Interoperability Rant
Originally posted on Facebook on October 2020

I'm not one to typically post or use Facebook very much, even though a lot of my friends are on it, and many groups have valuable discussions - why?

For the same reason I can't stand Twitter. Because the way I'm forced to interact with the platform is awful - all we have is a crippled UI that chooses what to show you and attempts to curtail any kind of thoughtful discussion in order to show you the next bit of distraction. At least the text is not limited to 280 characters (yet).

Imagine that I was not forced to use Facebook's crappy website to interact with it. Imagine it was like email, or IRC, where I could use any client I fancied?

Wow. That'd be so valuable I'd even *pay* for that. But it seems that harvesting data and selling ads while providing a shitty experience is a better business model. That seems to always be the case with the "walled gardens" of the internet: services that do not interoperate with other similar services, and cripple everyone's experience. The list is long: Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Google Hangouts, Apple iMessage, Discord, Snapchat, Instagram...

What would a world where sending a message from Facebook to twitter, between Hangouts and iMessage look like? We cannot even begin to imagine a world where sending a message is as easy as sending an email, one of the last truly open internet protocols - and therefore universally used and useful.

It is an unfortunate reality that the internet service providers went from using mostly open protocols and providing interoperable services in the 1990s to an internet of consolidated walled gardens. Most business models incentives seem to be unfortunately misaligned with an open and interoperable internet.

One path to rectify this and realign business and consumer interests is through legislation. To require internet communication companies to make their services interoperable - by either using an open protocol, like email, or exposing an API, like many already do.

Remember that throughout recent human technological history, first come the new technology, the society sees what good and bad things happen, and then sometimes decides to address the bad things through legislation. In the United States, this is how the FDA came to be (people selling poisonous food and drugs), or the SEC (people cheating each other on financial markets). Now that we've had a chance to appreciate the internet for some 30 years, we can tell some of the good from the bad, and how we might want to address it. And it has become increasingly clear that the walled gardens are having undesirable effects on the internet.

In July 2020 the Electronic Frontier Foundation put out an article titled *A Legislative Path to an Interoperable Internet*[1] which describes ways that this could be remedied. What prompted the article is a regulatory bill introduced in the US senate: S. 2658, the ACCESS Act of 2019. You can read the full bill text and see it's status revisions on the US congress site[2].

I highly recommend that everyone reads it - it is extremely short (2400 words, this rant is 800 words), well written, and probably the single most important piece of technology legislation this millennium. As the bill is right now, it requires communications platforms with 100 million monthly active users in the US to make their services interoperable with other platforms. The bill presumes that platforms using open protocols already (like email) are fine. Facebook and it's messenger platform is likely to be the only one meeting the threshold.

I'm not American, but if you are and you care, I would suggest you to write or call your representative and explain why you support (or not) this bill and similar measures. Remember that as it goes through congress, it can, and most likely will, be heavily edited or gutted to fit the many competing interests whispering in their ears. If you think the bill is good as is, tell them that!

Personally, I think the bill is perfect, except perhaps for the 100 million monthly active users in the US threshold to start demand compatibility, which I think should be lower. However, the broader the reach of a piece of regulation, the more organized opposition from those being regulated it will gather, and it is possible that this number was carefully chosen to include Facebook and Apple iMessage, and nothing else, for fear the resistance would be too much.

Finally, if you got *really* excited about this stuff, here is a summary of another three regulatory tech bills that are making the rounds in the US congress:
https://docs.google.com/document/d/193zSLS_q3l3uAUtu2-RGpohVdzor2ramfbs70KmZ2QI/edit?usp=sharing

---

[1] https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2020/07/legislative-path-interoperable-internet
[2] https://congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/2658/text