

Social Federation Standards: The Key to the Next Social Web

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As the social web continues to grow, the desire to interconnect and aggregate data produced by these systems grows as well. We are seeing specifications, such as ActivityStreams, emerge as a mechanism for normalizing the representation of social data across various providers; however, the ability to describe data in a common way is only one step in the process of supporting truly interconnected systems. To reach a fully federated social web, we must create a new set of interoperability standards that support federation of social identity, item visibility and processing rules.

It is my position that the W3C Social Working Group should create a new federation standard that expands on the groundwork laid by ActivityStreams and OpenSocial to serve as the basis for interoperability between social systems. Specifically, the standard should be organized to address the three aforementioned issues in social federation.

Prior attempts at constructing a federated social web have been too unfocused and attempted to solve the entire social web, rather than deliver a concise and usable standard focused on interoperability between social systems. Additionally, most standards have not addressed the three core issues in a sufficiently substantial manner as to truly open the door to federation. For instance, the definition of a resolvable identity and social graph is key for the success of any social data processor. OpenSocial does nothing other than briefly address this in an attempt to gain more widespread adoption. However, the landscape has changed significantly since OpenSocial defined its social graph and person model. We now have years of market experience in building social systems. This experience and the growing business adoption give a window of opportunity to close this gap via a true standard.

The same issues apply for visibility trimming and business rule syndication. Within the enterprise, source systems require a mechanism for delegating processing of social data to trusted intermediaries that will respect the visibility and business rules of the source system. Outside of the enterprise, B2B systems require similar mechanisms to support interoperability. With the growing number of social systems within the enterprise, data formats such as ActivityStreams, and this proposed standard, allow for a new level of integration across these systems. When combined with a web component model and embedded experiences, enterprises are able to drastically simplify their systems integration and drive new generations of engaging IT systems that allow users to fully utilize social business.

In summary, it is clear that the prior approaches to social federation have insufficiently addressed the core issues of social graph, visibility and business rule definition. A new standard is required to provide a solid foundation upon which modern social business systems can interoperate.