

Blog Post for the Oxford Internet Institute Blog,
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How social media interoperability could restore user choice

Social networking interoperability is a leading policy proposal that gives users a real choice of platform providers. New evidence shows it only works if regulators get the specifics right.

From locked-in to free to leave: The case for digital platform interoperability

Have you ever wondered why everyone uses the same handful of social networks? You may not love X, Facebook, Instagram, or LinkedIn, but leaving means abandoning your friends, colleagues, or professional networks. So you stay. This hands power to the platforms: users must accept whatever rules, moderation, and algorithms a provider imposes.

It does not have to work this way. Consider the telephone: you choose Vodafone, your friend chooses O2, and you can still call each other. Or e-mail: a @gmail.com address can write to a @protonmail.com one without difficulty. Economists and regulators name this principle “interoperability”.

Imagine it applied to social media: all your friends are on Instagram, and if Instagram were required to interoperate, you could decide to join a competitor, call it “Freepixel”, and still see, follow, and talk to everyone back on Instagram.

This idea of social media interoperability promises to distribute platforms’ power by re-enabling competitive market forces without sacrificing users’ connectivity. It has gained serious momentum: theoretical economics literature, legal analyses, and government expert reports recommend it.

Accordingly, policymakers have begun to act: the EU's Digital Markets Act has [mandated interoperability](#) for messaging services (e.g., WhatsApp) since 2024 and requires a [periodic review](#) of extending this to social networking. Comparable proposals are also advancing in the U.S. ([Utah](#), [New York](#), [Federal](#)).

Industry-funded think tanks, on the other hand, warn that forcing social media interoperability would create “disproportionate technical, security, and societal risks”. And yet, a crucial ingredient has been missing from the debate: empirical evidence. Would social media interoperability live up to its expectations?

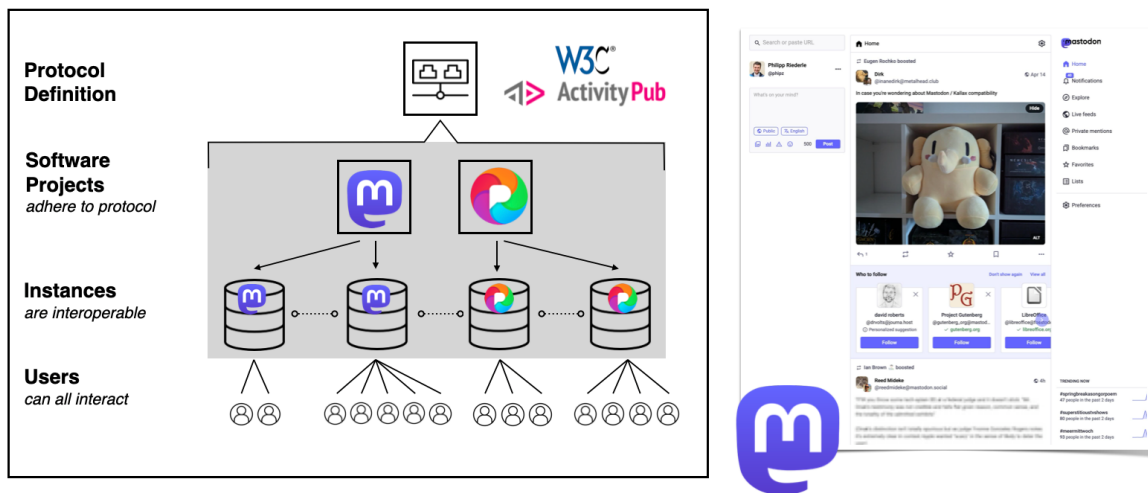
How do you research a policy that isn’t implemented?

A reason for this evidence gap is that no mainstream digital platform has been required to interoperate yet. Expectations have instead been extrapolated from experiences in older

network markets like telephone and email systems. Whether and how those lessons carry over to social media is exactly the open question.

My research looked for corners of the internet where social media interoperability already operates, and where its practical effects can be observed. One such space is the [Fediverse](#) with its [Mastodon](#) software: it enables an interoperable, Twitter-like microblogging network with roughly 740,000 active users. Those users are spread across more than 8,000 independent providers, called "instances", that interconnect through a shared [protocol](#). The arrangement is what specialists call “horizontal interoperability” in a “federated” model: each instance is a self-contained service, much like Vodafone or O2, yet they exchange data with one another. You sign up with exactly one instance, and you can then interact with anyone on any other.

The Empirical Case: Mastodon



Unlike on conventional platforms, where leaving means abandoning everyone, Mastodon lets users switch providers while staying within the same userbase and without losing followers. Mastodon users even post openly about why they are leaving and what they are looking for instead.

I collected millions of these posts from across thousands of instances, identified the users who switched, and analysed their reasons and experiences. This revealed how users engage with the option of within-network choice absent from conventional providers.

Three lessons from Mastodon for social media interoperability

My research is among the first to provide empirical evidence on user choice under social media interoperability. I find that it can give users a wide range of provider choice, but that it only delivers on its expectations when it accounts for the specific ways social media differs from earlier interoperable markets.

First, social media interoperability needs to extend beyond interacting with people you already know. In legacy networks, communication was “tie-based”: you contacted specific people, like with a phone call or email — something Mastodon handles well. But, what makes social media specific is what I name “open-network” interactions: discovering strangers’ posts, joining

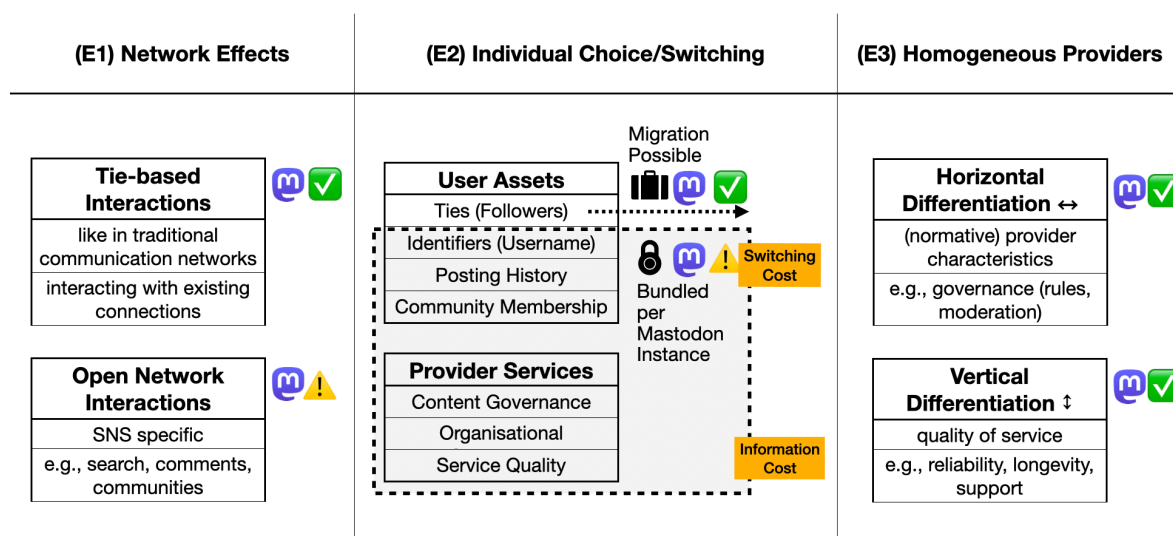
wider conversations, or searching across the whole network. Here, Mastodon's interoperability remains incomplete. Not because it is technically impossible, but because Mastodon is built mostly by volunteer open-source contributors and a [tiny paid team](#). The technical incompleteness was revealing: users moved toward the largest instances, because on smaller ones, they felt like missing out. The lesson for policy and developers is: interoperable social media must support both "tie-based" and "open-network" interactions. Partial openness retains a pull towards larger providers, and the old lock-in quietly returns.

Second, choosing and switching providers is harder when all features come bundled. Interoperability allows you to pick a provider that fits your individual preferences while staying connected to everyone else. You might want a provider hosted in the EU, content moderation aligned with your values, and a specific topical community, all at once. But on Mastodon, you can't mix and match: each provider bundles such "provider services" into one fixed package. Users face high information costs when they are required to find the package that meets all their needs. Switching is possible, but not smooth. By using social media, "user assets" build up: their identity, posts, connections, communities. On Mastodon, only your followers move with you. The need to leave behind the other assets causes high switching costs – a real deterrent to moving. The lesson is: all "user assets" should be easily migratable and "provider services" should be more modular. So that users could, for example, pick a different content moderation service while remaining with the same hosting provider. Bluesky, another interoperable social network with some other technical approaches, shows that such modularity is technically feasible.

Third, interoperability actually allows meaningful differentiation between providers. Some critics warn that the need to follow a standardised technical protocol would make providers indistinguishable. My evidence shows the opposite: providers vary vertically in quality, and users can hold providers accountable by leaving poor performers. They also vary horizontally, such as in differing rulesets, moderation philosophies, governance models, or hosting jurisdictions. This pluralism lets users choose a provider whose governance matches their preferences, something no centralised platform can offer.

Three Lessons from Mastodon for Social Media Interoperability

*checkmarks reflect Mastodon's specific implementation, not interoperability in general.



The specifics make or break the mandate

Social media interoperability can expand user choice, but social platforms aren't just modern telephones. They pose challenges that the experience from legacy networks cannot anticipate. My research highlights three areas specific to social media interoperability: "tie-based" vs "open-network" interactions, "user assets" vs "provider services", and horizontal vs vertical differentiation. These specifics matter for platform designers and policymakers alike. If they are underestimated, regulators may be underprepared for effective enforcement, well-intentioned mandates may fail to deliver, and large platforms will be quick to claim: the effort was misguided.