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Chapter 1

Exploring Mastodon

You've probably heard that Mastodon is the open-source Twitter or a Twitter alternative. There's certainly some truth to those definitions, but they don't really tell you all that much about Mastodon itself.

It's true that Mastodon is a microblogging service like Twitter. You can post short messages of up to 500 characters that friends and strangers can read and respond to. You can share links to news, information, photos, and video from across the internet.

But Mastodon is far from being a Twitter clone. It operates on a different economic model and isn't owned by anyone, especially a celebrity billionaire.

In this chapter, you find out how Mastodon works in the broader scheme of things. We provide a more detailed comparison with Twitter, definitions of terms you'll encounter while exploring Mastodon, a little bit of history, and more. If you're anxious to get started using Mastodon, feel free to skip to the next chapter. We understand. Come back to this chapter when you're ready.

A Brief Definition of Mastodon

At the <https://mastodon.help> site, they answer the question “What is Mastodon?” this way:

A good way to describe the network is by saying that Mastodon is a ‘galaxy of interconnected social networks based on a common platform.’

Mastodon isn’t just one site, like Twitter.com and Facebook.com. The first choice you’ll make when you decide to create an account is what star (or *instance*) in this galaxy of sites to call home. (Chapter 2 walks you through the steps.)

Each of these sites runs the Mastodon software (the *common platform*). Once you have a home on a site running the Mastodon software, you can connect with people on other sites running Mastodon.

However, there are exceptions to your ability to connect. Your site administrator can choose to block connections to some or all Mastodon instances for whatever reason. Most often, blocking happens because a particular site’s users frequently harass other people, produce spam, or engage in some other bad behavior. We talk more about your ability to block individuals and servers in Chapter 3.

You may wonder where all these instances came from. Perhaps more to the point, how does Mastodon pay its bills? There are two parts to that answer.

Mastodon’s code is open source, and the person who wrote the code doesn’t charge anyone to use it. But just because the Mastodon software doesn’t cost anything doesn’t mean there aren’t costs to running Mastodon. Internet service providers don’t connect sites to the internet for free. The web servers that host the content on Mastodon cost money to operate and maintain. Parts break and need to be replaced. Larger instances serving thousands of users need more than a volunteer admin (or even a squad of volunteers) to keep everything going.

Twitter and other big tech companies solve this problem by selling targeted advertising to companies that want to reach specific types of people. Everything you do on their platforms is tracked: The posts you like, the posts you share, the topics you post on, and more. Many of them track all your travels on the internet through browser cookies. Your privacy doesn't matter to them.

Mastodon doesn't work like that. The vast majority of instances don't accept ads, and many block access from instances that do sell ads.

In your travels around Mastodon, you'll see many reminders to "tip your bartenders." The folks who manage Mastodon instances usually have a way for users to contribute to the instance's expenses, either directly, through a foundation, or through a platform such as Patreon or Kickstarter. The best administrators are transparent about expenses, posting the monthly expenses of the instance, and describe in some detail where your contributions go. Be generous if you can.

A Brief History of Mastodon

Mastodon was announced on HackerNews.com in October 2016 by its German creator, Eugen Rochko (gargron@mastodon.social). See Figure 1-1. It quickly became a sensation, in part because Twitter was thought to be in financial trouble, unable to sell enough advertising.

In its first two years, the Mastodon network grew to 1,627,557 registered users on 3,460 servers.

Many of those early users were people obsessed with technology and privacy, and the perceived difficulty of getting started led to some stagnation. But while other social media services, such as Google Plus, were disappearing, Mastodon continued plodding onward. Mastodon's slow-but-steady growth profile changed massively in April 2022, when Elon Musk started making noises about wanting to buy Twitter. When he succeeded in September, a race to the exits began, and millions came to explore Mastodon.

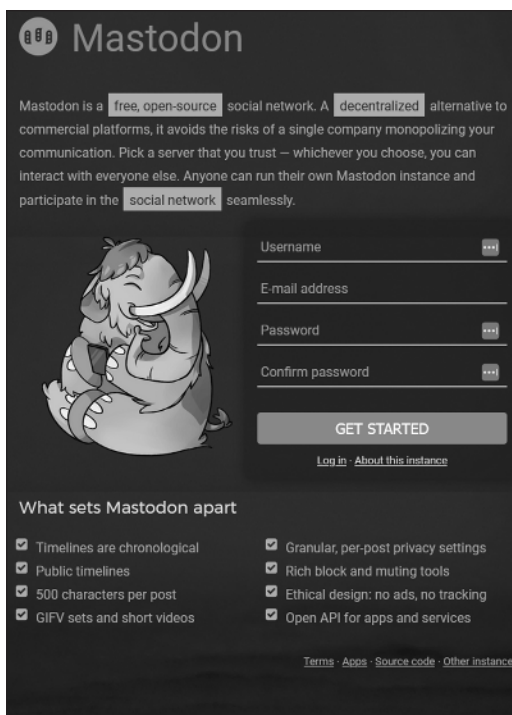


FIGURE 1-1: A Wayback Machine image of the mastodon.social about page on May 6, 2017.

In November 2022, Rochko announced that Mastodon had reached 1,028,362 monthly active users. By January 2023, Mastodon had 9 million registered users and 12,000 servers. The volume of posts on Mastodon had reached 500 million per month, according to the Fediverse Observer (<https://mastodon.fediverse.observer/stats>), a site that tracks various usage statistics for Mastodon and similar federated social sites. (See “Welcome to the Fediverse!” later in the chapter to learn more about the Fediverse.)

Comparing Mastodon to Twitter

In this section, we describe some of the main differences between Mastodon and Twitter.

On Mastodon, conversation is the focus

Patrick Hogan described Mastodon in 2017 as “a social media service where users actually feel comfortable being themselves, as opposed to a performative, more sarcastic version of who they actually are.”

Many people arrive on Twitter looking to raise their public profile, gain millions of followers, and go viral. Certainly some people have become media pundits and celebrities by way of their Twitter posts.

On Mastodon, however, being sociable, informative, and authentic is more important. A Mastodon instance is better thought of as a neighborhood rather than a stage. You don’t have to be smart-alecky to be respected.

In addition, before getting an account on a Mastodon instance, you sign on to a code of conduct. Although the code of conduct can go into detail regarding what is and isn’t allowed, the code is often simply a lengthy version of “while you’re on here, be nice.” (You learn more about codes of conduct when you set up your account in Chapter 2.)

Mastodon is a home, not a site

If you want to tweet, you go to Twitter.com, get an account, agree to the terms of service (whether you read all that legalese or not), and start tweeting. Twitter may not ask much of you as a user, but you pay a price.

You have no stake in Twitter as a company, except as an unpaid content contributor. Twitter polls run by the CEO aren’t binding and wouldn’t be even if a majority of participants were stockholders.

Every Mastodon server instance is an island to itself but interconnected. Instance administrators and moderators are not gods and can’t make any decisions beyond that instance. That’s true even for founder Eugen Rochko.

The vast majority of Mastodon sites seek to be safe and friendly spaces for all kinds of users. You should feel like you’re at home here.

Mastodon is built to serve its community

Mastodon is not driven by its financial bottom line nor the whims of venture capitalists, Wall Street traders, and hedge fund managers. It's driven to serve its users and the community.

If the founder or his heirs were to sell the mastodon.social site, where Mastodon was born, each user could easily move to another Mastodon instance, taking their posts and followers with them.

If you've found a home with a group of admins and moderators that serve you and the community at large, consider helping to keep the servers (and the community) running with a financial contribution that fits your budget.

Algorithms aren't allowed on Mastodon

Twitter started out as a place where you read the tweets of the people you followed in reverse-chronological order (as you do in blogs). But as the service grew, Twitter developed algorithms to figure out what you liked and shared on the service. The purpose of the algorithm was to keep you scrolling through your feed. You got what the algorithm thought you wanted, but you also saw more ads as the session continued. More eyeballs on ads, more money for Twitter.

As politicians and politically oriented people found a way to get followers, raise money, and gain influence on the service, ordinary users found themselves in a filter bubble, where they saw only things with which they agreed. Debate, where it existed at all, became toxic. Misinformation flourished. Some people started calling Twitter a hellscape because of all the angry tweets that the algorithm promoted into people's feeds.

No Twitter user ever got to opt-out of the algorithm's role in managing their feeds. There was never a vote among users to implement the algorithm when it was first developed. Programmers from outside the company couldn't review the algorithm to determine its effect on people's emotions.

In contrast, Mastodon displays every post from every user and hashtag you follow. You may still spend hours scrolling through

interesting posts by fascinating people, but at least you know that Mastodon won't try to manipulate you to stay longer on the platform.

Users aren't tracked on Mastodon

The same forces (sometimes called *surveillance capitalism*) that created algorithms also created the cookie, that tiny slice of code that lives in your browser and tracks your movements across the platform and elsewhere. The cookie's owner aims to understand the things you're interested in or curious about — the better to sell your social graph to advertisers.

The Mastodon focus on privacy actively discourages cookies. Nearly every instance offers strict rules on such behavior, and should an instance permit it, that instance would likely be blocked by most other Mastodon instances.

Don't bet on this changing anytime soon.

Ads aren't acceptable (yet) on Mastodon

The initial burst of enthusiasm for Mastodon came when Twitter appeared to be placing its financial stability on selling more advertising on the platform. The Great Mastodon Migration of 2022, which came next, was made up of users and advertisers who didn't want to be associated with Twitter's new owner.

On Mastodon, most codes of conduct discourage excessive advertising, and what's excessive has mostly counted in single digits. The exceptions are the online equivalent of yard sales, art shows, community theater, and musical performances.

The Mastodon focus on community-building frowns on personal branding at least as much as on corporate branding. However, businesses aren't banned, and if you're in business, you can post about it all you want. (We offer tips for businesses to succeed on Mastodon in Chapter 6.) What won't fly are targeted ads based on trackers and algorithms, as noted previously. Mastodon isn't perfect, but its ideals are high.

Welcome to the Fediverse!

The *fediverse* is a collection of websites and social networks that in some ways looks back fondly on the early days of the World Wide Web. When Sir Tim Berners-Lee created the web, he envisioned it as a collaboration tool, with sites offering read-write access to any visitor. Aside from wiki sites (such as Wikipedia) and blogs that accept reader comments, today's web is largely a space for one-way communication.

Mastodon encourages its users to collaborate by putting the focus on conversation and discussion. It's easy to participate in a conversation by selecting the post's reply icon. The Fediverse expands that idea beyond just Mastodon into other services.



TIP

The fediverse, which is a combination of *federated* and *universe*, got its name for the federated connections between independent websites on the social web.

The foundation of the fediverse, and Mastodon as well, is the ActivityPub protocol, recognized as a web standard by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). Developers use the standard to power a variety of federated alternatives for organizing events, sharing music, and just hanging out. (You can learn more about ActivityPub at <https://activitypub.rocks>.)



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The boring, technical way to describe the ActivityPub standard is that it “provides a client to server API for creating, updating and deleting content, as well as a federated server to server API for delivering notifications and subscribing to content.” Mastodon first used a protocol called OStatus, an open standard that enables microblogging, but switched to ActivityPub in 2017.

For the last decade or so, the IndieWeb movement (<https://indieweb.com>) has been building some of the social web standards that power Mastodon, especially the ActivityPub protocol, but for individual websites. IndieWeb focuses on your ability to control your content and connect with the people you want to connect with, with no one using your stuff to get others to sell you things you may not want.



WARNING

Do not confuse *fediverse* with *metaverse*! The metaverse started as a creation in the mind of speculative fiction author Neal Stephenson in his fantastic novel *Snow Crash*, where it served as the escape hatch from the dystopia in which most people lived, where the only jobs were in high tech and high-speed pizza delivery. The dystopia was the society. Today, the metaverse is a virtual reality that Facebook (excuse us, Meta) billionaire Mark Zuckerberg wants to use to make even more money.

The fediverse is a much more pleasant place, where the users rule. And if profits are even a consideration, they come after the people who participate.

Understanding Federation

When you're starting out with Mastodon, wrapping your head around the idea of a *federation* can be maddening.

Not to overwhelm you with community metaphors, but think about the following facets of neighborhoods:

- » Life might be pretty much the same from neighborhood to neighborhood, but some places have different social rules. Violating those rules can get you in trouble. In some neighborhoods, you must live there for many years before you can even call yourself a resident!
- » Although your neighborhood might have regular elections for city council members and other leaders, you might also have a person active in the community who is so respected that they're called the mayor of the neighborhood.
- » If you have an active neighborhood association, they probably have events to raise money for various programs to improve life in the neighborhood. While the city government pays for a lot of things (and usually has taxing power), neighborhood associations often pay for things such as flowers in common areas.
- » You can change your residence from one neighborhood to another without getting permission from the city or the neighborhoods involved (condominium association boards notwithstanding).

All this is true also in the virtual world of Mastodon:

- » Every Mastodon instance (neighborhood) has a code of conduct that you have to agree to before you join (move in). Violating the code of conduct can get you in trouble (a suspension or worse).
- » Regardless of whether your instance has a governing board, the administrator is definitely the permanent mayor, in charge of keeping things going.
- » While your instance administration can't tax you (yet) to keep the servers running, you do have an obligation to help out if you can. As the mother instance, <https://mastodon.social> helps other instances financially, but each independent instance has to keep the lights on.
- » Aside from a disciplinary situation, it's easy to change your Mastodon neighborhood — and bring all your friends with you.
- » If you ever need to move your account to another instance, check out the following for instructions: <https://docs.joinmastodon.org/user/moving>.



TIP