

Proposal: United Federation of Instances

A federation of good-faith actors on the Fediverse

DRAFT

December 9, 2022

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Changelog

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1 Abstract

The Fediverse derives strength from its decentralized, multi-instance structure. Localized administration allows each instance to implement a moderation policy to promote productive interactions among its users while federating with other instances to expand the scope of who its users can interact with. However, as the fediverse grows it is increasingly difficult for instance administrators to investigate whether each other instance maintains moderation practices that are compatible with the aims of their own instance. As a result, instance-level blocks may be implemented due to miscommunication, rumors propagated without context, or even malicious attempts to undermine the Fediverse as a whole. Such blocking is highly disruptive to the fediverse, as it can isolate groups of tens of thousands (or more) of users from each other.

We propose to create a United Federation of Instances that aims to maximize the ability of any two people to communicate using the Fediverse by establishing basic moderation standards that minimizes harmful content and provides conflict-resolution mechanisms to prevent members instances from blocking each other. Member instances would adhere to a set of articles that form a code-of-ethics. The articles are designed so that instances retain their autonomy, ensuring users continue to receive the benefits of the decentralized fediverse structure, while at the same time protecting them from the disruptive effects of instance-fracturing attacks.

2 The Problem

A spectre is haunting the Fediverse — a spectre which is ultimately undermining the federated and decentralized nature of the Fediverse. Instance owners are defederating from other instances based largely on gossip and unfounded accusations without there being any due process or evidence gathering to ensure well informed decisions are being made. To make matters worse, these instances are demanding other instances defederate from all the instances they passed summary judgment on lest be added to the suspend list with the others^[1].

To add insult to injury, this has been known to be exploited by bad actors. In one such case a known and self-described Nazi went around posing as LGBTQ members on various servers and used this to spread misinformation^[2], and the campaign has largely been successful, resulting in further fracturing. The proposal made here is intended to be a social, rather than technological, solution to this problem. It will ensure accusations are processed in a way that evaluates the evidence, allows both sides to make their argument, and concludes with a democratic process to make a decision. Known good-actors are welcome in the federation, bad ones aren't and accusations must be proven. Those who

petition to be part of the federation likewise agree not to defederate from instances within the federation and must instead provide the evidence, and have the decision to kick someone from the Federation come down to a democratic due process. The goal is to create a unified Fediverse of good-actor instances and put a stop to the fracturing that will ultimately destroy the entire network.

The problem lies largely in the way defederation considerations are evaluated in the Fediverse. Among many instances, it isn't based on facts or due process, but simply hearsay. As we all know, lies spread faster than truth, so this is a troubling pattern^[3]. What amplifies the problem tremendously is those who block an instance often demand every instance they federate block the same instances as them, and if they do not, then they get added to the suspend list as well. This leads to a severe fracturing of the Fediverse that is quickly devolving into walled gardens that resemble the data silos of Facebook and Twitter. We can do better, we must do better.

The problem is effectively one of an absence of due process: evidence isn't presented, the other side isn't heard, decisions are final. People sometimes see this as verification that a person or instance is a bad actor amongst the rumours they have heard and these decisions ripple outwards. In one such case, a known and self-proclaimed Nazi recognized this pattern and exploited it to manipulate the LGBTQ community against itself causing the aggressive opposition to others within their own community^[2].

The solution, therefore, is to ensure due process, enable discussion and to do so in a transparent fashion visible to all parties and with all sides having a chance to present evidence. While good-actor instances shall remain unified and federated amongst each other, any instances that have not shown to be good-actors by joining the United Federation of Instances (UFoI) are not under any special protections and they should be allowed to be moderated by instances however an instance sees fit. However non-UFoI members should not be assumed to be bad actors either. Simply not being a member of the UFoI should not imply a certain prejudice on its own.

3 Code of Ethics

All instances admitted to the United Federation of Instances (UFoI) must adhere to a basic Code of Ethics¹ and must enforce this Code in its moderation practices. It is perfectly acceptable

¹See section 3

for an instance to expand upon these rules and provide additional restrictions and rules within its own community.

The following constitute a minimal set of rules all servers must enforce in order to join the UFoI. The following terms are required for all instances within the UFoI:

1. **No hate speech**, We define *hate speech* as any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a protected characteristic, in other words, based on their age, disability, ethnicity, gender, pregnancy, religion, nationality, sex or sexuality.
2. **No Calls to violence**. Any individual promoting violence towards any person or group.
3. **Intentionally creating an account to circumvent people blocking**. This includes creating an account on a separate instance (a member of UFoI or not) with the intent of circumventing a ban.
4. **No harassment**. If a user explicitly asks you to disengage and you do not, explicit calls to dogpile will not be acceptable.
5. All bots must respect the #nobot tag and must post unlisted.
6. Posts intended for commercial advertisement purposes must be posted with the #ad tag or unlisted.
7. All posts including nudity must require a content warning (CW), be unlisted, or have its media marked as sensitive. For the purposes of this document, nudity will be defined as any state of nudity that involved a lewd exhibition or graphic focus on the genitals, as well as scenes that represent any sexual acts. Topless depictions of people are exempt from this definition and will not be considered nudity.

The code as listed above is only intended as an initial starting point. Once the UFoI is established and there is a critical mass of instances on board, then the above rules can be amended or edited by a super majority vote (that is, two-thirds) of the member instances in the UFoI.

4 The UFoI Council

The UFoI Council will consist of, at most, one member from each member instance of the UFoI. Due to the existence of small and single-member instances, there is no assurance that an instance will have representation on the council however. The

total number of seats on the council must be one tenth (rounded down) the total number of member instances in the UFoI. Whenever there is a vacant spot, an election will be held open to all members of all instances in the UFoI to vote. A nomination for a candidate in an election may be carried out by any of the following methods:

1. Any administrator may nominate, at most, one member from the UFoI community;
2. Each existing member of the council in good standing may nominate, at most, one member from the UFoI community;
3. Any member of the UFoI community may be nominated with the support of at least fifty members of the UFoI community.

Members of the council may be impeached at any time. An impeachment process must first be initiated and may be done by either a petition from the members of the UFoI totaling at least fifty signatures, or by any existing member of the council. If an impeachment is initiated via signature, regardless of the outcome of the impeachment process, none of the those signing the petition for an impeachment hearing shall be allowed to sign another impeachment hearing on the same council member for at least three months. This will ensure a small group of people can not filibuster the impeachment process by flooding repeats of the same impeachment hearing repeatedly.

The council will not act as a dictatorship, their only purpose is to keep order and to raise proposals for consideration. Any proposals raised by the council will ultimately come to a full vote among the entire UFoI community. Any member of the council may initiate a hearing on any of the following issues:

1. Review of an instance member of the UFoI for not adhering to the Code of Ethics², potentially resulting in their expulsion from the UFoI;
2. Impeachment hearing of another UFoI council member;
3. A proposal for an amendment to the UFoI's Code of Ethics or other bylaws.

²See section 3

In addition to initiating hearing, they will also be in charge of keeping order at such meetings, counting votes, and enacting decisions based on said votes.

5 Bylaws

The bylaws of the UFoI server as the mechanism by which it operates. It is distinctly separate from the Code of Ethics³, since the bylaws describe the technical, rather than the ethical, side. The bylaws shall be as follows:

³See section 3

1. All instances members of the UFoI agree to enforce the Code of Ethics in its moderation practices;
2. All instance members of the UFoI agree to federate with all instance members of the UFoI, though they have the liberty to defederate of their own volition from instances outside of the UFoI;
3. Any instance members of the UFoI found to violate the Code of Ethics will be given a due process hearing and, if found guilty, will be expelled from the UFoI.

6 Due Process

The central concept behind all actions taken against an instance in the UFoI is that of Due Process. Whether bringing in a new instance as a member, expelling them, or electing and impeaching council members, the due process that surrounds this is largely the same.

First, there is some process for bringing issues up to a vote to begin with, this is either brought up by a council member or by a petition from the general community. Once the process begins, the first step is presenting the evidence. All accusations must include evidence, not just hearsay. This means it must include a screenshot and/or a link to relevant content. Each piece of evidence must also reference the specific rule it feels the evidence shows a violation of. If either of these are missing, the evidence can not be submitted. Furthermore, evidence will be weighted based on how complete the context is. Full conversation threads should be considered more heavily weighted than out of context screen shots. Likewise, the other party may present counter evidence, hopefully providing wider context. The accused must also present evidence, along with their responses. However, exceptions will be made where they will be allowed to explain their stance on the condition it is limited to their personal reasoning. Any statements of fact that could be backed by evidence must still have the appropriate evidence attached.

Once all the evidence has been submitted, there must be a vote open to all people in the UFoI. If at any point during the process the moderator's decision on the accused instance has changed in light of new evidence that shall be added to the record and considered. The majority result of any such vote will determine if there are any violations. Violations will result in expulsion if the accused is already a member and likewise will result in an instance being denied new membership. However, if no violations are found, instances applying for membership will be granted.

7 Freedom of Leaving

Any instance that is a member of the UFoI is free to leave the federation at any time without any prior notice or approval needed. The admin of the instance must, however, publicly inform the UFoI Council they are leaving. Any instance that leaves the UFoI must go through the entire admittance process over should they wish to rejoin.

The freedom to leave is one of the fundamental protections of the UFoI. If all else fails, people can always leave and potentially form their own federation over, addressing any problems they felt the old system had. In some cases, this cause federations to split into two distinctly separate federations. This should hopefully improve initial adoption since entry into the UFoI is effectively non-binding since anyone can leave at any moment.

8 Initial Members

Since the UFoI system is largely democratic in nature, it raises one significant issue: how do we define the first instance members of the UFoI, since there are no initial members with which to vote them in? This problem can be solved by using some metric as an initial way to select a handful of seed instances. Once those instances are in the UFoI then they will vote in more members and the democratic process should win out, potentially even expelling some of the initial instances used to seed the federation.

My proposal would be to hold a Fediverse wide election for initial members. We start by allowing any instance admins from around the Fediverse to apply to be the first members of the UFoI. We then hold a general election where anyone in the Fediverse may vote for one of these instances. We then select the top 10 most voted instances and make those members of the UFoI. At that

point, the usual mechanisms take place to add new members to the UFoI and to expel any that happened to get in who were bad actors. The elections should probably be held using a neutral server, perhaps making it as simple as a thread on a GitLab instance.

9 Badges

We can use the verification process for links which already exists in Mastodon as a way of safely identifying instances. In short, we would provide a list of links to each admin of each instance that is a member. Those admins would also link us and get the green check mark showing as verified. We can do something similar if we want to maintain badges and a central list for moderators too. This will make for an easy way to identify members of the UFoI at a glance once we get larger.

10 Sister Federations

It should be noted we want the Fediverse to remain decentralized. As such, the UFoI is not intending to be the one and only federation. We welcome others to adopt our rules and structure and tweak them as needed, perhaps defining their own federations. When this happens, we can establish additional rules for defining mutual federation between them where rules are compatible to do so. These sister-federations will be judged by the same due process as we use internally to create a wider alliance of federations with no central authority.

11 Coalitions

Another interesting dynamic to consider is the idea of coalitions. Within the UFoI some subset of the instance members may come together and form a coalition with its own stricter set of rules than those of the wider federation. Two examples of coalitions that might be useful to discuss and ultimately form come to mind. The first would be a group of servers that agree if any server outside of the UFoI blocks any instance in the UFoI then all members of the coalition agree to block that server back. This would discourage fracturing from outside the UFoI. However this needs to be discussed and may be a counter productive

venture. A similar idea for a coalition would be block lists for certain purposes. For example there may be a coalition that wishes to identify instances outside of the UFoI which have explicitly racist content and in doing so block such content. These coalitions should use the same due process we use internally to ensure this is done fairly, but if done right it may allow for blocking of bad-actors in a way that ensures due process and evidence based decisions are the norm.

The primary purposes of a UFoI Coalition are, as follows:

1. To maintain lists of servers for a particular purpose. These may be block lists and other bad-actors or lists of good-actor servers or, in general, any list for any purpose;
2. The lists maintained by a coalition must adhere to the due process⁴ of the UFoI;
3. The process to admit new members into a coalition must also adhere to the above described due process;
4. The coalition may require members of the coalition to take some action on the members of a list in order to qualify for admittance to a coalition. For example, they may require members of a list to be defederated from, or require federation with, members of the list as well;

⁴See section 6

Coalitions should be run largely independent from the UFoI. While of course groups are welcome to create unofficially recognized coalitions, so long as those coalitions dont violate the wider UFoI rules, it should be noted that official UFoI coalitions would need to be approved by the council and, once approved, listed on the UFoI website. The council must approve all coalitions that meet the conditions required, specifically what is being evaluated is the adherence of a coalition to the due process expected of them.

References

- [1] *What Is Guilty By Association in Law?* 2022. [Online]. Available: <https://lawrina.com/blog/what-is-guilty-by-association/>.
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