



Showing your ass on Mastodon: Lossy distribution, hashtag activism, and public scrutiny on federated, feral social media

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Abstract

This paper presents an account of technopolitics in Mastodon, noncommercial, decentralized social media. Mastodon's significance has further risen in light of Twitter/X's recent decimation of its public sphere functions; a noncommercial and ideally public alternative to commercial social media is (even more) urgently needed. The autoethnographic narrative presented here, hinging on a dispute initiated and sustained by an intemperate donkeykeeper in Europe, is idiosyncratic, to say the least. But it reveals meaningful aspects of the network's features, which point to both the promise of such an architecture and to how it falls short in hailing other users and facilitating transparent communication, two important and related functions in democratic communication online. If we appraise Mastodon in view of civic commitments, this peculiar episode contains lessons for thinking about distribution, conviviality, and their intersections in social media. I show how Mastodon has been designed for "lossy distribution" and argue that this has implications for optimizing democratic functions of noncommercial social media.

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Introduction

In October 2022, with the news that Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter had been finalized, I along with many other Twitter users cast about for an alternative. In spite of having used Twitter on a relatively limited basis prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, I in short order had become reliant on it for an invaluable firehose of pandemic expertise, as well as academic community, and watching and amplifying uprisings especially during the tumultuous summer of 2020. I wanted to find a social media network that could answer to as

many of these needs as possible, but that was not under control of an erratic billionaire. My (and others') misgivings about Twitter's future were well-founded: under Musk, Twitter (now X) capriciously deplatformed journalists; allowed far-right political extremists back onto the site; and hate speech has spiked there, with researchers documenting this rise being sued by Musk (Isaac and Conger, 2022; Klepper, 2023; Reuters, 2023).

Of course, commercial social media were generally not designed with civic functions in mind, and their commercial commitments have constantly run afoul of deliberative, democratic needs. Nonetheless, Twitter's sudden downfall reveals with striking clarity that a noncommercial and ideally public alternative to commercial social media is urgently needed. In this moment, many eyes turned towards Mastodon: free and open source software for noncommercial social media. Begun in 2016, rather than being "a" social networking site, Mastodon links together a decentralized collection of servers to host user communities that communicate within and across these federated servers (Pincus, 2022). I and many other Twitter users showed up to the "fediverse" *en masse* in October and November 2022 [1]. We were quickly confronted with myriad ways in which this environment did and did not function like the one that we were departing, in ways that both revealed promise and generated frustration.

This paper presents an autoethnographic account of technopolitics in noncommercial, decentralized social media. The narrative presented here, hinging on a dispute initiated and sustained by an intemperate donkeykeeper in Europe, is idiosyncratic, to say the least. But it reveals meaningful aspects of the network's features, which point to both the promise of such an architecture and how it falls short in hailing other users and facilitating transparent communication, two important and related functions in democratic communication online. If we appraise Mastodon in view of civic commitments, this episode contains lessons for thinking about distribution, conviviality, and their intersections in social media (Braun, 2023; Bonini and Mazzoli, 2022). In this paper, I show how Mastodon has been designed for "lossy distribution" and argue that this has implications for optimizing democratic noncommercial social media.

To consider "lossy distribution" requires a quick survey of Mastodon's architecture. Users join a server of their choice (called an "instance," this might loosely be thought of as one's home neighborhood in the network [2]). Instances are linked to one another, or "federated," through users' follow relationships, and decisions made at the level of servers' administrators; but they are not all connected to one another. Thus there is no centralized space on Mastodon, and no universal view of or within Mastodon. According to Zulli, *et al.* (2020), federation is perhaps the most singular point of distinction between Mastodon and commercial social media.

It is obvious that federated architecture stands in contrast to centralized social media: as stated earlier, Mastodon is not "a" platform or "a" site. What is less obvious is *how this is experienced by users*, especially those accustomed to centralized social media. In practice, any Mastodon user at their given vantage point in the network does not have access all across the network. Even some replies to *one's own posts* may not be viewable, which is not at all intuitive, but flows from how servers interact with each other. "Lossy distribution" is what I have termed the phenomenon of how posts get seeded in a manner that suggests they are viewable to a wide, undifferentiated audience; but in practice results in, well, loss. And not only loss, but unknowable, invisible loss: you cast a remark out into a network, intending to hail an audience, but some of the potential audience does not see the remark because your part of the network does not "see" or talk to their parts. Your remark falling by the wayside for some users is invisible to users who do not see it (of course); but it is also generally invisible to you, because *some users do see it* (evidenced in interactions with the post). Specifically, it is your remark's failure to be *more universally distributed* that is invisibilized to casual users, both you and your potential audience. Lossy distribution has implications for the creation of public discourse on the platform, and especially for the traction of hashtag activism [3]. Lossy distribution may not matter all that much for users using Mastodon for casually joining affinity networks, but if Mastodon is to be suitable for public sphere activity (as Twitter undeniably was, however imperfectly), it is important to think through the implications of lossy distribution, as this paper will show.

Decentralization in architecture and governance

Technological artifacts and systems are prominent embodiments of power and authority (Winner, 1980). Indeed, “technology” is a fusion of material artifact, social practice, and political intention (which may or may not function as designers intend). In referring to “technopolitics” on Mastodon, I highlight this fusion of political intention and technological architecture, in this case software. Governance on/of Mastodon reflects how it is noncommercial and not beholden to shareholders. Communication scholars Nathan Schneider and Amy Hasinoff (2022) argue that Mastodon exemplifies “subsidiarity”: a governance principle holding that subordinate or local organizations should make decisions and perform the functions that they can, rather than ceding local control to a dominant central power, except when necessary. Making a complementary argument, Robert Gehl and Diana Zulli (2023) view Mastodon as a “covenantal” system in which small entities consent to band together while abiding by a shared ethical code, and contrast this to a “contract” model in commercial, corporate social media. Both of these analyses distinguish Mastodon from the terms under which “Big Social’s” users associate with decision-making and leadership; and, by extension, with one another. Meanwhile, Tiziano Bonini and Eleonora Mazzoli (2022) argue for what they call “convivial design principles” in “public service platforms.” All of these contributions are useful in thinking about values and features on Mastodon, especially how they may — and *should* — differ from “Big Social.”

Though these accounts are interested in how power and governance can be shared between users and developers of networks, *i.e.*, they are not top-down, my account backgrounds governance and design decisions to foreground technopolitics at the level of user experience on Mastodon. In so doing, I draw out *distribution* on the network: how communication circulates, and how this circulation is experienced. “Distribution” in media studies commonly refers to the infrastructures, institutions, practices, and the like that sit between, intermediate, and govern handoffs of media products between producers and consumers (Perren, 2013; Braun, 2022; see also West, 2022; Sauter, 2014). “Platforms” represent one avenue for thinking about distribution, especially as they intermediate between news organizations and audiences (Braun, 2015). It would be valuable to study Mastodon as a federated network intermediating between audiences, editors, and journalists, for example (especially in comparison to a “platform” like Twitter/X, or what Twitter was); but that is not the aim of this piece.

Here I take up distribution *in practice* as communication circulates amongst users, enabled, or inhibited by choices about Mastodon’s architecture. I am interested in how bottom-up engagement with the network potentially enables a distribution mechanism for users *to address one another*, bypassing both traditional institutions (like news organizations) *and* “Big Social” intermediators that set terms of association according to commercial motivations. Unlike commercial social media algorithmically vying for users’ attention, Mastodon does not push posts into a user’s view. (This feature even leads some frustrated users to mistakenly conclude the network is empty, if they do not understand that they need to follow other accounts or navigate to feeds to see posts.)

Overall, boundaries between personal address and public communication may shift or collapse to varying degrees on social media platforms (or networks). How such venues host and give rise to the practice of “hashtag activism,” which “works to naturalize and center the politics of counterpublics, develop repertoires of political contention, and attract allies” (in the words of feminist communication scholars Sarah Jackson, Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault Welles) is analytically important [4]. Attending to how distribution works in practice for users initiating communication amongst themselves reveals implications for Mastodon’s utility in public sphere activity. What this account shows is that certain features of Mastodon — what I here term its architects’ deliberate choice to facilitate “lossy distribution” — inhibit convivial, publicly deliberative social media exchange, even as they also work as intended, against a scaled outrage machine.

Autoethnographic method

Up front: I did not enter this space intending to conduct research in or on Mastodon. Although the experience of being on Mastodon activated my research subjectivities having to do with decentralized noncommercial media and FLOSS communities (Dunbar-Hester, 2014; 2020), my recent research had moved into very different topics, and I joined the network for the reasons stated above, without any research agenda. I witnessed colleagues' delight at the new space sparking research ideas and felt happy for them, but uninvolved myself (*e.g.*, Laser, *et al.*, 2022). The decision to conduct research and characterize it as autoethnography came later, in summer 2023 (described below). I mainly devoted myself to trying to be a friendly newcomer, self-consciously posting often to make the space seem bustling for other new arrivals. I felt (and still feel) that noncommercial, people-powered Mastodon is a promising alternative to billionaire-controlled social media, and I hope for its success.

Autoethnographic research is particularly suitable for showing how a researcher's presence "disrupts or reproduces [social space] ... [and] how social spaces contend with the invasion of foreign and familiar people by producing hierarchies of belonging." [5] "Self-consciously posting often" made me an unwitting target; and it was only when I encountered a significant challenge to my presence that I realized for the first time that I not only *could* write something about this space, I maybe ought to (see Korn, 2017). [6] Thus in late summer 2023, I acknowledged that at least one paper begging to be written about Mastodon might be best written by me.

However, it was not immediately straightforward to parlay this realization into research products. Other Mastodon users had not consented to be researched, for one thing; and as Josh Braun writes, "many long-time users view researchers poking around on Mastodon as stepping into their homes, or at least their private restaurant conversations, not a public record." [7] I thus trained my gaze on my own experience, which I felt I could represent with no ethical prohibition, and selected autoethnography as both method and epistemic framework to guide my analysis. This means that this study is in no way reproducible or generalizable, and in some lights, this is certainly a limitation; this account differs from a premeditated, more intentionally designed project that seeks to answer a particular research question and casts a wide or comparative net in terms of respondents.

At the same time, all knowledge is situated, and this is not a drawback. While I would not shy away from admitting to the peculiarity of this tale, I brought ethnographic research experience on technopolitics to my engagement with Mastodon, and I did pay close attention to interactions and features as I tried to get oriented there, and during the dispute. Upon deciding to write about my experience, I committed to faithfully chronicle events as they had happened. In spite of not having initially regarded or positioned myself as a researcher, I did conduct something like a thorough, immersive walkthrough of my corner of the network, over several months (Light, *et al.*, 2018; Jang, *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, novices or people self-teaching can take note of elements of an environment that have receded into background for experienced people; so being an attentive novice can be epistemically advantageous. Autoethnography is well suited to limit the social and architectural aspects of hashtag experimentation on Mastodon: here I draw from my "personal [experience] to make sense of my felt researcher/ed self" in an encounter with the site that *became increasingly personal*, placing my personal and professional self at the center of interaction in ways I did not anticipate, let alone engineer [8]. Some aspects of how Mastodon's assemblage of architecture and user behavior functioned were immediately apparent, but many nuances only became clear after sustained engagement with the site, and especially through revelations generated in a layered, weeks-long controversy. The findings here would be difficult to generate with other methods.

As I shifted towards acknowledging a research agenda, I tried to ensure that I would produce an ethical research account. I have consulted an extensive corpus of screenshots (many posts were deleted, by moderators and by a key interlocutor); and conferred with interlocutors and witnesses to make sure I am accurately representing "what happened" (even as we acknowledge that there are multiple versions of any

event). I lightly pseudonymize large instances within Mastodon, and do not name smaller ones. With one exception, I reproduce quotes and screenshots only with explicit permission (sought after the fact), and attribute them as people wished. I did not seek permission to quote or otherwise represent the key combatant in this episode [9]. He waived his right to be approached for consent in a series of choices that he made in his behavior, including harassing me personally on Mastodon, harassing my professional community there, and harassing me at my workplace.

(Dis)orienting features

One of the more disorienting features for users accustomed to Twitter is that Mastodon inhibits text searching [10]. This is a deliberate feature, meant to curtail abuse by preventing hostile users from searching for terms in posts and targeting the posters. However, for scholars, journalists, and others who used Twitter for following, researching, or reporting on certain topics or discourses, this feature is dismaying: journalists couldn't listen in on conversations or search to find experts as easily; researchers tracking the propagation of falsehoods, especially coordinated efforts, could not do their work easily; and academics could not turn up colleagues or research in their own and cognate fields by text searching. I quickly realized I couldn't use Mastodon identically to how I had used Twitter with regard to searching my own old posts to make "threads" on a topic over time; or turn up news stories or academic references that I'd posted in weeks or months prior.

As academics flooded into Mastodon, they arrived with an expectation of reconstituting the networks and functions to which they were accustomed from Twitter. Though it lacked text searching, Mastodon architecture allowed users to post using hashtags. The hashtag is a "discursive and user-generated" tool that "make sense of groups of [posts] by creating a searchable shortcut that can link people and ideas together" and on Mastodon, hashtags are visible across the network, searchable, and follow-able [11]. Immediately, communication and media scholars recognized that we would need to have a hashtag to hail each other. In consultation with a couple of colleagues in the U.S. and the U.K., we settled on "Commodon" and urged others to use this tag. It has been in use from around early November 2022.

There is also a norm for new people to write a hashtagged "introduction" post with terms that describe them, which others will "boost" (reblog) to help people find like-minded posters, seeding networks. This led to many academics upon arrival posting heavily hashtagged miniature cv's, trying to reestablish old connections and cultivate new ones. Such behavior in turn led to other users rightly poking fun at academics, such as one post, written in early November 2022:

EVERYONE ON MASTODON: Hello! I'm Dr. Whitney Appleby, a molecular biologist working on new ways to beat the Pacific Garbage Patch! In my spare time I love reading, hanggliding and playing with my cat. I'm also starting to weave—

ME: *shoving past them* yeah sure where are the dipshits? where are the real assholes around here. perverts, you got any perverts? (Mark, 4 November 2022)

Soon, even academics themselves lamented how in the moment of trying to become individually and collectively oriented, everyone was "acting like they were on a conference panel," to the detriment of other forms of sociality. In other words, humor and affect were (glaringly) missing in many interactions. This was not only less "fun" for users, but it threatened to inhibit widespread Mastodon adoption (Kissane, 2023). Having people acting like perverts, assholes, and dipshits in the mix was actually crucial to a site that could be fun to use.

Asstodon takes flight

In late November 2022, I replied to another professor complaining about the “conference panel” problem, saying that I thought one of the problems was everyone was “afraid to go first” with loosening up. (One inhibiting factor was no doubt scoldiness of the established user base; no one wanted to get in trouble for porting over some of the more earthy humor that one easily encountered on Twitter, side by side with professional announcements, journalism, or expertise [12]. A Mastodon norm, to put a humorous or off-color comment behind a “content warning [CW]” that says “off-color joke” inarguably attenuates the joke by removing the spontaneity of encountering it.) I mentioned that I’d recently seen a post complaining that Mastodon had tags for “mosstodon” (photos of moss) and “mushtodon” (photos of mushrooms), but there was nothing on “asstodon”. (It is common practice for community hashtags to pun on “Mastodon,” as in “Mapstodon” for cartography; “Fosstodon” for F(L)OSS; MNastodon for Minnesotans; and on and on.) I also “boosted” the post complaining that the tag “asstodon” was empty.

Within the day, with the topic of Mastodon’s lack of ludic sensibilities still simmering, one of my posting “mutuals” and companions on the site saw my comment about the “asstodon” post, and in response he posted a fossil skeleton of a mastodon, viewed from behind, with the hashtag “asstodon.” I “boosted” this too. Some continued to chatter about how the site needed to be more fun. Others showed up and rattled off CVs. Before going to bed, riffing on my companion’s mastodon derriere, I posted a picture of a donkey, captioned “I give up on you people! [academics],” and hashtagged it “asstodon” (Figure 1). (Needless to say, both of our posts were entirely general-audience friendly, in spite of the double entendre of “ass.”)



christina d-h

I give up on you people! #Asstodon



Nov 28, 2022, 23:57 · 🌐 · Web · ↻ 4 · ★ 18

Figure 1: My original “asstodon” with donkey post, 28 November 2022.

People seemed to think that was funny, so over the next few days I did a few more “asstodon” posts, with pictures of donkeys that I’d found on the Web (and including alt text, another strong norm on Mastodon). I also added the hashtagged exhortation to “Be the algorithm” to a couple of them: a reminder that we were outside of a corporate enclosure, and we had to make, boost, and otherwise support the posting communities that we wanted to see here. (This was a callback to “Be the media,” the 1990s-era Indymedia slogan, as other media and communication scholars recognized too, and riffed on. I asked, “who’s writing about this?” — not expecting it might be me, albeit in a circuitous fashion.)

In short order, other users also began posting donkeys hashtagged with “asstodon.” Within a few days, my server’s administrator even told me that “asstodon” was “trending” on our instance, going just a little bit “viral” in a setting where many choices about architecture had been made to create friction for virality. Some of the folks posting donkeys were, like me, just posting random donkey images to be funny and

participate in community-building; but soon a few donkeykeepers on Mastodon encountered the tag and ran with it. Over the next several months, it became common to encounter donkeys on Mastodon tagged “asstodon,” and people also commonly recommended the tag to new users. (People often commented to the effect of, “don’t worry, it’s safe to click!”) I followed the tag, boosted others’ donkey posts with the tag, and continued to post my own on the tag.

Several weeks later, in mid-January of 2023, I wrote a short meta-thread about “asstodon,” noting it appeared to be a successful experiment with creating a visible posting community around a hashtag. I invited the “Commodon” community to take it up as a case study, thinking it might be good for a graduate student. I wrote:

if anyone is looking for an academic project re virality on here, you’re welcome to look at the propagation of #asstodon (as far as I’m concerned, others would need to opt in too). In Nov 22 I simultaneously saw academics complaining [Mastodon] was too stuffy & formal, & a random post by someone else complaining that looking in #asstodon came up empty. ... it’s taken off with help from various donkey-posters/donkey-keepers. I have also seen stray comments that in NSFW [not safe for work] parts of [Mastodon], it does indeed have other connotations/uses, but I’ve never seen these posts.

Part of my interest here has been seeing how easy/hard it is to make a tag stick-y (implications for organizers/activists trying to gain traction here). Have at it #commodon #asstodon.
(Author, 13 January 2023)

No one took me up on this offer. I continued to use Mastodon, and I continued to think I was “not doing research” on the network.

Donkeygate: Can I really be arsed to write this? [13]

After many months of donkey-posting went by, on 18 July, I wrote, “Update: now, months on, there’s been some conflict [about] the ‘appropriate’ use of the tag. [In my opinion] it shows some of the limitations of using hashtags as main hailing/discovery feature here. Someone should write it up! Feel free to let me know if you want a bunch of screenshots” (Author, 18 July 2023). The context for my post was that in recent weeks, a few posts had appeared on the asstodon tag that were of butts, not donkeys, and controversy ensued.

Here it is worth describing some key features of Mastodon in additional detail.

First, federation, and feeds: As noted above, each user is hosted on a specific server; and this *network of servers* comprises Mastodon. Each user has a personal feed; a “home/neighborhood” feed; and a “federated” feed. Because of how federation stitches together a user’s experience from the vantage point of their home server, views looking outward to the network vary. While one can follow individual users across other servers, whether one sees the posts of users one does not follow in one’s personal and “federated” feeds is dictated by interactions and follows across servers. A user on a very small instance — and some are as small as a dozen users, or even a single user — would not see posts from other servers in their “federated” feed unless their instance-mates were following users across each of those servers. Some servers also choose to, at the server level, silence other servers, often because of lax or poor moderation that home moderators fear will affect their own home users. Depending on whether this is a silencing or a full

block, a user can personally follow another individual user on another instance; but unless they have a pre-existing reason to know about that user, they might be unlikely to ever encounter them. By contrast, very large servers, some with over 50,000 users, have quite a lot of activity right at home, before even federating outward. Those users will see a very lively feed on the “home/neighborhood” feed; and a much bigger pool of posts can be seen on the “federated” feed, as it will be populated by people across many remote servers with whom “home” server-mates interact.

Second, norms around “not-safe-for-work” or adult-only content (foreshadowed by the content warning norm above): Mastodon’s early user and developer base included quite a number of “antifascists, gay communist furies, and LGBTQ people,” which meant that various features and norms had been arrived at based on those users’ needs (Pincus, 2022) [14]. In FLOSS, people build for and implement functions that they wish to see in their software. This meant that adult-only sorts of content were entirely permitted; but servers have server-level rules about appropriately flagging posts using content warnings and hashtags, so that other users can consent to viewing this content (or opt out by choosing to mute posts with certain tags). (Recall also that as Mastodon is noncommercial, it does not answer to advertisers’ dictates for acceptable content; it is accountable to users rather than shareholders or advertisers.) These users’ needs were also paramount in inhibiting text search, many of them having fled abusive behavior on Twitter in particular. To make posts visible was, first, opt-in (using, for example, hashtags to make a post locatable by users outside one’s own followers), and second, subject to the vicissitudes of federation; even following or searching for hashtags placed by users in order to make posts visible and searchable yields only posts “seen” by one’s own server.

Third, moderation itself. As behooves a noncommercial FLOSS project, Mastodon servers are mostly staffed by volunteers: technical and moderation decisions are made by people electing to run servers for their users [15]. Instance costs are covered by soliciting donations from users (the overall Mastodon project also has a Patreon). This means that moderation decisions are handled locally, not offshored to an underclass, and there is variability across servers in terms of both abstract rules for enforcement and what will, in practice, get a user disciplined. (Discipline can range from a warning to the removal of a post to being asked to leave a server to having one’s account deactivated.) Many servers participate in something called a “server covenant” which means there is a core code of conduct they commit to enforcing (including silencing instances where hate speech and “free speech absolutism” flourishes) (Gehl and Zulli, 2023).

Returning to asstodon: by mid-July, asstodon followers including myself became aware through the strident brays of a lone donkeykeeper that the tag was under threat by “pornographers.” In mid-July he revealed that he had occasionally taken it upon himself to, when spying butts on the asstodon tag, reach out to those users to ask them to edit the asstodon tag out of their posts, because the tag was meant for a stream of donkeys [16]. Most users, it seems, complied. Other users, including myself, were completely unaware that this was going on, and had never seen a butt, only donkeys. Here it should be noted that this donkeykeeper’s home instance was one of the much larger ones, referred to here as Galaxy, with nearly 30,000 users.

Two things next happened nearly simultaneously. The donkeykeeper implored asstodon users to “keep posting donkeys” so that the tag didn’t, through disuse, get ceded to other uses. And the donkeykeeper singled out a poster who had, in his opinion, misused the tag. He first tried his usual approach, approaching the user to request they remove the tag from their post. But when he received no immediate response (because, it later turned out, the user had not seen the request), he posted an aggressive, public salvo, scolding the user and encouraging others to report the tag “misuse” to the moderators of that user’s home instance ([Figure 2](#)).

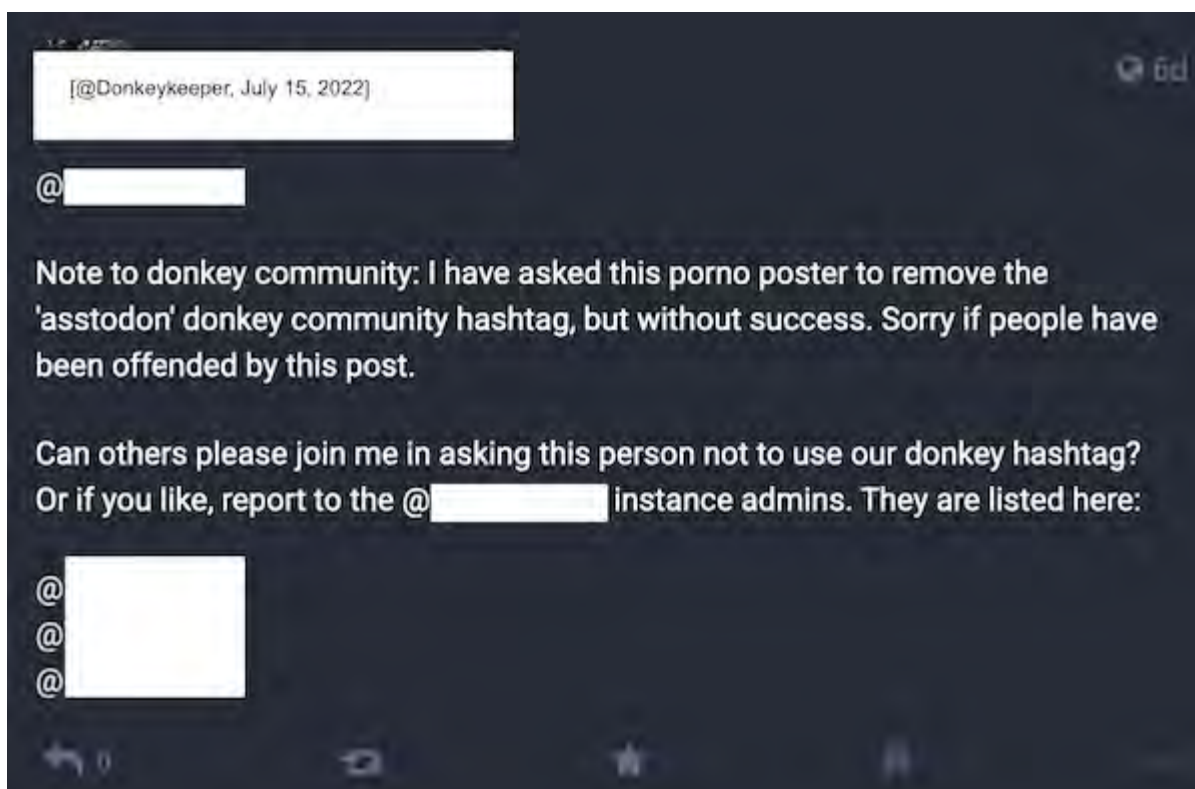


Figure 2: The donkeykeeper putting another user on public blast, inviting other tag community members to scold them and report them to their instance administrators. I have redacted identifying handles. 15 July 2022.

I was slow (in social media time) to pay attention to what was going on. When I encountered the donkeykeeper urging people to keep posting donkeys, I responded affirmatively. But when I apprehended the context, I began to feel badly for the user being singled out. I also felt, as a co-creator of the asstodon tag, like some intervention might be in order. Though I had nothing to do with the public shaming of this user, I couldn't help but feel in a tangential way responsible for them being hassled. As far as I could tell, users posting butts weren't doing anything wrong, per the wider norms of Mastodon (at least if they were using content warnings and hashtagging appropriately); and it seemed extreme to report this user to their instance maintainers and especially to shame them publicly.

Though I thought this was the wrong way to handle it, I could also see an argument that people expecting to see donkeys who encountered butts might legitimately wish to see this "problem" managed in some way where the expectation (built up over several months) that the tag contained donkeys, wouldn't lead to surprises or hurt feelings.

I posted on 15 July:

Ok, I see there is minor #Asstodon controversy. As I believe the 1st person who actually posted a donkey with the hashtag ..., tho I respect the donkey-keepers' claim & very much appreciate their making the tag what we know it today, the whole thing has been a live experiment with virality, campaigns, & hailing community on here.

& it does show how using a hashtag to hail ppl can get

hijacked/appropriated.

Someone in #Commodon should write about it! (Author, 15 July 2023)

In this “meta” post, I had multiple intentions. One was to remind donkeyposters and donkeyviewers that the tag had always had had multiple things going on, including its origin in people simply goofing around with hashtagging and exploring how Mastodon worked. I continued to hold that this made an interesting case study for scholars or others who were attempting to be reflexive about this particular realm of features and norms through which we were all associating. By this logic, being able to talk about the hashtag and the work it was doing (or failing to do) was part and parcel of being in this posting community on Mastodon; as I had said early on, the implications for being able to hail other users here were potentially a good deal bigger than a stream of donkeys. “Being the algorithm” also includes managing disagreement or going “meta” sometimes; any ethnographer or Internet denizen knows that a social space does not just reproduce itself without discussion, even conflict. Finally, I asserted a claim to talk about this matter too: it did not sit right with me that the donkeykeeper was claiming an exclusive right to the tag, which he then used to harshly discipline and shame the user who’d unknowingly posted a butt on a “donkey” tag. I didn’t “own” the “asstodon” tag, but certainly neither did he. If he reacted to my post in his feed, I didn’t see it. We didn’t follow each other or interact very much [17].

A day later, I posted again:

Maybe there’s a way to keep the donkey people and the other kind of ass people both happy: propose tags #Asstodon for donkeys and #AsstodonXXX for NSFW? (or something like that). ... Still won’t solve the problem of a hostile hashtag takeover, but to the extent I’ve seen a problem here, it was not that, just a polysemous tag/term. The potential problem of a hostile hashtag takeover is a #Mastodon affordance problem, and one of the things that maybe inhibits using here for organizing. (Author, 16 July 2023)

This musing attempt at mediation yielded replies from people that I didn’t know who were hailed by the tag, as well as some of my “mutual” posting friends, all of whom had seen me make “asstodon” posts for months. Some of the former said in effect, hey, this doesn’t bother me, if I see something I don’t expect I just mute the user and move along. A “mutual” of mine went further: he opined that my suggestion seemed prudish. He did not see a need to segregate the donkeys from the butts, given that the tag very much winked at the “butts” valence of the term (“I thought the whole joke of #Asstodon was that obviously everyone would expect it to be the second thing”), and that the norm on Mastodon would be to block or mute users or tags one did not wish to see (Scott F, 16 July 2023). Another person, a donkeykeeper and prolific tag poster himself, said:

I’m kind of a “live and let live, let a thousand asses bloom” kind of guy so I’m amused by the problem but don’t know that it really needs to be solved. Of course the insistence that it be resolved is part of the amusement, so as far as I’m concerned everyone can carry on exactly as they are with their antics, acceptance/protest of them, failed mediation attempts, etc[.] I will continue to turn the other ass cheek. (Impermanen, 17 July 2023)

I will admit that I thought this response — funny, generous, wise — was perfect, better than mine had been. It also foreshadowed futility in trying to get everyone to agree.

Yet another person volunteered in response to my musing about splitting the tag: “maybe this is just a function of the server I’m on and what content gets propagated here, but 100% of the content I see on this hashtag is either donkeys or people discussing the problem of NSFW content, but there’s no actual human arses” (Thanasis Kinias, 16 July 2023). This comment addressed a different, and relatively subtle facet of the situation: not the *norms* around hashtags in general and asstodon in particular, but a reminder that our vantage points on the hashtag were not all identical. (This user’s home instance was for historians.)

My post proposing to consider splitting the hashtag also hailed the donkeykeeper, who the next day replied to chastise the person who said he’d seen no “arses,” telling him to butt out. The donkeykeeper also chastised me: “The people who have spent many months creating donkey content on #asstodon and making the hashtag enjoyable and friendly to all newcomers are not looking for your clever geeky solutions to a problem of bad manners by porno pushers” (Screenshot, 17 July 2023).

When I read this, I actually laughed, and told him as much. The notion that a “clever geeky solution” could not be a helpful fix *on Mastodon* was hilarious. I replied to him:

Lol [Laugh out loud]. [You’re] lashing out at entirely the wrong person! & [you’re] also misreading wider room if you think a “clever geeky solution” has no prayer of working here. my suggestion is to create a norm where people who want to see donkeys & expect donkeys on asstodon & ppl who want to see butts *use diff tags*, separating these uses, tho some mistakes wd be inevitable ... to be clear, *[I don’t know] if what i’m proposing will work. i do know that your approach will not.* you’re signing yourself up for either giving up the hashtag or lifelong irritation of trying to police every non-donkey, possibly also inviting backlash ... (Author, 17 July 2023, emphasis added)

Another “mutual” of mine chimed replied to us both, saying that on Mastodon, some people would actually be happy to see *both donkeys and butts*, and that using the tag for both might appeal to more people, perhaps even bringing new eyes to his donkeys, while those who disliked this commingling were already in possession of filtering tools to control what they saw. The donkeykeeper did not care for this one bit: “Ah, great idea! So antisocial pornographers bursting into polite and happy places showing pictures of their anus will help fellow inadequates appreciate donkeys?” (Screenshot, 17 July 2023)

A few hours after this exchange, I made a new post making light of the situation, and, I confess, poking a bit of fun at the donkeykeeper’s opprobrium. A quick Web search revealed that in 2014, the metal band Mastodon (no relation, but occasionally humorously invoked on the Mastodon network) had titled that year’s tour “Asstodon,” encouraging fans to “twerk” for them, and selling custom shorts with “Asstodon” printed across the bottom. I posted a music press article about the tour with the comment, “The *band* Mastodon has weighed in on the #Asstodon controversy (committing time travel to do so, this is from 2014)” (Author, 17 July 2023). As indicated earlier, while I was sympathetic to a mismatch between users’ expectations of donkeys and a stray butt on the tag, it seemed, from a linguistic perspective, simply impossible to sanitize the “ass” out of “asstodon” — and futile to try. In fact, part of what made the tag function as it did, amusingly and wholesomely, was the double entendre. I assumed that other reasonable users would find humor in this too; and I was also confident from the comments quoted above (and others not quoted) that a good number of people saw things more or less as I did.

But there is a saying in English about what happens when we assume: “it makes an ass out of you and me.” Subsequent events took some turns I did not foresee. A few days later, on 21 July, I was tagged in two simultaneous posts, from users I did not recognize. One was named “Carrot” and the other was in the guise of a donkey. They both used the asstodon hashtag to hail tag followers, and they also used similar language, scolding me for stoking “controversy” on the hashtag, and saying that the tag belonged to other people. The

“donkey” post in fact claimed, erroneously, that donkeykeepers had created the tag; and it screenshotted my post from January inviting people to look at asstodon as a case in hailing/tagging on Mastodon (Figure 3).



[@Donkey]

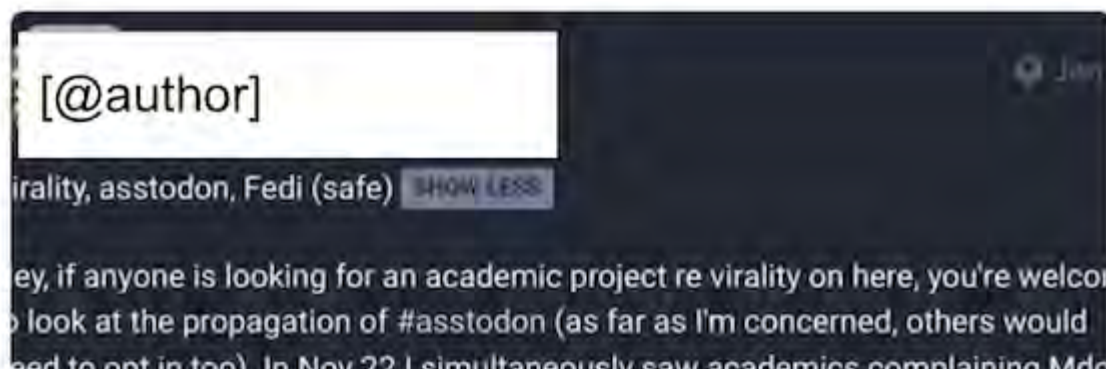
22m

[@author]

Some of your earlier posts indicated a curiously ambivalent attitude towards the idea of [#Asstodon](#)

Now it's been up and running and successful - which was nothing to do with you but due to the hard work of the people who came up with the hashtag and love donkeys - can you just step back please?

It is not about controversy but simply about donkeys. Thanks.



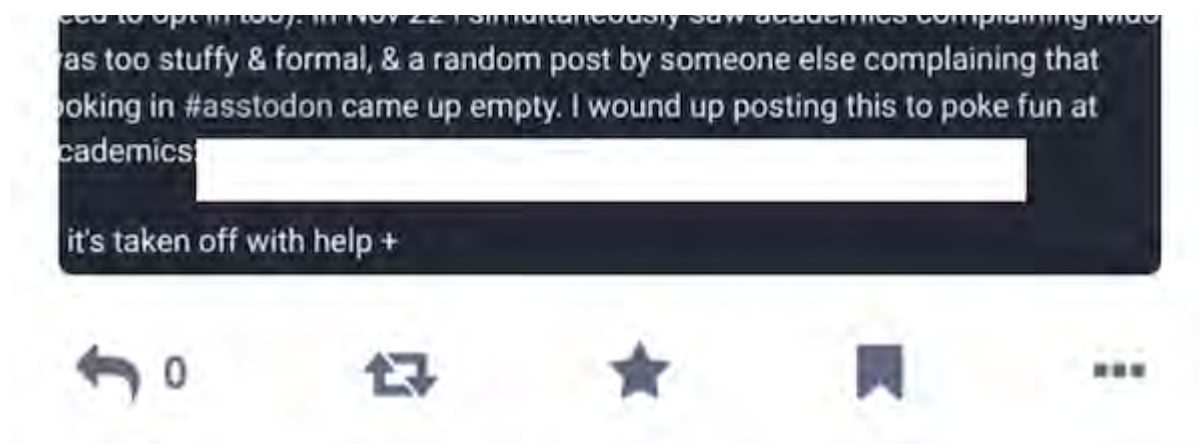


Figure 3: Note the claim that donkeykeepers “came up with” the tag; how the tag is used to hail the community; and how the post includes a screenshot of my post about “media studies” from January. 21 July 2023.

The content of both posts was superficially polite (the “donkey” said “[the hashtag] is not about controversy but simply about donkeys”). But I was alarmed at the way the posts appeared within moments of each other, from strange accounts, scolding me *while hailing other users of the tag*. It looked an awful lot like the donkeykeeper was trying to persuade others in the tag community to pile on me, but in an indirect manner, without his fingerprints right on the harassing posts. After a few moments of consideration, I responded to the posts asking the posters to leave me alone, stating I had an equal right to post on/about the tag, and accusing the donkeykeeper of being behind them. I also blocked his main account, and then the carrot and donkey accounts. Because I thought he might delete them, I screenshotted the carrot and donkey’s posts, and posted them on my account to create a record. I wasn’t yet inclined to report his behavior; I did however wish to put him on public notice that he stood accused of crossing a line. I also posted a picture of a braying donkey on the “asstodon” tag, along with the comment “controversy!” and a quip from another “mutual” who’d quickly diagnosed the situation, replying to me and the “donkey” account: “‘It is not about controversy but simply about donkeys’ has very strong ‘actually it’s about ethics in gaming journalism’ energy” (Gregory Hays, 21 July 2023) (Figure 4). I tagged this post and my posted screenshots with “Donkeygate,” a nod to Gamergate (the coordinated harassment campaign against women commentators of online gaming in 2014–2015, which rose to the level of death and rape threats and off-line harassment, wherein the harassers claimed they were merely concerned about “ethics in gaming journalism” [see Chess and Shaw, 2015; Hampton, 2019]).



[@author]

#Asstodon #Controversy

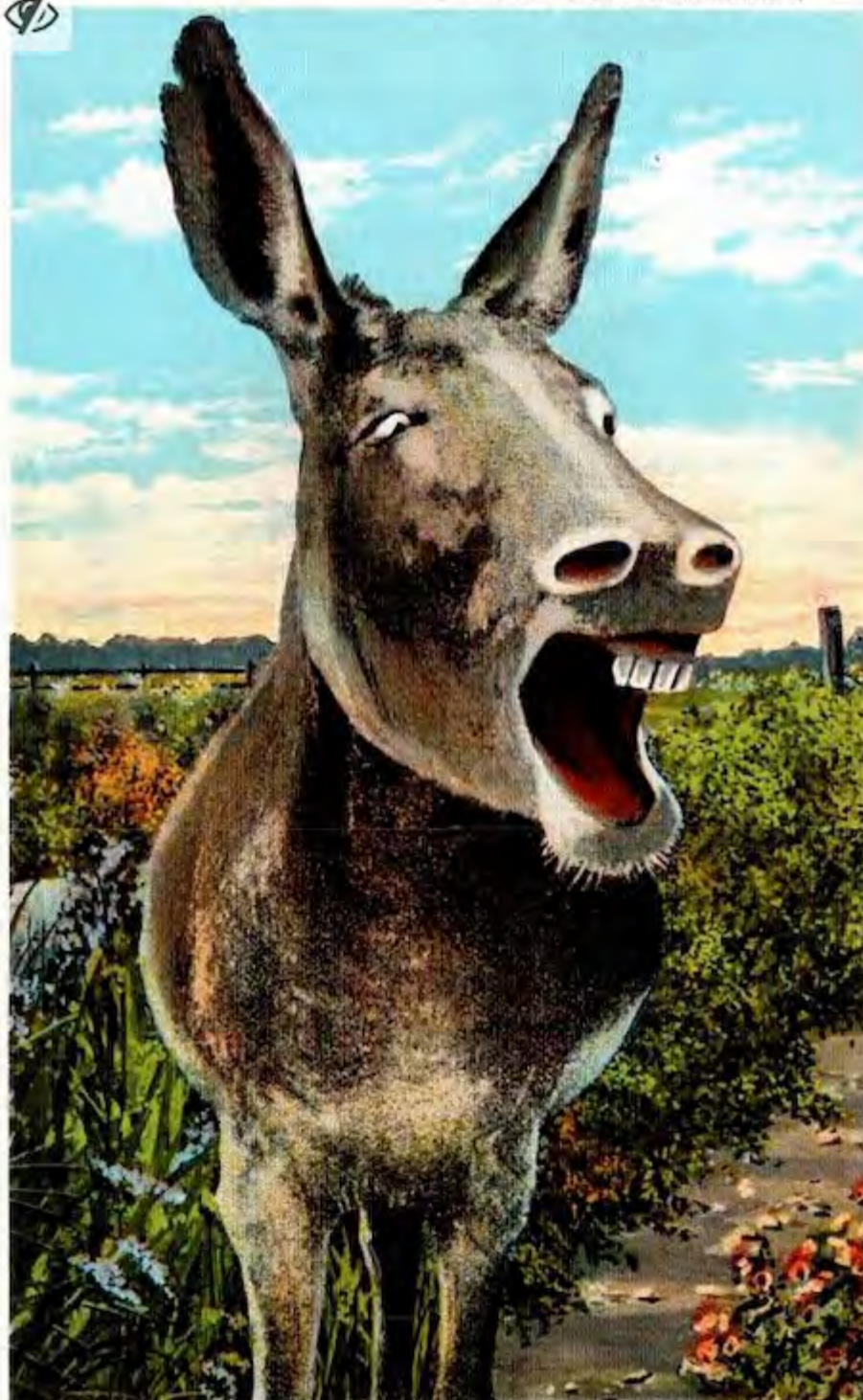
“It is not about controversy but

simply about donkeys" has very strong "actually it's about ethics in gaming journalism" energy."

*#Donkeygate



ROCKY MOUNTAIN CANARY,



JUL 21, 2023, 14:57 · EDITED JUL 22, 00:29

Figure 4: My quickly dubbing the donkeykeeper’s attempt to hail a swarm “Donkeygate.” 21 July 2023.

Over the next couple of days, the donkeykeeper’s purported wish to avoid controversy on the tag backfired. A couple of people who replied to his posts trying to hail a swarm sided with me. A few other users who’d understandably not been paying close attention asked what was going on. Whenever people asked questions or offered up opinions, he continued proclaim that the tag was “not for controversy but only for donkeys”; to this he also added that the tag was “not for media studies, but only for donkeys” (see [Figure 5](#)).



Figure 5: The donkeykeeper trying to curtail discussion of the hashtag. He also polices the tag’s use by anyone who is not a donkeykeeper. 22 July 2023.

One observer who recognized that the donkeykeeper was trying to direct harassment towards me lightly threatened the tag by posting on it: “I’d definitely never suggest anyone post their own or others’ asses on the asstodon tag” (Malena, 22 July 2023). Others refuted the donkeykeeper’s version of events: the fossil-poster dredged up his own November 2022 post of a mastodon’s behind and reposted it, reminding everyone of the evolution of the tag ([Figure 6](#)). An anthropologist who’d joined Mastodon when I had and watched the tag unfold replied to the “donkey” accusing the donkeykeeper of “trying to rewrite history”; and a person who is active both promoting Indigenous community and contesting racialized harassment on Mastodon posted the Tanya Tagaq song “Colonizer” on the tag, implying that the donkeykeeper was trying to enclose and propertize a shared space with prior inhabitants (Hugo, 22 July 2023; Yehuda, 22 July 2023). All of these posts admittedly did breach the norm of using the tag for donkeys; but in so doing, they offered a reminder that the tag functioning the way it did depended on users respecting norms and working out

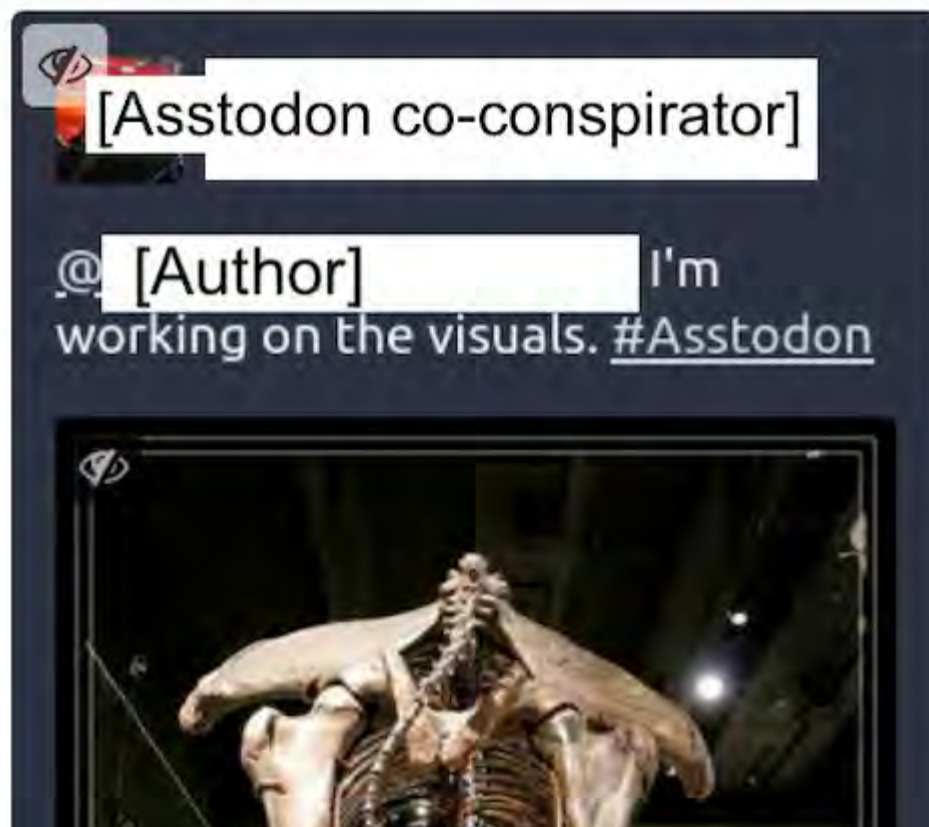
differences respectfully. They pushed back on the donkeykeeper's perverse insistence that only he had the right to create and enforce norms about the tag.



[Asstodon co-conspirator]

Ah, the memories. November 2022, when I was still a Mastodon noob and had mistakenly understood the [#Asstodon](#) hashtag to mean large extinct mammal backside.

It turned out, it was, and it also wasn't, and it was really about cute donkeys, and it also wasn't. 🍑





Jul 22, 2023, 14:25 · Edited Jul 22, 14:26 · 🌐 ·
↻ 1 · ★ 1

Figure 6: Post from July 2023, screenshotting an Asstodon post from November 2022, with a fossil mastodon’s “backside.” The poster in the July post notes that the tag both was and was not originally about donkeys. (The peach emoji is emoji slang for butt, of course.) 22 July 2023, used with permission [18].

The donkeykeeper’s protestations against media studies notwithstanding, the episode deeply underscored that our tag and conflict did indeed provide insight into how Mastodon functioned, both in terms of norms and in terms of architecture. The hashtag was a unique point of reliance *and thus of vulnerability*. In other words, whether or not one wished to acknowledge this, we were all “doing media studies” together, in real time. I referred to his position as “refusing to do media studies, as media studies.”

What happened next, I compress in the interest of word count. The donkeykeeper escalated his harassment. He signed up for a new user account on a very large, poorly moderated instance, and posted a racist “satire” of the situation in the persona of a Spanish fascist (see [Figure 7](#)), targeting me and another person, using racist and antisemitic slurs, and referring to me as “Miss Media Studies.” (I’m opting to not reproduce racist screenshots, though in withholding some of the donkeykeeper’s more vile posts, in this account he perhaps comes across as more innocuous than his actual record.) It was obvious that it was him, because his main account directed his followers to the “satire” posts; and his “donkey” account also posted about the satire. He was evidently adept at conducting harassment while keeping his main account free of the most vile behavior. The “donkey” and racist satirist both also tagged “Commodon,” seemingly to draw my professional community into the dispute or shame me in front of its members. Concerningly, his “donkey”

account referred to me by my full name, which I do not use on Mastodon: therefore this was an instance of “doxxing” (Figure 6). At this point, several people reported several of his accounts and posts for the various acts of harassment, bullying, antisemitism, racism, and doxxing; and a few also posted screenshots and an exhortation for asstodon tag users to not tolerate harassment, antisemitism, racism, and the like.



Figure 7: A post where the “donkey” account (later deleted) admits it is also run by the donkeykeeper; this was probably meant to avoid moderators taking action because sockpuppeting is a rule violation. Ironically, the donkey also “doxxes” me by posting my real name, another (serious) violation of Mastodon rules. It accuses me of exhorting others to post porn [19], and of “social media experiments.” 23 July 2023.

Moderators of several instances responded by silencing the donkeykeepers main and subsidiary accounts, meaning that users on these instances would no longer see any posts from these accounts. Some posts were also deleted, by either the donkeykeeper or moderators. The donkeykeeper next made a pathetic public display of *his* status as “harassment victim”: in response to being disciplined for his behavior, he said he was retiring from donkeyposting because he was “mentally exhausted,” and accused others of “dogpiling,” saying he “no longer wanted to share his life with donkeys after this experience.” (He also harassed me at work, sending a string of e-mail messages to me and to campus administrators.)

Doing “media studies” even after it has been refused

This arc reveals subtle facets of this decentralized, noncommercial social media network, which are very nonintuitive for users accustomed to centralized social media. The comment above, “100% of the content I see on this hashtag is either donkeys or people discussing the problem of NSFW content, but there’s no actual human arses,” surfaces a very important yet easy to miss feature of the network. It took on more import as the incident played out. *Many people* reported the same thing: they had never seen a butt on the tag. And *very few people* had seen the post that set everything off, to which the donkeykeeper had reacted (and escalated into public shaming). At the same time, other users, especially on the very large, very networked instance Friendly, confirmed that butts had occasionally crossed the tag’s feed for them.

This revealed that federation had greatly affected how people experienced both the asstodon tag and the asstodon controversy. Many of us on smaller instances (mine, for labor movement members and allies, has around 600 users, and others devoted to such topics as sound art, Internet culture, literary studies, and social science that host academics and other “mutuals” with whom I regularly interact are in the 500–1500 range) were not sure if we were not seeing butts because our instances were not networked with those where posters tended to congregate to post niche artwork or salacious content. All we knew was we hadn’t seen butts — and this wasn’t just because of quick work by the tag-pouncing donkeykeeper. Our experiences were certainly affected by being on smaller, niche instances culturally distant from (and thus not networked with) servers hosting butt enthusiasts.

When some interlocutors and I did a deep dive to surface the offending post, it was not easy due to the vicissitudes of federation and the fact that the asstodon tag had been edited out. An anthropologist and I joked that “seeing butts” had taken on a sort of “urban myth” cast, given the chorus of people confirming they too had never seen anything but donkeys on the tag. What we eventually ascertained to be the post in question contained a simple sketch of a marine mammal lustily eating a cat’s bottom. It was appropriately hashtagged NSFW and marked with a content warning, so no one would see the drawing unless they opted to click. In other words, the poster was participating in a hallowed Mastodon tradition (furry art) pre-dating most of our arrival on the site; and had followed Mastodon rules and norms to a T.

Conclusion: Lossy distribution, resolute partiality, and public goods

The phenomenon of some people seeing both donkeys and butts on the tag and others seeing only donkeys seems perhaps inconsequential, but its implications are bigger. About 10 days into the conflict, I observed that there was a “*Rashomon*-like” quality to the sequence of events: it was hard for people to have fully shared perspectives on the arc of the “controversy.” [20] Unlike on Twitter, affordances inhibited searching for posts except the ones that were tagged (I for one made a number of comments about the “asstodon” situation but did not tag them, in order to not spam the tag’s feed, and perhaps others did too, but unless posts were tagged they were unlikely to show up in any kind of search). Decentralization simply worked

against anyone who tried to follow arc of the conflict from beginning to end. As just illustrated, even following tagged posts would not give everyone the same perspective. The burden of figuring out “what really happened” was so great that a reasonable person might give up.

I actually did not realize how profound this was until another interlocutor told me what he had seen when he had looked at all of the donkeykeeper’s rulebreaking, harassing posts from multiple angles while trying to report them. He said:

[T]his fragmented, kaleidoscope-like aspect goes a bit beyond [what you said]. To wit: when I sat down to report our donkey keeper, I had to do it for four accounts: the three socketpuppets, and the puppet master. While doing this, I was

- 1) Looking at each TL [timeline] from my account here on [my home instance]
- 2) Looking at each TL from another account I have on [another instance]
- 3) Opening an “anonymous” tab in my browser.

Now, each of these vantage points presented me with a markedly different TL. Some posts were visible on all, some only on one, some on more than one but not on all of them.

Now, multiply that times four. Crazy.

I think the only way this can be ascertained is by an admin querying the database directly.

Rashomon, but the screenwriter did magic mushrooms. (Private correspondence, 30 July 2023)

Neither I nor my interlocutor could say exactly why the view of the harassing posts was so fragmentary and kaleidoscopic. It is possible that the donkeykeeper’s accounts had already had moderator actions taken against them before my interlocutor reported them on his home and secondary instances, which could cause individual posts or even whole accounts to disappear from view. This explanation would rely either on other instance-mates reporting, or these servers sharing disciplinary rulings and actions with, say, my server, to which I’d reported the harassing posts quickly. The fact that the posts remained visible in “anonymous” browsing mode (when one was not logged into a server with active moderation) meant that the posts hadn’t yet been removed by the server on which they were posted (which did eventually happen, though less quickly); or it could even be a caching problem. We didn’t know, and we will never know.

But this kaleidoscopic quality — fragmentation wrought by federation — affected many moments in the arc. Recall the incident that set off this whole arc. The user who had posted the asstodon-tagged furry art missed the initial requests to edit the tag out of the post. I initially assumed they had just been offline while the donkeykeeper grew impatient, but they later told me they believed they had never received the donkeykeeper’s initial requests to remove the tag because their home instance (for furry fandom) “silenced” the donkeykeeper’s large instance (ironically, probably because of poor moderation). They said they only realized they had been put on blast when *someone else who could see the donkeykeeper’s posts notified them* (Private correspondence, 28 August 2023). Meanwhile, the donkeykeeper worked himself into a lather thinking he was being deliberately ignored. And he reacted to people saying they weren’t seeing butts as undermining him, or not acknowledging his quick work to “restore” the “innocence” of the tag, rather than good-faith reports of different perspectives. A user with only one account on a single instance, especially a large and very well-networked one, would not necessarily realize that their view and another’s view when

looking at the same thread or hashtag were genuinely different. (This might especially be true of a newer user who was not deeply familiar with Mastodon’s architecture, as most of us in this episode were, including the donkeykeeper. But then, another user might have listened and learned something from statements by other users, rather than reacting with indignation.)

It is likely that lossy distribution also affected how people reacted to the conflict over the tag: the posts and conversations that occurred before the conflict became really heated (and even after it became heated) were not amenable to being searched for or assembled or read in order, unless one already had a very good idea of where to look, or happened to follow key players. Collective witnessing of “the same” phenomenon was all but impossible. This might have meant some people saw this as “just” a hashtag “pissing contest” more than a pissing contest plus very antisocial, abusive behavior [21]. It was alarming how some users reacted to the donkeykeeper’s racial slurs and harassment, and others’ demands for accountability for this behavior, as if they were both simply annoying to people who wanted to see donkeys [22]. “Big Social” is often rightly criticized for stoking outrage in algorithmically-enhanced efforts to drive user engagement, based on a core need to pursue profit (Lewis, 2018; Roose, 2019). By contrast, while lossy distribution may inhibit snowballing outrage, it may do so at a cost of inhibiting generative public scrutiny. Mastodon’s privileging of cooler engagement may generate a subtle refusal of knowledge that contributes to its culture defending itself against change; and inhibit robust conviviality, living together well [23].


I cannot say that I was performing hashtag activism: I was really doing hashtag goofing off, at most hashtag experimentation. But this episode nonetheless underscores why hashtag activism on Mastodon may face challenges. The hashtag is a *uniquely important tool in Mastodon*: it, in principle, can hail people to a topic, and is the closest to a guarantee to bringing willing eyes to a matter of shared concern or shared affection, aiding in the formation of publics, location of allies, or the elevation of counterpublics. But the hashtag is also *uniquely fragile*: it cannot function if there are typos or misspellings (or even linguistic differences in a single language, like “labor” versus “labour”); and it is vulnerable to hostile takeover (as happened briefly when people spammed the tag in response to the donkeykeeper’s aggression towards me). It is also an inelegant tool when people have legitimate reasons to all use the tag for different things. (A couple of weeks into this controversy, I peeked in on the hashtag #BearsOfMastodon saw that the tag turns up wild bears, teddy bears, and gay bear subculture, including sexuality: this seems fine if people share it peaceably, though less ideal if one were using the tag in an organizing campaign [24].) Further, because of federation, there is no guarantee of drawing all interested eyes, impeding the cultivation of shared, singular perspective (even one to then argue over).

While I rarely argue for increasing scale, and would never do so except cautiously and provisionally, scaling the public-hailing potential of Mastodon seems an important public good for social movement organizers [25]. Though scholars warn against making one-to-one comparisons between Mastodon and Twitter (and I agree with this), hashtag activism has inarguably been an important function of Twitter (Jackson, *et al.*, 2020). (It has arguably been so important that it motivated Musk to curtail organizing activity and leftwing voices there [Clark, 2020].) Mastodon’s lossy distribution inhibits the use of hashtagging to hail publics, which is an important function of democratic social media — and potentially *an even more promising function on a noncommercial network*, not beholden to shareholders or profit motive.

Increasing scale must, of course, be met with an equal commitment to inhibiting harm. Lossy distribution in Mastodon is in part an outgrowth of attempts to create friction for scaled abusive behavior on the network. But if the result is networked communication that — even when people are attempting to communicate as publicly and transparently as possible, using a tool like a hashtag — resembles trailing tendrils of mail art, this means that something has perhaps been lost in moving away from centralization. While it is excellent to give users many options for how public their posts are and how widely they will travel — I would never wish for users to be compelled to post in a fishbowl — we ought to attend closely to distributive potentials in post-Twitter regroupment [26]. (The friction on virality that Mastodon has implemented does not in fact prevent harm or abuse. My experience was idiosyncratic but at the same time not an outlier [27].)

My interlocutor’s description of how he saw different posts while logged in from different accounts; and

still other posts while logged out (*i.e.*, “anonymous” browsing) truly underscores the manifest partiality of perspective on Mastodon. This fragmentary view is an outgrowth of Mastodon’s ideological and architectural commitment to *non-centralization* (Gehl and Zulli, 2023). Here, note the shift in term from “decentralization,” which is how Mastodon is generally described in press accounts, and is the term I’ve used in most of this paper (*e.g.*, Koebler, 2023). Gehl and Zulli (2023) differentiate non-centralization from decentralization, arguing that the former is a formation where power is deliberately distributed across the federated system, *actively resisting* being constituted into a centralized formation. The fact that more posts were visible *while logged out* is subtly emblematic of a libertarian FLOSS ethos where you (or your server administrators) can control *what you can see*, but you (and they) can’t control *what others post*. While I have chronicled numerous disadvantages of lossy distribution for a discourse or discussion in common, and I argue that this feature is inhibitory of more centralized public sphere activity, there are also advantages to non-centralization. The demise of Twitter/X is actually a prime example: the lossy chatter on Mastodon is *extremely* resistant to a centralizing force dictating what can be said, to whom, by whom. In the context of civic communication, lossy distribution is an ambivalent feature, but non-centralization has redeeming qualities, beyond doubt, especially in light of the failures and harms of centralized, commercial social media [28].

My hashtag messing around was not restricted to Asstodon and Commodon. The third hashtag I’ve tried to get off the ground has seen the least success. That hashtag is #HigherEdWorkersUnited. (Some have suggested it needs to be snappier, and ideally would, in keeping with conventions for popular tags, riff on “Mastodon.”) Collaborators and I picked it to avoid labor-versus-labour spelling misfires, and also to be inclusive of campus labor beyond academic labor. But it lying fallow represents Mastodon’s missed potential for hashtag activism. As Erin Kissane (2023) wrote, “Mastodon is an immense achievement — a janky open-source project with great intentions that has overcome highly unfavorable odds to get to this point and is experiencing both growing pains and pressure to define its future.” Mastodon’s potential capacity to interrupt institutionalized distribution patterns favoring big, commercial players to some degree rests on the choices it makes going forward about facilitating consenting users’ distribution amongst themselves. Going further, fulfilling its public service potential will rely on designing *for* public service and conviviality, not only designing *against* centralized Big Social. 

About the author

Christina Dunbar-Hester is a researcher and writer with expertise in the area of democratic control of technologies. She is the author of *Oil Beach: How Toxic Infrastructure Threatens Life in the Ports of Los Angeles and Beyond* (University of Chicago Press, 2023), *Hacking Diversity: The Politics of Inclusion in Open Technology Cultures* (Princeton University Press, 2020), and *Low Power to the People: Pirates, Protest, and Politics in FM Radio Activism* (MIT Press, 2014). She is a faculty member at the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School for Communication in Los Angeles, California.
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Notes

1. This is a portmanteau of “federated universe.” Mastodon is only one of many software applications that can “talk” across services that run on the Activity Pub protocol.
2. Thanks to Malena Marvin for this description.
3. As Michael Warner has written, “Not texts themselves create publics, but the concatenation of texts through time. Only when a previously existing discourse can be supposed, and when a responding discourse can be postulated, can a text address a public” (Warner, 2005, p. 90). Thanks to Josh Braun for discussion.
4. Jackson, *et al.*, 2020, p. 185; see also Warner, 2005. This practice also has a history on Mastodon (Kiam and X, 2023; Pincus, 2023).
5. Adjepong, 2019, p. 29.
6. As a tenured white academic in North America, who is not a gender, sexual, or religious minority, I am far from the most vulnerable person in a context such as this one; but as a femme person (cis woman) I am also more likely than some to be harassed online (Beard, 2015).
7. Braun, 2023, p. 3.
8. Durham, 2014, p. 2.
9. His posts in that appear in this paper have been deleted, and so have all of his “sock puppet” accounts used for harassment. Given his targeted harassment campaign, only a small amount of which appears here, I feel fully entitled to claim his posts for my own narrative. I anonymize him, with ambivalence; he has published a screed about me on his blog, so I feel entitled to name him, but opted to choose the higher road.
10. This, like many other features, are in flux; and some of the statements made in this paper may therefore be incorrect by the time it is published. Opt-in text searching has been implemented in different piecemeal ways in recent months, though it still does not function as a “universal” feature for all users or across all servers; and even for users who opt in, only certain posts (those set to “public”) are searchable.
11. Jackson, *et al.*, 2020, p. xxviii.
12. Inarguably, Black Twitter fostered dominant repertoires of affective and political exchange within a libidinal economy on that site (Brock, 2020; see also Clark, 2020). Users behaving similarly on Mastodon have been met with scolding and “HOA racism” [homeowner’s association] for discussing politics, racism, or even making jokes; and this scolding has driven many people away from Mastodon, especially minoritized users (Kissane, 2023; see also Pincus, 2023).
13. Thanks to Hugo Reinert for this turn of phrase.
14. Though not labeled as such, this user base was very white. “[M]any queer, radical leftists on the fediverse ... had never taken the time to address race, whiteness, white supremacy in their politic,” in the words of Marcia X, a moderator of an early instance for Black and people of color Mastodon users (Kiam and X, 2023). Safety needs of people of color have historically not received the same consideration in Mastodon architecture or moderation, though Marcia X innovated the use of hashtagging for collective safety (Kiam and X, 2023; Pincus, 2023).
15. The Mastodon project pays a few employees and the largest instance pays moderators (Koebler, 2023).
16. Another unique feature of Mastodon is that users can edit posts, leaving a viewable edit history.
17. It is also possible that the donkeykeeper did post about this, in a way that was invisible to me: Mastodon allows followers-only posting, so he could have addressed his on followers without me being able to view

it. This feature is meant to give users control over their posts not being seen by adversarial actors, but in practice it's also possible to commit slander or induce people to harass someone out of public view. This feature stands in contrast to an option on Twitter where one's post is visible to all, but *who can reply* is limited, which allows for public address but curtails hostile replies.

[18](#). It is beyond the scope of this account to explain how the November 2022 post in [Figure 4](#) uses the hashtag but does not *appear on* the hashtag, because of its privacy setting. The July post was set to appear on the hashtag feed. Also, this fossil post was slightly earlier than my donkey post, but because I and the poster live in different time zones, he in Europe and I in the U.S., our screenshots of our first asstodon posts have timestamps from different days, because we see them in our local times.

[19](#). This charge is false; I did not delete any posts. The donkeykeeper either mixed me up with others threatening the tag; misunderstood a post I made referring to Korn's (2017) paper about the inevitability of seeing genitalia in online research (cited in this bibliography); or simply lied, perhaps trying to respectability — shame me by accusing me of this in front of my academic colleagues (note his hailing of #Commodon community members).

[20](#). This is a reference to the 1950 Akira Kurosawa film () where multiple characters offer contradictory and unreliable narratives of the same event.

[21](#). Various asstodon fans grumbled when the tag had devolved into a flame war; I sympathize with this. Other (in my view, more realistic) users took for granted that occasional meta-discussion, sometimes even heated discussion, was necessary to participate in keeping the fediverse ticking along. Conflicts are common in community spaces but this is partly because people care so much about them, and their governance (Dunbar-Hester, 2014, p. 136). Users who call for “no politics in fedi[verse]” are doing politics, of course, just status quo politics.

[22](#). It was also alarming that some people lamented there being porn on the hashtag in the vein of “this is why we can't have nice things” while being silent about abusive behavior. I'm choosing to be charitable about what they saw/did not see, versus drawing conclusions about what they do or do not condone.

[23](#). Illich (1973) defines conviviality as “the opposite of industrial productivity... autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment”, as cited in Bonini and Mazzoli, 2022, p. 930.

[24](#). If there has been conflict about this, I haven't seen it; but there is no reason why I would know about it if there had been, either. Though I did see a few people kvetch during the Asstodon Controversy about porn on the fediverse, the donkeykeeper seemed anomalous in his regard for lewd content as a matter for all-out war.

[25](#). To increase scale thoughtfully is not equivalent to making unthinking commitments to scalability (per Hasinoff and Schneider, 2022, following anthropologist Anna Tsing). See Zulli, *et al.*, 2020, on scale and sociality in Mastodon.

[26](#). See also Corry, 2021; Rentschler, 2015, on feminist distribution.

[27](#). I discuss moderation and safety dimensions further in a companion (draft) to this piece.

[28](#). This is not a full-throated endorsement of the FLOSS principles that led Mastodon here, of course.

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Showing your ass on Mastodon: Lossy distribution, hashtag activism, and public scrutiny on federated, feral social media
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