Public Broadcasters Are Going Federated — and We're Betting on Both Protocols

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Seven public broadcasters — from Germany, Canada, Belgium, Switzerland, and Australia — are building a shared platform for constructive public dialogue called the Public Spaces Incubator. Our guiding principle is Civility by Design: we want to create digital spaces where respectful, nuanced conversation can thrive, not because we moderate everything into blandness, but because the platform architecture itself encourages better discourse. ZDF Spaces, our MVP, has been in pilot since summer 2025, with full production targeted for March 2027.

What matters to this community is this: we are building federation support into the platform from the start, and we are committed to both ActivityPub and the AT Protocol.

Why both protocols?

We see ActivityPub and AT Protocol not as competitors but as complementary parts of the Open Social Web, each with distinct strengths that serve different aspects of what we are trying to build.

ActivityPub gives us immediate reach into the established Fediverse and interoperability with Mastodon, PeerTube, Pixelfed, and the broader ecosystem. The W3C standard is mature, widely adopted, and its server-to-server model maps naturally onto an infrastructure where multiple public broadcasters each operate their own instance. For a project like ours, where institutional trust and editorial responsibility matter, the instance-level governance model of ActivityPub is a natural fit.

The AT Protocol brings a fundamentally different architecture that solves problems ActivityPub does not. Portable identity through DIDs means users are not locked to any single broadcaster's instance. The publishing-and-indexing model opens up possibilities for custom feed generation and content aggregation that go well beyond what chronological or algorithmic timelines typically offer. We see real potential in Lexicon schemas for defining conversation-specific data types — structured dialogue formats, civility signals, moderation metadata — that could be shared across the Open Social Web. And with the Free our Feeds initiative working to keep AT Protocol governance distributed, we are confident this is infrastructure worth investing in.

Architecture: protocol adapters over protocol wars

Running both protocols in production is not trivial. The federation models are fundamentally different, moderation philosophies diverge, and feature parity across protocols is an illusion. Rather than pretending otherwise, we are building on a modular architecture with protocol adapters. Internally, PSI operates on a shared data model. Protocol-specific translation layers implemented in bridges like fedify.dev handle all external communication, so that a conversation happening on our platform can federate out via ActivityPub, AT Protocol, or both, depending on where the participants are.

This approach also keeps us flexible. If a new protocol emerges or an existing one like nostr evolves significantly, we add another adapter rather than rearchitecting the whole system.

What public broadcasters bring to the Open Social Web

We recognise that public broadcasters entering federated spaces is not without tension. Institutional actors carry weight, and that weight can distort the dynamics of a decentralised ecosystem if wielded carelessly. We take that seriously.

What we do bring is long-term commitment. Public broadcasters are not startups chasing growth metrics or ad revenue. Our mandate is to serve democratic discourse, and that mission aligns directly with what the Open Social Web is trying to build. We are funded to think in decades, not quarters. We can invest in moderation infrastructure, accessibility, and trust and safety tooling at a scale that benefits the broader ecosystem, not just our own platform.

We also bring audiences. Millions of people in Europe and beyond already engage with public broadcasting content every day. Federation gives us a way to meet those audiences in open, interoperable spaces rather than surrendering them to closed platforms.

Where we want to collaborate

We are not building this in isolation and have no interest in doing so. We are keen to connect with others working on federated moderation tooling, cross-protocol identity, conversation-specific data formats, and governance models for institutional participation in decentralised networks. If any of this resonates, we would love to talk.