practice, commercial companies struggle to resist government demands from markets where they want to operate their business. See for example Google's lackluster opposition to censorship in China and Twitter's regular blocks of Turkish activists. The strength of a decentralized network here is in numbers-some servers will be blocked, some will comply, but not all. And creating new servers is easy.

Last but not least, decentralization is about fixing power asymmetry. A centralized social media platform has a hierarchical structure where rules and their enforcement, as well as the development and direction of the platform, are decided by the CEO, with the users having close to no ways to disagree. You can't walk away when the platform holds all your friends, contacts and audience. A decentralized network deliberately relinquishes control of the platform owner, by essentially not having one. For example, as the developer of Mastodon, I have only an advisory influence: I can develop new features and publish new releases, but cannot force anyone to upgrade to them if they don't want to; I have no control over any Mastodon server except my own, no more than I have control over any other website on the internet. That means the network is not subject to my whims; it can adapt to situations faster than I can, and it can serve use cases I couldn't have predicted.

Any alternative social network that rejects decentralization will ultimately struggle with these issues. And if it won't perish like those that tried and failed before it, it will simply become that which it was meant to replace.

1: <https://blog.joinmastodon.org/2018/12/why-does-decentralization-matter/>

Explosions of Sociality in High Places

Gui Machiavelli

XMPP-infused patches of witchcraft herbs rain down from the loving embrace of machines of terrible grace in a move that can be perceived both as threat and rich, succulent disruption – the distinction is either lost or unimportant as pulsating tendrils overpower constructive social efforts and can only force involuntary tinkering with gregarious furnaces of reshaped languages which are body parts which are discourse. This discourse takes the shape of a thumbnail, an avatar of mixed omens served with a wave of the hand of a self-declared divinity that believes in the dialectics of being in one's own living room sitting on a throne of seductive data that entice you, beckon you.

A first lashing, a second lashing, mediocre systems of magic surrounded by sweatshop-built dolls whose mouths spout consumerist mantras when you press their bellies. The centre of the centre, pragmatism and ill-at-ease ease-of-use, blob syndication, a resistance to unionising; mechanised scabs, the lot of you. Syndicalised content, lyricism exposed, her plump hairy breasts tingle at the ping of your circuitry but you're too far away, beyond the updated terms and conditions, behind patreonised steamrollers who have a huge following in a timeline you probably never heard about. In it, neopets have recently become presidential and you would vote for them, except you never fancied cleaning tamagotchi piss, which in any case is also used as the foundation for a hot new network if you don't mind wearing bell bottoms – strictly mandatory I'm afraid; protocols won't protocol otherwise, you see.

A bot army of mastodontic meme sculptors carry you off into the sunset. Their leader, many wintermutes old, is clad in all-black antifa apparel. His network runs on small potatoes wired together with umbilical chords that sound divine if you treat them right. "Precarious velour feels heavenly to the touch," he said. DANICE and sir TBL beatbox The Internationale, a tankie cries on a corner after being dissed by a verified infant latina news anchor. A bird tweets and a garbage collector gargles a mix of spam and influencer spit.

price. To measure how much I'm worth as a product, I created a system called 'data stocks' inspired by the stock exchange. You will be your own stock, and all types of data you produce are the shares – the value of every share resolute from your behavior in the system I created to calculate these.

Knowledge and understanding of data economy are essential, to make steps towards a well- regulated data-driven society. To share my research, thought and observations on this, I created The Attention Fair. An experimental installation where the audience learns about this through a variety of games, experiments, and visuals. For example, a card game in which you have to gather online behavior patterns, a gambling game where your data is the revenue, a display of 'products' that are for sale, an experiment about inflation and deflation on the value of the behavior, a visual language for privacy policies and some more.

Whether or not it will be the best solution to start selling our own information, the production of data is labor. Labor that is becoming more intensive and frequent. Currently, the profit of that labor isn't yours. You have been enslaved by the data-business.

With awareness about the opportunities of how data can improve your life and our society in combination with the regulations to protect how to share these wisely and a technology that supports new systems: You will be the one in control. You shouldn't be forced to accept policies, but being the one who creates them. You should be the owner of your data. You are the product of your own information.

Join the campaign :i:am the product of my own information

www.attentionfair.com

:i:am the product of my own information

Julia Janssen

"We have been enslaved by the data-business" A phrase I used for the first time in March 2016. At that time I was graduating as a graphic designer from the ArtEZ Institute of Arts, in Arnhem, the Netherlands. Never could I have expected that three years later, this phrase completely dominates my practice as a designer.

When entering a website, the first thing you do is click 'agree' on the cookies and privacy statement. Long, dry and legal text nobody reads. But mainly with that one click, you are accepting more and just one agreement. www.dailymail.co.uk, for example, is positioned in a so-called 'trusted-third-party hosting network.' Meaning if you click 'agree' you agree with all policies in their network. In this case resulting, through that one click, you agree with 835 privacy policies. You're left in the dark when it comes to who owns your data. You are in no position of control.

Companies like Google, Facebook, and Amazon gain revenue out of the data you produce when using their service. Either by selling information to other parties or to analyze and learn about behavior, for personalizing content. In 2018, Google stroke a profit of \$116.32 billion by selling targeted advertisements. The old statement "knowledge is power" might be overused, but it is more accurate than ever. Information is becoming one of the most valuable assets in our society. Meaning the one controlling it will become the most powerful one.

It's a shame that the main focus on data is at the commercial aspect. Data also means opportunities to improve healthcare, infrastructure, education, sustainability, security, leisure, and much more. The Internet is a new era, and we are just exploring its possibilities.

Companies who discovered the financial benefits in an early stage are now dominating the world economy – a concerning development. We have to look beyond advertising models, and change our sense of privacy to see the full benefits of a data-driven society.

After a period of scandals like Cambridge Analytics, data leaks, and whistleblowers, the topic has been critically examined by

media. A desirable development cause it shows the urge of the situation. But it also created primary negative imaging on the subject. Most people only got in contact with these matters due to new reports about 'government is spying on you,' 'search three times for bomb and the FBI knocks on your door' and 'companies are controlling your brain.'

Majority of people are still using these services, although they know their privacy might be in jeopardy, cause there isn't offered so much of a fair option here. Online searching, ordering, streaming and communicating became an extension of life. The internet is about being easy, user-friendly and efficient. There are alternatives to avoid tech-giants, but mainly these are time-consuming, less of quality, excluded from services your friends are using and not accessible (or even visible) for regular internet users. Also, there is a big gap between how people think and act when it comes to privacy.

If I ask you if you care about your privacy, you'll probably say "Yes I do." But if a similar question is asked in a pop-up while you're browsing: "Do you agree with our privacy policy?" you likely don't think twice, click 'agree' and continue browsing without a clue what permission you just gave. The concerns about privacy are real, but the crave to access all the wonderful things the Internet provide triumphs.

Ownership of your data shouldn't be a choice, privilege or labor-intensive activity. The infrastructure of the internet and the technology that is connected should be designed in a way that only allows people to control their information. May 25th, 2018, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) went into effect. The legislation, developed to more strictly monitor companies on data use, raised the tendency to think that the problem is now 'fixed'. But this issue is way more fundamental than a law about what companies may and may not do. For instance: GDPR gives you the right to be forgotten and data portability. But how can you apply to be forgotten, if you can't figure out (due to trusted-third-party hosting networks) where your data are located?

This year, we celebrate 25 years of the World Wide Web. A system that at first has been invented for communication and sharing knowledge. Companies like Amazon and eBay started selling things like books, retail, and electronics online. But who could have foreseen that not the products they were offering but the

information, the knowledge that is communicated, would become their most essential product?

The knowledge in your data isn't just one-on-one information. Netflix, for example, knows way more than what kind of movies you like and series you binge-watch. When you press pause, algorithms start calculating why: bathroom? Snack-break? Are you opening another browser? Calling a friend? Answering an email? Do you find it too scary? Boring? Or are you getting intimate with your partner, or yourself? Way deeper layers of who you are, then if you prefer romcoms over horror movies.

We are increasing our connectivity with platforms, smart technologies, and devices. Meaning the amount of data we produce is ballooning, and so are the details and intimacy in this information. When we don't seriously start controlling who owns these data, tech-giants will expand their power and monopolized position. Netflix started as a platform that made all types of entertainment accessible and cheap to watch. Currently, it's spending less than 15% of its income on licensing content, and almost 85% on creating their own. Netflix's own content is viral, due to data analyzes. They know exactly how people consume entertainment: how many times you scroll over a title before you watch it, after how many episodes you're hooked to a show, and after what number of minutes something must happen to hold your attention. Lately, it's often said that Google knows you better than you know yourself. Netflix might know you better than you thought there was to be known about you.

Considering these developments, the ownership rights of data are vital. We have to think beyond symptom management and radically change the way data are stored and shared. The Internet's infrastructure currently supports that your activities on a website automatically are stored on their server. Imagine a new infrastructure, designed in a way that all information you produce, is stored on your server. Data should become something that companies don't want to own but may access with valid consent.

Over the past years, I've been investigating in these systems and especially the economic value of information. One thing became evident to me: I'm not a customer of Amazon, nor a user of Facebook. I am their product. My online behavior, preferences, habits, desires, and contacts are the ingredients that define my