

Organizing on Decentralized Social Networks

February 25, 2025

Jon from The Nexus of Privacy

<https://neuromatch.social/@jdp23> / [@thenexusofprivacy@infosec.exchange](https://infosec.exchange/@thenexusofprivacy)
[@jdp23.thenexus.today](https://thenexus.today/@jdp23) / [@thenexusofprivacy.net](https://thenexusofprivacy.net)
<https://thenexusofprivacy.net>

Slides downloadable at

<https://thenexusofprivacy.net/data/slides-0225.pdf>

Welcome! A few quick reminders

- We are dedicated to providing a positive, inclusive, and harassment-free experience for everyone.
- 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.

Slides downloadable at

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Agenda

- Brainstorming: what are *you* looking for as an organizer?
- Decentralized social networks
 - Options for Twitter and Facebook alternatives
- Organizing case studies
- Discussions and brainstorming how organizers can leverage these networks
- Helping people sign up

Slides: <https://thenexusofprivacy.net/data/slides-0225.pdf>

What are *you* looking for as an organizer?

Social networks and online organizing

Social networks *complement* other kinds of organizing and activism

Social networks are (potentially) good for

- Sharing public information (events, actions, alerts) with a broad audience
- Following and having discussions with activists, journalists, politicians, organizations, etc.
- Tracking news
- “Private” discussions (like Facebook groups)

Social networks are **not** good for

- Secure communications. Use Signal!
- Collaborative editing and document sharing (like many orgs use Google Docs for today).
 - Alternatives include NextCloud and CryptPad ... but that’s beyond the scope of this talk

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

- As commercial social networks become government-aligned propaganda machines, how do we create alternatives?
- 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?

Decentralized social networks

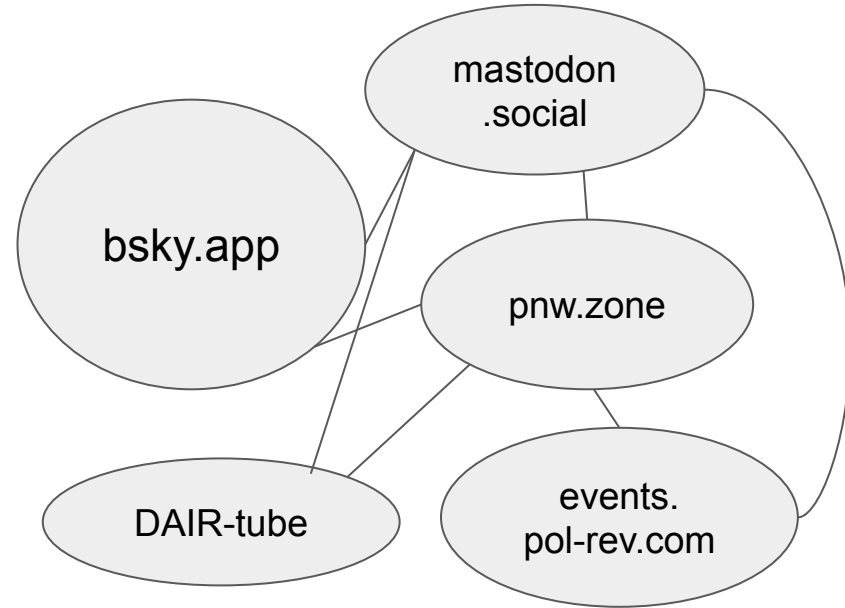
Hosted on many different *instances*, running all kinds of different software

There isn't just one Mastodon instance, there are literally thousands

Accounts on different instance can (usually) communicate with each other – often even if they're running different software

Each instance has its own norms, rules, governance, and software

It's very flexible! But also very complex



Terminology note: instances are also called sites, servers, service providers, hosts,



Ciara | Ciaráíoch 🎨

@Ciaraioch@mastodon.ie

Every Mastodon explanation is like "It's very simple, your account is part of a kerflunk, and each kerflunk can talk to each other as part of a bumblurt. At the moment everyone you flurgle can see your bleeps but only people IN your kerflunk can quark your nerps. Kinda like email."

Nov 04, 2022, 15:09 · 🌐 · ↻ 346 · ★ 18

Decentralized alternatives to centralized networks

Functionality	Centralized	Decentralized
Status updates, sharing links, following friends	Twitter, Facebook	Bluesky, Mastodon, GoToSocial, Akkoma, Misskey, ...
Video	YouTube, Vimeo	Peertube
Events	Facebook, Eventbrite, Meetup	Mobilizon , Gancio
Link aggregation	Reddit	Lemmy, Mbin, Piefed
Image sharing	Instagram	Pixelfed
Blogs and newsletters	Wordpress, Substack, Medium	Wordpress, micro.blog, write.as
Forum	Discourse, NodeBB, Flarum	Discourse, NodeBB, Flarum
Private groups	Facebook	hmm ... see upcoming slide

Your org can also run your own instance(s)!

- Hosting services make it possible even if you don't have Linux sysadmin skills
- In principle, this “networked communities” model is the best of both worlds
 - *You* control the policies for your instance and who your data is shared with
 - Members are part of a community – and can take part in the broader conversation
- In practice, there are complexities
 - [Potential legal liabilities](#) – and new legislation could make things worse
 - Depending on how big your org is, it can be expensive!
 - Moderation is a challenge
 - If you want a range of functionality, you'll need multiple instances – e.g., one running Peertube for videos, another running Mobilizon for events, another running GoToSocial
- If you go this route, Mastodon may not be the best choice
 - GoToSocial and Akkoma have key functionality that Mastodon doesn't
 - So do Mastodon forks like Glitch and Hometown, but hosting services don't support them

Bluesky as a Twitter alternative

- Very Twitter-like feel
- 10 million+ active users, racially very diverse, lots of journalists, more and more politicians
- Owned by a venture-funded startup that even employees describe as a “future adversary”
- “Custom feeds” let you choose different algorithms – or create your own
- Bluesky moderation allows a lot of racism and Islamophobia
anti-LGBTQIA2S+ bigotry
 - Blocklists and community moderation services can help, but it’s not easy to find the right ones
- Blacksky’s custom feeds and moderation service are great
 - although there’s also a lot of anti-Blackness
- Accessibility is not good

Mastodon as a Twitter alternative

- Similar functionality to Twitter, but a different feel
 - Less viral
 - No algorithmic feeds
 - Search is very limited
 - No real equivalent to Black Twitter
- 1 million+ active users
 - lots of trans / queer / non-binary people and techies,
 - not a lot of journalists or politicians
 - very few Black or Indigenous people
- Accessibility is good once you find the right apps
 - Alt-text on images is very common – great for people using screenreaders!
- Many instances are run by coops, non-profits, or even individuals
- Moderation varies a lot between instances
 - What instance you choose has a huge influence on your experience, but there's not a lot of help choosing an instance that's a good match for you
- Anti-Blackness is a problem, as is Islamophobia and antisemitism

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What about a Facebook alternative?

- Following friends (including friends-only posts)
 - Mastodon, GoToSocial, Akkoma, etc, do this well – including long posts on many instances
 - GoToSocial, Akkoma and Mastodon forks like Glitch and Hometown also allow formatting!
 - Bluesky allows following, but it's public-only, and posts are limited to 250 characters
- Pages
 - Mastodon, GoToSocial, Akkoma, etc, have fairly flexible profiles so can work for this
 - Bluesky has a bare-bones profile, but might be enough
- Events:
 - Mobilizon is very flexible, and compatible with Mastodon, GoToSocial, etc

Alternatives to private Facebook groups?

- Some software has the functionality ...
 - Friendica has private groups
 - Misskey and Sharkey channels are similar to private groups
 - Forums like NodeBB, Discord, and Flarum can have members-only categories
 - GoToSocial, Akkoma, Misskey and Mastodon forks like Glitch and Hometown have “local-only posts”, which are limited to people with accounts on that instance, so are an approximation
- You’ll probably need to run your own instance for this
 - None of these options allow for private groups with people from multiple instances
- “Island networks” are an intriguing possibility here
 - A group of instances that only federate with each other, so posts are private to the network
 - People would need another account to participate in broader conversations ... but maybe that’s not a bad thing?

Organizing case studies

- 50501: Mobilizon for events
- Washington Privacy Organizers: Mastodon and Bluesky for actions and feedback
- Blacksky: Building the Black social layer for the decentralized web

50501: Mobilizon for events

- Political Revolution runs their own instance, events.pol-rev.com
- Local grassroots organizers can create an account, and then create an event
 - There were two different events for the Presidents Day protest in Olympia, oops!
 - But, it would be easy enough to address this
- People can RSVP to an event
 - With an account on events.pol-rev.com
 - With an account on another Mobilizon instance
 - With an email address
- People can communicate with the organizers from Mastodon accounts
- Before the last round of protests, the site got overloaded and wasn't always available
 - Was it a denial of service attack, or just enthusiastic protestors? Who knows!
- [Here's their current list of March 4 protests](#)



Calendar
(beta)

Login

Register


50501 Movement > Events

50501 Movement's events

Upcoming events


Passed events

March 2025

- 


We the People's: State of the Union

Online

1190 participants
- 

March 4th For Democracy

Frankfort

6 participants
- 

March 4th for Democracy Connecticut

Hartford



Calendar
(beta)

Login

Register



We the People's: State of the Union

By 50501 Movement

Public event Movements and politics

Participate

Actions ...

About this event

Stay tuned for updates on how to attend our livestream leading up to and during the SOTU on March 4th, as well as links to the various protests ongoing in DC in the days before and on March 4th!

Comments

DDuggins about 1 hour ago
Participating from California!

Date and time

On Monday, March 3, 2025

Organized by

50501 Movement
@50501_movement

Website

linktr.ee/50501DC

You wish to participate to the following event



We the People's: State of the Union

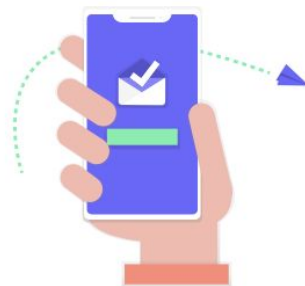
Created by 50501 Movement

 1190 participants



I have a Mobilizon account

Either on the events.pol-rev.com instance or on another instance. 



I don't have a Mobilizon account

Participate using your email address

Washington Privacy Organizers: Mastodon and Bluesky for actions and feedback

- Mastodon account: <https://pnw.zone/@waprivacy>
- Bluesky: [@waprivacy.net](https://bsky.net/profile/waprivacy)
- Twitter-like approach, complementing other activism tactics
 - Threads including actions and links to relevant articles
 - Polls and open questions to get feedback
 - Tagging accounts and DMing people to try to get boosts for more visibility
 - Hashtags on Mastodon
- Techniques for actions (these work on any social network)
 - “One-click” email directly in the post – for example, <https://wa-privacy.net/email-approps-hb1671> brings up draft mail to the Appropriations committee
 - Action pages like <https://wa-privacy.net/take-action-peoples-privacy-act/>
- At least so far, more traction on Mastodon than Bluesky

Search or paste URL



Washington Privacy Or...

@waprivacy



What's on your mind?

Public

English



500

Post

← Back



Edit profile

Washington Privacy Organizers

@waprivacy pnw.zone

It's time for strong privacy protections in Washington state! Washington Privacy Organizers is a resource for privacy advocates in the Pacific northwest. Tweets by [@jdp23](#)

JOINED

Jan 20, 2023

WEBSITE

✓ wa-privacy.net

84 posts 46 following 85 followers

Posts

Posts and replies

Media

📌 Pinned post



Washington Privacy Organizers

@waprivacy

🌐 1d..*

TAKE ACTION: Support the People's Privacy Act in Washington state! (3/5)

mastodon

🏠 Home

🔔 Notifications

🔍 Explore

🌐 Live feeds

@ Private mentions

🔖 Bookmarks

★ Favorites

📄 Lists

⚙️ Preferences



Washington Privacy Organizers

@waprivacy@pnw.zone

TAKE ACTION: Support the People's Privacy Act in Washington state! (2/5)

The People's Privacy Act protects sensitive data including racial or ethnic origin; religious beliefs; sex life; sexual orientation; status as transgender or nonbinary; union membership; income level; citizenship or immigration status; health and biometric data; precise location data; and browsing history.

Why is this so urgent? responsibledata.io/2016/11/21/... discusses the role of data collection in multiple genocides.



Responsible Data · Nov 21, 2016

Dangerous Data: the role of data collection in genocides

One way of working out if the data you're gathering is particularly sensitive is to do a ...



Washington Privacy Organizers

@waprivacy@pnw.zone

TAKE ACTION: Support the People's Privacy Act in Washington state! (3/5)

The People's Privacy Act doesn't cost much: \$800,000 / year to protect 8,000,000 Washingtonians. Still, with the budget so tight this year it's going to be a struggle to get it approved -- especially since Big Tech is pushing hard to kill the bill.

If you're a Washington state resident, wa-privacy.net/email-approps-h... brings up draft email to the committee. Add your name, city, and anything else you want to say, and click send!

TAKE
ACTION!

Hide

ALT

Feb 23, 2025, 02:14 PM · 🌐 · Web

Last edited Feb 25, 12:28 AM

Blacksky: Building the Black social layer for the decentralized web

- An example of the possibilities of Bluesky's AT protocol
- Today:
 - Custom feeds: [Blacksky](#), [Blacksky: Trending](#), [Blacksky Videos](#)
 - [Starter pack](#)
 - [Blacksky Moderation](#) service (aka labeler)
- Work in progress: an alternate tech stack to remove dependency on Bluesky

See also

- [Building #Blacksky](#)
- [Blacksky Is Nothing Like Black Twitter—and It Doesn't Need to Be](#)
- [Could Blacksky emerge as Black Twitter's spiritual successor on Bluesky?](#)
- [Blacksky: Expressing the Black Everyday in a New Digital Space](#): a three-part series, where [part 3](#) in particular takes an organizing perspective

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Discussion and brainstorming!

- Thoughts about moving forward?
- How to move people as a group?
- What about orgs like Indivisible with multiple chapters?
- Your experiences on the different networks?
- Other topics????

What about orgs with multiple chapters?

- Indivisible, Working Families Party, DSA, ...
- Possible directions for discussions and microblogging
 - A single instance where each group could have their own private group
 - An instance for each state, networked together
 - An instance for each group
- Shared resources at national or state level
 - Events
 - Video
 - Moderation experts to help deal with tricky situations

Thoughts?

An idea about moving people as a group

- Start with a [Signal group chat](#)
 - If people aren't already on Signal, getting them there is the top priority!
 - You can invite people to a [Signal group chat](#) using links and DMs
 - Onboarding is easy and straightforward
- Use the Signal group as an interim solution – and for support as people explore other options

Thoughts about that?

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Signing up on Mastodon

- What instance to sign up at?
 - [Resources for choosing the right fediverse instance](#) is a deep dive
- A few of the hundreds of options:
 - [pnw.zone](#): people from the Pacific northwest, open signup
 - [mas.to](#): broad audience, based in Europe, open signup
 - [social.coop](#): a cooperative, need to apply, monthly fee
 - [mastodon.social](#): the “flagship” instance, run by Mastodon gGmbH, based in Germany
- View it as an initial choice!
 - If you decide it’s not a great fit, or find another instance you prefer, you can move

Getting started on Mastodon - a handful of tips

- <https://fedi.tips> has a lot of great resources
- The **Explore** page lets you see what other people on your instance (and across the network) are posting about and find accounts to follow
- Many people prefer third-party apps like [Mona](#), [Ivory](#), or [Tusky](#) to the official mobile apps
 - [phanpy.social](#), a web app, is my fave both on the phone and the desktop
 - [elk.zone](#) is another web app, that has a more Twitter-like feel
 - All these apps work with any Mastodon instance and most are compatible with GoToSocial, Misskey, Sharkey, and other software
- If you use a screenreader, check out [Accessibility resources for Mastodon and compatible software](#)
- Alt-text on images is a big part of Mastodon culture. [Here's how to do it](#)
- Hashtags are very useful!
- You can find privacy settings under Preferences / Profile / Privacy and reach

Signing up and getting going on Bluesky

- Signup at <https://bsky.app/> – or download the app and sign up
- [Debbie's unofficial guide to Bluesky](#) has useful getting-started info (and a whole lot more)
- The default “Discover” feed is algorithmic; switch to “Following” if you prefer a chronological feed
- [Starter packs](#) make it easy to find people to follow – but be careful about doing a “follow all” unless you really trust whoever’s put it together
- Blocklists are very useful – again though make sure you really trust whoever’s put them together! I recommend Karl Bode’s [Far Right Accounts](#), Casey Ho’s [Coordinated Inauthentic Accounts](#), Penny Oaken’s [Bad Faith](#) and [Nazis](#)
- Labelers (aka moderation services) are useful too. I use [Blacksky Moderation](#), the XBlock Screenshot Labeler,

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