

Fear, loathing, and excitement as Threads adopts open standard used by Mastodon

Jacqui VanLiew/Wired

reader comments

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Days after Meta launched its new app, Threads, this month, a software engineer at the company named Ben Savage introduced himself to a developer group at the World Wide Web Consortium, a web standards body. The group, which maintains a protocol for connecting social networks called ActivityPub, had been preparing for this moment for months, ever since rumors first emerged that Meta planned to join the standard. Now, that moment had arrived. “I’m really interested to see how this interoperable future plays out!” he wrote.

Warm replies to Savage’s email filtered in. And then came another response:

“The company you work for does disgusting things among others. It harms relationships and isolates people. It builds walls and lures people into them. When that doesn’t suffice, brutal peer pressure does ... That said, welcome to the list, Ben.”

Meta’s embrace of ActivityPub, used by apps including the

Twitter-like Mastodon, was bound to be a little awkward. The constellation of small apps and personal servers that currently use the protocol, known as the Fediverse, is marked by an ethos of sharing and openness, not profit-seeking or user bases denominated in the billions.

ActivityPub is designed to allow users of different apps to not only interact and view each others' content, but also move their digital identity from one service to another. Mastodon, the largest app in the Fediverse, is open source and run by a nonprofit, and smaller Fediverse apps like PeerTube and Lemmy are often held up as a repudiation of the closed nature of services such as YouTube or Reddit. Corporations like Meta are typically held up as the enemy. No surprise that, despite appeals from ActivityPub leaders for civility when Meta arrived on the listserv, some couldn't hold their tongue.

Weeks-old Threads already dwarfs the Fediverse, which has been around for more than a decade and recently peaked at about 4 million active monthly users. Some Fediverse fans see that imbalance as a win: Suddenly, the network could become many times more relevant. Others consider that view naive and expect Meta's size to push the small world of apps built on ActivityPub in undesirable directions. Some have circulated a pact to preemptively block content from Threads' servers from appearing on their own.

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"The Fediverse community has been jolted into motion—due to fear and loathing of Meta, and also excitement," says Dmitri Zagidulin, a developer who leads the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) group responsible for discussing the future of ActivityPub. The prospect of Meta joining the decentralized movement has people trying to spiff up their projects and prepare for the spotlight. "There are furious meetings. Grants being applied for. Pull requests. Pushes for better security, better user experience. Better everything," he says.

Zagidulin is himself a member of a Mastodon server that operates as a social cooperative, where users collectively decide major decisions. They recently held a vote on whether to preemptively block Threads, a process known as defederation. The result: 51 percent in favor, 49 percent against.

That divide reflects different visions for the Fediverse's future. One involves embracing Threads to bootstrap the network's stagnant growth. The ideals of openness and giving users more control didn't tempt many people to join platforms like Mastodon until Elon Musk's chaotic takeover of Twitter sent many longtime users looking for new digital homes. Even then, the bump quickly went bust. Some users gave up after finding federation tools confusing compared to Twitter. Then came Bluesky, a competitor supported by Twitter-founder Jack Dorsey that reflects many of the same principles but is developing a rival decentralized protocol to ActivityPub.

Amidst those challenges, Meta's interest dangles the potential of the company's vast resources and reach to inject new life into the Fediverse movement. "This is a clear victory for our cause," wrote Eugen Rochko, CEO of Mastodon, in a blog post on the day Threads launched.

Others simply want Meta out. To Fediverse users like Vanta Black, the warm response from community leaders to Meta's interest felt like betrayal. In 2017, as she navigated her gender identity, she found a home in small Mastodon communities where moderators and users intermingled and held shared values for how to filter out hateful posts. She fears the arrival of millions of Threads users will unleash volumes of content into the Fediverse that are impossible to manage.

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