

Musk is not our project. Here is another one.

French Digital Council's Newsletter

November 15, 2024

Since last October 25, the Council has stopped posting on X. We have been on Mastodon for over a year now, and we are comfortable there. Since Donald Trump's election, various calls to leave X have been made, and others have simply taken and announced this decision. Notably, David Chavalarias encouraged people on France Inter to get ready to depart by January 20 and invited the media to join this movement. On the same day, The Guardian and La Vanguardia announced their departure from Twitter. Also noteworthy was François Saltiel's column encouraging migration to Bluesky, a network frequently cited for the choice it offers users regarding algorithmic recommendations and content moderation. Since Donald Trump's victory, the number of users on this social network has surged, marking a similar trend to when Elon Musk acquired Twitter.

Being Free to Leave: Making Portability and Interoperability Realities

Despite everything, leaving a social network is very challenging. We can all observe what hinders our escape to less hostile environments: the lack of portability or interoperability, which makes us suffer the full force of network effects.

In the case of the Council, we lose a potential communication channel with more than 60,000 subscribers. This is precisely why we have continuously advocated for effective economic regulation. If we all want to regain an audience quantitatively comparable, at least in appearance, the portability as currently regulated is incomplete. Incomplete because it entirely relies on the user and the goodwill of the company one wishes to leave. However, a good portability process must be painless for the user. This is why, in telecommunications, a process was created with no costs of any kind for the user. Portability is based on the destination company. And, ultimately, it is the companies' responsibility to ensure that nothing is lost along the way. But for this to happen, you need a regulator whose mission is to ensure things work smoothly. This is not at all the case today for social networks. This results in a weakening of democracy. Thus, we see how regulation is the extension of democracy and a means of ensuring its defense.

➔ **The deepening of data portability—contacts, social graphs, histories, preferences, etc.—should be a priority for the European Commission in implementing the Digital Markets Act as dominant social networks shift into a potentially uncontrollable political environment. Alongside and in support of this framework, let us encourage the deployment of portability tools. Some already exist, while others still need to be developed.**

More broadly, what we must strive for in Europe is the defense of a world of open protocols. To borrow Henri Verdier's terms applied to commons, this European path is the "first path" and must remain so. It is the path of the ActivityPub interoperability protocol, deployed by the W3C, which allows the Fediverse to exist as a decentralized network. This interoperability will also be what enables us to avoid losses when leaving a social network.

➔ **The interoperability of social networks is only mentioned as a possibility in the European Digital Markets Act. It must absolutely be addressed now to allow the free flow of information and users between social networks without us suffering network effects.**

Before delving into the issue of opening up social networks, let's clarify one thing regarding the Council, as with many other public institutions likely, and which goes far beyond the case of X. By using dominant social networks, including LinkedIn, which has become almost indispensable for professional purposes, we submit ourselves to a game we cannot win. We let our modes of expression, posting schedules, and incentives to pay for better visibility be dictated to us. This we refuse. Consequently, out of tens of thousands of followers, the actual number of views is significantly limited. Examining this ratio could be insightful to understand what is truly lost when ceasing to post on one platform or another.

Opening Social Networks and Breaking Free from the Attention Economy

Beyond portability and interoperability, other structural solutions must be proposed to address the shortcomings of social networks. These solutions focus on the technical and economic architecture, which makes today's dominant social networks inherently toxic—firstly due to their economic model, and secondly due to their technical functionality and interfaces. A conclusion, perhaps too rapid for some, but one that nevertheless encapsulates the situation, is that there is no horizon for non-toxic social networks in the commercial sphere unless we commit to curbing the contamination of content by the attention economy.

To combat this, we have consistently advocated for dismantling the monopoly social networks hold over their functionalities, starting with recommendation and moderation features. But it is also about the ability to delete, at the very least, all one's subscriptions (see Ethan Zuckerman's lawsuit against Meta), to choose other applications to access these networks (as on Mastodon), to have better tools for searching content and people (currently unavailable), less polarizing architectures (e.g., in discussion rooms), and so on. The solutions are numerous, well-known, and unfortunately underutilized. What is disheartening is that the proposal to give users more choices is being co-opted by the "2025 Project" of the think tank The Heritage Foundation, which has the Republican Party's ear and likely the incoming administration's. While they propose empowering users in their online practices, this is framed as liberation from the yoke of censorship—a completely fallacious argument that cannot be equated with the Council's objectives. However, in her written response to one of the questions posed to her, Henna Virkkunen, the designated commissioner for digital affairs, expressed her wish "to give consumers the choice and the ability to regain control in an environment where they feel large companies are too powerful" (p.11). This perspective could be worth supporting.

→ Forcing the opening of social networks to transform them into decentralized structures is a possible course of action that the European Commission can implement through remedies under the Digital Services Act. It can also aim for this horizon in 2026 with the revision of the Digital Markets Act. This is a proposal we have detailed at the Council in a note advocating for cultivating the richness of social networks, which was taken up by the États Généraux de l'Information (General Assembly on Information).

Deploying Alternatives to Big Tech

But we must act much faster and on other fronts. We know well that regulation is not everything. That much is clear. And here too, we have many tools at our disposal. The American election once again confirms the message we have always conveyed, which has not been fully absorbed into the general discourse: we cannot entrust our democratic space to Big Tech. Any project that relies on their existence without taking control of the services they offer or constructing alternatives is a project of democratic surrender. Any initiative that seeks to mimic Big Tech's policies by chasing financial power, centralization, and user lock-in is a democratic offense. Alternatives exist. They may seem insufficient, incomplete, or even unusable. So be it. These critiques point us toward the path we must follow in the next two years.

Even at the French level, many of the technological building blocks already exist, at least in the service layer. Thanks to the efforts of the Interministerial Directorate for Digital Affairs, the Digital Directorate for Education, Inria, CNRS, ANCT, IGN, French research institutions, and countless entrepreneurs or activists, we already have significant assets at hand. These include highly skilled individuals who, sometimes working in small teams, achieve remarkable results. These professionals know how to deploy quality software at very low costs compared to the expenses incurred by companies that lock us into their systems. They know how to forge connections with European partners and communities advocating for open-source software. To date, the public alternative to private messaging services, now fully functional, has cost "2.2 million euros, or 1.2 euros per active service user." Today, videos from the National Education Academies can be hosted within the Fediverse, we can operate with free web conferencing software, and so on. Yes, further development will undoubtedly be needed to make these tools even more seamless and functional. Yes, costs will rise. But again, this direction—far less expensive—is where we must invest more than ever if we are to secure our freedom.

This issue becomes even more pressing as discussions arise around following the "Draghi Report" on European competitiveness, which involves investing hundreds of billions of euros in superstructures. It is worth remembering that we can also pursue the path of autonomy, freedom, cooperation, sharing, efficiency, respect for planetary resources, decentralization, and democratization. In short, we have a strategic and democratic autonomy project within reach, potentially capitalizing on the achievements of already very active communities. To those who prematurely dismiss us as naive, this open software alternative, supported by state financial and personal investment, is, in fact, the voice of reason in a particularly unstable international context and amid budgetary constraints in many states. For those who argue that this path would leave us vulnerable to foreign dominance, one need only look at the current situation to conclude that it is hard to imagine things getting worse. The solution lies within the open European software ecosystem.

→ A strong commitment, of a relatively modest amount compared to other proposed investments, should be allocated to scaling up all our open tools, whether already supported by the public sector or not. This would enable us to offer viable alternatives to the rest of the world and fulfill the original purpose of the European Union. As Clara Chappaz stated this week, we have another path ahead of us—one driven by frugality and grounded in public research.

Beyond the Digital Realm: Rethinking the Media Landscape

But the solutions to democratic challenges extend far, far beyond technological fixes. Our democratic future is not just played out on social networks, which have become little more than extensions of mediocracy and the commodification of our identities. It also lies in the broader informational landscape, which is similarly susceptible to toxic dynamics, particularly in terms of the spread of misinformation. This was eloquently articulated by David Chavalarias and Aurélie Jean on France Inter's morning show this week. It is also a recurring theme in the book *Network Propaganda* by Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts (Oxford Academics, 2018), as well as in articles by Sylvain Bourmeau and op-eds by Claire Sécaïl. The problem is not personal but structural. Allowing information to fall prey to the attention economy necessarily affects how it is treated and impacts public services as well. Bernard Stiegler wrote about this nearly 20 years ago. Consequently, we are subjected to a massive fragmentation of who we are and who we can be, both individually and collectively.

Amid this turmoil, we are fortunate to have certain media outlets and journalists who stay the course. We must cherish them. This is all the more crucial in a context where AI tools are proliferating, feeding on media content without compensation and further precarizing this ecosystem, leading to an increased race for funding and virality. In this regard, let us recall that bilateral agreements, as some editorial teams worldwide have decided to conclude with AI companies, cannot be the way forward. We lack sufficient transparency regarding the value such content provides to these systems and clarity about the sustainability of such agreements.

➔ Looking to the future, we must question the role of advertising in the broader media environment and ensure the negotiation power and unity of information stakeholders in the age of AI, as we have advocated here and as the working group on technological innovations of the États Généraux de l'Information has suggested.

Focusing on Proximity and Strengthening Social Connections

But more broadly, beyond the media landscape, these transformations can only occur effectively if we enrich our social relationships. To guide us in this direction, the Cevipof Political Trust Barometer remains illuminating. There are three entities in which the French have the least trust: the media, political personnel, and social networks. At the same time, there is one thing they trust: proximity—whether it's local artisans or municipal officials. Additionally, one

of the most trusted domains is science. Finally, 83% of the French cherish democracy and wish to see it enriched (p.70 onwards), even though, as confirmed by Ipsos, they are generally dissatisfied with how it currently operates. Furthermore, the latest study published by the Fondation Jean Jaurès suggests that in combating disinformation, the delivery method of a message may matter more than anything else. This is yet another confirmation of the adage that "the medium is the message". Taking these elements together, it seems essential to direct the enrichment of our democratic and informational horizons toward ever more proximity—even to the point of bringing democracy out of institutions, extracting it from the attention economy, and embedding it into our daily lives.

As announcements of budget cuts threaten actors in digital inclusion and mediation, let us remember that these structures currently alleviate public isolation and address the raw emotions we have encountered on the ground throughout our Itinéraires Numériques initiative. Our relationship with digital technology is intimate and emotional, even sensitive. To address it collectively, it requires more than technical or economic perspectives viewed from a distance. It necessitates creating proximate spaces and times for attentive listening and multiplying exchanges. Continuing the policies of inclusion pursued thus far requires fostering a shared understanding of the stakes and impacts of these technologies on our daily lives and society to ensure both individual and collective agency and freedom of choice in our relationship with digital technology.

➡ Our democratic crisis will find renewed momentum in empowering individuals capable of facilitating knowledge building within local collectives. Our future lies not in gigantism but in solidarity and attentiveness to one another. This foundation will allow us to build a democratically connected network across the country—a network of learning and knowledge-sharing, making us more "resilient". Café IA serves this vision with the guiding principle that the more pervasive technology becomes, the richer our social connections must be.