Mobilizon V4 : the maturity stage

5 years after its announcement, Mobilizon, our free, federated alternative to Facebook groups and events, is reaching maturity. We take this opportunity to look back on its history and future.

VS 🌐: Let’s take back some ground from the tech giants!

*Thanks to your donations to our not-for-profit, Framasoft is taking action to advance the ethical, user-friendly web. Find a summary of our progress in 2023 on our Support Framasoft page.*

➡️ Read the series of articles from this campaign (Nov. – Dec. 2023)

Five years of Mobilizon

As this is the last major version of Mobilizon to be ported by Framasoft (yes, we’re teasing you a bit 😏), we’d like to start with a reminder of the various stages that led us to this v4.

2018: an intention and attentions

Remember: in December 2018 (5 years ago already!), we announced (in French) our intention to develop Mobilizon. Our aim was to offer an alternative to Facebook groups and events, which had become the de facto dominant tool as a platform for mobilisation, whether it was organising a birthday party, a free software conference or a climate protest.

To do this, we decided to do things in the right order, starting by asking different audiences about their real needs and expectations (not those we assumed). The aim was to create a tool that was not only practical and welcoming, but also empowering. For example, we decided to reject any form of social gamification (in Mobilizon you follow groups rather than individuals, we banned infinite scrolling in favour of simple pagination, etc.).
2019: Crowdfunding and first beta version

In May 2019, we launched an appeal for donations to fund the development of a first version. Thanks to the mobilisation and generosity of over 1,000 donors, it was a success, with almost €60,000 raised. Less than 6 months later, we announced a beta version of the software.

This version provided a good foundation for creating and publishing events. However, it still lacked « core » functionalities, such as the ability to register anonymously for an event, or federation (i.e. the ability of a Mobilizon instance (in French) to easily exchange data with other Mobilizon instances, or even Mastodon instances).

2020: a pandemic and a V1

In October 2020, after a few months delay due to a worldwide pandemic, the first stable version (« v1 ») of Mobilizon was released!

This v1 already offered what was to become the core of the software: groups (the central element of Mobilizon), articles, resources linked to a group, the possibility of having several profiles for the same account, the possibility of participating in an event without registering, and... the federation.
2021: notifications and an app

At the end of 2021, we announced version 2 of Mobilizon. One of the main new features was the eagerly awaited integration of a notification system. But also on the menu: time zone management, « RTL » management (for languages written from right to left, such as Arabic or Hebrew), provision of RSS feeds, the addition of sorting filters, the ability to define an event as « online » (without geographical location), public group tracking, etc. There was even the release of a smartphone application developed by Tom79 (thanks again to him!).

2022: Engines and search

The third major version of Mobilizon was released with the regularity of a Swiss watch, one year after v2.

Its main focus was search. It introduced the possibility of federated searches: a search from the « SOMETHING » instance could return results from events hosted on the Mobilizon « ELSE » instance. As with PeerTube’s SepiaSearch metasearch engine, we designed and implemented a Mobilizon-specific engine that allows searches across multiple instances: https://search.joinmobilizon.org

With this release, we have also redesigned the front page of the software. Our aim is to give you more opportunities to discover events and groups you may not have known existed, and to make the diversity of content published on Mobilizon more
2023: waiting for v4...

During 2023 we also quietly released two minor versions. These added anti-spam tools, the ability to manage arbitrary addresses (because an address database can never be perfectly up to date), the ability to use external authentication systems, and the ability to define an external website for people who want to manage registrations outside Mobilizon.

They were also the occasion for bug hunting and improvements to the Mobilizon API, paving the way for one of the most eagerly awaited features of v4 (yes, the teasing is unsustainable □).
What’s new in Mobilizon v4?

We’ve done it! Version 4 is finally here! And we’re very proud of the new features it brings!

Private Announcements and Conversations

Event organisers can now send private announcements to attendees. This has been a long awaited feature!

Group or event administrators or moderators can now contact people registered in a group or event directly. You can then write to all these people, or select sub-groups, for example only those who have confirmed their attendance, or conversely those who have not confirmed (or declined). It’s even possible to contact people who have registered without creating a Mobilizon account. This opens up some very interesting possibilities, such as the possibility of communicating important information: a change of location or date, for example.

Please note that this is an announcement system and registrants cannot reply (although moderators can add messages). This is not a forum, but a channel for sharing important information in a more top-down way.
As well as this announcement mechanism, we’ve added a conversation system.

This allows you to contact a group or specific people and chat with them live.

For example, an outsider to an event can contact the group administrator from the event page and exchange messages with them. Think of this conversation system as the « DM » (direct message) or « MP » (private message) system you know from other social platforms.

For those who have a Mastodon account (or equivalent), the magic of Fédivers means that you can even use this conversation feature to send private messages from Mastodon, while the person you are contacting can reply from Mobilizon!
Import and synchronise events from other platforms (Facebook, Meetup, etc.)

Once again, this was one of the most eagerly awaited features of Mobilizon.

But it was also one of the most complicated for us to implement in the software. Because these external platforms (yes, Facebook, we’re looking at you!) are the despots of kingdoms of which you are merely the vassal. If they want to raise the drawbridge over which your data passes, they can do so with the snap of a finger, and there is nothing you or we can do about it.

That’s why we’re announcing this feature as present, BUT with a great deal of reserve and caution.

Nevertheless, we’re excited to introduce this new Mobilizon feature to you!

How does it work?

First of all, please understand that everything that follows takes place... outside of Mobilizon. In an external tool modestly called « Mobilizon Import System » (note that we’ve kept it simple [1]).

From this tool, you’ll be able to connect to your Mobilizon account and define your profiles or groups on which you authorise external platforms (such as Meetup or EventBrite) to post. These profiles and groups then become « Destinations ».

Then, simply go to the page of the event you want to synchronise (e.g. https://www.eventbrite.fr/e/billets-street-art-feminisme-743545834607), copy and paste this address into Mobilizon’s import system, and the event will be imported.

In addition to the classic import, it is also possible (depending on the platform) to set up the synchronisation of one or more events. Once synchronised, the new events will be published on your selected Mobilizon profile/group. Event updates on the source (for example, if you change the description on Meetup) will automatically update the event republished on Mobilizon (note that deletions are not currently handled).

Important note: iCal (.ics) event feeds are supported! This means you can have events in Framagenda (or Google Calendar, we won’t judge you (too much)) and
synchronise them in Mobilizon! Nice, isn’t it?

In addition to the iCal format, the platforms currently supported are Eventbrite, Meetup...

Yes, we can see you now, screaming in your head:

« What about Facebook? ¼ «

So Facebook, « It’s complicated » ©

We did all the work on our end and... it works (Yaaaaaaaaaay! ¼)... but only with our « App Developer » account (Oooooooohhh! ¼).

We still have to go through several validation steps, and... we have absolutely no hand in it. It’s Facebook’s kingdom, so Facebook decides. Maybe it’ll work for 5 years, 5 months, 5 days. Maybe it won’t work at all. ¼

Technically, another feature - reserved for developers - that we’ve added is the ability to add « webhooks », which are internal calls that can also act as « destinations » for sources. Events can then be sent to these webhooks, which will do... well, whatever you want them to do! This might be useful for our friends at Transiscope, for example, so that their tool can also import events from other platforms.
The « Mobilizon Import System » was deliberately developed outside the Mobilizon core. It is therefore a separate piece of software. In fact, we think that this software is likely to need a lot of modifications (for example, to correct bugs or to add new platforms such as Démosphère or Agenda Militant) and that there might be an interest in hosting this application outside Mobilizon instances (for example, to share functionality between several instances, or to manage the legal risks imposed on us by third party platforms). So we’ve made it a separate software project, but of course free and self-hosting.

Other Mobilizon v4 improvements

Don’t go away! We’ve got more great features to share with you!

First of all, we’ve improved compatibility for tracking other federated event instances (one of the most interesting projects is « Event Federation for WordPress», which would eventually allow the famous WordPress website/blog engine to be used as an event platform. We talked to the people coordinating this project to share our experiences and incorporated their requests in the form of developments in Mobilizon (which they confirmed in their latest blog post).

Secondly, we have improved the formatting of event descriptions when exporting events and in ICS feeds (which now take into account the status « tentative »,
« confirmed » or « cancelled »).

Also, we changed email registration confirmations for attendees without an account to now include an unsubscribe link.

Finally, Mobilizon is now available on more operating systems and architectures (Debian, Ubuntu, Fedora, arm64, etc.).

Mission accomplished, Framasoft is ready to pass the baton!

Framasoft had announced in March 2023 in the Mobilizon roadmap that this v4 would be the last we would develop.

We still strongly believe in the future of this project.

But we’ve reached our goal: we announced an intention and a vision in 2018 and... we’ve fulfilled our mission!

Of course, software is far from bug-free. But anyone involved in software development knows that there will always be things to fix, features to add... It’s never-ending. And we sincerely believe that it’s also important to be able to step back, say to yourself that you’ve kept your commitment, and hand over a project.

The Framasoft team is small: Mobilizon is a salaried developer (yes, only one!), and not even full-time... He is certainly supported by the rest of the association in terms of communication, project management, fundraising, etc. But after five
years, we consider the project a success. But after 5 years, we feel that Mobilizon is stable enough for him to redirect his energy and skills to other projects and missions.

We’re not putting Mobilizon on the shelf!

First of all, Framasoft is committed to maintain this v4 for the next few months (and as long as we can), especially in case of security updates or blocking bugs. We’ll also maintain our public, French-language forum https://mobilizon.fr.

But we won’t be developing any new features.

Secondly, another team (the Kaihuri association, well known to the Mobilizon community as the maintainers of the Keskonfai instance) already has a take-over and contribution project to improve Mobilizon’s handling. They present their project and their ambitions on our forum dedicated to Mobilizon: don’t hesitate to give them your feedback and encouragement (or disagreement, for that matter), but also your desire and ability to contribute.

So, if the community doesn’t mind, in the next few weeks we’ll be handing over all the Mobilizon « keys » to this community (they already have maintainer access to the source code repository, but this also applies to the joinmobilizon.org, mobilizon.org, search.joinmobilizon.org websites, tools, social media accounts, etc.).

Mobilizon seems to have a bright future ahead!
For five years, thanks to your donations, Rose has been training to fight Faceghoul – Illustration by David Revoy – Licence: CC-By 4.0

Five years of Mobilizon, thanks to you (and your donations)!

Although we’ll be handing over the keys to the project in a few weeks time, all the work done throughout 2023 has come at a significant cost.

If you like this version 4, and it’s possible for you to do so, we encourage you to support Framasoft as a token of our gratitude for all the work we’ve done this year, but also for honouring our original moral contract: to provide you with a free, federated alternative to Facebook groups and events.

Once again this year we need you, your support, your sharing, to help us regain ground on the toxic GAFAM web and multiply ethical digital spaces.

So we’ve asked David Revoy to help us present this on our « Support Framasoft » page, which we invite you to visit (because it’s beautiful) and above all to share as widely as possible:
If we are to balance our budget for 2024, we have five weeks to raise €162,716: we can’t do it without your help!

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