

Quick-Start Guide to Fediverse Governance Decisions

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Introduction

Our main findings report goes into considerable detail about the many insights on moderation, server leadership, federated diplomacy, and governance tooling that our research participants shared with us. This doc is meant to serve as a lightweight guide to the knowledge collected in that report as well as a compilation of the many governance decisions Fediverse server teams encounter when setting up and running a medium-sized server, which we define as one that hosts roughly 100–10,000 members.

We’ve written this guide with a focus on current and potential Fediverse server operators who want to provide an online home for a group larger than a few dozen friends. Folks who do want to keep it super simple may still find some useful notes here, but may find Darius’s guidance at Run Your Own Social most relevant.

Think about governance structures

There are many ways to govern a server, and our participants described several practices that seem to work particularly well for medium-sized servers. Consider giving a thought to your server governance model early on, before decision-making processes and tech stacks are locked in/harder to change. If you’re just testing the waters with a small group, you might not need to spend much time on this, but if you aspire to run a self-governed or cooperative server, thinking about, for example, incorporating lightweight participatory rule-making can help build a sturdy foundation for more complex practices down the road. (See main report, [Section Three: Server Leadership](#))

Consider the following questions:

- Who will establish server rules and make future decisions about registration policy, moderation and communication practices, financial and legal factors, and technical provisioning and administration?
- Do you want your server members to be involved in decision-making, and if so, how? Does a co-op make sense for your server, and if so, how involved will members be in the daily care and feeding of the server?

- Do you prefer a benevolent-dictator model, or a small leadership group? If you're going solo/BDFL, do you have thoughts about how to address the [bus factor](#)? If you're setting up a small group, how much autonomy will group members need to share the work of e.g. moderation?
- Do you need an advisory board or a member council? If so, what will be the scope of their involvement or authority, and how will the group be formed and maintained?

Figure out your vibes

Many decisions about the character and management of a Fediverse microblogging server are interconnected. Registration policies, for example, can strongly up-regulate (or down-regulate) the amount of work (and money) required to keep a server running: If you want to maintain fully and permanently open registration, you'll have to deal with a lot of spam accounts and a much larger moderation workload than you would with a more restricted registration model, so you'll need more moderators, more developed and specific public documentation, and also a way to cover larger server costs, especially as media files stack up.

Moderating membership by requiring potential members to apply first—either in a very lightweight way in which you let everyone in who doesn't seem terrible or like a bot, or in a more intensive way, as with co-op memberships that involve written applications and dues payments—can sharply reduce the maintenance workload for moderators. Closed or by-invitation registration is even more restricted, but can still allow for gradual growth or maintenance of member numbers. (See main report, [Section Two, Moderation](#) for much more on this)

Because so many elements of governance are interconnected, you may want to consider the following questions in terms of budgets for fixed resources—your team's time and attention, the availability of trusted and trained moderators, your interest in/willingness to do extensive up-front work to filter spam accounts and defederate problem servers, etc.

- What's the purpose of your server?
- Will registration be open, moderated in some way, or closed/by invitation only?
- How loosely (or tightly) do you want to moderate your own members and their messages, and messages originating from external servers?
- Will you write your own server rules and moderation/policy documentation from scratch, or base them on another server's (presumably with citation)?
- What will be your rough criteria for federating with or defederating from other servers? (It may help to think in terms of whether you will federate with servers with marginal moderation policies.)

- How much active work will you do to locate and defederate from other servers likely to pose risks to your members? Will you use any shared block lists or information from trusted other servers?
- How many moderators do you need at launch and as the server grows? How will you find and train them? What kind of documentation will they need? How will intra-team moderator communications and accountability/transparency work? How will moderator communications and accountability/transparency to server members work? Will you need 24/7 coverage across all time zones or can your team maintain a set of “business hours”?

Document your processes

Document plentifully and in ways that make it easy to understand the (desired) character of the server, the server team’s sense of what its responsibilities are, and the processes and guidelines in place for content and member moderation, inter-server governance, and governance of the team itself. (See main report, [Section Two: Moderation](#), [Section Three: Server Leadership](#), [Section Four: Federated Diplomacy](#).)

- You’ll want a place to put your docs. A server “About” page becomes insufficient after a while. Could be a wiki, could be a shared drive of documents, could be a [WriteFreely](#) site. It doesn’t really matter as long as it’s low-friction: your team can easily update it and your members can easily find and browse it.
- Have a process for announcing documentation changes to your users. If you add a new document or make a major update to an old one, you’ll want people to know about it rather than have it sit around in obscurity.
- Ideas for documents: Content policy, federation/defederation criteria, overview of how your moderation team works, appeals process, how to join the operations team, privacy policy, legal stances (what will you do if law enforcement requests user data; how do you handle illegal content), account registration criteria if applicable, etc. Some of this documentation could be internal-facing for your operations team, but most documents should be available to all your users. Some examples we like:
 - [Woof.group blog](#)
 - [Hachyderm Community Documentation](#)

Build a robust and diverse moderation team

Effective Fediverse moderation requires a solid understanding of (and buy-in on) the local norms you want to establish on your server, as well as the ability to deal with messages and moderation choices from other servers with potentially conflicting norms. Assembling a trustworthy,

levelheaded, culturally attuned moderation team is an investment in building a good experience for your server's members and in your server's stability and longevity.

- As a rule of thumb, we've observed that a team of 5 trained moderators appears to provide ample coverage and redundancy for servers of about 1,000 active users. Your server's moderation needs will change as your server membership fluctuates, and if you experience a period of rapid growth, you may need to either expand your moderation team quickly (at the risk of bringing on inexperienced or less attuned mods) or reduce the flow of new accounts (at the risk of turning away great potential members).
- Remember that offline/IRL community management experience can be just as important as online experience. Seek out moderators with strong on- and offline community management experience, low reactivity, and potentially first or second-degree IRL (or long-term online) connections to your existing community, to reduce the risk of disruptive problems on your moderation team—and unnecessary stress on underprepared moderators. ([Section Two: Moderation](#))
- Try to recruit a group of moderators with a wide variety of cultural competencies—and potentially with the ability to moderate in multiple languages and across time zones, depending on your server's purpose and character.
- Consider doing onboarding and training for all new members of the server team, including discussions of past decisions, recusals, and preferred methods for handling complex or heated interpersonal problems. ([Section Two: Moderation](#))
 - Use specific cases and complex decisions as opportunities to refine (and document) the team's sense of its responsibilities and underlying goals/values. ([Section Two: Moderation](#), [Section Four: Federated Diplomacy](#))
- Make at least a loose succession plan for when moderators need to step away, either temporarily or permanently.

Structure your decision-making

As your server grows, you'll encounter new and sometimes unforeseeable challenges. Think about how you want to involve your moderation team or other members of your server team—or your full membership—in decisions that extend beyond basic moderation calls and simple technical changes. ([Section Three: Server Leadership](#))

- Consider consulting your full moderation team on complex moderation issues and policies, while allowing mods to opt out or recuse themselves as appropriate based on their situation and the topic under discussion. (Certain kinds of content, for instance, may be difficult or damaging for some folks to engage with.)

- If you're building toward participatory or democratic governance, consider establishing a proposal and voting system (some teams we spoke with use Loomio, but multiple options exist) for major policy decisions.
- When major policy decisions are made, document the rationale for making them so that you can use those decisions as helpful precedent for future ones. A great example of this documentation is [Woof.group's post on federation with large servers](#).

Involve your community

Communicate transparently with members (and potential members) about big social and technical decisions and their implications, financial sustainability, and future plans. ([Section Three: Server Leadership](#))

- Publish straw polls to your users to get a sense of the general temperature on various issues.
- Create clear pathways for users to participate on your operations team.
 - Avoid promoting brand-new members unless you already have a pre-existing relationship with them.
- Actively solicit users to become members of your operations team.
- Designate a place for user feedback (an email address, account to DM, etc) and make sure it's an inbox that your team can be responsive to.
- Create a generic, well-publicized, user-facing moderation account like "[@moderators@example.social](#)" that your entire team has access to, and come up with rules for who manages DMs from that account. ([Section Two: Moderation](#), [Section Five: Tooling](#))
- Larger servers can benefit from a staff member whose duty is specifically community engagement and managing the above items.

Plan for financial sustainability

Running a Fediverse server for more than a handful of people is not cheap. While our report was not focused on the financial aspects of running a server, we naturally heard a lot from our participants about finances. There was no clear pattern among our participants when it came to financial mechanisms, tools, or decision-making processes. ([Section Three: Server Leadership](#))

- Look into donation systems like Patreon or Ko-Fi, but think about where the money is going: is it your personal bank account or some other entity? Could you begin with a

personal bank account but make a plan to move the money to something more formal and separate?

- Consider charging for accounts or offering paid memberships.
- Research options like forming an LLC, non-profit, or cooperative.
- US-based entities can look into [fiscal sponsorship options](#) for handling funds — while we do not know of any orgs that will fiscally sponsor a general purpose server, if your server is mission-focused you might be able to approach a nonprofit with a similar mission for sponsorship.
- If you fundraise directly, you'll need to consider how this will affect your taxes. You'll want to talk to a tax professional.

Plan for legal liability

Of course the thing you really want to do here is talk to a lawyer. (Some of the server operators we spoke to were able to consult with members of their servers who are also legal professionals!)

There are some free resources available, and every resource of note is documented at the IFTAS Trust & Safety Library. They have a [Legal & Regulatory category](#) that is more comprehensive than anything we could list here.

We hope there will be more resources available in the future, particularly tooling around legal compliance. This is one of the big infrastructural gaps we point out in our main report. ([Section Five: Tooling](#))

Talk to other server operators

It's always helpful to be plugged into a network of other server operators, particularly ones that share similar values to your own. While it can be difficult to build these networks we did notice a few patterns used by operators to meet peers and stay up-to-date on the ever-changing Fediverse landscape. ([Section Three: Server Leadership](#))

- Consider joining one or more server admin/moderator forums (ex: the [Mastodon Discord for supporting members](#), [IFTAS Connect](#)) for peer support, resource sharing, and easier communication with other server teams.
- As you get to know other server operators, consider bringing the ones you are closest with into a private chat where you can speak more freely.
- Stay informed on Fediverse-wide developments through news sources like [The Fediverse Report](#) and [We Distribute](#).