

Digital Policy Hub – Working Paper

Beyond a Canadian Facebook: Interoperable Social Media for Canada

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Bottom Line Up Front

Canada's public square runs on US-centric platforms that Canadians do not govern and cannot easily exit. Regulation cannot fix this dependence while infrastructure remains foreign-owned. This working paper argues that Canada should treat interoperable, open-source social media as digital public infrastructure (DPI) supporting public communication and local governance. Built on open standards such as ActivityPub and the Authenticate Transfer or AT Protocol, these systems demonstrate both the viability of this model and the growing demand. The challenge is sustained stewardship and funding, but Canada has a model in the Canadian Internet Registration Authority (CIRA) that can coordinate shared infrastructure. Building on this model, Canada could invest in interoperable Canadian social media and enable public institutions to operate on open networks rather than remain on US-centric platforms.

Key Points

- **Interoperability reduces lock-in:** Open standards including ActivityPub and the AT Protocol allow platforms to connect without central control, enabling shared DPI across services.
- **Canada is dependent on US-centric platforms, but alternatives exist:** A small number of firms shape how Canadians access news and communicate, limiting national leverage. Projects such as Gander and Mastodon Canada show open-source networks are feasible.
- **Digital sovereignty requires infrastructure autonomy, not just regulation:** Regulation alone cannot resolve dependence or shift underlying power. Without interoperable alternatives, Canadians remain embedded in dominant platforms they do not control.
- **Canada has a stewardship model to build on:** CIRA's management of the .ca domain shows DPI can be governed independently, with reinvestment into public-interest systems supporting long-term sovereignty.

Recommendations

- **Invest in interoperable Canadian social media as DPI:** Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada (ISED) and Canadian Heritage should support open-source platforms built on ActivityPub and the AT Protocol. Rather than building a "Canadian Facebook," Canada should strengthen interoperable, locally governed services. Resilience comes from shared standards, not scale.
- **Enable public institutions to operate on open networks:** The Treasury Board Secretariat (TBS) and Public Safety Canada should ensure federal departments, Crown corporations and public broadcasters operate on interoperable social media built on open standards. Federal institutions should communicate across federated ecosystems, reducing reliance on foreign platforms.
- **Designate a public-interest steward to coordinate support:** The federal government should designate a nonprofit steward, such as CIRA, to administer funding for open-source infrastructure, prioritizing widely used but underfunded systems. Germany's Sovereign Tech Fund provides a proof of concept for this model. A Canadian equivalent, or joint initiative with the European Union, could extend this approach while strengthening digital sovereignty.
- **Align procurement with interoperability and portability:** TBS and ISED should embed open standards and portability requirements into federal procurement policies. Public investment should reduce lock-in, expand choice and strengthen domestic capacity.

Canada's Public Square, Silicon Valley's Keys

A century ago, US President Theodore Roosevelt warned that concentrated economic power produces “crimes of cunning” (Glass 2018). In the digital age, as data has become “the new oil,” such crimes manifest through control over data and the infrastructures that mediate information and political life.¹ Incidents linked to harmful platform dynamics, such as the shooting at Tumbler Ridge in British Columbia, show how US-centric platforms are shaping how Canadians access and act on information, bringing this infrastructural power into clearer view (Hayes and Linley-Mota 2026). Canadians now access information, debate politics and participate in civic life through platforms that Canada can neither govern nor easily exit. The Cambridge Analytica scandal in 2018 made this dynamic visible, showing how platform data can shape political behaviour across borders (Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison 2018).

Canada's information environment is defined by reliance on platforms such as Meta and X, even as trust in these US-centric systems remains low (House of Commons 2025, 4; Statistics Canada 2023). Despite this combination of dependence and declining confidence, Canada has done little to build alternative digital public infrastructures (DPIS), particularly for social media, that would give it more control over how information circulates.

In early 2025, there were renewed calls for economic self-reliance, from tariff tensions to “buy Canadian” initiatives (Stechyson 2025). Yet this movement has not extended to the digital systems shaping the public square, suggesting Canada has been less “elbows up” in practice than it claims. The gap persists as Canada revisits its online harms approach to digital governance, including reconvening Canadian Heritage's expert advisory group (Government of Canada 2026). At the same time, the United States has warned that it will use “every tool at its disposal” to counter platform regulation, raising the prospect of repercussions for Canada (European Commission 2025; Duffy 2026).

Questions about who controls communication infrastructure have shaped Canadian policy for centuries, with US influence embedded from the outset. In 1763, Benjamin Franklin helped organize postal infrastructure in British North America, laying the foundation for what would later become Canada Post (CBC News 2013). By 1932, Prime Minister R. B. Bennett warned that Canada needed “complete Canadian control of broadcasting from Canadian sources” to foster national unity (Craig Baird 2022), a logic that helped justify the creation of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) in 1936 (*ibid.*). In the digital age, the terrain has shifted from postal systems and broadcast towers to platform infrastructure, but the question remains: who controls the systems through which Canadians communicate and participate in public life?

¹ See <https://ico.org.uk/for-the-public/ico-40/data-as-a-commodity/>.

Canada's Digital Dependence on US-Centric Platforms

A 2025 Government of Canada white paper defines digital sovereignty as autonomy over digital assets, services and data, regardless of where technologies are developed or hosted (Government of Canada 2025). EU debates echo this, arguing that “digital autonomy is no longer a luxury; it is a foundation of sovereignty” (Bria, Timmers and Gernone 2025, 13). As AI Minister Evan Solomon puts it, sovereignty is not about isolation but rebalancing power within systems Canada will remain part of (Castaldo and Norman 2025). The question, then, is whether Canada can shape the infrastructure that structures its public life or if it will remain dependent on systems governed elsewhere.

However, caution toward regulating digital platforms is rooted in early internet ideology, which framed government involvement as a threat to openness, innovation and freedom (Barlow 1996). In practice, limited intervention allowed a handful of firms to consolidate control over communication infrastructure (Falkner et al. 2024, 2; Cohen 2025, 3). In Canada, this concentration is evident: 30 million Canadians use Facebook and more than 14 million use X, with Meta products dominating attention and distribution even as public frustration with them grows, as evidenced by more than 20,000 Canadians signing a petition calling for stronger protections (Martin 2025; Bush 2026).² Treating social media as civic infrastructure would align platform design with democratic participation, not just shareholder value (Friedman 1970). For Canada, this means supporting interoperable DPI to create real exit options from dominant foreign platforms, while keeping governance local and plural (Zuckerman 2020a).

Canada has long treated communication systems as infrastructure rather than ordinary commodities, through Canadian content requirements, trade carve-outs and frameworks such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, which affirms governments' right to support domestic cultural industries (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2020). However, that logic has not been applied to social media. A similar principle appears in the Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement's telecommunications chapter, which allows governments to require interconnection and technical interfaces, including interoperability between networks, recognizing the need for public-interest rules beyond market coordination (Government of Canada 2023). The gap is not from a lack of precedent, but rather where it has been applied: Canada has protected broadcasting, culture and telecommunications as exceptional domains, while leaving the platform infrastructure shaping public communication largely outside that tradition.

Canada has limited and contingent control over the platforms that mediate public communication, a reality that becomes most visible when infrastructure fails or its underlying power is exposed (Star 1999). After Prime Minister Justin Trudeau rejected annexation rhetoric from US President Donald Trump, Elon Musk mocked him on X as the “governor” of the 51st state (Zimonjic 2023). And in 2023, X labelled the CBC as

² See <https://you.leadnow.ca/petitions/ban-x-twitter-in-canada>.

“69% government funded,” placing it alongside Russia’s state-funded broadcaster RT (Bamaniya 2023), just two examples illustrating how public communication can be shaped by these platforms beyond Canada’s control.

As confidence in major platforms declines, Canadians are becoming more skeptical of online information (Statistics Canada 2023), and this erosion of trust is beginning to shape institutional behaviour. New Brunswick Premier Susan Holt announced the province would leave X for Bluesky, citing declining trust (Brown 2026), while Halifax voted to do the same (Patil 2025). Other local governments, including the City of Cambridge, Ontario, have followed, often citing transparency and accessibility (City of Cambridge 2025). Political actors are beginning to move as well, with more than a third of Canadian members of parliament now on Bluesky and most actively using the platform (De Angelis and Alexander 2025, 7).

Canada Has Built Before

Canada’s reliance on US digital systems has deep roots, but so do efforts to build alternatives grounded in Canadian priorities. In the 1960s, the United States developed the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network or ARPANET, a government-funded network that became the foundation of the modern internet. Canada’s Science Council proposed a comparable national system, but without sustained funding the project stalled, and Canadian networks were integrated with US systems by 1983 (Moreau 2012). Efforts to build domestic alternatives persisted, including Telidon, a proto-internet in the late 1970s (ibid.), and CBC’s ZeD, which enabled Canadians to share videos before the invention of platforms such as YouTube (McKelvey and Gehl 2022).

Although these initiatives did not take off, Canadian contributions to internet infrastructure persisted: James Gosling created Java, and Rasmus Lerdorf developed PHP, a server-side scripting language that powers roughly 80 percent of websites (Moreau 2012). Canada also built lasting infrastructure through the Canadian Internet Registration Authority (CIRA), founded in the 1990s, which manages the .ca domain and supports more than 3.5 million websites.³ Policy makers at the time of its founding described the domain as a “key public resource” central to Canada’s digital development (Binder 1999).

The .ca domain operates as a non-profit registry with governance shared by its members, rather than as a private platform. Domain holders elect its leadership, embedding accountability into the system and helping sustain trust and long-term adoption. In practice, its governance, in addition to government support, has made it last.

Governing on Borrowed Infrastructure

Efforts to address US-centric social media concentration in Canada have struggled to produce structural reform. The Online Harms Act (Bill C-63), introduced in February 2024 to regulate harmful online content and platform accountability, stalled amid

³ See <https://www.cira.ca/en/>.

disagreements across and within parties and died on the Order Paper following prorogation (Tworek and Tenove 2024). At the same time, US platform companies intensified their lobbying, which rose by 46 percent in 2024 and increasingly targeted Conservative members who strongly opposed the bill (Bannerman et al. 2025, 4). The Online News Act further exposed the limits of Canadian leverage, while requiring large platforms to compensate the sharing of Canadian news.

While Google committed CAD \$100 million annually to support Canadian journalism, Meta blocked credible news links entirely across its platforms altogether (Aiello 2023; Leyland 2025). Yet 70 percent of Facebook users continued to rely on the platform for news even after Canadian journalism could no longer circulate there (Parker et al. 2024, 6), fundamentally reshaping Canada's information environment. For instance, in Regina, the city's most followed "news" source in 2023 became a garbage company's Facebook page masquerading as journalism. Such gaps in credible local news created space for informal and unverified sources that amplified attention-driven content (Whitfield 2024; MacLeod and Johnson 2026). Ottawa is now back at the bargaining table over the Online News Act, with few structural alternatives.

These developments highlight a longstanding dilemma: Canada's reliance on US-centric platforms cannot be solved through regulation alone. In the early twentieth century, *Ottawa Citizen* editor Charles Bowman warned that "government control of broadcasting is the only means by which we can prevent U.S.-domination of the Canadian air" (CraigBaird 2022). His point was simple: when the systems themselves are governed elsewhere, Canadian institutions have limited control, and that problem has not gone away. Individual or institutional exits can send a signal, but they do not change how platforms operate (Paikin 2026, 23:32). Without credible domestic alternatives, Canada continues to operate within systems it does not control. Strengthening that influence over infrastructure is therefore central to digital sovereignty.

A Tale of Two Protocols

As Prime Minister Mark Carney argued at Davos, resilience requires collective investment, not "everyone building their own fortress" (Boynton 2026). For Canada, that means investing in shared public communication infrastructure rather than simply regulating platforms it cannot govern effectively. As the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development notes, when governments fall behind on digital platforms, civic activity shifts to parallel networks outside formal institutions (Mickoleit 2014, 6), a shift already underway in Canada as some institutions leave platforms such as X and experiment with alternatives such as Bluesky.

Interoperable, open-source platforms such as Bluesky offer a practical path forward, helping ensure public institutions remain present in the digital spaces where people already engage (Zuckerman 2020b). In Canada, initiatives such as Elbows Up Digital reflect growing calls for publicly owned infrastructure, emphasizing that "[Canadians] deserve digital infrastructure that they actually own."⁴ Digital sovereignty is not only

⁴ See <https://elbowsupdigital.ca/>.

about infrastructure but who governs it. Decentralized⁵ platforms make it easier to embed Canadian values in governance and in how platforms are moderated. As Aaron Rodericks, a Canadian and Bluesky's head of trust and safety, has noted, Canadian values such as "peace, order and good government" guide his approach (Thompson 2025).

The Canadian government should make interoperability a core principle of social media policy. Open-source platforms allow independently governed networks to interconnect through shared protocols rather than closed systems such as Facebook. Interoperability is not just technical; it shapes how power is distributed across digital systems. Email offers a clear example: shared protocols allow users across services to communicate (LSE Library 2025, 17:11). By contrast, Facebook users cannot take their networks or data elsewhere. Interoperable systems reduce this lock-in, shifting power back toward users and institutions (Doctorow 2023).

Two open-source ecosystems offer a foundation for a Canadian-centric model: Bluesky and the fediverse. The fediverse is a network of independently operated servers (instances) connected through shared open-source standards; platforms such as Mastodon use ActivityPub, allowing users to interact across communities while administrators set moderation rules and manage connections between servers (Woloshyn and Fraser 2023).

Bluesky reflects a related model: built on the AT Protocol, it separates users' accounts from any single provider. In both cases, the result is shared infrastructure rather than systems controlled by a single company. Interoperability becomes a form of governance, shaped through voluntary, consensus-based standards that determine how systems connect, rather than decisions made by a single platform (Yates and Murphy 2022). While these systems can be more complex than centralized platforms, improvements in design and onboarding are beginning to reduce these barriers.

Canadian Projects and International Lessons

This shift is already visible in Canada, where communities are experimenting with interoperable platforms to build more locally grounded spaces while reducing reliance on US platforms. Gander, a Canadian open-source network built on the AT Protocol, was created with this aim, arguing that dominant platforms amplify American discourse while limiting Canadian voices and local context (Norman and Silcoff 2025). The project has attracted support from Canadian entrepreneur and *Dragon's Den* mainstay Arlene Dickinson, who notes that similar models could be replicated by other countries or communities seeking more sovereign digital networks (ibid.).

Related efforts are emerging across the country. Mastodon Canada, the largest Canadian Mastodon instance, has registered nearly 35,000 users since launching in

⁵ Decentralized refers to a system in which control, governance and technical operations are distributed across multiple independent actors rather than concentrated in a single authority. In decentralized digital networks, no single company or institution owns or controls the entire system.

2022.⁶ Canadian politicians, including Senator Paula Simons, have joined the platform, where she has advocated for open-source social media to reduce reliance on US-centric networks. More broadly, a growing number of Canadian-based Mastodon instances now span from British Columbia to the Maritimes, pointing to an expanding, if still modest, national footprint.⁷

Canada's efforts are in their early days, but similar shifts are further along in Europe, where digital sovereignty is moving from rhetoric to infrastructure. Initiatives such as EuroSky reflect attempts to develop European-controlled social media, captured in its slogan: "The next era of social media built and run in Europe, ruled by our laws"; its co-lead argues that digital spaces should be governed by domestic laws rather than foreign control (Escritt 2025). Polling in France, Germany and Spain shows a strong preference for Europe-based platforms, with only five percent favouring US providers (ibid.), while 54 members of the European Parliament have urged the European Commission to "build [a] European social media now" (Geese and Riss 2026).

Size Is Not the Problem. Cost Is.

A common objection is that independent social media platforms cannot match the scale of dominant networks such as Facebook. But scale is the wrong metric; interoperability drives resilience by connecting systems across services. ActivityPub allows Canadian-run instances to federate/interlink across the fediverse to other platforms such as PeerTube, Pixelfed and even Meta's Threads, which reports roughly 400 million users (Perez 2026). Similarly, AT Protocol-based platforms such as Gander can connect to Bluesky's network of more than 40 million users.⁸ Smaller communities are intentional, locally governed spaces that remain connected to far larger networks, extending reach without requiring scale.

However, interoperability does not resolve the financial constraints shaping long-term sustainability. After the 2022 surge following Twitter's acquisition, Mastodon usage stabilized rather than collapsed (Hoover 2023). Many administrators deliberately keep servers small to preserve moderation and governance, but reliance on volunteer labour and personal funds limits viability; without institutional support, these platforms struggle to match the durability of corporate networks (Zulli, Miao and Gehl 2020, 13). Blacksky, a successful decentralized platform also built on the AT Protocol, illustrates this challenge: despite seed investment and a small moderation team, it still processes around 200 reports per day and continues to seek additional support (Hendrix 2025). Interoperability expands reach, but long-term stewardship requires stable funding to be effective.

6 See <https://fediverse.observer/mstdn.ca>.

7 See <https://elbowsupdigital.ca/>.

8 See <https://bsky-users.theo.io/>.

Europe Is Building. Is Canada?

Across Europe, digital sovereignty is increasingly treated as an infrastructure problem, with open-source at its centre as a solution. The European Union has reinforced this through successive strategies, including its 2020–2023 framework encouraging public institutions to “think open” to strengthen innovation and digital autonomy (European Commission 2020, 3). Initiatives such as EuroStack extend this logic by coordinating efforts across cloud, software and platform layers to reduce dependence on foreign providers while remaining embedded in global networks (Gates 2025).

Germany’s Sovereign Tech Fund, established in 2021, shows what this looks like in practice by supporting core open-source components such as protocols, libraries and developer tools that underpin widely used technologies yet are often underfunded and maintained by small teams or individual developers (Mucciacciaro 2025; Groh et al. 2021). Rather than funding new applications, the fund focuses on sustaining this underlying layer and has committed more than €24 million to more than 60 projects globally (Mucciacciaro 2025). The shift matters: open source is treated as infrastructure requiring ongoing stewardship, showing how governments can support shared systems without taking direct control of platforms.

Canada has yet to make this shift. Despite open-source underpinning an estimated USD \$8.8 trillion in global value (Hoffman and Greenstein 2024), Canadian policy still relies on proprietary systems, leaving core infrastructure governed elsewhere. Recent proposals to support a public alternative to social media point in the right direction (Tworek and Wanless 2025b), but the challenge is not to build a single national platform; it is to invest in shared systems while leaving governance to independent actors. A Canadian equivalent to the Sovereign Tech Fund, or a joint initiative with European partners, could extend this model to ActivityPub and AT Protocol-based networks. Canada must invest in the systems that structure its digital public square.

Governing Interoperability: Stewardship, Funding and Capacity

Canadian-centric social media requires more than technical design. It depends on sustained funding and institutional stewardship. Non-profit, user-governed networks can offer alternatives to ad-driven platforms, but without durable support they struggle to scale and support themselves in the long term (Salvaggio 2023). The Wikimedia Foundation shows that DPI can operate at scale when governance and financing are institutionalized (ibid.).

Canada already has a model to build on. A 2025 memorandum of understanding between ISED and CIRA clarifies CIRA’s role in managing the .ca domain as a public trust, operating independently while aligned with national priorities (CIRA and ISED 2025). It has begun extending this approach to federated social media, including partnerships with Mastodon Canada in the past (Sayeed 2022). Building on this model,

CIRA could administer shared infrastructure and targeted funding for ActivityPub and AT Protocol-based Canadian social media, strengthening digital sovereignty without placing day-to-day platform control in government hands.

Building interoperable, open-source communication infrastructure is one thing. Integrating it into public institutions is another. In that sense, procurement becomes a core tool of infrastructure governance. Yet Canada already spends heavily in this area, with \$4.57 billion going to IT procurement in 2023, second only to defence. At the same time, past efforts suggest a need to do things differently, as the ArriveCAN case shows (Melika-Abusefien et al. 2024). More fundamentally, procurement still leans toward custom-built solutions over reusable systems, reinforcing reliance on external vendors and limiting the development of shared infrastructure (Office of the Procurement Ombud 2024, 20–25). In 2024, Canada paid \$77 million for Microsoft software without ownership, underscoring how subscription models can entrench long-term dependence on external platforms (Bednar 2026).

When platforms have already consolidated power, building public alternatives may be more effective than relying on regulation alone (Tworek and Wanless 2025a). The barrier is no longer technical but political: Canada can continue operating on infrastructure governed elsewhere or invest in interoperable social media as DPI. The question is not whether Canada can build, but whether it will fund and sustain what it builds.

Recommendations

- **Invest in interoperable Canadian social media as DPI:** ISED and Canadian Heritage should support open-source platforms built on ActivityPub and the AT Protocol. Rather than building a “Canadian Facebook,” Canada should strengthen interoperable, locally governed services. Resilience comes from shared standards, not scale.
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- **Align procurement with interoperability and portability:** The TBS and ISED should embed open standards and portability requirements into federal procurement policies. Public investment should reduce lock-in, expand choice and strengthen domestic capacity.

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