Losing Signal

by Ploum on 2023-03-09

Warning to my friends : Until further notice, consider I'm not receiving your Signal messages.

Signal, the messaging system, published a blog post on how we were all different and they were trying to adapt to those differences. Signal was for everyone, told the title. Ironically, that very same day, I've lost access to my signal account. We are all different, they said. Except myself.

- Signal is for everyone (except me)

What is this difference? I'm not sure but it seems that not having a standard Android phone with Google Play services play a huge part.

How I lost access

I'm using an Hisense A5 Android phone. This is one of the very rare phones on the market with an eink screen. While this is not recommended for most users, I like my eink phone: I only need to charge it weekly, it's not distracting, I don't want to use it most of the time. I feel that coloured screens are very aggressive and stressful.

The Hisense A5 comes with proprietary crapware in Chinese and without Google Play Services. That's fine for me. I don't want Google services anyway and I'm happy with installing what I need from Aurora store and F-Droid. For the last three years, it worked for me (with some quirks, of course). Signal worked fine except for notifications that were sometimes delayed. I considered that as a feature: my phone is in do not disturb all the time, I don't want to be interrupted.

On March 7th, I made a backup of my Signal messages and removed the application temporarily as I wanted to quickly try some open source alternatives (signal-foss and molly). Those didn't work, so I reinstalled Signal and asked to restore the backup.

Signal asked for my phone number, warned me that I had no Google Play Services then re-asked for my number then re-warned me. Then asked me to prove that I was a human by solving a captcha.

I hate captcha. I consider the premises of captcha completely broken, stupid and an insult to all the people with disabilities. But those were the worst I had ever seen. I was asked to look on microscopic blurry pictures, obviously generated by AI, and to select only "fast cars" or "cows in their natural habitat" or "t-shirt for dogs" or "people playing soccer".

Now, I've a question for you. Is a car looking like an old Saab fast enough? While a cow on the beach is probably not in its natural habitat, what about a cow between two trees? What if the t-shirts are not "for" dogs but with dogs on them. And what if the drawing on the t-shirt is a mix between a dog and a cat? What if there's a player holding a golf club but hitting a soccer ball? Even with a colour screen, I'm not sure I could answer those. So imagine on an eink one…

Signal is for everyone but you need to answer those idiocy first. It should be noted that I have a very good eyesight. I cannot imagine those with even minor disabilities.

Of course I did try to solve the captcha. But, after each try, I was sent back to the "enter your phone number" step, followed by "no Google services warning" then… "too many attempts for this number, please wait for four hours before retrying".

I have no idea if my answers were bad or if there's a bug where the captcha assumes Google Play Services. I've tried with the APK official version and the Google Play Store version (through Aurora), they all fail similarly. In three days, I've managed twice to pass the captcha and receive an SMS with a confirmation code. But, both times, the code was rejected, which is incomprehensible. Also, I learned that I could only read the code from the notification because opening the SMS app reinitialised Signal to the "enter your number" step, before the captcha.

Centralisation is about rejection of differences

What is interesting with corporatish marketing blog posts is how they usually say the exact opposite of what they mean. Signal blog post about differences is exactly that. They acknowledge the fact that there's no way a single centralised authority could account for all the differences in the world. Then proceed to say they will do.

There's only one way for a centralised service to become universal: impose your vision as a new universal standard. Create a new norm and threat every divergence as a dangerous dissidence. That's what Facebook and Google did, on purpose. Pretending to embrace differences is only a way to reject the differences you don't explicitly agree.

Interestingly, Signal is only realising now that they have no choice but do the same. At first, Signal was only a niche. A centralised niche is not a real problem because, by definition, your users share a common background. You adapt to them. But as soon as you outgrew your initial niche, you are forced to become the villain you fought earlier.

Moxie Marlinspike, Signal's founder, is a brilliant cryptographer. Because he was a cryptographer, he did what he found interesting. He completely rejected any idea of federation/decentralisation because it was not interesting for him. Because he thought he could solve the problems of world with cryptography only ("when you have a hammer…").

He now must face that his decision has led to a situation where the world-freeing tool he built is publishing facebookish blog post about "differences" while locking out users who do not comply with his norm.

Like Larry Page and Serguei Brin before him, Moxie Marlinspike built the oppression tool he was initially trying to fight (we have to credit Bill Gates, Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg for being creepy psycho craving for power and money since the beginning. At least, they didn't betray anything and kept following their own ideals).

That's the reason why email is still the only universal Internet communication tool. Why, despites its hurdles, federation is a thing. Because there is no way to understand let alone accept all variations. There's a world of difference between Gmail interface and Neomutt. Yet, one allows you to communicate with someone using the other. Centralisation is, by its very definition, finding the minority and telling them "you don't count". "Follow the norms we impose or disappear!"

It is really about Google's services after all…

One problem I have with my Hisense A5 is that my banking application doesn't work on it, expecting Google Play Services.

To solve that issue, I keep in a drawer an old Android phone without sim card, with a cracked screen, a faulty charging port and a bad battery. When the bills-to-pay stack grows too much, I plug that phone in the charger, fiddle with it until the phone start, launch the banking app, pay the bills, put that phone back in the drawer.

After fiddling for two days with Signal on my eink phone, I decided to try on that old phone. I installed Signal, asked to connect to my account. There was no captcha, no hassle. I immediately received the SMS with the code (on the Hisense eink phone) and could connect to my Signal account (losing all my history as I didn't transfer the backup).

At least, that will allow me to answer my contact that they should not contact me on Signal anymore. UPDATE: signal account was unexpectedly disconnected, telling me signal was used on another phone.

Signal automatically trusted a phone without sim card because it was somewhat connected to Google. But cannot trust a phone where it has been installed for the last

three years and which is connected to the related phone number. Signal vision of the world can thus be summarised as: "We fight for your privacy as long as you agree to be spied on by Google."

Centralisation is about losing hope

One thing I've learned about centralised Internet services is that you can abandon all hopes of being helped.

There's no way Signal support could help me or answer me. The problem is deep into their belief, into the model of the world they maintain. They want to promote differences as long as those differences are split between Apple and Google. They probably have no power to make an exception for an account. They could only tell me that "my phone is not supported". To solve my problem, they should probably reconsider how the whole application is built.

Technically, this specific problem is new. Three years ago, I had no problem installing Signal on my phone and no captcha to solve. But once you sign up for a centralised service, you are tied for all the future problems. That's the deal. I was similarly locked out from my Whatsapp account because I didn't accept a new contract then forgot to open the app for several months (I was disconnected at the time).

- [Le suicide de mon compte Whatsapp](#)

That's what I like so much about federated protocols (email, fediverse). I can choose a provider where I know I will have someone in front of me in case I have a problem. Either because I'm a customer paying the expensive tiers for quick support (Protonmail) or because I trust the philosophy and donate appropriately (my Mastodon server is hosted by La Quadrature du Net, I trust that team). I also know that I can easily migrate to another provider as soon as I want (considering mailbox.org instead of protonmail).

As a chat tool, Signal is better than many other. But it's centralised. And, sooner or later, a centralised service faces you with a choice: either you comply with a rule you don't agree, either you lose everything.

With every centralised service, the question is not if it will ever happen. The question is "when".

Either you conform to the norm, either you are too different to have your existence acknowledges.

That's also why I've always fought for the right to differences, why I've always been utterly frightened by "normalisation". Because I know nobody is immune. Think about it:

I'm a white male, cis-gendered, married with children, with a good education, a good situation and no trauma, no disability. I'm mostly playing life with the "easy" setting.

I'm sure lots of reaction to this post will be about how I made mistakes by "trying signal-foss" or by "using a completely weird and non-standard phone".

That's exactly the point I'm trying to prove.

I've suddenly been excluded from all the conversations with my friends because I very slightly but unacceptably deviated from the norm.

Because, three years ago, I thought having a black and white screen on my own phone was more comfortable for my eyes.

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