ActivityPub: A Non-Standard Standard

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Move Slowly and Build Bridges: Mastodon, the Fediverse, and the Struggle for Ethical Social Media

Please see the Social Web Incubator Community Group for current and future activity.

Social Web Working Group

- Announcement 2014-07-21
- Charter (closed on 2018-02-13)

Chairs for the duration
Tantek Çelik (Mozilla)
Evan Prodromou (e14N)

Staff Contacts during and at close
Amy Guy (W3C/University of Edinburgh)
Sandro Hawke (W3C/MIT)

Specifications

Specifications that the Social Web WG has produced.

Some use cases have been addressed by multiple specifications that provide alternative approaches, so trying to figure out what's what can be a bit...
SocialWG Charter

“The Social Web Working Group will create Recommendation Track deliverables that standardize a common JSON-based syntax for social data, a client-side API, and a Web protocol for federating social information such as status updates.”
actor reads incoming messages

send messages to actor (federation!)

GET INBOX

POST OUTBOX

Actor sends messages / posts content

Outside world can read messages from actor

REST OF THE WORLD

https://www.w3.org/TR/activitypub/
Sources and Methods

- Interviews with ActivityPub and Mastodon devs
- Close reading of SocialWG meeting minutes
- Software studies analysis of AP, Mastodon
Amy Guy, from https://github.com/rhiaro
Surely, there’s a standard way to join a standards-setting group, but Guy’s way wasn’t it.
Technical Standards: Foundations of the Future

Ken Krechmer
COMMUNICATIONS STANDARDS REVIEW,
Palo Alto, California

A early example of a standard is the written alphabets developed by the Egyptians and Babylonians around 4000 BC. Thus the setting of a standard marks the start of recorded Western history. The Western
What’s so Standard?

Andrew L. Russell

Susan Leigh Star
Non-Standard Elements of AP

- No corporate social media involvement
- SocialWG produced seven standards (including AP)
- ActivityPub almost didn’t happen
- Half of AP is ignored
NON-STANDARD ONE

“Small Beans”: No Corporate Social Media Involvement in the SocialWG
Declined invitations

- Facebook (W3C member)
- Google (W3C member)
- Twitter
- Sina Weibo
The Business of Internetworking: Standards, Start-Ups, and Network Effects

Published online by Cambridge University Press: 21 March 2022

Andrew L. Russell, James L. Pelkey and Loring Robbins
Home

Welcome to OpenSocial.org, the main site for all information about OpenSocial. This site currently houses the canonical copies of the OpenSocial specification as well as the homepage of the OpenSocial Foundation, and will evolve to include more documentation and information. Today, if you are looking for developer articles, please look here.

Specification

OpenSocial defines a common API for social applications across multiple websites. Built from standard JavaScript and HTML, developers can create apps with OpenSocial that access a social network’s friends and update feeds. By using a common API, developers can extend the reach of their applications more quickly, yielding more functionality for users. For more details about the API, review the Technical Resources.

Foundation (New!)

The OpenSocial Foundation is a non-profit corporation created to sustain the free and open development of OpenSocial specifications. To read more about the proposed foundation, and to get involved, please review the OpenSocial Foundation section.

Terms of Service
“None of the big players... no one took us seriously. No one saw [the SocialWG] as a threat. No one expected it to go anywhere.... The feeling was, it was small beans, and it wasn’t worth their time.” -- interview with Amy Guy
NON-STANDARD TWO
Standardize All The Things
SocialWG vs. Typical W3C

- Webmention
- Linked Data Notifications
- Micropub
- ActivityStreams Core
- ActivityStreams Vocab
- WebSub
- ActivityPub

- ~2 recommendations
“Most of [the SocialWG participants] were either open source enthusiasts [or] people coming from an academic or theoretical background. So a lot of it was kind of witchcraft, right? It’s the imaginary world we can have, rather than how do I get more users onto [a corporate] social network.” -- interview with Evan Prodromou
Three Distinct Groups

- SoLiD – academic approach, Tim Berners-Lee
- IndieWeb – POSSE approach
- Federated social media – Rstat.us, Media Goblins, OStatus
“As you can imagine, it went round and round in circles. No one could agree, because everyone was invested in their own option. There were a few places where people would not compromise…. There were always things that nobody would budge on.” -- interview with Amy Guy
Standardize All The Things
“That basically unblocked us. All of a sudden, people who were at odds with each other were helping each other out. Navigating the W3C process, consulting each other with technical expertise. The whole dynamic changed after that.” -- interview with Amy Guy
“I almost want to say we succeeded too much.” -- interview with Bengo
NON-STANDARD THREE
ActivityPub (arguably the most important standard of the lot) almost didn’t happen
WHAT IF
WE CLOSE WITHOUT
A RECOMMENDATION?

From the 2015-11-10 meeting of
the SocialWG
STOP TRYING TO MAKE FEDERATION HAPPEN

IT'S NOT GOING TO HAPPEN

From the 2015-12-02 meeting of the SocialWG
"I DON'T CARE ABOUT FEDERATION, I CARE ABOUT MY CONTENT, AND MY FRIENDS."

— Tantek Çelik
Things looked very bleak for a federation protocol.
GEEKERY

Mastodon 101: A Queer-Friendly Social Network
You’re Gonna Like a Lot

BY CREATRIX TIARA
OCTOBER 11, 2017
Christine Lemmer-Webber
In the absence of major corporate implementation of any draft SocialWG standards, Mastodon’s was the largest implementation of any of the draft standards.
w3c.social is part of the decentralized social network powered by Mastodon.

w3c.social is a friendly and respectful instance for people involved in the activities of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). The instance is run on a volunteer basis by a few of the W3C team.

ADMINISTERED BY: Coralie Mercier (@koalie)

SERVER STATS: 64 active users

Learn more

w3c.social
Decentralized social media powered by Mastodon

ADMINISTERED BY: Coralie Mercier (W3C) @koalie

CONTACT: k@w3.org
In spite of this, time was running out for ActivityPub
The Mastodon Extensions

- The original charter for the SocialWG was to end in mid-2017
The Mastodon Extensions

- The original charter for the SocialWG was to end in mid-2017
- The Mastodon extensions pushed this back into early 2018
NON-STANDARD FOUR
Half of ActivityPub is Ignored
A highly opinionated guide to learning about ActivityPub

by Darius Kazemi, Jun 1, 2019

This document is for programmers who take one look at activitypub.rocks, click on through to the documentation, and can’t make heads or tails of it.

In other words this document is for me, one year ago.

IMPORTANT NOTE: This document does not explain ActivityPub. It explains how to learn about ActivityPub.

If you want THE ULTIMATE TL;DR, just skip to that section.
Conclusion
Conclusion

● ActivityPub and the fediverse have largely been developed outside corporate social media logics
● AP development took a personal toll on its creators
● AP is an open standard and is evolving
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