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Panel proposal

archaeo.social: archaeology in the Fediverse and the future of scholarly social media

Proponents:

Joe Roe <joeroe@hey.com>
University of Bern
ORCID: 0000-0002-1011-1244

Zack Batist <z.batist@mail.utoronto.ca>
University of Toronto
ORCID: 0000-0003-0435-508X

Description

In November 2022, the microblogging service Twitter (now X) was acquired by billionaire Elon Musk, triggering the first of several exoduses of its users. Amongst those who left the site for other services, new or existing—or simply stopped using it—were archaeologists and other scientists. 'Science Twitter' was long the main venue for scholarly communication in social media, providing a platform for researchers to talk directly to each other and to the public (Cheplygina et al. 2020). Its sudden disintegration was a wake-up call for many to the risks of placing public scientific discourse under the control of a single private corporation. This rude awakening has not been limited to Twitter. Recent controversial decisions by the corporate owners of the instant messaging service Slack and news aggregator Reddit, for example, have also affected academic users, leading to similar exoduses.

Amongst several alternatives, Mastodon has emerged as the primary destination for scholars leaving Twitter (Insall 2023). Very similar to Twitter in its design and function, what distinguishes Mastodon is its social architecture: rather than being controlled by a single corporation, it is a decentralised network of individual servers based on free and open source software. Servers are 'federated' with each other using an open, W3C-standardised protocol (ActivityPub), allowing communication not just across Mastodon servers but with a wider 'Fediverse' of software using the same or compatible protocols, e.g. photo-sharing software Pixelfed, or instant messaging service Matrix. It presents a golden opportunity for scholars not just to replace Twitter with a clone, but bring scholarly social media back into common ownership and resist corporate capture (Brembs et al. 2023).

Archaeologists are active across the Fediverse, on specialised servers such as archaeo.social or scholar.social, as well as general-purpose servers like mastodon.social (Shilobod, Titolo, and

Visser 2023). archaeo.social, which we created in November 2022 to encourage the use of federated social media for scholarly communication in archaeology, has X active users and an average of Y posts per day, as of August 2023. The aim of this panel is to critically examine the emerging community of archaeologists in the Fediverse and its place in the future of scholarly communication online. We invite discussion of the use and potential of decentralised/federated social media for archaeology; of risks, challenges, and critiques; and reflections on the future trajectory of archaeo.social and archaeology in the Fediverse more broadly.

References

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