LURK

Introduction

LURK, on the precipice since 2014.

LURK started out as a small collective of artists / hackers, cultural workers, art, sound and design practitioners (from makers to writers) interested in facilitating and archiving discussions around net- and computational culture and politics, proto- and post-free culture practices, (experimental) (sound) (new media) (software) art, and other such topics. We have been active since 2014, and today we are best described as both a collective and a community of communities. Practically speaking, we offer, to like-minded people and peers, the possibility to host their email discussion lists, access instant messaging services, participate on alternative social media platforms, as well as make use of an audio and video streaming server for events, radios, and miscellaneous experiments.

With COVID-19 reigniting conversations about autonomy and sovereignty in relation to digital infrastructures, it has been our concern to inform these discussions with lived accounts of both the challenges and opportunities of self-managed digital resources and autonomous digital infrastructures. We frequently share these concerns in the form of lectures, seminars and hands-on workshops to discuss the services we run, the infrastructure we use, and the time and energy it takes to support it all. We do, however, remain critical of the frequent technosolutionist reduction often found in discourses surrounding alternative computer and network technology, as well as the social, economical and organisational dependencies it systematically obfuscates. In that sense, our motto could be "there is no one-click install to autonomy".

We see the ATNOFS exchange as a valuable way to continue our practice of networked services, experiments and workshop facilitation, in which we can engage with the issues listed above together with others. Therefore, it felt natural for us to first contribute to ATNOFS through supporting the discussion across participants, by hosting the project's email discussion list. Second, and, most importantly, we contributed by developing and facilitating the workshop "How to run a small social networking site with your friends". The latter is both a synthesis of past similar workshops and a new way of engaging with the topic of alternative social media hosting and communities.

This chapter thus provides some background information on the workshop in relation to prior experiences of running similar activities, as well as a detailed account of its structure. The chapter also briefly introduces the participants who joined and what their concerns and experiences were, both before, during and six months after the workshop. Finally, the chapter concludes with some reflections on the ongoing challenges with regard to launching and sustaining community-owned alternative social media sites.

Motivation

The workshop *How to run a small social networking site with your friends* draws significantly from our prior experiences of running workshops with groups and individuals interested in alternative social media. In the past, we have co-hosted workshops focused on explaining and introducing the fediverse[1], and have hosted workshops focused on the technical aspects of installation and maintenance of software[2].

Running workshops to introduce new things is always a delicate exercise in balancing between focused and broad into something that can be actually activated or carried on once the session is over and the participants part ways. Frequently, this exercise leads either to overly technical or generic formats. On the one hand, engaging with, and understanding the underlying technical aspects of computer and network technology seems like a good idea to open up discussions on other non-technical topics or concerns. In practice, however, these kinds of workshops tend to get bogged down in technicalities (e.g. debugging why a particular command won't run). Another effect is that it will often favour a minority of very engaged participants who "get it", while being too distracting or confusing for the majority. On the other hand, more general, explanatory and introductory workshops tend mostly to attract groups and individuals only interested in learning about novel concepts, for general curiosity, for entertainment, for footnoting an ongoing research, or simply to surrender to FOMO. As a result, such participants do not necessarily care more deeply about the subject, nor will pursue it any further beyond the workshop.

In particular, in the Western European cultural sector, the workshop as commodity is inextricable from socioeconomic conditions that have increasingly turned such activities into disposable experiences led by a pool of precarious cultural workers. These are commissioned to entertain a general audience, or another pool of precarious cultural workers, as part of an ongoing cycle of media art circus and creative destruction within the fields of art and cultural production, facilitated by both cultural organisations and funding bodies.

Collective practices in the field of art and cultural production have become increasingly popular. We should, however, not forget that one incentive to work in such a way is the extreme precarity of cultural workers. In such a context, what does it mean to teach and explain ideas such as alternative social media, data sovereignty, self-hosting, and the autonomy of communities of practice? Thus, the challenge for us was to figure out if, and how, these issues could be addressed in the way the workshop was structured, and the way participants were selected. No stone should be left unturned, and we took the near complete freedom provided by the European Cultural Foundation funding as a rare opportunity to experiment with the format. We felt this was even more relevant given that our topic touched profoundly on concrete activation and experimentation around digital autonomy and data sovereignty.

In the past, we have worked with an approach that goes beyond technical or introductory imperatives. More specifically, we have run workshops about setting up a self-hosted alternative social media platform, with a strong focus on what happens *after* the installation. This bypasses most of the technical, and makes room for hands-on moments to discuss things such as group formation, content moderation and governance, instead. We first trialled this form of workshop for the Centre for the Study of the Networked Image[3], and realised that the selection of participants, as well as the context of their participation, is essential to make such activities meaningful. Going forward, it became clear for us that we wanted to engage more thoroughly with non-institutional settings. Choosing to work with different kinds of collectives and communities, specifically those in which the urgency of autonomy, the conditions of precarity, the need for safe spaces or their activist practice created a strong incentive to engage with collective practices in a radical way. This is the reason why the selection process, a part often overlooked in our past workshops, became a crucial element. As a result, we decided to only accept already established, non-funded or self-funded groups who had active plans to establish an alternative social media presence for themselves and / or their community, yet were struggling to get started. We also had to make sure that the participants should feel they were allowed to represent whatever group they came

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1. Welcome to the Federation. the What, Why and How of Alternative Social Media #1. Available at: https://2020.transmediale.de/content/welcome-to-the-federation-the-what-why-and-how-of-alternative-social-media-1.

2. See, for example: https://bibliotecha.info/read/.

3. Screen Walk: One-click install to autonomy? https://www.centreforthestudyof.net/?p=5693.

from. We did so by stressing that all the results of the workshop could be anything from a fully operating social media platform ready for people to join, to a first draft that could be brought back to the larger group for further discussion.

In the process of preparing the workshop, we also came to realise that what we were ultimately working on was a workshop derived from, and synthesising, all the things we encountered as a collective, let them be social, economic, cultural and technical issues, while running an alternative social media ourselves for the past few years. It was the workshop we would have liked to attend when we started.

(fade to black, sad yet bold background violin music ensues)

Workshop Format

The core idea of the workshop, which will be described in more detail below, was simple. First, to gather a group of participants wishing to set up an alternative social media instance with their community, either publicly, privately or both. Second, to give them not only a theoretical introduction, but also the opportunity to work out some issues on governance and moderation in a focused and rich environment.

While the workshop began as rather theoretical and unidirectional, to introduce some basic concepts and make sure everyone was familiar enough with the issues at hand, most of the activities were designed to be interactive and hands-on. Divided in blocks, each block asked participants to engage with specific questions (referred to as discussion prompts in this text) which would impact their social media platform-to-be. We introduced each block with a personal / collective account of the experience of running post.lurk.org. The purpose of this was to highlight how setting up and successfully maintaining such a community over time very much consists in learning by doing. We did so by illustrating that fundamental decisions such as how the "door policy" would have a considerable impact on the nature, quantity, and quality of work involved and on the character of the space being created.

These blocks and corresponding prompts asked participants to specifically think in terms of "for whom", "what is the work", "who does the work",

"what are the available energies" etc. Progressing through the blocks, the discussion prompts about capacities, resources, labour etc. would inevitably end up modifying answers to previous blocks, complicating the picture and forcing a shift from blue-sky thinking to situated perspectives. Finally, each block also introduced some examples of communities running their own social media platform to illustrate the discussion.

Consequently, the format we chose for the workshop would hopefully give the participants several concrete results: a running server with the first configuration steps, a map of capabilities and resources of the team and first drafts of governance documents (Code of Conduct, Privacy Statement and Terms of Service). In addition, the participants would be part of a network of similar groups, including LURK, that could offer mutual support.

Even though we had two days, in order to not waste time solving technical problems, all participants were asked to have a working installation of Mastodon prior to joining the workshop. We provided an email discussion list so that participants could help each other during the installation phase, that took place roughly a week before the workshop started. When some people got stuck with this, we tried to help them as well.

Regarding the software, we mentioned Mastodon, which is a popular alternative social media software. To be more specific, the workshop was based on a special version of the software, called Hometown. Hometown is a modified version of Mastodon which has some additional community-oriented features. It is developed and maintained by Darius Kazemi, an artist and developer who created the Hometown modification as part of a Mozilla fellowship. During that fellowship, he also wrote "How to run a small social network for your friends"[4]. This is where the name of our workshop derives from, both as a tribute, a comment (the important distinction between the *for* and *with*) and an apt description of the workshop content. Furthermore, we introduced the option of participating groups not installing a server themselves, but instead having one managed by a hosting company. Somewhat surprisingly, no group went for this option. These considerations for the workshop format made their way into the call for participations.[5]

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4. How to run a small social network for your friends. Available at: https://runyourown.social.

5. Read the open call here: https://txt.lurk.org/how-to-run-a-small-social-networking-site/.

Who Joined?

Considering that the call was circulating right before and during the latest upheaval involving Twitter and Elon Musk, the Western oligarch who eventually managed to buy the platform, we got an overwhelming response. It was difficult to choose from the many applications. In the end, we settled for those which answered the questions in the call, represented a group, seemed serious and committed to the work, and most importantly we privileged those who did not have institutional support.

The final list of participants included representatives from the following nine groups:

hypha collective, "an initiative in Bucharest, Romania that aims to coagulate discussions around eco-feminist, hacktivist, and autonomous possibilities of software actualisations and embodiments". hypha is one of the partners of the ATNOFS project.

Feminist Hack Meetings (FHM), "a project that wants to support a safe, inclusive community of people who are typically discriminated against in the technology sector. As a group, we like to work with free / open source tools." FHM members are based both in Rotterdam, The Netherlands, and in Athens, Greece, and create activities in both cities. FHM is one of the partners of the ATNOFS project.

Dot Dot Dot User Group, an upstart group of four artists and their network "who share interests in Net, Sound, Feminism, Tech etc. and [...] are located in Seoul, South Korea."

Enby Social Club, "a discord group for non-binary (and other trans individuals)" in Michigan, USA.

MayFirst Movement Technology, "a cooperative of US and Mexican social activists that provide secure tech services including web hosting, video conferencing, email, database, collaborative editing, and discussion forum services with free, libre and open source software, and supports political awareness within [their] movements about the uses and abuses of digital technology through workshops, presentations and participation in conferences."

Data Coop, "a volunteer-driven consumer cooperative data.coop based in Copenhagen, Denmark. Collectively [they] own two physical servers and run a number of services on them. The goal of the association is to collectively run digital infrastructure for [their] members with focus on privacy protection, encryption, decentralisation and zero-knowledge, and to further these goals and help other data cooperatives getting started."

Organization for Ethical Source, as represented by media scholar Robert Gehl, OES is "an NGO that makes and promotes the Hippocratic License."

Minadora[6] server collective, a collaboration between three practitioners of the cultural scene in Tiblisi, involved in queer activism and cultural production in the city. The goal of the collective is to build up emancipatory tools / platforms in Georgia, for artists, particularly women and queer folks.

Varia, a space for developing collective approaches to everyday technology. Varia members joined as part of the ATNOFS project, not necessarily to host their own instance.

Workshop Program

The workshop was conducted hybridly, meaning both online and in-person in Varia. This permitted some flexibility given the international and diverse group of participants. Joining in person were three representatives of the Minadora server collective, Varia members, members of FHM, a representative of hypha, Robert Gehl and the workshop facilitators. No one cancelled their participation last minute — an ever present risk with free-to-participants workshops — another testament of the commitment of the group.

The workshop was structured over two days, from 12:00 to 18:00, to accommodate for the extreme difference in timezones. This compromise allowed for those in USA to *only* start at 06:00 and those in Seoul to end *only* at 01:00. The six hours of each workshop days were divided into forty five minute thematic blocks followed by a fifteen minute break and with a one hour break in the middle of the day.

In practice, we chose for a well structured and didactic approach given the density of material to cover. We were very strict with our frequently planned small and larger breaks, to make sure the

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6. Named after Minadora Orjonikidze.

hybrid situation of dealing with both remote and local participants would not be too exhausting. This provided a humane and enjoyable tempo for all.

	Friday, 13th May
12:00	Block 1 - Introductions
12:45	Break
13:00	Block 2 - Where are we? The Fediverse
13:45	Break
14:00	Block 3 - How is the software different?
14:45	Break
16:00	Block 4 - Thinking in inclusions & exclusions + scale
16:45	Break
17:00	Block 5 - Discussion and review about response to Block 4

	Saturday, 14th May
12:00	Block 6 - Money + resources and how to use them
12:45	Break
13:00	Block 7 - Defining expectations and norms: Codes of Conduct, Terms of Service and Privacy Statements
13:45	Break
14:00	Block 8 - Governance, moderation and hosting: CoC, ToS and Privacy Statements in action
14:45	Break
16:00	Block 9 - Maps and diagrams: visualising infrastructures, workflows, resources and interdependencies
16:45	Break
17:00	Block 10 - Final presentations

Block Reviews

The following text provides an overview of each block and an anonimised highlight of the discussions we had along the way in the form of a Q&A. We are also providing the prompts used for the blocks in which the participants were asked to reflect in small groups, as a means to help think about all the things that need to be considered when running an instance.

To make things practical, we split into groups for smaller discussions to happen:

- Group 1: Sergiu (hypha) & Rob (Organization for Ethical Source [OES])
- Group 2: Dorian (Enby Social Club) & Dave (MayFirst Movement Technology)
- Group 3: Wonjung & Dooho (Dot Dot Dot User Group)
- Group 4: Tekla, Mika & Nona (Minadora server collective)
- Group 5: Artemis, Mara & Aggeliki (FHM)
- Group 6: Balder & Reynir (Data Coop)
- Group 7: Roel (LURK), Lídia (LURK), Aymeric (LURK), Manetta (Varia) & Marloes

Day 1

Introductions

We started the day with an introduction, during which we informed participants about the content of the two days ahead, how we would work and what they could expect. Furthermore, we laid some groundwork by situating ourselves and contextualising the workshop, both within the ATNOFS project and within Varia.

It was also in this block that we introduced the pad structure, in which we would be taking notes and documenting the workshop.

Lastly, we alerted participants to the existence of a Code of Conduct, namely that of Varia, which would apply to both physical and digital spaces, and collected their consent for photographic and written documentation.

Where Are We? The Fediverse

Summary

The second block focused on giving an overview of the Fediverse as a different paradigm of social media, contrasting it with corporate social networking platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. Such a different paradigm allowed us to unpack and reconsider principles that are usually taken for granted: what does it do, how does it run, what is the economic model, what applications are used, who is it for, how to best use it, agency, etc. In addition, the second block provided a critical account of what and who is already part of the Fediverse. We also discussed matters of privacy and the importance of trust within this context. Finally, we introduced the relationship between the different instances and diverse software applications which constitute the Fediverse, including Hometown. In order to discuss the latter, we introduced its origins, its aims and its most important features, namely the possibility to post local-only messages, a feature which creates a space for community formation that seems to be lacking in other social media platforms.
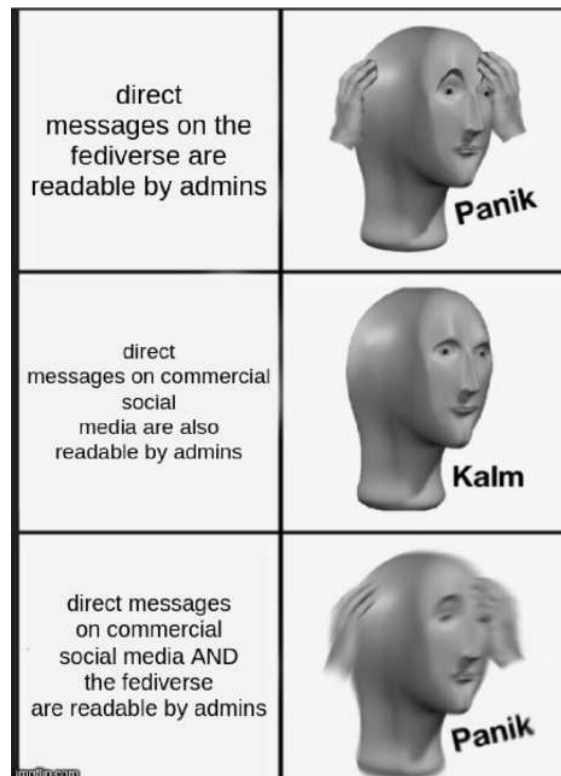
Meme by Cristina Cochior

Group Discussion

Q: How do mapping projects such as https://fediverse.space interact with consent?
A: They do not really interact, but there is also a distinction with scraping content for mapping. Furthermore, these projects tend not to map very small providers as a way to respect privacy and generally allow opting-out. This also points to the fact that, within the Fediverse, it is relatively common to discuss cultural norms about what kind of stuff is acceptable or not within the communities that form the network.

Q: Is 'no to scraping' possible on a server level? Via the robots.txt file?
A: 'No to scraping' is configurable but it isn't widely enforced, or even truly possible unless an instance is fully private and not federated. It is however common that anyone who admits they are scraping, or are seen scraping, are called out by Fediverse users and asked to stop. At the very least, scraping is looked down upon by them. However, as new users join — including journalists and academics — they may not recognise this cultural prohibition or even understand why it is an issue, as this represents yet another sample or population to study. We can only assume this will become increasingly problematic if the Fediverse becomes more popular and visible.

Q: Are blocking lists between servers also shared?
A: The #fediblock hashtag is a way for people to spread news about instances they block which are considered unsuitable to their community. Nonetheless, this hashtag can contain false positives and has also been used to smear others during conflicts. It is best to use your own judgement rather than to copy from a hashtag or a list. In general, blocklists are pretty controversial: developers think blocklists will lead to abuse. In contrast, people concerned about safety are trying to implement shareable blocklists. There is an interesting paper that looks into the subtleties of blocklists by Jhaver, Ghoshal, Bruckan and Gilbert.[7] At time of writing, shareable block lists are being discussed as a future feature, which will add another layer of complexity and messiness.

Q: In a federated environment with several web applications of different kinds which are interconnected, you can never really know how your message will show up on the other side. How to deal with that?
A: You don't. For a lot of the messages it's really clear, because many clients use a Twitter-like interface. But different servers can make changes, such as forcing their users to make posts with fewer characters, while others will allow the posting of very lengthy posts. The federation of different systems also means that public posts can end up as comments in someone's blog, but this is not necessarily an example of good practice. Besides, some software like Pixelfed, an Instagram inspired platform, will emphasize images; however, if you render those posts on a regular Mastodon client it might look radically different (and vice versa). More generally, every server has its own view of the Fediverse! You might not be able to connect to a friend because your admin has blocked their provider for bad behaviour in the past. This happens because each instance has their own policies / Code of Conduct, and these range from highly moderated safe spaces to free speech, absolutist troll nests.

How Is the Software Different?

Summary

The third block of the workshop looked more closely at the interface features of Mastodon / Hometown in order to discuss their differences in relation to non-federated social media. We introduced features such as posting (aka tooting), following (both local and remote users), favouriting, filtering, boosting and interacting with different federated software applications (Pixelfed, Peertube, etc.). Furthermore, and in connection with posting, we discussed options such as different visibility settings and content warnings. Not only did we provide a more theoretical introduction to these topics, we engaged with them through hands-on exercises in which participants could follow each other and interact with posts across different software projects on the Fediverse.

Group Discussion

Q: How do hashtags interact with the federated nature of these platforms?
A: As you follow more people, and as your

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7. Jhaver, Shagun, Sucheta Ghoshal, Amy Bruckman, and Eric Gilbert. "Online Harassment and Content Moderation." ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction 25, no. 2 (2018): 1–33. https://doi.org/10.1145/3185593.

instance's network grows, more and more posts will show up when you search for hashtags. There is no "total" view of the network.

Q: How do other servers get connected to your server?
A: When you interact with accounts on other servers, your server becomes aware of that connection. This is a bi-directional relationship.

Thinking in Inclusions ✕ Exclusions ✕ Scale

Summary

Block four asked who the server is and isn't for. To set the ground for Block four, we gave an overview of post.lurk.org's history and composition up to now, a community made up of three roughly overlapping groups of cultural practitioners: algoravers and live coders, artists and academics working with net culture or net.art, and graphic designers working with free software tools. This allowed us to introduce topics such as recruitment (from friend-of-a-friend tactics to guerilla flyering), scale, and community diversity.

Although there are a few limitations for joining post.lurk.org (such as, applicants preferably have a creative practice), opting for a relatively arbitrary "door policy" often makes it difficult for the moderation team to make decisions, and may aid with the creation of certain imbalances within the community (such as gender). Defining who can make accounts and how thus greatly influences the need for moderation work, the workload it involves and the culture created. Hence, sharing these experiences and comparing their outcomes to other Mastodon instances, such as mastodon.social, where everyone is welcome except blatant Nazis. Another example, queer.haus, only interconnects with two or three other servers that are related to the Berlin queer scene or are fully trusted. These examples laid the ground for introducing some prompts for the participants to reflect on.

Discussion Prompts

- For whom is this instance meant?
- Who is not welcome? Think not only broadly (no racists) but more subtly (your friendly but quite boring colleagues)
- You know your crowd the best: to what extent does this need to be a sheltered or a hyper-connected space?

- Should people mostly talk to each other as a community, or should they be individuals grouped together who each talk to an "audience" (Twitter-like)? How do you facilitate that?
- How will you recruit new people? How much time do you spend introducing newcomers?
- Are you ok with institutional and / or promotional accounts? Are you ok with automated posts? How does that decision affect the (community) experience you are trying to build?
- What size server are you planning for? Your immediate friends? Your association? Your co-workers? Your association and some others? Your city?

Discussion and Review of Responses to Block 4

During Block five, several topics came up, but two are worth highlighting:

Concerning activist practices

Building a local activist community is difficult, and some participants wondered if Mastodon was suitable for that. Mastodon in general doesn't fit every use. Maximum reach can be at odds with privacy concerns, for example. Specially if the community is of an activist or political nature general security considerations come into play, for example: are people using their real name to discuss sensitive topics?

It is unknown if there has been any serious analysis of how Mastodon holds up to attacks. Furthermore, the creation of Mastodon instances during the incidents with the elections in Catalonia a few years back (2018) has, in fact, created a completely open directory of people doing activist work. Easy to scrape, it facilitates

the task of profiling people and networks. While it was positive that the instances were easy to quickly deploy and impossible to take down, it created a potentially massive security risk. In that respect, old school indymedia networks were much more secure, careful and aware of risks. Nonetheless, depending on your threat model, Mastodon could be suitable.

On choosing Hometown (instead of Mastodon)

The biggest advantage of Hometown, by far, is the possibility to do local only posting, which is not possible in vanilla Mastodon; this means you can utilise your instance for group discussions with only your members. This could also partly echo some concerns regarding privacy and surveillance sketched above.

Hometown has minimal changes from vanilla Mastodon, meaning that maintenance of the fork is very simple. Of course, choosing a fork is a big decision because new / added / altered features may not work well across the Fediverse and between various clients (such as, local posting is not well supported by mobile clients). Furthermore, if the maintainer of the fork stops maintaining it, you might be stuck with something difficult to migrate away from.

Day 2

Money / Resources and How to Use Them

Summary

We started the second day of the workshop with Block six, which aimed at highlighting the fact that setting up a Hometown / Mastodon server requires not only resources and personal energy, but also costs money. Thus, it is important to take

this into account and to find a model that works for the specific local context in order to keep hosting sustainable and future-proof.

To illustrate these points, this section introduced a history of public arts funding in Europe for the development of digital infrastructure as a background for LURK. It also introduced the notion that because of our interests, skills, and backgrounds it was easier for us to get started with hosting. For example, LURK benefits from having some of its computing infrastructure donated by friendly associations / companies. At the same time, the team has other weaknesses and blindspots. Here, we briefly touched upon task division and the risks of burnout when performing this type of, mostly, highly unstructured labour. On a rather sobering note, it was proposed that the question now is not whether post.lurk was going to crash and burn, but rather when.

Finally, we described different funding models, and how, after nearly four years of operation, LURK started its own crowdfunding model to sustain the cost of labour specifically, as we currently have no server costs. This financial structure is supported by Open Collective, a platform that facilitates fundraising, fiscal hosting and legal status for grassroots organisations.

Last but not least, we briefly discussed the environmental concerns linked to hosting an alternative social media software. LURK purposefully chose to work with a service advertised as *green* for our instance, but we are not naive that this is far from being so simple. Green IT does not exist. More practically though, we try to be very careful when it comes to optimising our servers, and take pleasure in working under constraints, recycled hardware and old machines in general. We have no desire to scale LURK without consideration on the footprint consequences. This is has an impact on choices we are making presently, and also future, for instance with a current discussion we have regarding our desire not to provide infinite storage and infinite account numbers.

Discussion Prompts

- Who is the team?
- What are the resources / strengths in the team? Who is enthusiastic? Who is a good communicator? Who is technically very proficient? Who is a good fixer? Who has a lot of money? Who has a lot of time?

- Which resource is the most scarce? (time, money, computation, bandwidth, etc.)
- Who can take over if the one doing the task really can't or doesn't feel like it?
- How are things paid? Which things are paid (i.e. what are your priorities)? What rate?
- How much work are you willing and realistically able to put in?
- How do you take care of the ecological footprint? (computational limits, recycled repurpose hardware, so-called green datacentre)

Note: as we had planned to look into server infrastructure mapping later, for these questions we wanted to focus solely on resources (machinic, humans) and financial / environmental / labour sustainability considerations and ethics.

Texts about Expectations and Norms

In Block seven we discussed norm and expectation setting documents, such as the Code of Conduct, Terms of Service and Privacy Policy. These are three important documents for the administration / moderation team and the people on the server that help establish and understand; expected and prohibited behaviour, the conditions for using the server and finally, how privacy is impacted by using the service. In particular, we stressed how these should both reflect the capacities and capabilities of the group and the threats faced by the group. In this, it was introduced how LURK's documents came about, their conscious development, albeit rather haphazardly and responding to specific incidents, only took place after four years of LURK services being online and half a year after post.lurk.org saw the light of day. Finally, we shared examples of documents from other instances, organisations and events, namely Varia's, Libre Graphics Meeting's and Merveilles.town Codes of Conduct and QueerHaus's and Mastodon.social's Terms of Service. It was a great block to discuss digital paperwork :)

Discussion Prompts and Assignments

- Does your group have already established norms and guiding documents that you could rely on?
- What kind of behaviour do you want to see?
- What kind of behaviour do you not want to see?

- How do you take the first step to ensure that you are creating a space where your community feels safe? What safeguards should be put in place?
- How do you take the different relations of power within your own community into account when writing these documents?
- Which things are you promising, and do you have the resources to make good on those promises?
- Look back on block four & six and modify the above accordingly.

Write a first draft of these:
- CoC (what behaviour do we want to see in the community, what behaviour do you not?)
- ToS (what can you expect of the service / server, what not?)
- Privacy Statement (how do you deal with your users' data, from analytics to retention and tracking?)

Governance, Moderation and Hosting: CoC, ToS and Privacy Statements in Action

Summary

Block eight focused on putting the documents discussed in Block seven into practice, as these should be evolving and actively enacted to be effective. The block discussed questions of governance, work distribution, procedures for moderation and for making decisions, etc. Specifically in terms of governance, while it might be seductive to go for a democratic consensus-governance model, this can also be a risk when it comes to starting out and establishing the space if the group doesn't have enough capacity. In order to highlight this, we introduced an honest description of LURK's governance model as an "impulsive and time-constrained benevolent eurocentric oligarcho-do-ocracy". Deconstructing what this means: our governance model is impulsive because scratching itches / personal enjoyment are the main motivators for work on LURK. Time-constrained because everything is done whenever the administrators / moderators find free time to work on the server; TODOs tend to span months, unless they happen to be scratching someone's itch. Benevolent, as we like to consider ourselves well-intended, and are willing to listen, learn and do best efforts given our constraints. Eurocentric, as the entire team is in

one timezone, concentrated on four to five languages, and culturally homogenous. Oligarchy, as the governance structure consists of a small cabal (a conspirational group) which makes executive decisions. A do-ocracy, because decisions are made primarily by people acting on something. Moderation decisions such as accepting new people to the server, banning other servers etc., tweaking the technical configuration are often just "done" by those within the oligarchy without prior discussion. Only very difficult situations, non-trivial technical issues, or really large decisions are actively discussed in the oligarchy. All of that does not imply that we haven't, for example, solicited input and feedback on things such as the Terms of Service to the larger LURK.org userbase.

On a less exciting note, running LURK also means that we frequently run into time zone issues, have been harassed on our personal accounts by blocked users, etc. In order to help solve some of these, and to support each other with dealing with problematic situations, we created an extended moderator group for one of our services, XMPP, and for one particularly difficult chatroom on this service, we set up a system where users joining the group don't have voice by default. While in theory this is not ideal, in practice this is what has worked for LURK.

Finally, we discussed that, when setting up our donation system, it was of the utmost importance for us to keep track of the time we put into moderation work, for which it was necessary to have a clear overview of the exact tasks which qualify as such.

Group Discussion

Q: Does the invite policy lead to a disjointed community within LURK?
A: It worked really well for a long time, where we mostly invited friends and friends of friends. However, with the latest influx from Twitter, it became more tricky. We ran into timezone problems: suddenly twenty new people join. What if two hundred people suddenly join: how will we manage it? Thus, we decided to close it down for a while. However, people in the wider LURK network could still ping the administrators / moderators for an account. In the end, it's about speed. How quickly do people join and get accustomed to how things work on LURK? We want to avoid people joining and simply using it the same way they used Twitter. The more you

open it, the more chance for good as well as bad encounters, so it is quite important to think this through.

At the time of writing this chapter in November 2022 and as post-scriptum to the above: with the current wave of new users coming after Elon Musk became the new CEO of Twitter, we have decided to limit the LURK instance to six hundred and sixty six (666) accounts, and not take anyone new. Regardless if seen from a moderation point of view, a resource issue, or the desire to keep the community at relatively human-scale, it all points to deciding to stop scaling up for the foreseeable future. We will, however, free some space by deleting never-ever-used accounts, allowing a few new people to join from time to time.

Discussion Prompts

- How are your CoC and ToS accommodated proactively / preventatively?
- How is the CoC enforced? Who does that?
- Who are admins, who are mods? How are they reachable?
- How do you assist each other with grey / vague issues regarding moderation?
- Is there a group account for mod / admin or individual accounts?
- How is the place governed in theory? How is it in practice?
- How explicit can you be, or do you want to be, about how things are enforced and directed?

Maps and Diagrams: Visualising Infrastructures, Workflows, Resources and Interdependencies

Summary

Block nine drew from several visualisations of resources and workflows we made for lurk.org.

This map (Fig. 1) is essentially an inventory of services, machines and their situation. It shows how, for example, the server infrastructure of LURK is an assembly of old machines running in a university, donated virtual servers and servers maintained by other cultural collectives. It also shows that some machines are *exclusive* to LURK, while others are *shared* with other collectives and groups. While a constant source of frustration, a reliable back-up system is an absolute must-have.

Another aspect to consider regarding the federation, is the strong discrepancy between the cultural diversity of instance hosting and their communities, and the diversity of the hosting infrastructure. The https://fediverse.observer/ map notably shows that the biggest chunk of Fediverse hosting is located in datacentres across Europe, followed by USA, which in turn is followed by Japan. More generally, when you are running an instance, what kind of infrastructure are you going to be engaging with? It varies from self-hosting at home to going to the cheapest option you can find online, regardless of their impact on the planet, their politics or judicial conditions.

Mapping can also be used to show the governance structure (the impulse, time-constrained nature, etc.) and how decisions are made. It can also be used to summarise the underlying economic model that allows the instance to remain sustainable in the long term.

Following this, participants were asked to take the input of the last two days to sketch out their situation, once again using LURK's own diagrams as an example.

Assignment

Final exercise, make three maps / diagrams to synthesise:

- computer / net infrastructure
- money / resources flowchart
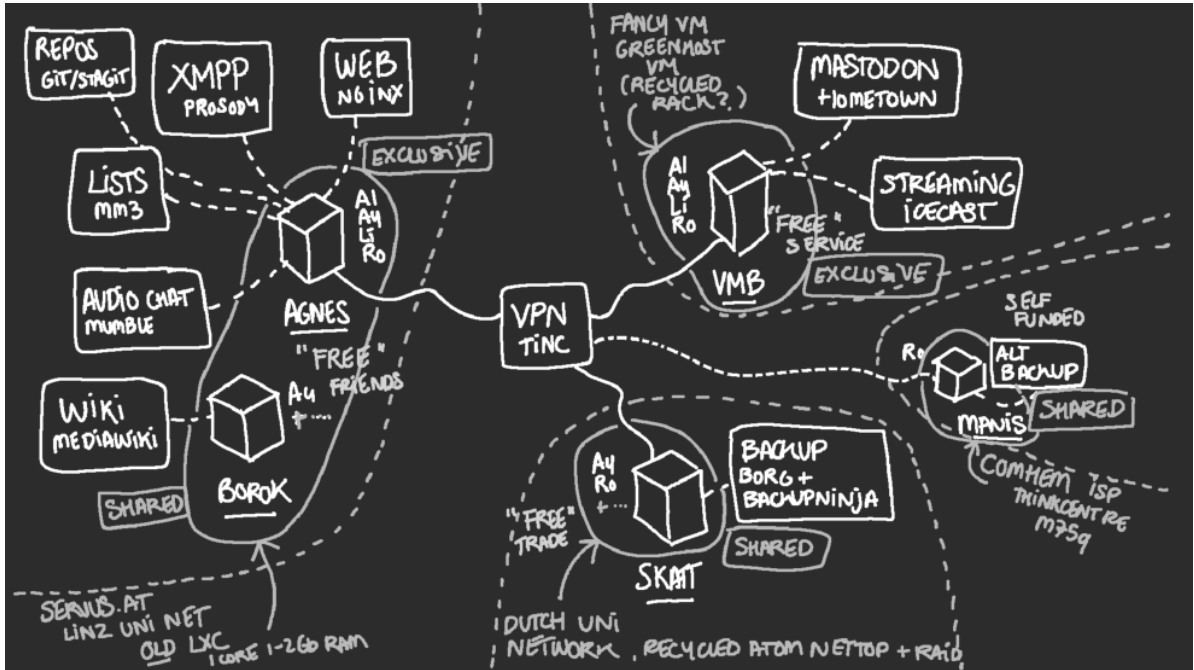- Moderation / maintenance / admin workflow

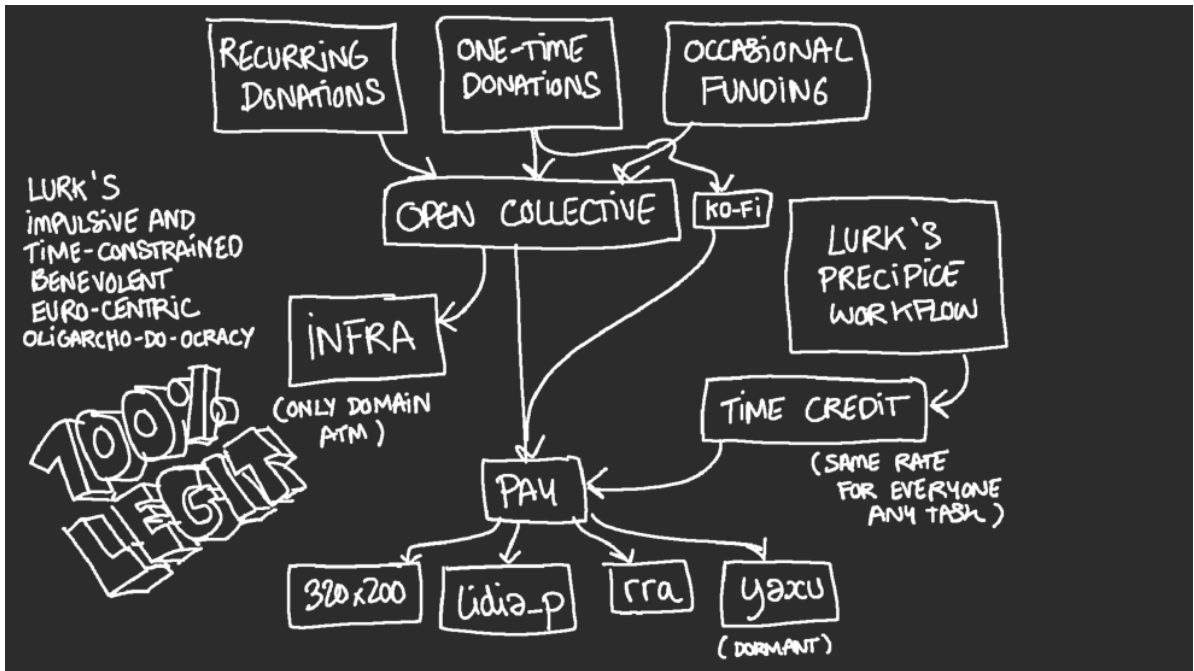Fig. 1: Inventory of services, machines and their situation – a map

Fig. 2: LURK's impulsive and time-constrained benevolent Euro-centric oligarcho-do-ocracy
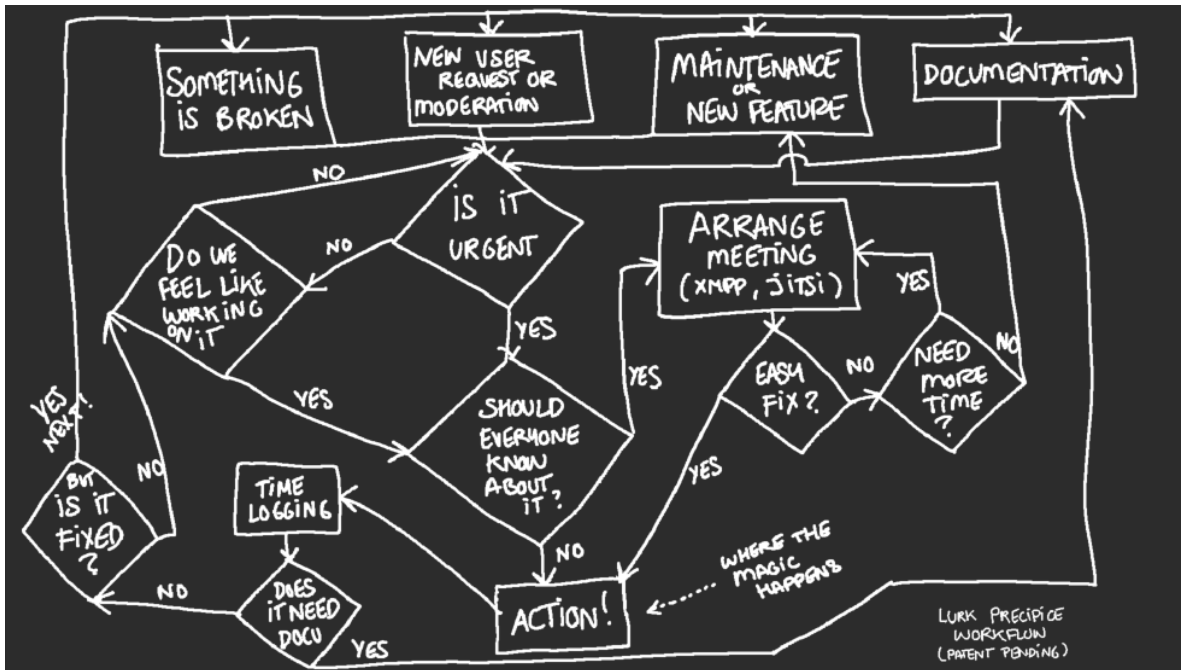
Fig. 3: LURK's precipice workflow

Final Presentations

Summary

For the very last session, we asked the participants to make use of all the pads / documents, maps and diagrams they produced during the two days and put together a small presentation about what their group has been working on in relation to:

1. CoC / ToS / Privacy Statement
2. Infrastructure
3. Resources
4. Moderation

Next to the presentations, we were able to use this as one last opportunity to discuss things that did not quite fit in the final presentation format. For instance, we discussed:

- the necessity of some organisations to align with software platforms that match their ethical agenda;
- the problem of access to technical documentation and resources for groups situated in environments where English is not used easily, if at all;
- the scale of the platform and its impact on the kind of conversation it generates;
- the regional specificities of access to cultural funding or the possibility to crowdfund such a project;
- the challenge to preserve the dynamics of very small collectives once it interfaces constantly with a much broader network, and if federation limited to a handful of other like-minded instances can help preserve such dynamics;
- the problem of availability across different timezones; the difficulty of a right process to onboard new people, specially when the space

has been carefully crafting specific CoC / ToS / Privacy statements;

- the hierarchy between admins, mods, and users and whether or not any alternative governance is possible when so many assumptions are already hardcoded into Mastodon;
- the emotional labour and work of care of moderation and facilitation that cannot be reduced to a technical fix, content flagging, editing;
- the problem for activists to organise and communicate more and more via mainstream social media, whether there is any actual true alternative, and why this is not addressed more widely with the exception of some groups and services like Riseup and similar efforts;
- how to properly classifiy the different kinds of labour taking place in running an alternative social media;
- how the non-capitalist modes of organisation and production based on mutual support get impacted by the increasing needs to make such projects financially sustainable to avoid burnout and instability within communities;
- the tension between federation as networked load-balancing, and federation as a project of cultural diversity;
- the potential of reinventing social media seen by some as a last attempt to figure out if there is any value in such type of software.

Where Is Everyone Now?

Where do the participants and their servers stand after half a year of the workshop taking place?

We approached all participants to discuss this with us. While not everyone was able to get back to us in time, we gathered enough feedback to provide some useful insights and afterthoughts in relation to what the workshop brought to the group. Below is an edited summary of our follow-up discussions with them.

FHM used Systerserver's https://systerserver.town/about, a pre-existing community of cyberfeminists. It has been in use since, even if it is not a Hometown instance. Additionally, after the FHM ATNOFS session in Athens, they met and connected with a local Greek feminist group, Kamia Anohi[89], who needs support in installing a Mastodon instance aimed mostly at reporting violence against women in Greece. FHM will support them during that process, giving them another chance to revisit the outcomes of the workshop and potentially install the Hometown fork.

FHM joined our workshop with an interest to discuss alternative social media and technologies from a feminist perspective. According to them, in the Greek art and activist scene most feminist and grassroots initiatives rely on corporate social media in order to reach out, making them more vulnerable to harassment and unable to control important aspects of governance and moderation of their online communities. FHM was specifically interested in joining to develop their Code of Conduct, not only for their Mastodon instance, but also for the rest of their online community infrastructure. By learning more of LURK's Mastodon moderation strategies and getting an insight into costs and energy required for maintenance, they hoped to acquire necessary knowledges to eventually expand their user base. FHM found the discussion prompts asked in each block particularly useful. These questions helped them revisit their organisational models and work

towards future developments. The discussion prompts were also shared with their feminist sysadmin's mailing lists and used in a workshop during the TransH@ckFeminist convergence last August. However, FHM stated that, in practical terms, their rules and moderation policies have not changed since the workshop. The limiting factor in this has been the size of the Systerserver network and the governance structure it currently has. This makes taking these types of decisions a slow process that requires much communication before agreement is found and action can be taken. FHM realised the significance of having more clarity about who manages, moderates and maintains their Mastodon instance as a result.

DDDUG used https://toot.dddug.in/about. During a conversation looking back on their experience of the workshop, the DDDUG members Dooho and Wonjung mentioned they kept their instance purposefully small. There were several reasons for this: first, the group had not had much time to work together since the workshop. Second, they were keen on only letting people join whom they knew in person. They mentioned this makes it easier to maintain and easier to introduce to newcomers. However, there was also a technical constraint, as DDDUG is hosted on a small machine on a residential network in Seoul. While it works for now, they mentioned it is not allowed to self-host with their ISP and they are also having trouble setting up email which means that registering accounts needs to be done together. Thus, right now, the instance is kept alive but small and on unstable ground, while the members wait for a good artistic opportunity to activate both DDDUG and the instance. Dooho mentioned the workshop and their Hometown server were a good way "in" to what they believed is an exciting network of artistic and hacking practices. Thus, they follow others actively through the Fediverse. Wonjung mentioned that when using Hometown to share things she had a better sense of who she connected to, as opposed to Instagram which felt more anonymous. Finally, there was an interest to look at customising and using Pixelfed[10] as the possibility to work with a platform designed for sharing visual content primarily felt more exciting to them than Hometown did.

hypha, a group who focuses on the multiple aspects in which technology impacts social and political life joined the workshop because they

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8. Καμιά Ανοχή's Facebook account https://www.facebook.com/KamiaAnohi/.

9. Καμιά Ανοχή's Twitter account https://twitter.com/kamiaanohi?lang=en.

10. Pixelfed https://pixelfed.org/.

were interested in the possibility of hosting a Mastodon instance to connect local activists and leftist groups across Romania. After the workshop, they realised the group is not yet in a stage where it can take the responsibility of hosting a Mastodon instance. They are not, however, discouraged, but rather realise this is a serious endeavour and the timing is not yet quite right. In their email conversation with us, hypha stated they will use the guidelines and notes collected during the workshop (especially the Code of Conduct) when the time comes, to create their own instance.

Organization for Ethical Source was represented by media researcher and OES member Rob Gehl, who wrote a report on the workshop for the board of OES. At the time, OES was having discussions on what their social media strategy should be and Gehl wished to make a case for social media that aligned with the values of OES. In this report, he lauded the questions raised during the workshop, specifically those concerning resources and moderation. He recommended OES to work through the questions and set up their own Mastodon / Hometown server. However, wary of additional system administration and moderation labour, the organisation did not follow this recommendation. Nonetheless, Gehl mentioned that the workshop was beneficial in another way, as he plans to re-use much of it for similar workshops for NGOs in North America. The feedback also turned out very relevant to introduce the Fediverse to the Association of Internet Researchers, an academic association dedicated to the advancement of the cross-disciplinary field of Internet Studies.

Months prior to the LURK workshop, the **Minadora server collective** came together with the intention to form a feminist server collective engaged in the development of emancipatory tools / platforms for artists in Georgia, particularly women and queer folks. Upon learning that the LURK workshop would be taking place, the collective was excited to join with the expectation to learn more about different approaches of hosting an instance and gathering a more comprehensive overview of the platform. Reflecting on the workshop, the collective indicated an appreciation for its accessibility and its focus on sharing personal experiences of the LURK team, particularly the challenges and frustrations faced during their time hosting post.lurk.org. This allowed for a more realistic understanding of the possibilities of hosting their own instance. Furthermore, regarding the rules and moderation policies, the Minadora collective stated that the LURK workshop greatly impacted

them in their thinking about these topics, providing a set of guidelines to tackle the development of these documents. While they shut down their experimental server set up for the workshop, in their email response the collective stated their intention to slowly continue engaging with the topic, aiming to set another instance up based on the insights drawn from the workshop. Since our exchange with Minadora, we have seen this instance go live. The Minadora collective has networked with the other participants of ATNOFS, specifically mur.at and Systerserver, to build out their digital infrastructure and create an affinity network.

Concluding Thoughts

Between the lines of the responses that we got, and the ones we did not get, it can be read that it remains very challenging to set up and maintain an instance. The groups who joined the workshop with an already established server had an easier time to keep it going afterwards. Surprisingly, one of the particular challenges that was raised in two separate conversations was that, while it was doable to install the Hometown / Mastodon server, the real challenge was in getting email working. The dependency of Mastodon on having email to set up accounts thus became a bottleneck. While not excessively difficult to install by itself, Mastodon makes of course many assumptions about the Linux / BSD knowledges required to make an instance fully operational, in relation to other software components of the operating system, including a working email server. These knowledges becomes even more necessary when the instance requires fine tuning and optimisations to operate under heavier load and network constraints. On a more positive note, this challenge also sketches the benefits, and the urge to rethink network solidarity and decentralisation, from a cooperative perspective where not every collective would need to deploy and maintain everything on their own. As mentioned earlier, LURK is already doing that partly, both relying on the infrastructure of others for some services, but also lending its own services to others (including access to our email server!).

Regardless, and as seen at time of writing with the current influx of new users on the Fediverse following the take over of Twitter by Elon Musk, the real hard challenges are not technical. They are the facilitation and organisation of a community; the clash of expectations between providing a relatively safe discursive space and the normalisation of toxic behaviours learned from mainstream social media, the deployment of a moderation strategy and, of course, financial support to make all this happen (especially when some public instances can grow ten times bigger within a couple of days). While we believe that the workshop was able to signpost the road ahead, and tried to prepare everyone as much as possible for a safe journey, the journey still remains to happen and it is easier said than done.

This is why, for future iterations of this workshop, we would like to focus more keenly on the afterglow: what remains when the workshop is over? How can we facilitate the post-workshop experience and keep the energies going? While we set up the mailing list with this purpose in mind, it has not been used as such ever since. A reflection point therefore is whether the workshop can be structured differently to promote these future conversations or whether this reaches beyond our sphere of influence. More specifically, and looping back to a remark introduced earlier in this text, it could also very well be that the workshop as a model of dissemination and learning for this particular situation is in fact simply not a good fit, specially when so many elements require care in preparation, and time for fermenting and sharing. We are still thinking about this...

All that being said, and as one participant reminded everyone, even in the situation where things do not quite turn out as planned, there is still potentially much fun to be had in the process of trying to run a social media platform with friends. So, what are you waiting for?

P.S. Everything is amazing and the world is a beautiful glittery thing.

Acknowledgements