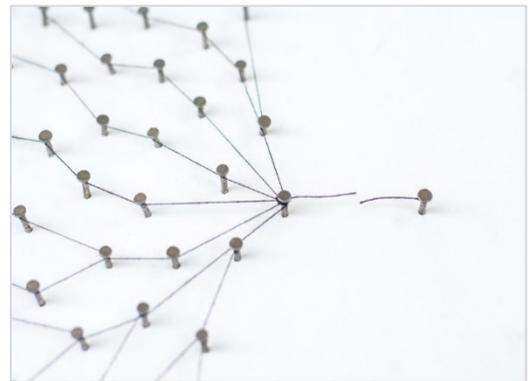


What if social media were open and connected?

Social media platforms are often thought of as open and connected spaces, since they allow users to communicate with a wide range of people and organisations. It seems obvious that to have access to a social network it should be necessary to open an account with the platform, and that on closing the account that access would be lost. However, telephone and email networks do not restrict access to their networks depending on which provider or platform is being used, and there are ways in which social media too could be more open and connected, providing greater connectivity and allowing users to change platform without losing access to the network. This could help foster a more competitive market that is more responsive to challenges such as privacy and disinformation.

The implications of changing provider for telephone, email and social media, three transformative communication services, vary. First, telephones. With both landlines and mobile phones, regardless of the service provider used, it is possible to call friends and family on other networks competing in the market. Any phone, using any service provider, can call any other phone. This means that customers can change provider if they become unhappy with their current provider or want to test the services of a new market entrant. They can even keep the same phone number, so they do not have to tell their contacts to update their phone books. Indeed, their contacts will probably not even notice.



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Just like with phone calls, emails pass freely between accounts managed by different providers. Many people have several accounts, perhaps including a personal account from a commercial provider and a professional account maintained by an employer. Here, a customer who wants to change provider can open a new account elsewhere without losing the ability to email friends and colleagues who still use the original provider. Advanced users who are dissatisfied with what the market has to offer, for whatever reason, can even set up their own domain names and servers and control the whole account themselves. They can still send and receive emails to and from anyone else, with any email address. A change of provider, however, means a change of address, requiring contacts to update their directories.

When it comes to social media profiles, there are many options available, and some people manage several profiles for different aspects of their personal and professional lives. However, social media platforms do not usually offer interconnectivity, so users cannot interact with accounts on a particular social media platform without having an account on it. This also means that the price is high for any customer who decides to leave a platform. They lose access to the network and their contacts and so might no longer receive invitations to events, and might not even realise what they have missed because they cannot see the pictures posted by their erstwhile contacts.

On the markets for telephone, email, internet or electricity services, customers can choose between several companies that provide access to the same open and connected network. There might be a small fee or minor inconvenience involved in changing provider, but the customer is not penalised by losing access to the whole network. Social media platforms, on the other hand, not only provide *access to* a network but, rather, they *are* the network. So the only way to participate in a particular social media network is through an account with the platform itself. Leaving the platform means losing access to that space.

In this sense, social media platforms are less open and less connected than old-fashioned telephone and email networks. As a result, their market is also less competitive. While new entrants to the telephone and email markets can immediately connect their new customers with all other telephone and email users, a

new entrant to the social media market does not have the same luxury. Only platforms that are already large can offer a large network and, since they have full control over access to their network, they continue to attract more users. As large networks grow even larger, the cost of leaving them grows accordingly, and so do the barriers to new market entrants.

With high penalties for leaving platforms and little competition in the market, life is difficult for the discerning customer. Yet, there is a long and growing list of reasons to be judicious when it comes to social media providers. Citizens are increasingly concerned about immediate personal risks related to [privacy](#), [cyberbullying](#), [depression](#) and [addiction](#), as well as wider social issues such as [taxation](#), [fake news](#) and [political interference](#). Perhaps a more competitive market would foster more robust responses to these problems. One way of fostering a healthier ecosystem of social media platforms might be to encourage the emergence of an open model for social media.

Potential impacts and developments

An open model for social media would have two separate features, open accounts and open platforms. Open accounts are just like standalone social media profiles, so they would include basic personal details as well as contacts with other accounts – using their email, phone number or other identifiers – and familiar content such as status updates, events, photos and videos. They would also specify the user's preferences for how content could be shared with other accounts and how information from the network should be presented and communicated to them. These open accounts could be used with any open platform.

Open platforms would host and maintain these accounts. They would be responsible for managing communications with other platforms and accounts, protecting the user's privacy, and presenting the user with information from the whole network – including contacts from all of the open accounts on all of the other open platforms – according to the user's preferences. Open platforms could be funded by advertising revenue, subscriptions, donations, endowments, the state or some mixture of sources. They could offer specialist features and services catering for different users' needs and preferences. Advanced users could set up their own servers and manage their own accounts and their relationships with the network. They could pay for this themselves, and offset the cost by charging advertisers to use their data. With such an open model, there would be no contradiction in a social media platform that has only one user, because it could still connect with any other open account on any other open platform.

The key to this is developing open standards that describe how open accounts and open platforms should communicate with each other, such as W3C's [social web](#). The open standard should have full connectivity and portability so that any account on any platform that complies with the standard can connect with any other account on any other open platform. This means that users could change platforms without losing access to the network. In this way, if they felt that their current social media platform was untrustworthy or unethical, they could leave it and join another without missing invitations to events. En masse, such behaviour could help foster a competitive market that could respond to the immediate personal risks and wider social problems posed by social media. Users who already had accounts on closed social media platforms that did not comply with the open model could download a readable copy of all their data and convert it into an open account format, which they could then use with any open platform.

Anticipatory policy making

Several EU policies are already encouraging the portability of social media accounts, as well as the development of open standards. For example, Article 20 of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) gives citizens [the right to obtain readable, portable copies of data](#) about them that is held by their social media platforms. This could help discerning users to change platform if they are dissatisfied. EU procurement strategy also supports [open source](#) and [open standards](#). Further initiatives supporting user control and open standards, combined with consumer demand for a new approach, could lead to the emergence of a genuinely open and connected model for social media.