

Between Curation and Decentralization

A Qualitative Analysis of Mastodon Use. *By Jeffrey Wimmer*

This article examines the use of Mastodon as an example of alternative social media within the broader transformation of digital communication shaped by platformization. While mainstream platforms such as Facebook or Twitter (X) organize visibility through algorithmic systems and economic incentives, Mastodon represents a decentralized, non-commercial alternative based on federated infrastructures. Despite growing scholarly interest, little is known about how users integrate Mastodon into everyday communication and negotiate its federate architecture in practice. The study addresses therefore four central research questions: How is Mastodon use embedded in everyday life? How are interactions structured on the platform? Which thematic orientations and normative values shape communication? And how can these findings be interpreted from a media-ethical perspective?

The analysis is grounded in the concept of discursive-material assemblages (cf. Carpentier 2017). This approach conceptualizes media as configurations in which material infrastructures and discursive practices are mutually constitutive. In contrast to platform-centric models that emphasize algorithms and economic logic (cf. Gillespie 2018; van Dijck et al. 2018), this perspective allows for a more integrated understanding of how technical architectures, social practices and normative orientations co-evolve. Mastodon, as part of the Fediverse, represents a specific case of Alternative Social Media (cf. Gehl 2015). Its decentralized structure, the absence of centrally controlled algorithmic curation and emphasis on community governance mechanisms make it particularly suitable for analyzing alternative forms of digital public communication.

The study is based on a qualitative research design using 24 semi-structured interviews with German-speaking Mastodon users and administrators conducted between January and March 2024. Sampling followed the principle of theoretical

Prof. Dr. Jeffrey Wimmer is a professor of communication studies specializing in media reality at the University of Augsburg.

sampling to ensure variation in usage intensity, experience level and roles (users vs. administrators). Data were analyzed using grounded theory methods (cf. Charmaz 2015), including: open coding, axial coding and selective coding. Analysis identified six interrelated categories: everyday integration, interaction practices, curation practices, thematic structures, normative orientations, and platform governance. These were integrated into a core category describing Mastodon use as a curated and normatively shaped practice in decentralized publics.

Mastodon is typically used in a fragmented but routinised way. It is often integrated into short, recurring time slots and remains part of broader cross-platform practices rather than replacing other social media. Interactions are predominantly selective, dialogic and less conflict-driven than on commercial platforms. Communication occurs within smaller, relatively stable networks and is shaped by active curation practices such as following, filtering or blocking. Governance practices, particularly moderation and instance administration, further shape users' experiences and perceptions of decentralized communication. Thematic focus lies mainly on political and informational content. At the same time, shared values such as respect, privacy, non-commercialization and decentralization play a central role. These values are reflected in everyday communication practices and strongly influence how users perceive and evaluate the platform. From a media-ethical perspective, the findings reveal several tensions: autonomy versus overload, community versus exclusion, and openness versus complexity. Users gain greater control over their communication environment but also face higher demands in terms of curation and navigation.

Interview data suggest that visibility and interaction on Mastodon are organized differently markedly from those on centrally operated commercial platforms. Instead of algorithmic filtering, communication is structured through user-driven curation. This is associated with lower levels of conflict, stronger normative orientation, and increased user control. However, it also results in fragmented publics with limited exposure to diverse perspectives and reduced scalability. Thus, the decentralization process of Mastodon does not automatically lead to greater pluralism but rather creates new forms of segmentation.

The findings indicate that communicative practices and normative orientations emerge in close relation to the platform's infrastructural design. Mastodon emerges not merely as a technical alternative but as a specific socio-technical assemblage of digital public communication. Compared to algorithmically

structured platforms (cf. Gillespie 2018, van Dijck et al. 2018), Mastodon represents a shift from automated visibility towards self-organized publics. These findings raise broader questions concerning democratic participation, media ethics and the organization of contemporary publics. The findings indicate that alternative platforms are not merely oppositional to mainstream social media but foster their own communicative dynamics, tensions, and forms of social organization. Future research should further explore long-term sustainability of decentralized platforms, issues of inclusivity and accessibility, and undertake comparative analyses with other segments of the Fediverse.

References

- Carpentier, Nico. 2017. *The Discursive-Material Knot: Cyprus in Conflict and Community Media Participation*. New York/Bern.
- Charmaz, Kathy. 2014. *Constructing Grounded Theory*. 2nd ed. London.
- Gehl, Robert W. 2015. "The Case for Alternative Social Media." *Social Media + Society* 1 no.2: 1–12.
- Gillespie, Tarleton. 2018. *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media*. New Haven.
- van Dijck, José, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal. 2018. *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World*. Oxford.

Full Article

(German):

Jeffrey Wimmer:
Zwischen Kuration
und Dezentralität.
Eine qualitative
Analyse der
Mastodon-Nutzung.
In: *Communicatio
Socialis* 59 (3), S.
392-404.
DOI: 10.5771/0010-
3497-2026-3-392