Op-ed: Why the great #TwitterMigration didn’t quite pan out



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I’ve been using fediverse stuff (Mastodon and, most recently, Calckey—I’m just going to use “Mastodon” as shorthand here; purists can bite me) for over a year now and have been doing so full time for about six months, following Elon Musk buying Twitter (since on principle, I decline to give Elon Musk money or attention). This latter part coincided with the “November 2022 influx,” when lots of new people joined Mastodon for similar reasons. A lot of that influx has not stuck around. Everyone is very aware at this point that active user numbers of Mastodon have dropped off a cliff.

I have evidence of this. I recently shut down my Mastodon instance that I started in November, mastodon.bloonface.com, and (as is proper) it sent out about 700,000 kill messages to inform other instances that it had federated with that it was going offline for good and to delete all record of it from their databases. Around 25 percent of these were returned undelivered because the instances had simply dropped offline. These are people and organizations who were engaged with Mastodon and fediverse to the point of investing real time and resources into it but simply dropped out without a trace sometime between November 2022 and now. I know multiple people who tried it and then gave up due to a lack of engagement with what they were posting, a lack of people to follow, an inability to deal with the platform's technical foibles, or, worse, because they found the experience actively unpleasant. Something has gone *badly* wrong.

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There are some good reasons for this that really point to both shortcomings in the whole idea and also how Mastodon is and was sold to potential new users, some of which might be uncomfortable for existing Mastodon users to hear. There are some conclusions to draw from it, some of which might also be uncomfortable, but some which actually might be seen as reassuring to those who quite liked the place as it was pre-November and would prefer it if it would go back to that.

Much of this is my opinion, based on my personal observations and experiences as someone who's been all-in on fedi since November and has been on it since April 2022, starting off on Mastodon.social and moving to my own instance in November. I'm happy to trail it as just that, my opinion, in advance. But I think it should be food for thought either way.

Mastodon here is also being used as a shorthand for various ActivityPub-interoperable platforms for making short messages, including Pleroma, Misskey, Calckey, whatever.

Mastodon did not, and does not, have a unique selling point for most users

As it exists at the moment, Mastodon functions essentially as Twitter did in around 2008. In some ways, that’s nice. The userbase is calmer, and the Discourse™ does not get spun up as easily.

But the thing is, functionality-wise, Twitter in 2008 existed in 2008. We are now in 2023, when someone can use the Twitter of 2023. From a functionality standpoint, Twitter in 2023 is quite good, with some of the alternative Twitter-style frontends (e.g., Misskey and Calckey) being at about parity.

So what does Mastodon bring to the table in addition to Twitter that might justify someone deciding to take the plunge and move to it? There are a few unique things about the platform, but they generally fall into the broad category of “things users don’t care about.” Chief among these is decentralization. This brings me to the first thing that might piss off a lot of Mastodon users.

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