The Twitter Alternative: A Quick Guide to Mastodon for Newbies

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If you haven't been living under a social media-free rock (no shade to you if you are, in fact, good for you), you've probably noticed by now that strange things are afoot at Twitter. That means it's time to look at an alternative, in this case, Mastodon.

Is there a viable Twitter alternative?

So, Elon Musk did finally buy Twitter on October 28, 2022. And then he fired a whole bunch of people, reinstated Trump's and Kanye's accounts, and overall made quite a vast number of Twitter users unhappy enough that they have mostly abandoned their accounts there and moved on to other social networks.

But is there a viable alternative to Twitter? Many social networks have been touted as potential alternatives, some newly formed, some that have been around for ages. The ones most often mentioned seem to be the following, but not always without issues:

- Mastodon, a federated platform launched in 2016
- Tumblr, a microblogging platform that has been around since 2007
- Cohost, a new microblogging platform founded by a self-proclaimed "software company that hates the software industry", which has since been [called out for their problematic TOS](#)
- Hive Social, founded in 2019, was recently [called out for security issues](#) and has now [shut down its servers](#) to deal with those issues

There are, of course, many more platforms, but these are the most prominent ones at the time of writing. Cohost and Hive Social don't currently seem like the safest options. In my experience, Tumblr users were often enough concomitant Twitter users anyway, so it doesn't seem to be quite the replacement some people claim it is. Some communities have moved to Discord, but I find that, similar to Slack, Discord is more for closed communities than Twitter. So we're left with Mastodon, which is certainly one of the most interesting alternatives just based on how it all works. So let's dive into that.

What is Mastodon, and how does it work

At the beginning of November 2022, Mastodon saw a surge of incoming users and grew to 1 million users. By the end of January 2023, official data shared by Mastodon on their help center reported:

We currently count 12,941 Mastodon instances, with 6,194,479 users (1,587,552 active during last month) and 599,597,566 published statuses.

Sure, some of the newcomers won't stick around. Some of them just made an account and then forgot about it again. But as someone who tried to move to Mastodon the first time Musk threatened to buy Twitter, I can tell that it's different this time. The key is critical mass.

An important term when it comes to Mastodon is federation, which means "an encompassing political or societal entity formed by uniting smaller or more localized entities". And the fediverse, a portmanteau of "federation" and "universe", is a collection of servers used for microblogging, social networking, etc.

These servers, or instances, are all self-contained but interconnected or federated; they can communicate with each other because the software they run supports open communication protocols.

Platforms in the fediverse are, for example, Mastodon, Bookwyrm, blogging platforms Drupal and WordPress, and even Tumblr.

So these platforms can look entirely different from each other.

Mastodon is merely a free and open-source software for running self-hosted social networking services. People can set up and host a Mastodon instance, allowing others to sign up for it as users. Each Mastodon instance (or server) has its own set of rules, moderators, code of conduct, settings, and might even have a differing Graphical User Interface (GUI).

For example, some Mastodon servers allow posts up to 500 characters, others have no length limit for posts at all. Some servers still call posts toots, while many others have embraced the recent Mastodon update that changed the toot button to a publish button.

Federation also means that instances can actively choose to block — defederate from — other instances. Many Mastodon instances block the connection to known fascist or transphobic servers or servers that don't have an adequate code of conduct that prevents harassment. Think of it as one server protecting its users from bad actors by blocking a server that allows such bad actors to do whatever they want.

What's important to understand is that there is no generalised Mastodon experience — what you experience and how you interact with people will always be strongly influenced by the server you choose.

How to choose a server and sign up

First of all, you need to find a server that suits you. There are many, many servers to choose from. You can choose by topic or interest (tech, LGBTQIA+, academia, games, sports, etc.). There are also some generalised servers but those tend to be very full and often weakly moderated.

If you don't have any friends influencing your server choice by where they are, you could start by browsing for Mastodon instances on To the Fediverse, which has one of the most comprehensive server lists that I've seen. You can filter by topic but, additionally, also by language, which can be helpful.

Next, I'd recommend opening those domains and checking out their rules, code of conduct and the instance's admin. Check if the server is currently taking new signups. Some servers are closed to signups because of the influx of Twitter users, some are closed to random signups but if you know someone on that server they can invite you. Keep in mind that bigger instances that have entry barriers will be fairly crowded and might not be as closely moderated as smaller servers. Pay attention to the code of conduct to determine if this is a server you would feel safe on.
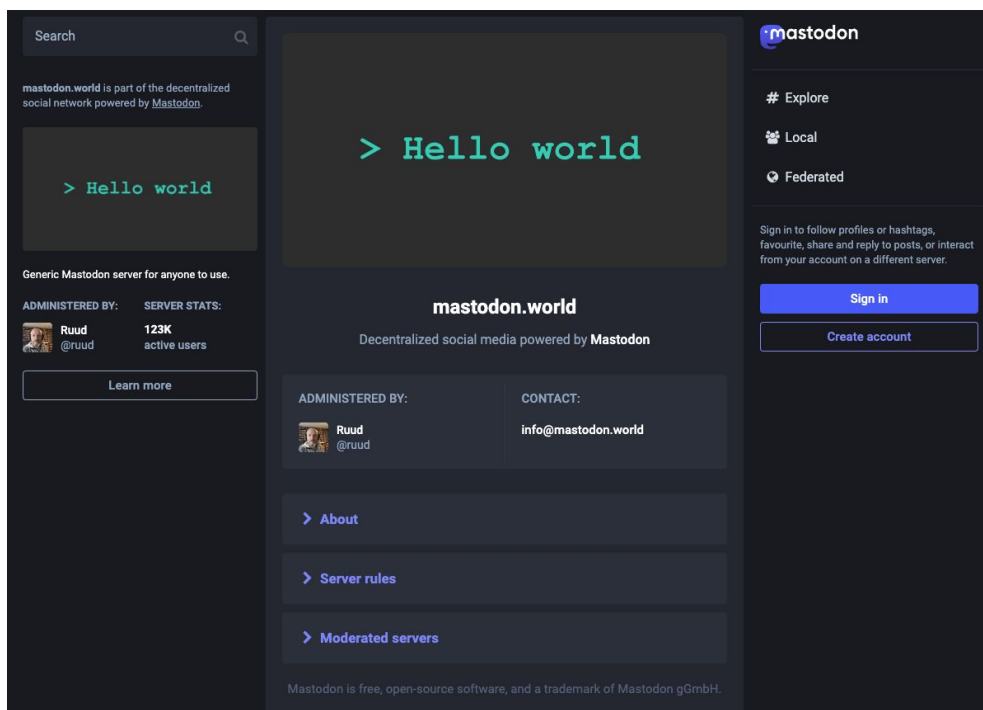
Check out a server's about section and server rules and find out who the admin of the instance is by going to the domain and finding the link to the about page.

If you find one you like, set up an account. Don't worry too much about it because you can easily [migrate your account to another Mastodon instance](#) later if you find one you like more.

Now, this is important to remember: your shiny new Mastodon account **only exists on the server you made it on**. Your handle consists of both your username and your instance's name: @YourUsername@YourInstance. If you move to another instance, the second part changes accordingly: @YourUsername@YourNewInstance.

This also means that to log in to your account, you need to navigate to your instance's domain. If you're viewing a friend's profile on a different instance and try to log in from there, it won't know who you are because you don't have an account on your friend's server. However, you can of course follow and interact with users on other instances (as long as they're not blocked by your instance).

To sum up:

- Find a server that suits you
- Sign up for an account on that server
- Your account now lives on that server
- Interact with people on your and other servers

Getting started on Mastodon

Now that you're signed up, there are still a few things that differ from Twitter.

Privacy settings and direct messages

One of those is privacy. While Twitter only gives you the choice between locked or public, Mastodon doesn't have the private/public dichotomy but gives you more granular options for control.

By default, your profile is public. However, you can set it so that people have to request to follow you. And then, you could set your posts to only be visible to your followers. You can also change the visibility on a per-post basis and much, much more. NerdChalk has a more in-depth guide to the various ways you can create more privacy when using Mastodon. But, long story short, posts can be set to public, unlisted, followers only, or mentioned people only on a post-by-post basis.
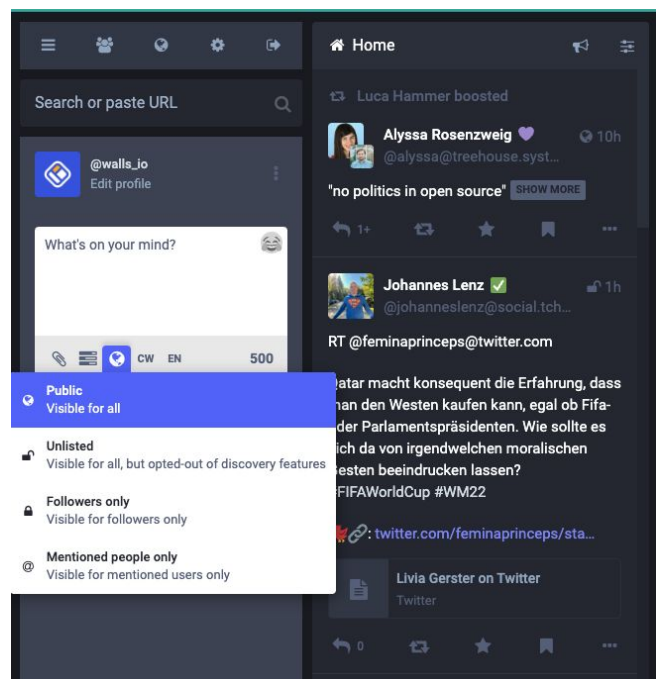
Something that needs to be mentioned is that direct messages on Mastodon are not so much private messages as posts where the visibility is set to "mentioned people only". And if you were to have such a conversation with person A, and then mention person B later on, they will also be pulled into the conversation and will be able to see the entire conversation from before they joined the thread. So it's smartest not to view them as private at all, as they are also not encrypted.

Account verification

Verification also works differently. You can verify that you are you by linking to an entity that you own, e.g. your website. You do this by adding a link back to your Mastodon profile to the website that is linked in your profile. And voilá, it shows that you are indeed the owner of said website.
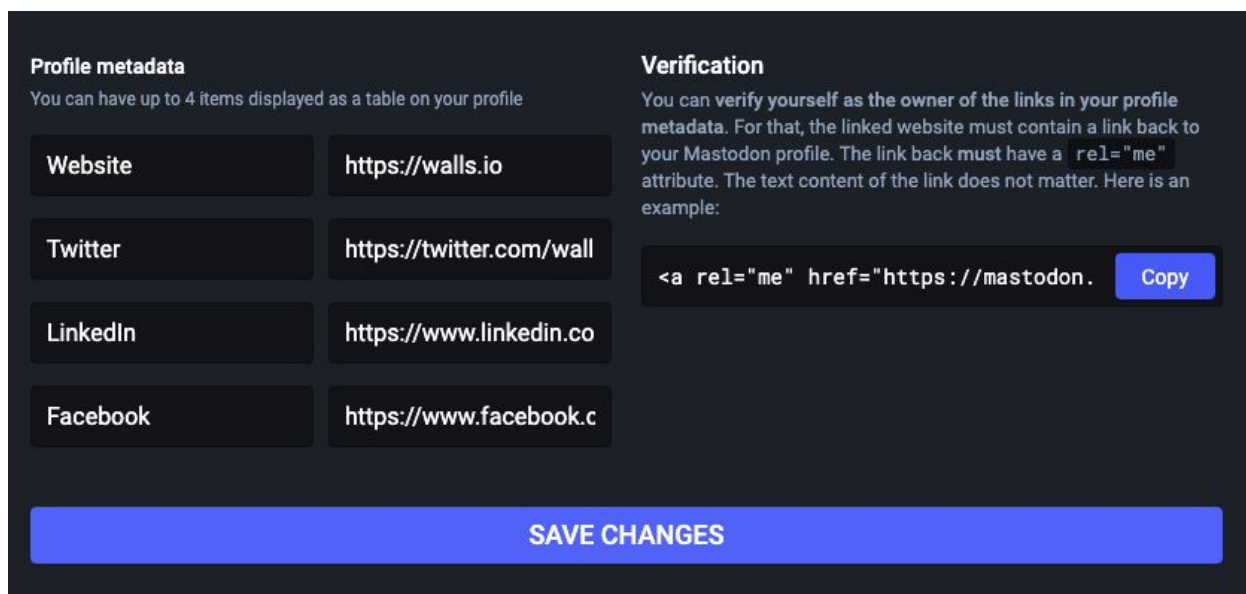
First steps posting content

Speaking of profiles: It is considered fairly rude on Mastodon not to have anything in your profile, and people are much less likely to follow someone with no bio and no profile pic. So fill out your profile and let others know you're a real person, not a bot or a creep. For many marginalised communities this provides a way of staying safe, which is why many marginalised folks feel particularly happy on Mastodon.

Next up, write an introduction post. This might feel a little unusual to you but it's very much how it's done. Write a post (or a thread) using the #introduction hashtag to tell potential followers who you are, what you're interested in, etc. Use interest- and identity-based hashtags liberally, as they allow people to find you (we'll get to that in a moment). And perhaps even pin your introduction post to the top of your profile (unlike Twitter you can pin multiple posts to your profile).

How discovery works on Mastodon

I've already mentioned using hashtags liberally because that's one of the main ways users can discover content on Mastodon.

Timelines are chronological

There's no algorithm at play, so Mastodon won't float any content it thinks you'll like to the top of your timeline the way Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and TikTok are doing. It is a literal *time*line — chronological.

Actually, you have multiple timelines. You have your **home** timeline, which is made up of everyone you follow. Then you have a **local** timeline showing the posts being made by people on your server. And then there's the **federated** timeline, which shows posts from your and all other servers your server is federating with.
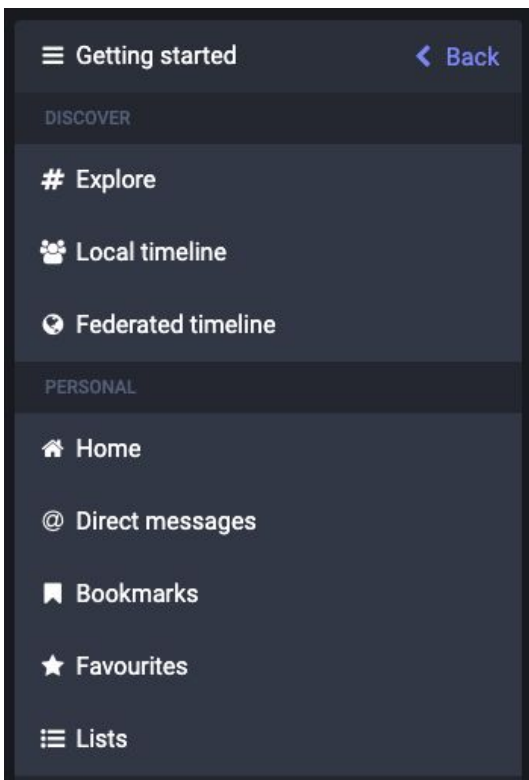
It can all feel a bit overwhelming. So if you want to make sure you don't miss out on what specific people are posting, then put them in a list that you can easily pull up and check for recent posts. You can also make several lists. I have one for IRL friends, one for mutuals, one for people in tech, etc.

Search for hashtags, not for keywords

Another thing to know is that keyword search doesn't work on Mastodon. But hashtag search works really well, which is why you should add relevant hashtags to your posts. Just keep in mind that only posts from your instance and ones that yours is federating with will show up in your search. That is one of the trickier things about Mastodon. As soon as someone from your instance follows someone from another instance, posts from that server can show up in your search. But without that connection, they won't.

You can also search for specific accounts. But if you want to add people from another server, you have to search for them with their entire handle: @username@InstanceName. Similarly, when you have their profile open in the browser, you can't just click follow because you're looking at the profile on a different instance. So if you want to follow them, copy their entire handle or simply the URL to their profile and then go back to your own instance and paste it into your search bar there.

How to find your friends from Twitter

If you want to find your mutuals from Twitter who have made it to Mastodon (or even everyone you follow), you can use various third-party services to find them and export a list that you can then import to Mastodon. These services may rely on others having used them already or them putting their Mastodon handles in their Twitter bios but, all in all, they seem to work well, especially if you come back after a while and let them run again to find more people that have joined since.

Some services that help with this:

- [Debirdify](#) (this is the one I personally have used, and it works well)
- [Movetodon](#)
- [Fedifinder](#) (looks like this one also lets you check initially which instance your Twitter friends have signed up on)

Apps and interfaces

There are various ways to use Mastodon, and here are the main options users have:

- Use Mastodon in-browser by navigating to your instance's URL, whether you're on desktop or mobile. Keep in mind that the interface may vary slightly from one instance to the next.
- Access your Mastodon account through a web client in-browser
- Use a native app for Mac, Windows or Linux
- Use a native app for iOS or Android
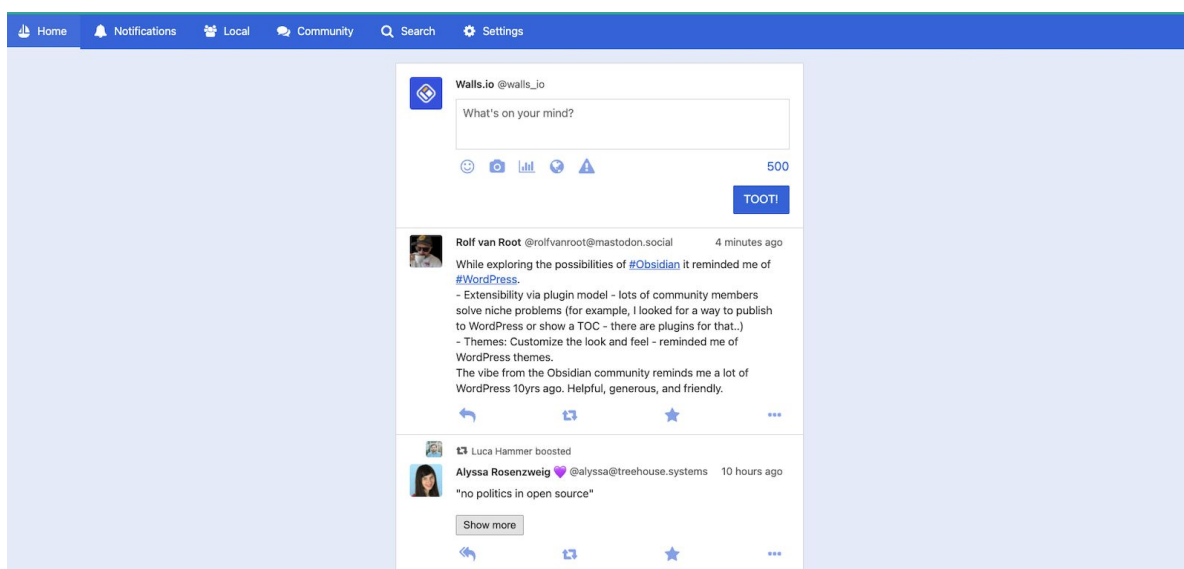
This is what Mastodon can look like when used through the web client Pinafore.

Which interface you use may affect what you can do, what things look like, when you have to click through to a profile in-browser, etc. Some of these will also let you switch between accounts on different instances.

You can find the right app for your needs on the [Mastodon website](#).

Do's and Don'ts on Mastodon

There are a few things one should know about the etiquette when joining Mastodon.

You're the algorithm; the algorithm is you

Since there is no algorithm, favouriting a post has no other effect than making the original poster happy. Which sure is nice, but it doesn't help that post spread. No one else will see that you faved a post. That means that when you want to help a post gain reach, you have to boost it. So don't be shy with that boost button.

There's also nothing like a Quote Retweet. The upside of this is that conversations happen in one place, in the replies to the original post. So don't be shy about replying to posts either, even if they're by people you don't know.

Use content warnings generously

Mastodon is really big on content warnings, which may be something you need to get used to if you've not seen them much before. People use them in the original sense — to hide content that may be sensitive, triggering or NSFW. But many people on Mastodon also use content warnings to let others make a conscious decision about whether they want to engage with a particular topic or not.
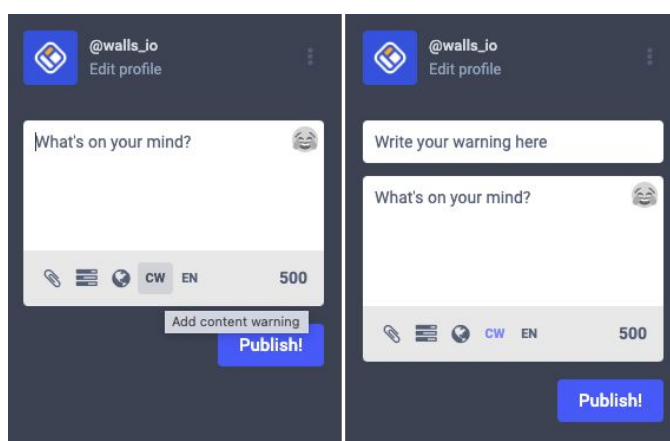

For example, I have previously slapped a CW for "self-promo" on a post where I was promoting my upcoming speaking engagements because I know not everyone cares for these things, and I don't want to clog up people's timelines with stuff they're not interested in.

You might also use a content warning if you post about a TV show and you don't want people to get spoilered. Or, since some instances have no character limit on posts, you should also use this function to not make people scroll past long posts.

Thread with care

You can thread on Mastodon just like on Twitter, but the etiquette is slightly different. When threading, you keep the first message set to public but set all following messages to unlisted. This helps to avoid clogging the timelines with various fragments of your thread. Because, remember, there is no algorithm!
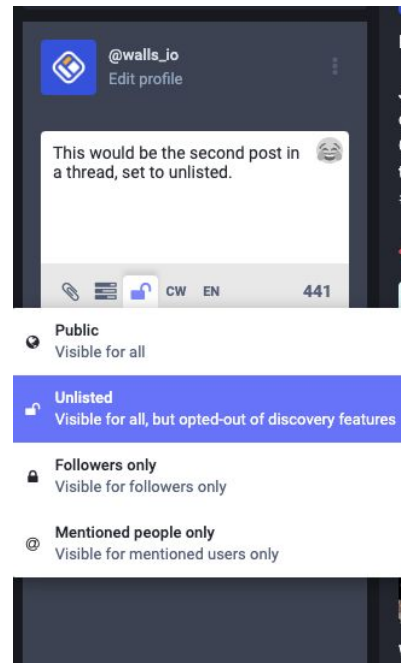
Accessibility is key

Accessibility is a huge topic on Mastodon. So when you're posting images, please add ALT text to them. It takes two minutes to do this and makes content accessible to more people, such as blind and otherwise vision-impaired folks.

Hashtags are great for discoverability, but here, too, you should think of accessibility: Use camel case for hashtags to make them properly readable for screen readers. Camel case is when you capitalise the first letter of each word, so then #ThisHashtagIsMoreAccessible.

Screen readers are also why it's better to append hashtags at the end of your post rather than build them into your sentences.

Moderators be moderating

On most Mastodon instances, moderators are there to actually moderate content and ensure harassment doesn't prosper on the server. If someone is going against a code of conduct, being racist, transphobic, etc., report them.

Unlike on other social networks, people here really do care. Moderators will look at reports and make a decision accordingly. Of course, this also means not abusing the report function, as this will just clog the pipeline.

And keep in mind that not all servers are equal in how well moderation works. How harassment-free a server is, very much depends on the code of conduct and the number of moderators available. Some bigger instances, such as the very general mastodon.social instance, have seen some issues with moderation not working properly anymore because the server has taken on far too many new users that a small moderation team can't handle anymore. Consequently, those bigger servers have become potentially uncomfortable places for minorities. This is why I recommend choosing your server wisely and not necessarily going for the most populated ones. Bigger isn't always better.

At first glance and coming from Twitter, you might think, "there sure are a lot of rules to follow here." But think of the rules as a form of self-governance put in place by instance admins and the community at large to protect everyone, especially the more marginalised community members. On Twitter, people are basically allowed to metaphorically defecate wherever they want with nary a consequence, but on Mastodon instances generally like to keep the house clean so everyone can enjoy living in it.
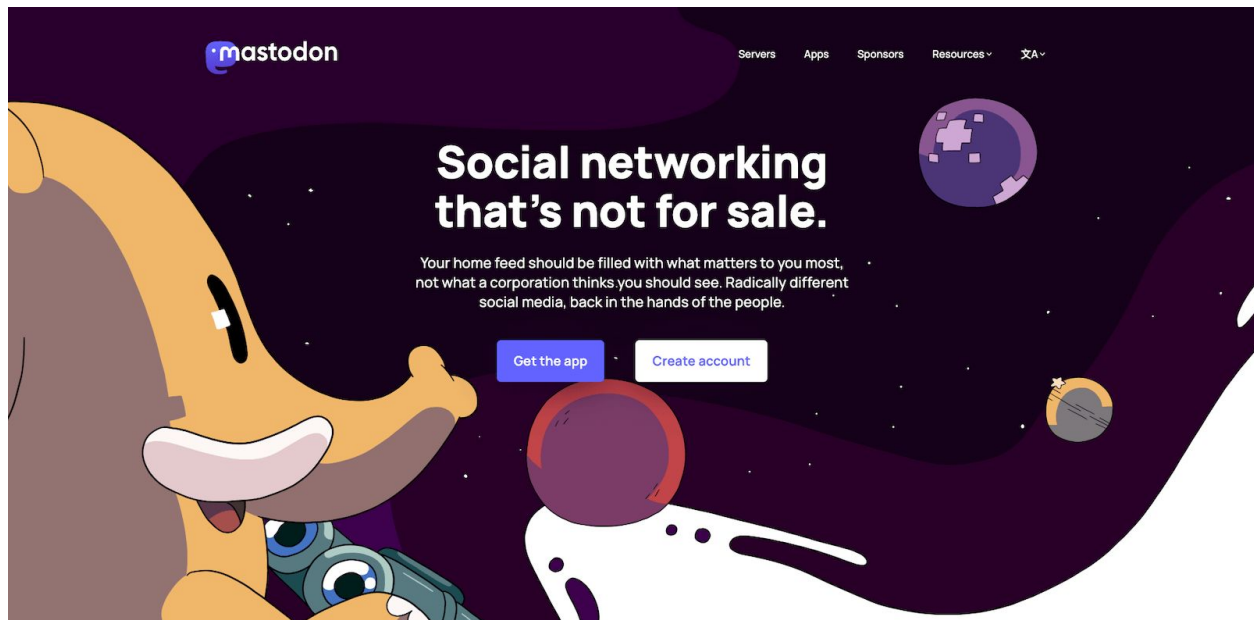
Brands on Mastodon

Speaking of enjoying life on Mastodon, there is some disagreement about whether brands and companies would contribute to said enjoyment or whether they shouldn't have a presence on Mastodon at all.

Mastodon isn't a fan of brands. It wasn't built for brands or profit but for users to enjoy the content they *want* to see. If you go to the Mastodon website, the first thing you see is this:

> Social networking that's not for sale.
> Your home feed should be filled with what matters to you most, not what a corporation thinks you should see. Radically different social media, back in the hands of the people.
>
> https://joinmastodon.org

As someone who is old enough to remember what Twitter was like before brands were everywhere and ads were constantly forced into your eyeballs, I can very much relate to this lofty goal. So can many other Mastodon users and some Mastodon instances might not welcome brands and businesses to their servers at all.

If Twitter goes down or becomes unusable and most people head on to Mastodon, it will become more difficult for brands to reach their customers. Ads are not happening on Mastodon, and I believe they never will, so that option is out entirely.

One thing that's been floated is that brands and businesses should set up their own servers. That would give other instances and users a straightforward path to blocking said servers if they don't want to see brands on Mastodon.

In fact, having organisations set up and run their own instances comes with the huge advantage of knowing that a source is real and you can trust that someone on that server can speak for that particular organisation.

The German government was at the forefront of this and has already set up [its own Mastodon instance](#). So if, for example, NPR had its own instance, you'd know you could trust that only their journalists are posting from there. This is expandable to NGOs, universities and other educational institutions, and even for-profit companies.
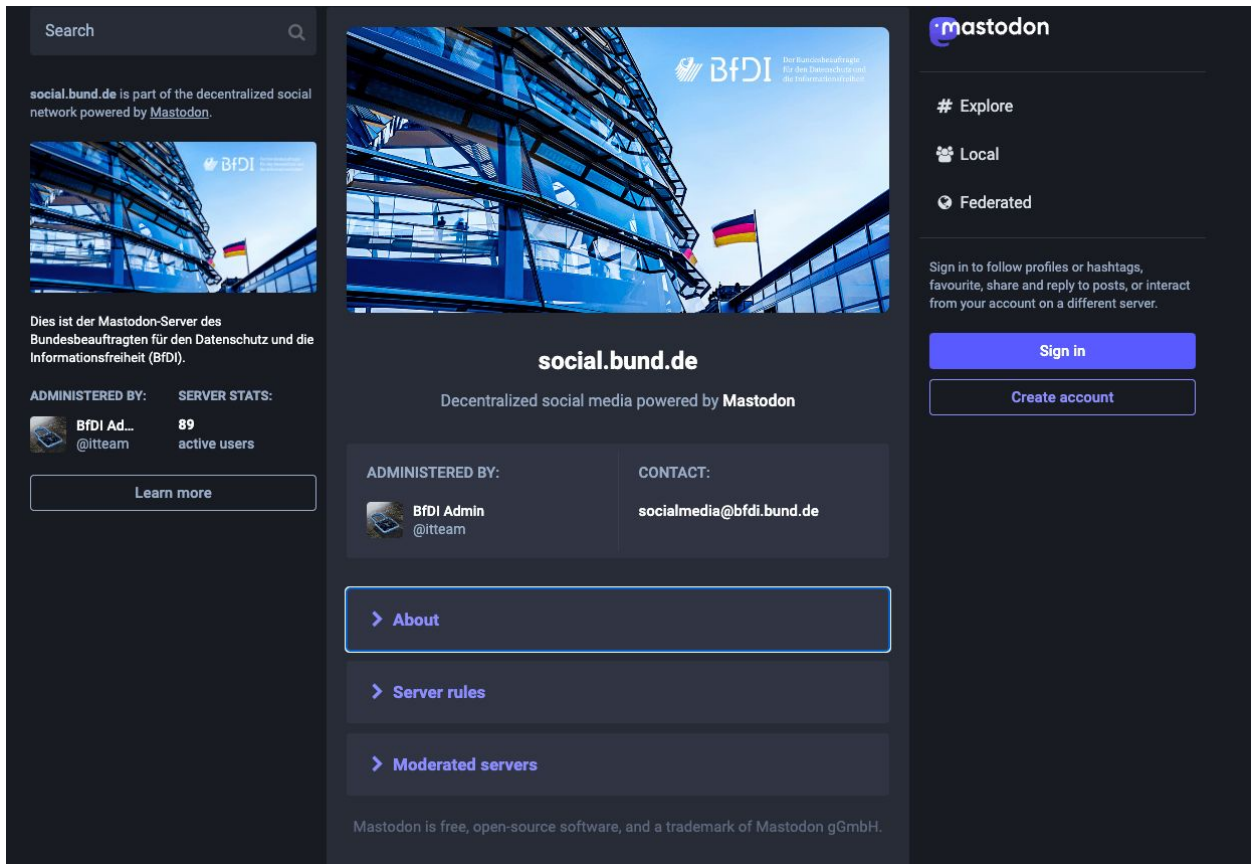
Organisations can also decide how public they want their servers to be. Ex-Twitter employees have their own instance, which is locked and only for actual former employees. Locked instances can provide a safe space or could even be used as a reward by companies for loyal customers.

I believe the possibilities with Mastodon are very much there. Brands will just have to rethink their marketing strategies. We might need to go back from *pushing content* (that phrase alone!) to offering content to those who choose to see it willingly. Perhaps the quantity of interactions will go down, sure, but consider just how much the quality might go up. Plus, you will actually own your channels, so there is definitely a case to be made for corporate Mastodon instances.

How to set up a Mastodon social wall

How to set up a Mastodon social wall

A Mastodon social wall lets you display public Mastodon content on your website, internal wiki, or a digital screen. Walls.io is **the only social wall that integrates with Mastodon**. It allows you to pull content from Mastodon in real-time and it's a great alternative to **Twitter walls**.

Collect content from Mastodon profile sources

You can collect content from any public Mastodon profile. Adding a profile as a content source to your social wall is easy. Enter both the username and instance of the Mastodon profile (i.e., @YourUsername @YourInstance) or the full URL (i.e., **https://mastodon.social/@YourUsername**).

For example, if you want to pull posts from the Walls.io Mastodon profile, you should add **@walls_io@mastodon.world** or **https://mastodon.world/@walls_io**

Walls.io is the only social wall that can aggregate hashtag and profile content from **Mastodon**!

TRY IT NOW

Collect content from Mastodon hashtag sources

Adding Mastodon hashtag sources to your social wall is also straightforward. All you have to do is enter the full URL of a hashtag (i.e., **https://mastodon.world/tags/HASHTAG**) as a source.

For example, if you want to pull posts with the #wallsio hashtag published on the mastodon.world instance, you'll have to add this URL: **https://mastodon.world/tags/wallsio**. Mastodon is a great addition to **social media walls**, whether you're using it as a Twitter alternative or as an additional social network.

Too long; didn't read?

While I do recommend reading the entire article for context and to understand the nuances of Mastodon etiquette, here's a quick summary for you in case you're in a rush:

- ❏ Mastodon is the open-source software that Mastodon instances run on.

- ❏ There are many different Mastodon instances or servers, all with their own rules, admins and moderators.

- ❏ The instances can be connected to each other (federation), allowing users to interact with users on other instances; they can also block other instances (defederation) if they disagree with how things are run there.

- ❏ [Choose a server](#) based on your interests, identity, industry, etc., and each server's culture/code of conduct.

- ❏ Sign up for an account. Your full handle will be @YourUsername@YourInstance. Find your friends from Twitter using a third-party migration tool.

- ❏ Fill out your profile and write an introduction post. Tweak your privacy settings.

- ❏ Use hashtags liberally, as they are the main content discovery tool; you can't search for keywords on Mastodon.

- ❏ There is no algorithm, so if you want to help a post gain reach, boost the post.

- ❏ Use content warnings for triggering topics, NSFW posts and images and simply to allow people to make their own choices with regard to what content they want to engage with.

- ❏ Make your images and hashtags accessible. Always add ALT text to images and use camel case for hashtags.

- ❏ If you plan on joining Mastodon as a brand, make sure you understand how the platform works and whether you are willing to change your approach to social media channels accordingly.

Embed your Mastodon feed on your website!

TRY IT FOR FREE

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