Federating Mobilizon: one more step towards defacebooked events

There is a new development to our future alternative to Facebook: different Mobilizon installs can now federate with each other.

Why is that important? Why is this a key element? How can this make Mobilizon a fundamentally emancipatory tool? We will try to explain all this below.

This article is a part of « Contributopia’s travel journals ». From October to December of 2019, we will assess our many (donations-founded) actions, which are tax-deductible for French taxpayers. Donate here if you can.

If you are not (yet) familiar with our Mobilizon project….

Mobilizon was born from our desire to offer an alternative to Facebook events for marches to protect our climate and other citizen gatherings. Once the first version completed (by summer 2020 if all goes well!), Mobilizon will be a software that groups, structures or collectives can install on their server, to create their own event platform website. Who can do the most can do the least: if Mobilizon is designed to organize a large pacifist march, it will be easy to manage the birthday of the youngest one !
We worked with designers to have a strong vision for the software. Interviewing activists at various levels of civil society has allowed us to better design Mobilizon. It should not only serve as an alternative to Facebook events, but also to Facebook groups (to gather, communicate together, organize) and Facebook pages (to publish a presentation, however brief, of its collective, its place, its association... and organized events).
We also understood that Mobilizon had to move away from the Facebook-style social features that exploit our ego and motor the attention economy. In the Mobilizon we designed, there are no likes, incentives to create the narrative of your life on a wall, and no echo chambers to these frustrating dialogues where everyone shouts and no one listens.

In June 2019, we presented this project, asking you to finance it if you wanted us to develop it. With more than €58,000 raised, it’s obvious that you shared our enthusiasm for Mobilizon! In October 2019, we released a first beta version, with basic functionalities. We want to show, in all transparency, the evolution of Mobilizon’s development, with an always-up-to-date demo on test.mobilizon.org.
A new step forward: Mobilizon is now federated!

The federation is one of the most important aspects of the Mobilizon software. It is already good that University X can install Mobilizon on its servers, and create its instance of Mobilizon (let’s call it « MobilizedCollege.net »). But if
Jaimie has created their account on UniMobilize.org, the body of their union, how can they register to the « March for Student Loans Awareness » event that was published on MobilizedCollege.net?

Integrating the ActivityPub protocol into the Mobilizon software allows each installation of each instance of the Mobilizon software to talk and federate with each other. Thus, in our example, MobilizedCollege.net and UniMobilize.org can choose to federate, i.e. share their information and interact together.

Mobilizon federated, illustrated by David Revoy (CC-By)

Rather than creating a giant platform with a single entrance door (facebook.com, meetup.com, etc.), we create a diversity of entrance doors that can be linked together, while keeping each one its own specificity. Since the second beta update, Mobilizon has made it possible to federate events, comments and participations. Most of the future features we will add in the coming months will also be federated, when appropriate.
For people who administer an instance, there is an interface to manage which instances you are subscribed to and which instances have subscribed to you.

You can already see the effects of this federation on our demo instance test.mobilizon.org. Note that the events there are fake (made for tests purposes), so if you try and install a Mobilizon instance on your server, it is better not to federate with this demo instance!

**Other new features of the last two months**

These last two months of development have mainly been devoted to the Federation aspect of Mobilizon. However, other improvements have also been made to the software.

One of the most visible is the addition of comments below events. Right now, this tool is basic: you can comment on an event, and respond to a comment. It is not intended to be a social tool (with likes, etc.), just a practical one.
Many addresses sources (to geolocate the address you type when entering the event location) have also been added to Mobilizon. We are currently thinking about how to improve this point without overloading our friends in the free-libre community such as OpenStreetMap. Today, we are still relying on OSM’s Nominatim server, pending the delivery of our own server!

Many bugs have been fixed since the October beta release. These corrections, combined with many practical and aesthetic improvements, are partly due to your feedback and contributions on our forum: thank you! If you have any comments about Mobilizon, if you spot anything on test.mobilizon.org, feel free to create a topic on our forum, the only place where we read all your feedback.
The road is long, but the path is set

Let’s be clear: Mobilizon is not (yet) ready to host your groups and events. We are already seeing pioneers who are tinkering with an installation on their servers (congratulations and thanks to you), it’s cool, really… But until we have released version 1, please consider that the software is not ready.

Also, there is no point in suggesting new features, we will not be able to add anything to what was planned during the fundraising last June. We would like to, but we simply do not have the human resources to meet all expectations. Our small non-profit manages many projects, and we must accept our limits to achieve our goals without burning out.
Click to join our forum, and give us your feedback on Mobilizion

For the next few months, the path is set:

- Process your feedback from this beta version and get some rest by the end of the year;
- Work on pages and groups (with messaging, moderation, organizational tools) in the first quarter of 2020;
- Have time for patches, possible delays and finishes that stabilize and document the software, for its release planned before the summer of 2020.
Framasoft remains Mobilized, see you this summer!

Adding federation functionality to Mobilizon is a key step. We will continue to keep you informed of such progress on this blog, and to demonstrate it on the test.mobilizon.org website.

In the meantime, we hope that this new milestone will inspire you as much as we do on the future of Mobilizon, do not hesitate to give us your feedback on our forum and see you in June 2020... to Mobilize together!

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