

Organizing, Mutual Aid, and Activism

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Slides downloadable at
thenexusofprivacy.net/data/fediforum-1008.pdf

Welcome! A few quick reminders

- We are dedicated to providing a positive, inclusive, and harassment-free experience for everyone – see the [FediForum Code of Conduct](#)
- No racism, ableism (including mental health shaming and stigmatization), sexism, microaggressions, gaslighting, sea-lioning, trolling, bullying, calling group members names, personal attack or harassment are allowed.
- If there are any problems, let me know – or the FediForum staff, via email at fediforum@proton.me or [@fediforum@mastodon.social](https://mstdn.social/@fediforum) (Mastodon DM)
- We're using a riseup pad for notes. Please help if you can!

Goals

- Share learnings to date – and get feedback
- Lay groundwork for kicking off working groups on key short-term projects
- Find out about similar projects and people with aligned interests, potential partners, barriers to progress

Agenda

- Background
 - The project and progress to date
 - Learnings
 - “Pluriverse” model
 - Three short-term areas
- Discussion
- Action items and next steps

About the project

“Mutual aid. Organizing. Sharing, contextualizing, and making meaning of news and health information to counter propaganda and information overload. The use cases for decentralized social networks – not controlled by techbro white supremacist CEO's working with their cronies in authoritarian governments – practically write themselves in today's world. And with so many talented social scientists, designers, systems thinkers, and developers directly impacted by DOGE, MAGA, et al, there are a lot of people with the right skills for these new networks to make rapid progress.

The good news is there's a lot of promising work happening in the decentralized social media ecosystems known as the fediverses ("federated universes") and the ATmosphere (a fediverse built on Bluesky's AT Protocol).... Still, as promising as these efforts are, there's still a long ways to go.”

– [If not now, when?](#)

Some open questions in today's political climate ...

- With protest getting criminalized, how long will public social network organizing be feasible?
- With dissenters getting targeted, how long will sharing news and discussions on public social networks be safe?
- With increasing surveillance, how long will private-but-not-encrypted social network organizing be safe?
- How can we use whatever time window we have effectively?

What do organizers use social media for?

Public communications

- getting the word out about events, action alerts, programs
- recruiting new people
- fundraising and asking for resources
- messaging
- sharing and contextualizing accurate news and information
- countering disinformation and propaganda
- connecting with journalists, politicians, civil society orgs

“Private” (ish) communications:

- within a group's leadership team
- between leadership and members
 - announcements
 - questions and answers
 - polls and surveys
 - discussions
- cross-group
 - coalitions of different groups
 - chapters in a distributed org
 - working groups of individuals
- sharing secure contact info
- initial contacts for “outsiders”

Social networks are **not** good for secure communications

- Use Signal, Germ, or some other messenger with strong encryption!
- Make sure you check who's in your group chat!!!!

But a Signal-only approach isn't enough:

- Hard to catch up on if you're not online all the time
- Notifications are overwhelming if you're in more than a few groups (or in large groups)
- Not useful for public communications

Today's decentralized social networks are prototypes

Need to take a multi-pronged approach

- Find ways to leverage and improve the current prototypes
- Build whatever comes next
- Help people move from corporate social networks - without losing their support networks, ties to communities, and connections with friends and family
- Find ways to help organizers and activists who still need to operate on corporate social networks.

Progress so far

- [Notes \(and thoughts\) on organizing in the fediverses and the ATmosphere](#), focusing on perspectives of US-based progressive activists and the possibilities of current tools
- [More notes on Organizing, Mutual Aid, and Activism on decentralized social networks](#), where the first concrete actions started surfacing
- [Notes on genocide prevention and other kinds of organizing, mutual aid, and activism on social networks](#)
- FediForum [slides](#) and [notes](#)

Goals for first phase

- Prioritize some needs for key organizing, mutual aid, and activism use cases
 - Yes! We came up with an overall list, and a few candidate short-term projects:
- Present to partners incentivized to make progress
 - Multiple discussions, and everybody likes the ideas ...

but ...

Everybody's got a lot on their plate already, and so we haven't yet succeeded in sparking significant movement on any of these projects

Oh well. If changing the world were easy, everybody would do it.

High level use cases

- Genocide prevention in multiple languages
- Collective sense-making
- Safety and community defense – online, and helping in the physical world
- Mutual Aid
- Anti-fascist, anti-racist, pro-LGBTQIA2S+ organizing spaces
- Influencing broader narratives
- Amplifying public actions, events, media coverage, announcements, etc
- Developing, refining, and communicating strategy, plans, and priorities
- Inviting, recruiting, and onboarding new people (while remaining conscious of the risks of infiltration)
- Working in coalitions
- Disaster response
- Legislative and electoral activism
- Resisting authoritarian governments
- Finding community, support, respite, and joy

Key functionality from anti-genocide activists ... and other use cases too!

- A safe online space, including
 - Context-aware moderation including languages other than English
 - Better solutions than blocklists
 - Quick intervention mechanism
 - Risk escalation level
 - Robust mechanisms for deplatforming bad actors
 - Non-public discussions: Facebook Group alternative
- Holding important information for longer periods so it doesn't get lost into the abyss – more than just pinning posts
- Widely disseminating information on commercial social networks, despite the intense censorship

Fedi and ATmosphere
potentially have major
strengths here

????

Huge gap today!

????

“Design for pluriverse” including
bridges and low-tech (manual)
approaches

Some learnings so far ...

- [Pluriverse model](#): multiple networks, not just decentralized social networks
 - Friendly-ish, neutral/contested, and hostile spaces
 - Also consider low-tech approaches – and connecting to offline
- Huge challenges for people looking to explore alternatives (“onboarding”)
 - How to find or create community that shares values?
 - “Local-first” approach works well – help collectives, groups, etc find their own paths to join
 - If somebody wants to help, how to find a project with needs that match skills and availability?
 - Unless something changes, influx of new people is likely to reinforce current power dynamics
 - Accessibility problems, safety issues: many people can’t fully participate
 - US/Europe focus, anti-Blackness in fedi, anti-transmasculinity and transmisogyny, ...
- No effective [decentralized substrate](#) (better term welcome!) in fedi or across networks
 - What are well-known sites people can go to for general-purpose info?
 - This could help with onboarding too
 - No effective discussion channels in fedi
 - Resist temptation to take a centralized approach here!
- “Positive deviance” approach: learn from what Blacksky, Tech for Palestine and others are doing well – and find ways to help them

A pluriverse: multiple social networks

See Engine Room's report on [Exploring a transition to alternative social media platforms for social justice organizations in the Majority World](#)

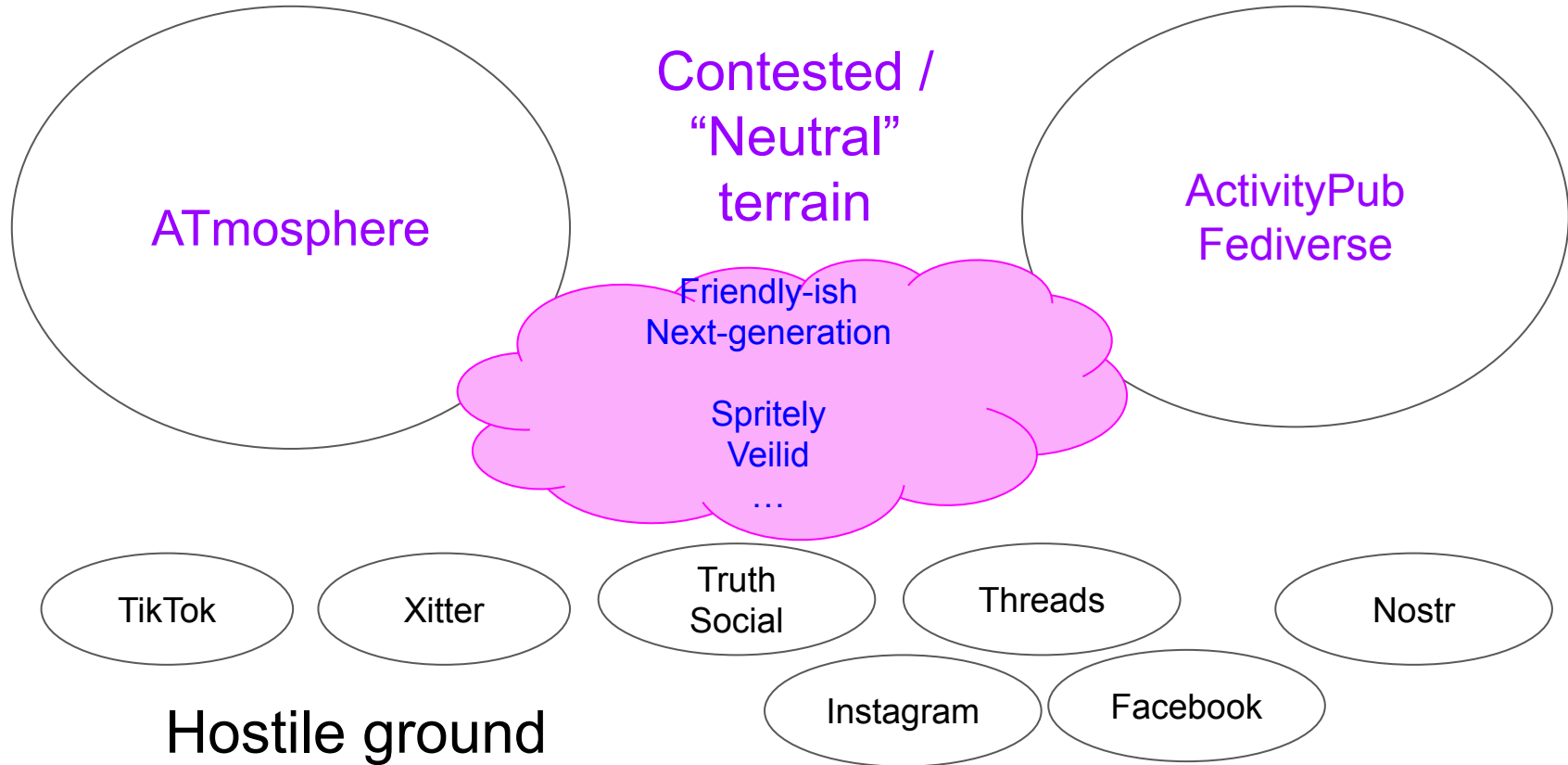
Need to think about operating in different kinds of spaces

- Friendly(ish) spaces, where we (mostly) control the platforms and maybe even the software
 - Can provide more safety and faster tech/social improvement here – but lower reach
- Contested and “neutral” terrain
- Hostile ground, platforms and software, controlled by and/or supporting fascists, eugencists, genocide perpetrators, white supremacists, etc
 - The technology and policies are stacked against us
 - It's where most people are today, so we need to operate there

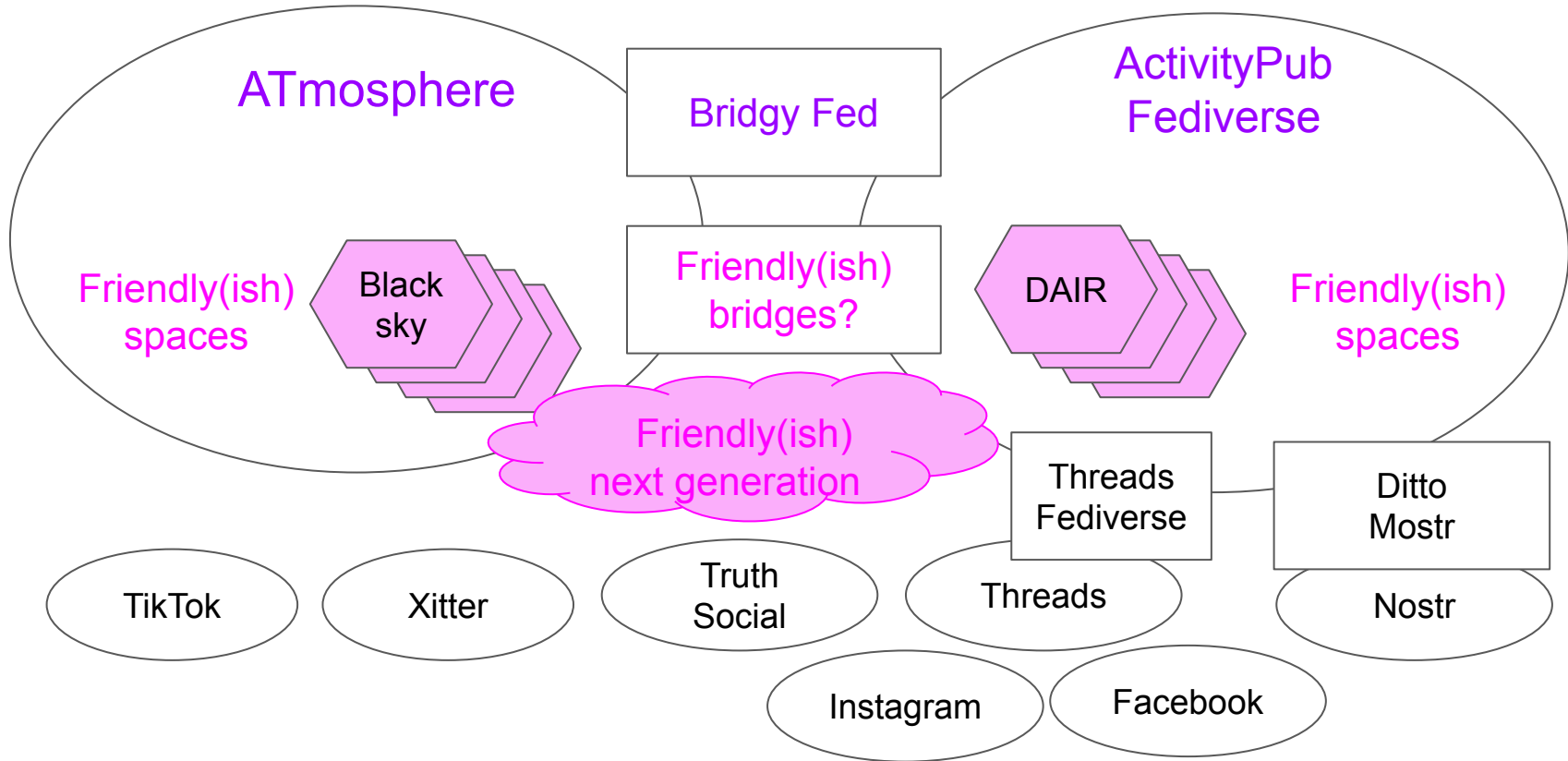
Communities span networks. So do apps, bridges, and “low-tech” tactics

- cut-and-pasting, sending a link to a friend, list of accounts to block in a file, taking notes on paper, in-person discussions

A simplified network architecture (not to scale)



A simplified network architecture (not to scale)



Gaps across today's tech stack

- **Accessibility** (disability, income, language, [Global Majority needs](#), ...)
- Focus on **safety** for marginalized people (including [threat modeling](#))
- [Design Justice](#) and [Design from the Margins](#) perspectives
- [Consent-based architectures](#)
- Communicating across differences (language, background, norms and customs, terminology, education/expertise)
- Offline-first
- Trauma-informed design
- Security and privacy
- “Distros” – packaged tech stack, with social support
- Ecosystem of coops, non-exploitative small business and individuals, community-focused non-profits, etc
- Focus on well-being and joy

Three areas to focus on over the next few months

- Accessibility (considered broadly)
 - Initial project: improving software/website accessibility (“a11y”)
- Safety
 - Initial project: keyword muting / racial slurs
- Substrate, including
 - High-quality generally-useful info (like resources in reading list)
 - Discussions across fediverse / across networks, because the absence of good mechanisms for this makes it hard to get feedback on – and enlist people in – any of our projects
 - Initial projects
 - Accessibility
 - “Help wanted”: how can people who want to contribute find projects that match their interests
 - Exploring / onboarding resources for communities, contributors, individual users
 - There’s a lot of stuff out there but not easy to find and not necessarily accessible
 -

Discussion

- Thoughts on the overall framing and priorities?
- Specific projects: accessibility, keywords, substrate
- Specific organizing and mutual aid projects (whether or not they're on fedi) we should be talking to?
- Short-term opportunities: how to leverage and improve current state of the art? What can make work in progress more effective? How to complement it?
- Next generation platforms: How to complement and influence? How can we help?

Appendix - background slides

Fedi's strengths (at its best)

- [“The Fediverse was created by queer people,”](#) very strong trans and non-binary presence
- Anti-fascist – [response to Gab](#), [anti-Meta FediPact](#) and the [Free Fediverse](#), reaction to Fosstodon
- [Focus on consent](#)
- [Alt text culture](#)
- [Networked autonomous communities](#)
 - DAIR's combination of PeerTube and Mastodon instances is a great example of *complementing* presence on commercial social networks
 - New structures like island networks, bubbles, [fedifams and caracoles](#) are paths forward

“Medium-sized Fediverse servers are especially well positioned to offer a model of high-context, culturally sensitive online community”

(From [Governance on Fediverse Microblogging Servers](#))

The ATmosphere's strengths (at its best)

- Blacksky
 - And other projects like Northsky (2SLGBTQIA+ focused)
- Large flat social networks and everything that comes with it
 - “A better Twitter” is useful even though it includes a lot of what so many people in fedi really didn't like about Twitter
- A different approach to “*high-context, culturally sensitive online community*”
- Lots of energy in the ecosystem including Brazil, Europe, Japan
- Larger autonomous communities (1-2 million people)
- In the US (and other geographies?), a critical mass of academics, organizers, progressive journalists and politicians are on Bluesky
 - Everybody knows how imperfect and fragile it is but it's a lot better than Twitter or Threads
 - And, everybody on Bluesky has an account for other AT Protocol apps as well

Accessibility

- Have to address accessibility to avoid marginalizing disabled people
 - In our own projects as well as more broadly!
- This is a challenge for pretty much all projects ...
 - “If you can give me a long-form writeup of what needs to be done, we’ll do it, but we don’t have the resources to investigate”
 - More positively, centralized social networks aren’t great at this, so it’s an area where new networks can provide a better experience to a lot of people
- It’s also something that everybody can help with
 - Non-developers can help find accessibility problems; document how best to use various projects with assistive technologies; learn, teach, and encourage best practices
- There’s lots of low-hanging fruit, so a good chance to have an impact

Accessibility steps so far

- Review plan with accessibility expert
- Start by soliciting input
 - [Blog post](#), [CryptPad form](#), [Bluesky](#), [Leaflet](#), [FrontPage](#), [gotosocial.thenexus.today](#), [activitypub.space](#), [SocialHub](#)
 - A challenge: none of these have gotten a lot of traction. That darn missing substrate!!!!
- Write up initial suggestions for dev teams and end users
 - We've already got several good ideas! See the next slide ...

Accessibility recommendations (draft)

Everybody

- Learn to avoid common accessibility mistakes
- Take the time to compose good alt text for your images if you're able to – and if not, ask others for help
- When somebody shares an image without alt text, provide alt text in a reply (instead of giving them a hard time)

Software teams

- Provide easy-to-find accessibility-related info
- Provide info in multiple formats and languages to accommodate different needs and preferences
- Consider your landing page, getting-started guide, tutorials, etc as well as the software
- Do a first pass of accessibility checking with a screenreader and free tools
- Do usability testing with disabled people
- Ensure there's an easy (and accessible!) way for people to report accessibility problems
- Think about initial settings from an accessibility perspective
- Provide a flow for people to suggest alt text

Accessibility next steps

- Circulate broadly
 - Including asking for more feedback and looking for people to help
 - Where? Where to make available as a reference?
 - Hey it's the substrate problem!
- Possible channels:
 - Follow up on initial distribution: blog post, Bluesky, Leaflet, FrontPage, Mastodon/GoToSocial with hashtag, [activitypub.space](#), [SocialHub](#)
 - Also, dev chat rooms [ATProto Community](#) discussions, Piefed / Lemmy
 - Externally: Hacker News, lobste.rs, reddit, ... pitch as story to TechCrunch?
 - FediForum session?
- *Thoughts? Suggestions? Who else to reach out to?*

Keyword muting / racial slurs

Keyword lists are imperfect, but useful – and a special case of racial slurs

Basic idea

- People from targeted communities develop context-aware keyword lists
 - Or, we may be able to find existing lists – for example, [Uli's for Hindi](#) etc.
- Individuals can upload on any platform
 - Fedi: provide as CSV file, with instructions
 - AT: ummmm ... probably need to write a simple app
- AT Protocol moderation services can auto-label / auto-report
 - Auto-report lets moderators investigate context (e.g. reclaimed slurs) – Blacksky takes this approach for “hard R”
 - No obvious existing equivalent in fedi, will need to add

How to make progress?

Resources for exploring and onboarding

- What existing sources of info are there? Examples:
 - [Tech Reclaimer's resources](#), including The Opt-Out project's [CyberCleanse](#) (with pages on [Leave Social Media](#) and [Get Social Again](#))
 - [Fediverse-Dienste: Die Idee](#) (in German)
 - Videos like Framasoft's [What is the Fediverse](#) and Elena Rossini's [Introducing the Fediverse: a New Era of Social Media](#) (both available in multiple languages)
 - Getting started pages like Robert Kingett's [Mastodon for writers/readers](#) and [Debbie Ridpath Oh!s Unofficial Guide To Bluesky](#)
 - [FediTips](#)
- Where are the gaps?
- How can we help make this info more broadly available and fill in the gaps?

Resources to help people find out where to contribute

- Goal: create a “flywheel” effect – and not just for devs
 - Dev, testing support, admin, moderation, marketing, translation, writing friendlier summaries of techie-focused documents (in multiple languages), welcoming committee
- How can people with different skills and background help improve decentralized social networks?
 - How can we help people find projects to get involved in?
 - How can projects let potential newcomers know how to help?
 - How to accommodate different time availability, experience levels, etc
- Two places to start: people interested in accessibility and exploring / onboarding
 -

“Substrate”: Initial projects

- Accessibility
 - How to make resources available?
 - How to have broad discussions (getting feedback and suggestion, answering questions, etc)
- “Help wanted”: how can people who want to contribute find projects that match their interests?
 - Today it’s not easy even for devs – and virtually impossible for anybody else
- Exploring / onboarding resources for communities, contributors, individual users
 - There’s a lot of stuff out there but not easy to find and not necessarily accessible

Tech stack for organizing (etc)

- Private(ish) messaging: 1-1, small group
- Medium-to-large community discussions
- Sharing, discussing, discovering, and curating media, links, status, etc
- Moderation tooling
- "Verification", vouching, web of trust, etc
- Threat modeling
- Events, calendars, scheduling
- Video + audio: streaming, meetings/ rooms, archived
- Time-banking
- Offers and wants
- Marketplace
- Job board
- Contact sharing

- Search
- Surveys
- Collaborative editing: text, presentations, videos, etc
- Project management and facilitation
- Decision-making
- Budgeting and accounting
- Payments

Infrastructure:

- Identity
- Storage
- Translation
- Platforms like ATProto, Veilid, Spritely, etc
- Mesh networks + Offline-first tech

Social stack for organizing (etc)

- "Communities"
- Values, norms and community guidelines
 - Including mutual aid orientation: sharing what you can, getting what you need
- Organizing structures
- Governance and “federated diplomacy”
- Moderation
- Sensemaking
- Care work
- Learning (including training and tutorials)
- Knowledge repositories
- Decision making processes
- Inviting and welcoming newcomers who share values and find norms compatible, and helping them while also helping them find ways to contribute and help

Example organizing structures

- Different channels for leadership, trusted members, broader group, network
- “Lobby” for newcomers (with greeters), followed by inviting people to group channel(s)
- Shared calendar
- Curated feed (for important announcements, actions, events, news stories, etc)
- “Welcome packet”, FAQ, and newcomer discussion group and meetings
- Status page (possibly with limited visibility) so everybody can see what’s up

Technology-independent:

- channels + lobby can be implemented on Signal, Matrix, Discord, forums, multiple fediverse instances (if you’re a masochist), ...
- Status page could be a web page, GoogleDoc, CryptPad, pinned thread in forum or Matrix channel, ...

Nonpublic discussions: “Facebook Group” alternative

User view

- Join / leave group
- Post / reply / like / etc
- See posts in home feed
- See recent posts in group
- Search posts in group
- See group members
- See and add events to group calendar
- Invite people
- Report posts to group mods

Moderator view

- Set group guidelines / code of conduct
- Request info on application form
- Invite / approve / reject members
- Hide / delete posts, remove members
- Mute members for a time period
- Pin posts
- Screen posts / replies before publishing
- Lock threads
- Labelers and/or domain block / allowlist
- Send announcement to members

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