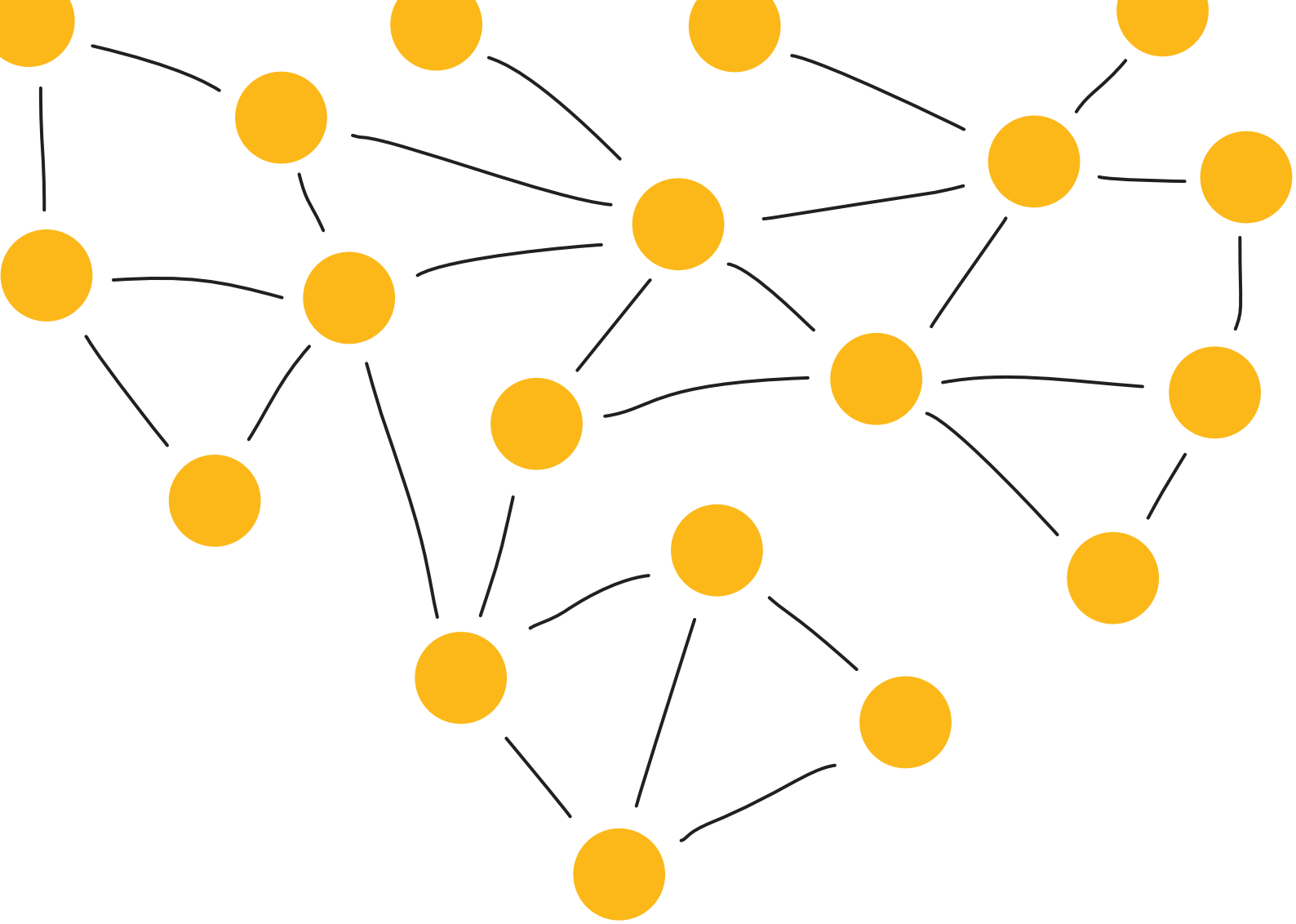
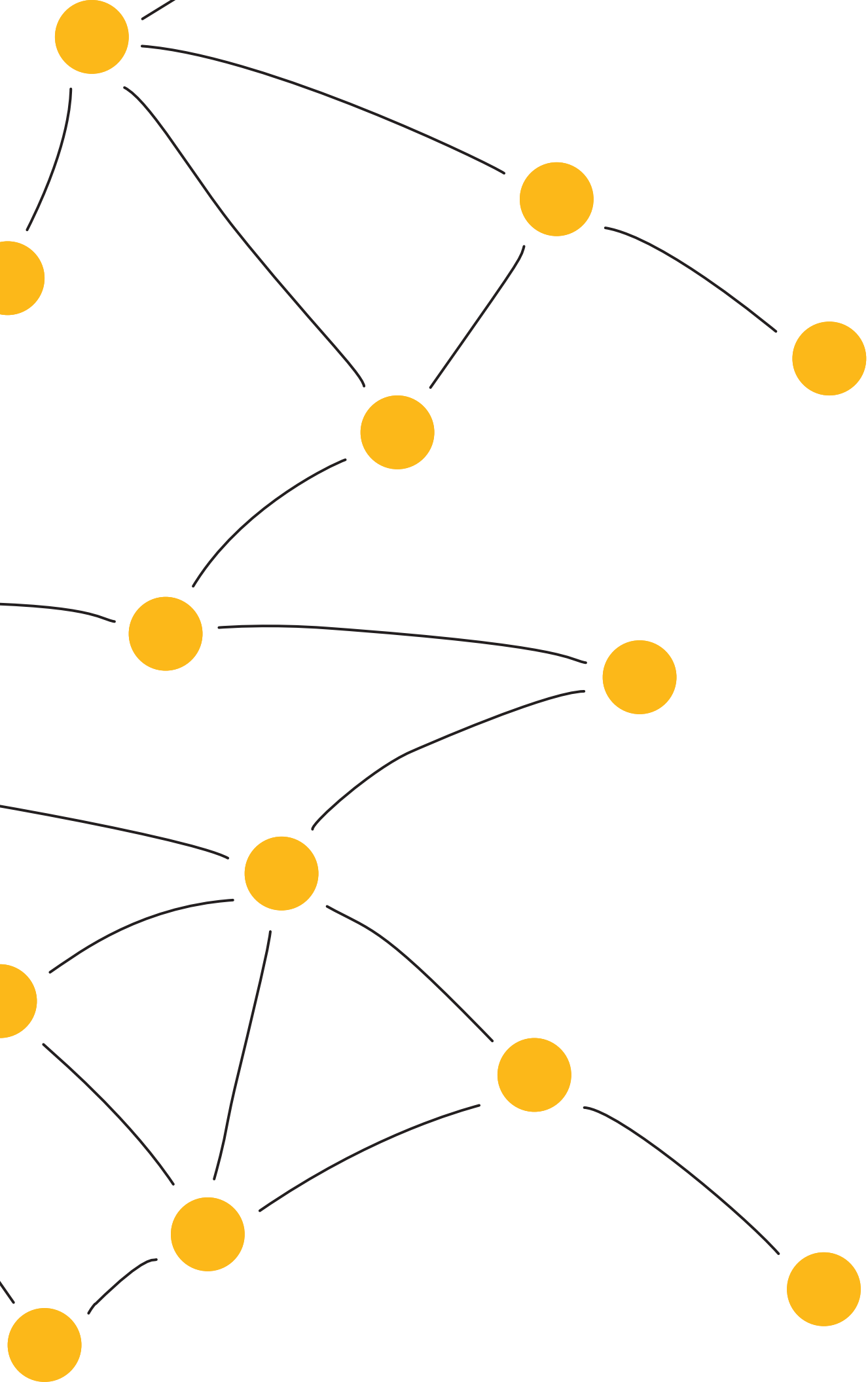




Open Social Web Alliance

Scaling sustainable social networks
in the public interest



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1. Open Social Web Alliance

From vision to plan

How can we design social media platforms that strengthen democratic discourse while remaining both resilient and appealing? The aim of the Open Social Web Alliance is to provide answers to these questions. Working alongside and in close coordination with existing communities and networks, we want to help foster the growth of open social networks to serve the common good and breathe life into them.

We, and consequently this paper, are guided by the following concepts:

1

Open Social Web

The digital public sphere consists of interoperable infrastructure, open protocols and a wide range of services and applications. This is where democratic social networks are emerging, with greater digital participation. The Open Social Web is geared towards the public interest while also supporting sustainable business models.

2

Open Social Web Alliance

A coalition of committed individuals and organisations from the worlds of academia, civil society, business, the media, culture and the public sector, who are working together to advance the Open Social Web and shape its governance. The Alliance brings together the strands of the various technical, legal and social requirements for an Open Social Web.

3

Communication and Opinion-forming

Digital social networks are an important part of our private and public communication. For us, the digital public sphere is not merely a place for entertainment, but also a space where people can form their political views and get involved. This makes it all the more important for them to be protected against commercial and government interference. The Open Social Web plays a key role in this regard.

4

Transparency

Trust requires verifiability: protocol-based networks must document their code, user numbers, rights management, resources and decision-making in a transparent and traceable manner. This applies at the infrastructure, governance and user levels. A functioning, free market for application-level business models also requires this level of transparency regarding the underlying infrastructure.

5

Research

When developing and designing open social networks, accompanying research must be taken into account at all levels right from the start. This requires open interfaces, clearly regulated data access and designated points of contact within governance bodies and applications. Security risks, design features, user behaviour and the constantly changing dynamics of the information system must be examined independently, with the findings incorporated into the design. This builds trust and contributes to a focus on the public interest and independent oversight.

1.1 The vision

A shared, standardised communication protocol: what sounds technically complicated is as simple as it is ingenious, and has long been available as a technical blueprint: email. Whether your email address is hosted by Proton, Posteo, Gmail or GMX, your emails will reach their destination. We are building on this idea.

It's the year 2028. Thanks to smart investment and political foresight, the Open Social Web has made a breakthrough. Over 100 million people are connecting, communicating with one another and experiencing the world of open, social networks. There is no platform economy of the kind operated by Meta, Bytedance, Alphabet and the like; completely free from the stress of digital migration and without any toxic designs. It works in the same way as email: whether using Mastodon, Eurosky's Mu or Streamplace – one account, your own posts and content, your own decisions, and the freedom to connect with 100 million users worldwide.

A critical mass of users in Europe have turned their backs on the platform monopolies and created a free market based on interoperable infrastructure. Nowadays, users decide for themselves which content, which algorithms and which applications they wish to use. Closed platforms have become open networks. Based on the ActivityPub and AT Proto protocols (as well as Matrix for direct communication), an ecosystem of non-commercial, public-service and commercial services has emerged which enrich and complement public-interest projects such as Mastodon and Eurosky, and which are able to communicate with one another via shared interfaces.

This vision describes the Open Social Web (OSW): a decentralised, public-interest infrastructure for digital communication, based on open standards and interoperable protocols.

1.2 Who contributes and why

Policymakers are interested in the Open Social Web because it enables genuine interaction with people, rather than filtering content according to corporate policy and distorting public opinion. Relevance is defined neither by commercial nor by authoritarian interests.

That is why the **German Government** ...



will act as patron of an Open Social Web Summit in autumn 2026, thereby supporting the Alliance in its work.



will provide adequate resources for existing funding schemes, both for infrastructure and innovation, including the simplified combination of public and private funds (e.g. through the Sovereign Tech Agency (STA), Zendis, EDIC or Sprin-D) in order to fully capitalise on the potential already identified, as well as the initial pilot funding via the Prototype Fund, STA and Sprin-D: a total of **€36 million** would be sufficient to provide for the ecosystem over the long term. This includes start-up funding of €15 million for key infrastructure components of ActivityPub and AT Proto, closing technical gaps, and developing key design features and bridging services; a €10 million transformation and innovation fund (including for journalistic services), a €10 million investment fund (50% of the total volume) and €1 million for the secretariat function within the governance structure.



amending the law on non-profit organisations and establishing legal certainty for open-source projects.



working towards the consistent implementation of existing, effective digital legislation at EU level, such as the application of Article 7 of the Digital Markets Act (DMA) to social networks; as well as pushing for new regulations to promote decentralised, public-interest alternatives.



shifting their communication to open social networks and only using the currently dominant Big Tech platforms as a secondary channel, if at all.

The **federal states** will benefit from being more in touch with the public and from the opportunity to contribute to digital sovereignty and independence, while reducing their expenditure on administration and communication (licences, maintenance, advertising). They will strengthen the discoverability and refinancing of reliable content, thereby supporting high-quality local and regional media.

The **federal states** will therefore ...

-  enshrine the expansion and promotion of the OSW in law under the Digital Media State Treaty (DMStV).
-  ensure fair competitive conditions for OSW providers vis-à-vis Big Tech, for example through clearer standards in the advertising market.
-  provide public-service media with sustainable support to offer their own instances and/or services, including through public-private partnerships, following the example of the “funk” pilot project, thereby enriching open social networks with high-quality content.

Public service media (PSM) will benefit from a level playing field regarding competition, where they are neither at a disadvantage compared to large tech companies nor restricted in terms of their own visibility.

Public service media will therefore ...

-  consistently post (news) content on open social networks in order to reach new target groups.
-  experiment playfully with new formats and make sure PSM are fit for the future.
-  design their media libraries to be compatible with the OSW.
-  contribute to the diversity of the OSW through their own applications, services and development work.

Private media organisations will become less dependent on the logic and constraints of the currently dominant Big Tech platforms. They will once again be able to reach more users through posts on OSW and, thanks to working outbound links, benefit from referrals and subscriptions once more.

Private media organisations will therefore ...



enter into new partnerships with infrastructure operators, PSM and other service providers.



develop and technically implement new business models, such as context-based, data-protection-compliant advertising.

Commercial providers of applications will benefit from lower entry costs within the OSW, as they can build directly on the user base, who have already placed their trust in the Open Social Web.

Businesses will once again be able to build stronger bonds with their customers, leading to higher conversion rates.

Commercial stakeholders will therefore ...



develop innovative business models that focus not only on their own commercial success but also on the public interest and the well-being of users.



develop services that rely on context-based advertising and modular product placement, and encourage interactive dialogue with customers.



place renewed emphasis on the added value of referrals and subscriptions.



contribute 50% of an investment fund of €20 million to strengthen new business models in the OSW.

Philanthropists, civil society organisations, creatives and artists will find spaces and technical features in the OSW that are designed with the public interest in mind and based on shared values, and which they can help to develop further politically, socially, creatively and technically.

They will therefore ...

-  launch awareness-raising and participatory campaigns to highlight the appeal of the OSW to the general public.
-  build their own communities of fans and supporters who respect their work, help to promote it and can provide direct financial support.
-  launch, promote and further develop initiatives that provide key input into the governance of the OSW.

In the Open Social Web, **users** will find a digital space for communication, interaction and information-gathering, without being forced to disclose their personal data for commercial advertising purposes and without the content they see being determined by opaque algorithms.

They will therefore:

-  move their digital accounts from the currently dominant Big Tech platforms to the OSW.
-  benefit from data security, freely chosen algorithms, free access to discourse, information, and genuine communities.
-  actively strengthen democratic debate.
-  engage in dialogue with other stakeholders, such as PSM, public authorities, their own local communities and other state institutions, thanks to the OSW's open digital infrastructure.

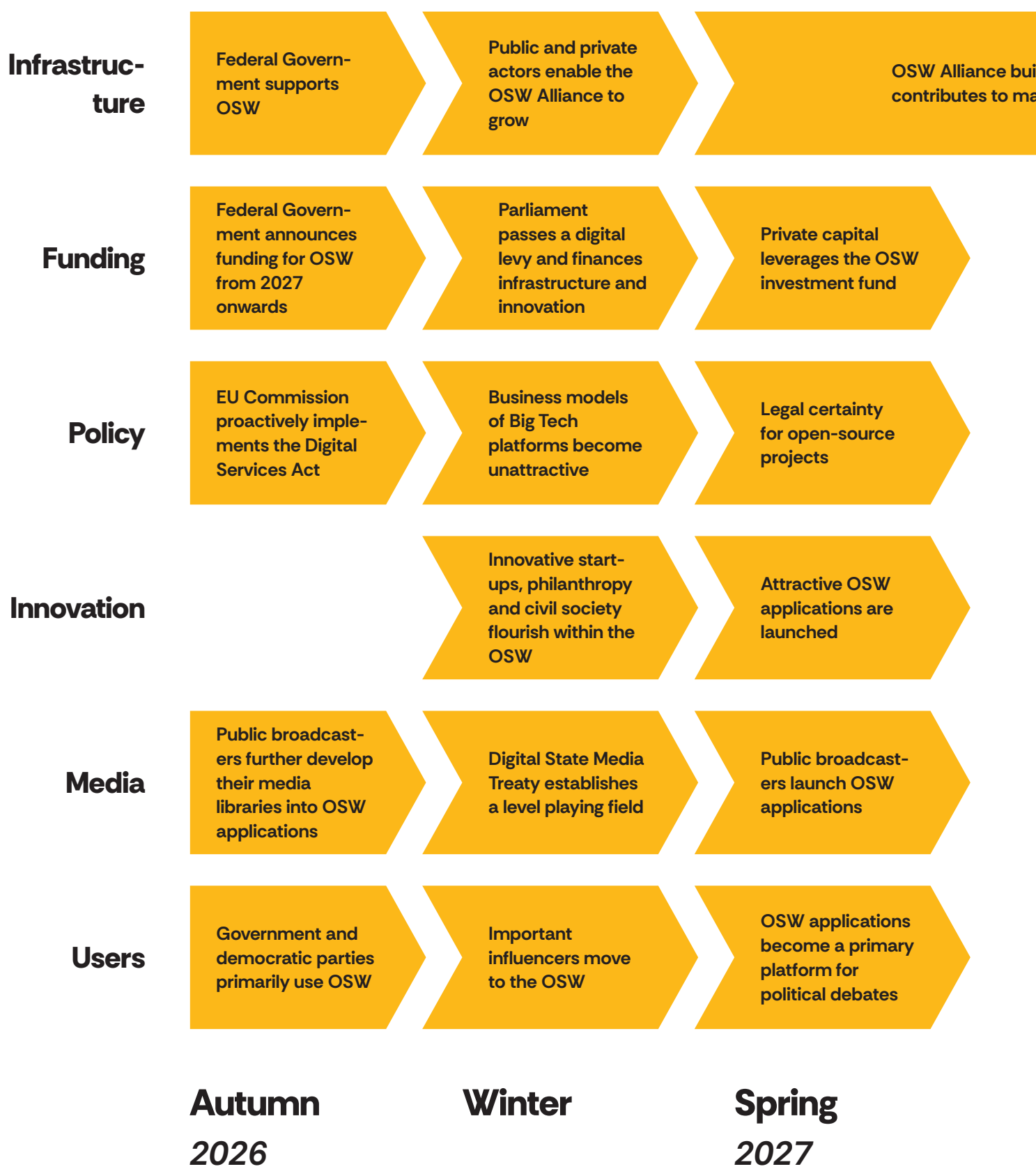
1.3 The timetable

An ecosystem like this does not come about by itself. Our **roadmap** shows how the Open Social Web can become a significant force within just a few months. It requires political will, sensible regulation, adequate funding and a broad coalition of stakeholders willing to take joint responsibility. It's a huge task. But the means to achieve it are there.

As a first step, we are establishing the **Open Social Web Alliance** – an open alliance of interested parties from civil society, academia, business, the media, the cultural sector and the public sector, committed to the joint governance of the OSW. It will bring together a wide range of existing communities and initiatives and is set to be supported in future by a publicly funded body. Its main goal: the expansion and operation of the OSW basic infrastructure (see 2.1 Infrastructure).

The German Government expressly supports the Alliance. In autumn 2026, it will sponsor an **Open Social Web Summit**, to which all stakeholders with an interest in the OSW will be invited.

At the summit, the Alliance will agree its **charter**, in accordance with which it will admit new interested parties and implement its future governance structure (see 2.2 Governance). The **public financing** for infrastructure as well as the first round of seed funding from public and private capital for innovations and applications (see 2.3 Funding) are scheduled for spring 2027. The Alliance is publishing its first **Social Web Health Report**, presenting the results of user surveys, legal, technical and scientific analyses, and clear recommendations for further development (see 2.4 Attractiveness). At the same time, the federal and state governments are ensuring that the legal framework for cooperation between **PSM, the media, the business sector and civil society** will be established (see 2.5 Public Mandate). The German Government is also championing the OSW concept at EU level, for example through a campaign to implement effective digital legislation. Key stakeholders – such as the German Government – will use OSW applications as their primary means of communication. Prominent **influencers and publishers** will follow. Due to that, key political debates will rapidly shift to the Open Social Web. As a result of these measures, the influence and appeal of the currently dominant Big Tech platforms will wane.





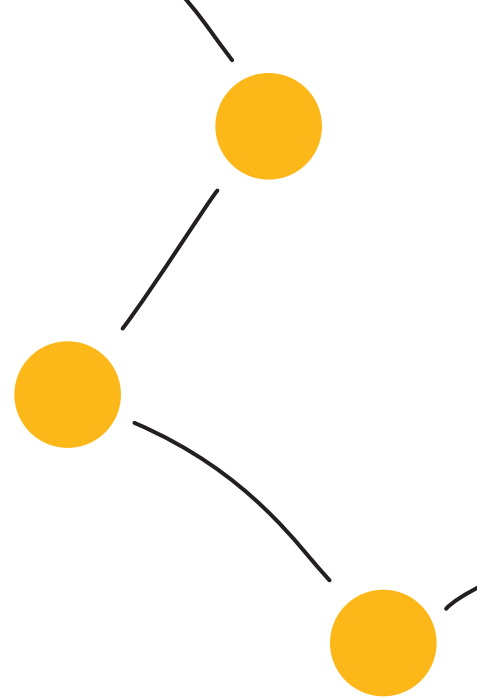
2. Challenges

The idea of the Open Social Web is not new. The Fediverse has been under development since 2008 and has a diverse range of vibrant communities that develop individual applications and run instances. While the focus has so far been on Europe, North America and Japan, there are now over 100 applications, such as Mastodon, Loops and Peertube, and more than 42,000 active instances worldwide. And yet the number of active users, at around 13 million, is growing only slowly. The ATmosphere community has been growing since 2022, primarily in North America, but increasingly also in Europe and beyond. There are currently around 43 million registered accounts and dozens of implementations and applications, including Euroskey's Mu, Gander and Sill.

Both of these protocol-based social networks are attractive alternatives to the platform economy dominated by Meta, ByteDance and Alphabet for a variety of reasons. Why, then, have people so far been so reluctant to make the switch?

We have identified five key challenges: infrastructure, governance, funding, attractiveness and public mandate. Below, we set out how we intend to overcome these challenges in order to lead the Open Social Web Alliance to success together.

2.1 Infrastructure



2.1.1 Objective

The infrastructure of the Open Social Web must be understood, funded and safeguarded as a digital, non-state-controlled basic infrastructure in the public interest. It is intended to facilitate a representative digital public sphere without individual platform operators, cloud providers, state actors or app ecosystems gaining centralised control over communication, data flows or access.

In this context, digital sovereignty does not simply mean replacing dependencies on the U.S. or China with dependencies on Europe. What is far more important is whether public-sector and public-interest actors are able to identify risks, assess dependencies and have realistic options for action. An infrastructure is considered robust if it is based on open standards, provides for phase-out scenarios from both a technical and organisational perspective, remains verifiable, allows for a change of service provider, protects personal

data and enables continued development by a diverse community.

The aim is therefore to establish a core infrastructure that is open, interoperable, compliant with data protection regulations, secure, resilient, verifiable, environmentally sustainable and operated in the public interest. A distinction must be made between this level of infrastructure and the – both private and public – services, apps and offerings that are built on top of it. This distinction between the OSW's infrastructure (which should be supported by the state) and its services (which are left to private innovation) is crucial and has long been established in other markets (e. g. transmission masts and broadcasting organisations; electricity grid and energy suppliers; rail network and railway operators; telecommunications networks and digital companies).



2.1.2 Model design

The two protocols currently most widely used for social networks, ActivityPub and AT Proto, are designed to ensure interoperability and data portability between applications. While this does not always run smoothly in practice, it is at least technically possible. The distribution across different entities – namely instances or servers in the Fediverse and Personal Data Storage (PDS), relays and microservices in the ATmosphere – also increases resilience and can enhance data security, as user data is not necessarily centralised in a single location. This architecture should be specifically developed into a robust OSW basic infrastructure. It is not enough simply to relocate individual services to European data centres or so-called ‘sovereign’ clouds. Cloud-based operations can be a sensible operational option, but they do not constitute proof of sovereignty. The key factor is whether the infrastructure

can continue to be operated, migrated or replaced in the event of a failure, a change of provider, political pressure, a change in business model or licence amendments.

The OSW should therefore be structured in accordance with the ‘Exit by Design’ principle: all users must be able to export their data, social graphs, content, moderation lists and configurations in open, documented formats and transfer them to other services. It is equally important that key software components are open-source, auditable and verifiable by independent third parties. Digital sovereignty does not arise solely from open source, but without access to source code, interfaces and data structures, control remains little more than a promise.

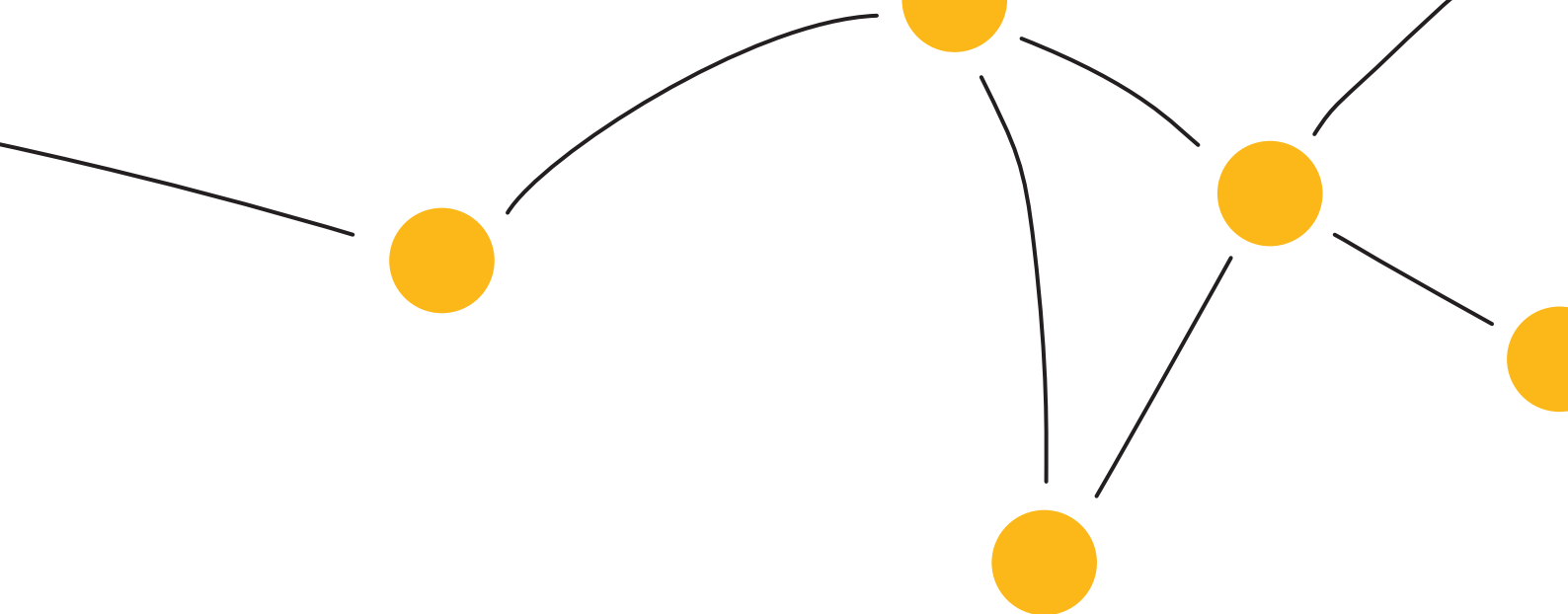
A model public infrastructure stack should therefore have the following characteristics:



Open protocols and documented interfaces as a binding foundation.



Portability of accounts, contacts, content, moderation preferences and relevant metadata.



- Transparent, auditable software components and data storage models.
- Operating options, including the cloud, federated hosting and on-premises deployment.
- An ecosystem comprising several support, hosting, moderation and development service providers, rather than reliance on individual providers.
- Public funding for maintenance, security, usability, bridging services and further development.
- Institutional expertise among public and not-for-profit organisations, so that infrastructure decisions are not entirely outsourced to service providers.

The **state** should not itself become the central platform in this context (see. Section 2.5). Its role is to lay the foundations for a pluralistic, decentralised and resilient ecosystem: through **funding, procurement guidelines, legal safeguards, access to research, capacity building and support for governance structures**.

Public funds should be channelled primarily into components that enhance interoperability, verifiability and collaborative development. Long-term funding and the awarding of contracts through actors subject to civil society oversight will ensure that the information infrastructure remains independent of the state.

2.1.3 Benchmarks

Expansion and supply must be driven forward in the public interest, with a focus on the common good and in an environmentally sustainable manner. Just like water and energy supplies, digital infrastructure forms part of essential services. If digital infrastructure is not in place, fails or can be taken offline, the digital public sphere collapses. In order to meet this requirement, at least the following criteria must be taken into account:

1

Open standards and access

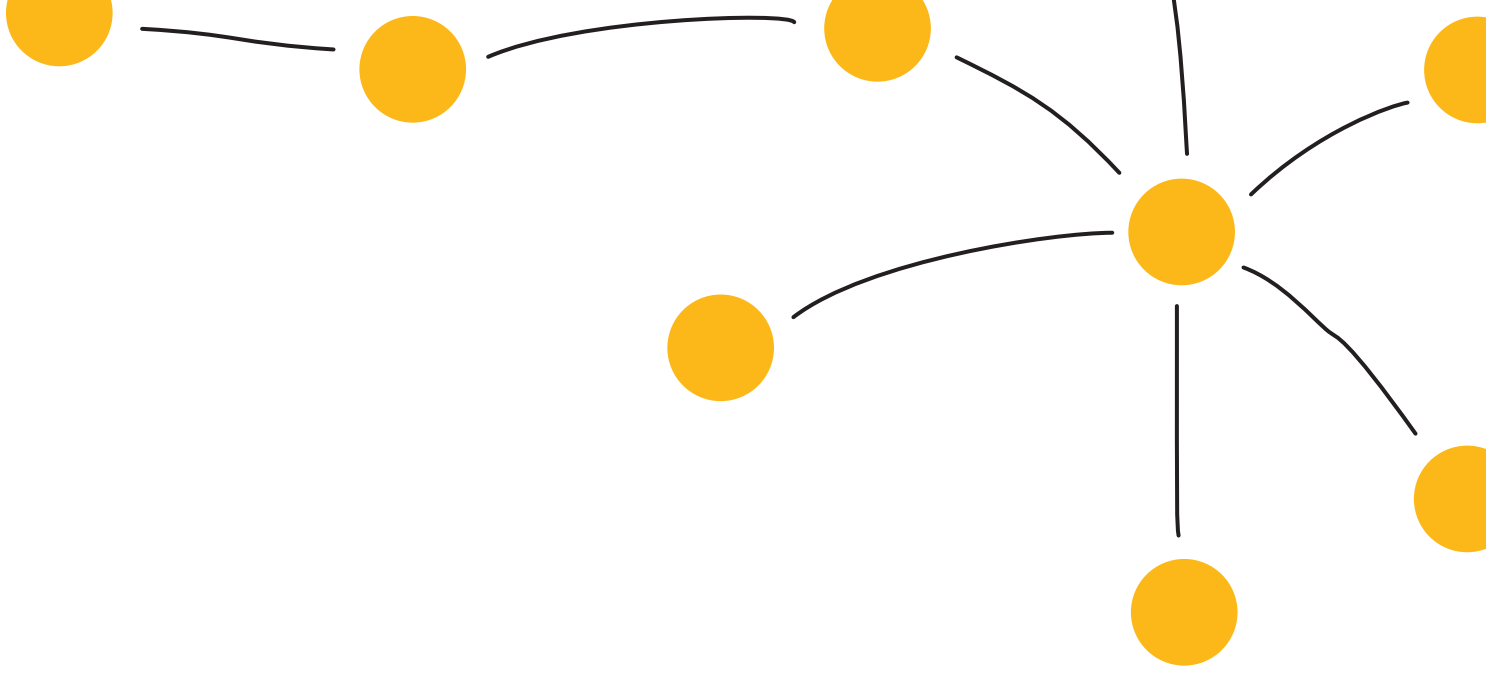
Digital infrastructures must be based on open protocols and standards that are accessible to all.

Objective:

Preventing the concentration of (authoritarian) power, fostering competition, innovation in the public interest and long-term interoperability.

Indicators:

- 500 new, medium-sized instances (Activity-Pub), as well as at least five fully functional regional relays, 100 new institutional PDSs & two new AppView instances (AT Protocol) by 2028.
- 1,000 new instances/microservices outside Europe and North America by 2030.
- All publicly funded components use documented, open interfaces.
- Reference implementations and technical documentation are freely available.



2

Interoperability and bridging

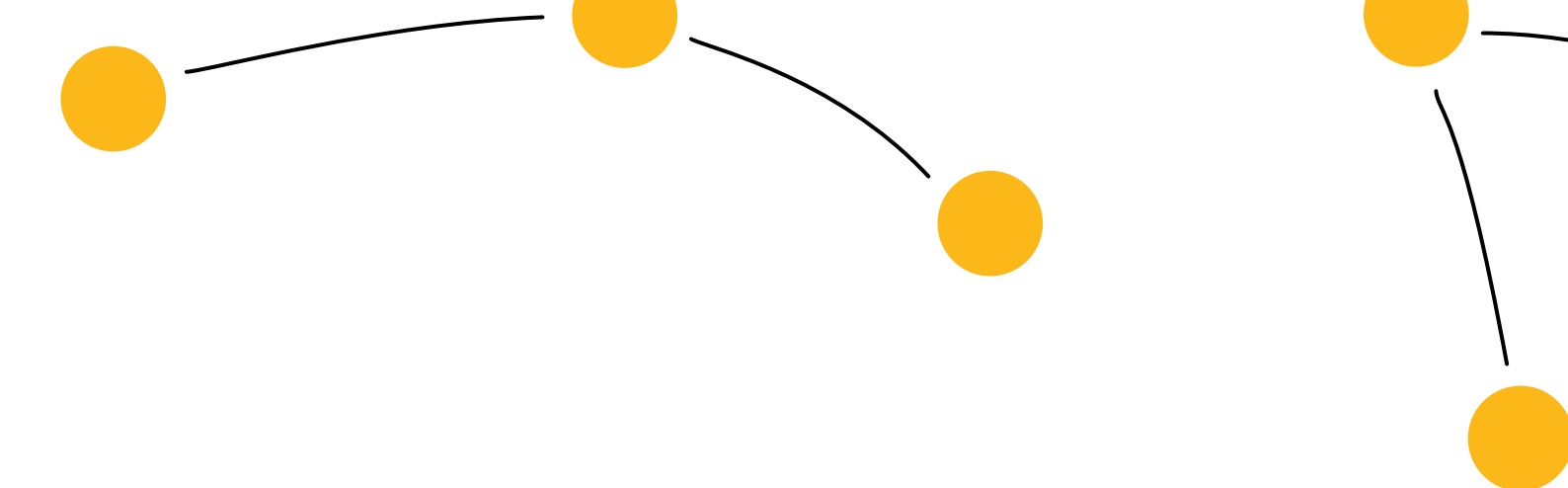
Interfaces and bridge services are needed between decentralised protocols. Interoperability must not merely be a technical promise; it must be practical, secure and understandable.

Objective:

Preventing the concentration of power, promoting connection rather than division, protecting against external attacks, reflecting local circumstances

Indicators:

- 100 high-profile figures demonstrate the added value and promote bridge services.
- €5 million in funding secured for bridging services.
- Bridge services are regularly checked for security, data protection and the risk of misuse.
- Users can track and control where their content is visible – and where it isn't.



3

Exit by Design and Data Portability

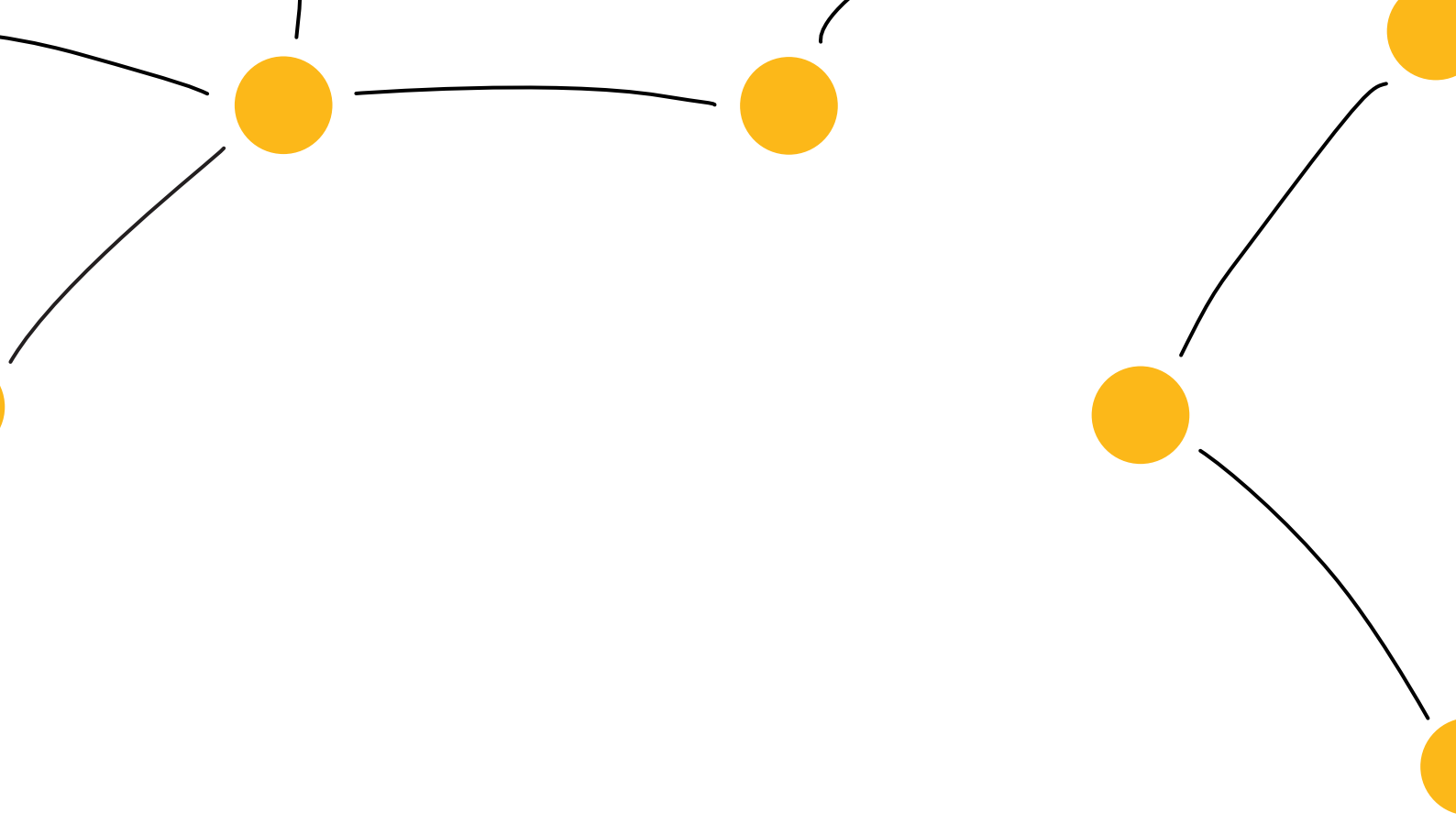
Users and operators must be able to switch seamlessly between instances, services and applications. Data, contacts, content, moderation preferences and configurations must be exported in open formats.

Objective:

Preventing vendor lock-in, strengthening individual freedom of choice, promoting competition based on quality rather than network effects, and safeguarding against political, technical or economic dependencies.

Indicators:

- Standardised export and import formats for accounts, social graphs and content have been defined.
- User surveys show an 85% satisfaction rate with digital migration processes.
- Publicly funded services must meet mandatory portability requirements.
- Exit scenarios are documented and regularly tested prior to procurement or funding.



4

Efficiency and sustainability

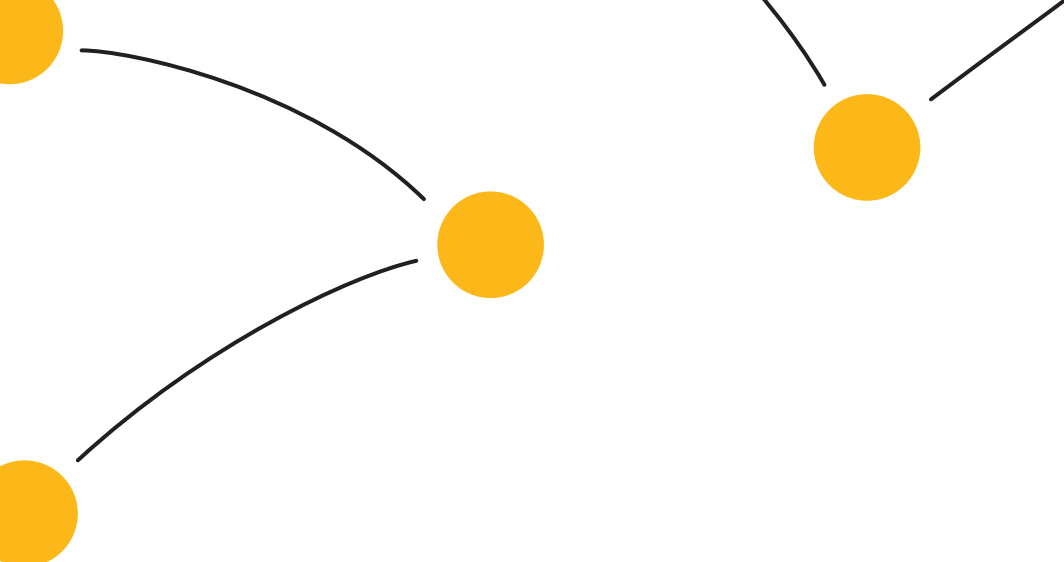
Protocols must operate in a data-efficient manner and ensure energy efficiency regardless of user numbers. Sustainability must be a criterion for infrastructure funding, not an afterthought.

Objective:

Data protection, data security, protection of natural resources, long-term operational viability

Indicators:

- Energie- und Ressourcenverbrauch zentraler Komponenten wird regelmäßig gemessen und transparent veröffentlicht.
- Geförderte Infrastruktur erfüllt klar definierte Nachhaltigkeitskriterien.
- Datenminimierung ist in Protokollen, Anwendungen und Förderbedingungen verankert.
- Skalierungskonzepte berücksichtigen ökologische Folgekosten.



5

Operational options and regional redundancies

Protocols, instances, PDS, relays and AppViews, as critical infrastructure, must be strategically duplicated in much the same way as internet exchange points. Various operating models should remain possible in this regard: federated hosting, public-interest cloud services and, where necessary, on-premises deployment.

Objective:

Preventing the concentration of power, safeguarding independence, protecting critical infrastructure, mitigating disruptions.

Indicators:

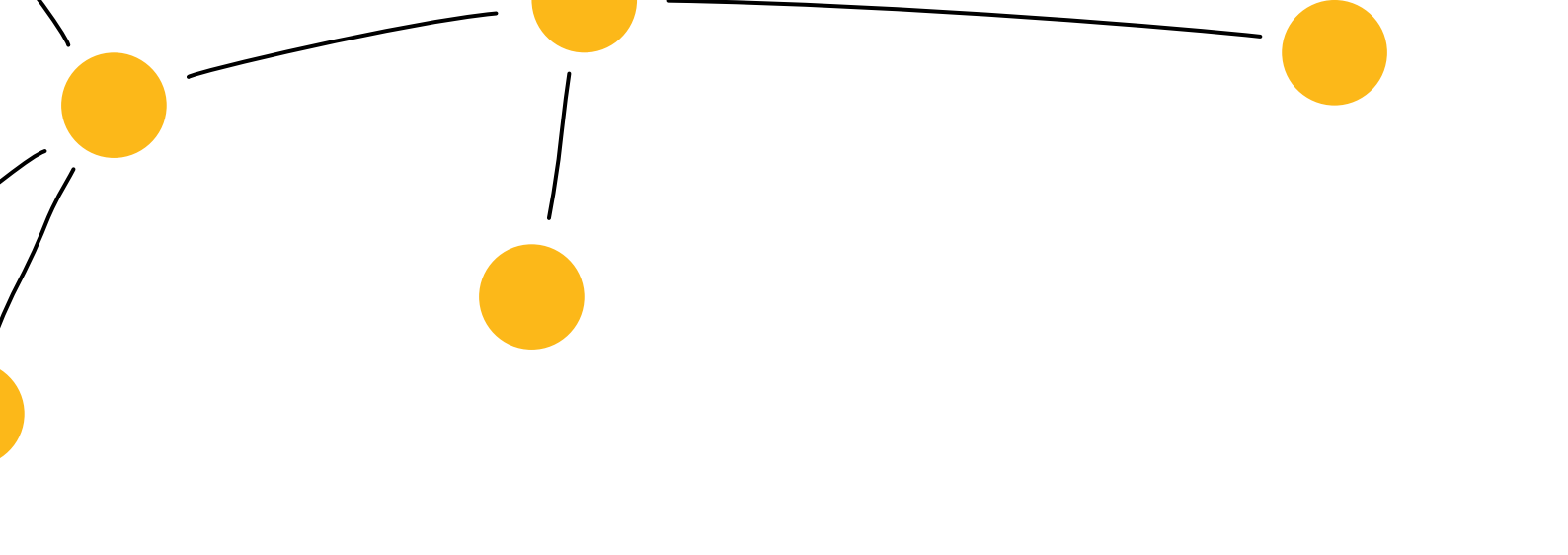
- Regional redundancy plans for key components are in place.
- Critical services can be migrated in the event of a provider or site failure.
- On-premises deployment is possible for particularly sensitive public or public-interest applications without any loss of functionality.
- Regular resilience tests assess failure, migration and recovery scenarios.

2.2 Governance

2.2.1 *Objective*

To ensure that a minimum level of decentralised infrastructure remains available over the long term in the public interest, independently of government and with a public-interest focus, a clear governance structure must be established. The governance structure of the Open Social Web serves to ensure the stability, political and economic independence, and ongoing development of its infrastructure. It brings

together the various technical, legal and social requirements for an OSW and ensures that opportunities for flexibility are identified and reaped. Among other things, it creates incentives for a diverse media landscape to make use of the infrastructure and integrate it into its publishing processes for the purpose of strengthening public-interest discourse.



2.2.2 Model design

In order to meet all the requirements for the governance structure, a process and a forum must be identified in which the interests of all stakeholders can be expressed and decisions taken in the public interest. We refer to this structure as the **Open Social Web Alliance**.

The Alliance is tasked with regularly assessing the stability and vitality of the ecosystem, identifying and evaluating risks, and working towards solutions.

- A **secretariat function**, together with the participation of relevant stakeholders, will be funded through €1 million of public funding. The Alliance itself will be responsible for administering and documenting these funds, subject to transparency requirements.
- The Alliance follows the **multi-stakeholder model**. Stakeholders from civil society, academia, the media, the cultural sector and politics must be represented in all relevant bodies, alongside infrastructure operators and application developers. To prevent the Alliance from being co-opted by the state or the business sector, no single sector may hold more than 40% of the representative voting shares. The aim is to reach decisions collectively, mirrored on the rough consensus of the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF).
- The secretariat will act as a **point of contact** for instance operators and application developers, providing a forum in which new and critical issues can be discussed across instances and services, and decisions made regarding interventions at either infrastructure or application level. The Alliance secretariat will also be responsible for **engaging with users** on a regular basis, incorporating findings from user surveys and recommendations from independent academic evaluations into decisions on future development. These evaluations will cover issues such as infrastructure resilience, the identification of bottlenecks and vulnerabilities, and legal and commercial risks.



The Open Social Web Alliance **will not duplicate existing structures** of Internet and media governance. Instead, it will participate within them and build important links between governance forums where these do not yet exist. To achieve this, it will establish communication channels with key organisations, including the W3C, the IETF, policymakers, the German state media authorities and broadcasting councils.



Interested individuals from all sectors can become involved within the Alliance, provided they commit to a common charter. The following criteria are initially defined therein:



Focused on the common good.

Members must put the public interest before private, economic and political interests.



Transparency regarding interests.

Members disclose which organisations and sectors they belong to and highlight any potential conflicts of interest.



Commitment to open standards.

Members support open, interoperable protocols and reject lock-in mechanisms.



Non-discrimination.

Members advocate equal digital participation for all users, regardless of their background, resources or technical expertise.



Support for independent research.

Members recognise the right to independent research into platform dynamics and security risks, and do not obstruct access to data for scientific purposes.



Data protection and fundamental digital rights.

Members are committed to the protection of personal data and the safeguarding of fundamental digital rights.

2.2.3 Benchmarks

Independent, informed governance that is shaped in the interests of the common good is ensured if at least the following criteria are met:

1

Representativeness

The Alliance comprises representatives from all stakeholder groups. Users are also involved in a representative manner. To this end, the Alliance, with the support of the secretariat, sets out requirements under which applications and services must regularly gather user feedback and make it available in a standardised format. The standardised results are incorporated into a comprehensive annual Social Web Health Report, which is subject to scientific oversight and is continuously refined (e. g. through A/B testing for ‘Social Health”).

This ensures that the OSW continues to develop in the public interest and in line with users’ needs, while embedding adaptive design throughout the entire stack, from infrastructure to application level.

Indicators:

- 80% of the applications regularly collect structured feedback and pass it on to the Alliance in a standardised format.
- Five stakeholder groups are actively represented.
- The feedback includes views from all user groups.
- 10% of users provide feedback on a regular basis.
- Each year, at least three suggestions for improvement put forward by users are tested and evaluated.
- The user satisfaction score across all services is calculated and documented.
- Annual publication of a Social Web Health Report, drawing on scientific findings and data-driven analyses.

Risk Management

The Alliance detects risks at the infrastructure and service levels at an early stage, identifies gaps in the regulatory framework and supports server and application operators in ensuring they can operate in compliance with the law. The principle here is that servers and applications enjoy the greatest possible freedom of design and operation under criminal law, while improved media regulation ensures that action is taken in the event of clear breaches of the law. At the content level, infrastructure governance must ensure that content already known to be illegal can be filtered out. Further content filtering is at the discretion of server operators and communities.

The aim is to identify vulnerabilities and mitigate them in a transparent manner, and ensure the protection of users, also with regard to their broader rights.

Indicators:

- Where filter lists are used, regardless of the infrastructure or application level, these lists must be a) transparent to users and b) allow users to select or deselect them.
- A sandbox model is in place for critical development phases and features.
- A helpdesk assists server and application operators with queries regarding legal matters and IT security.
- A conciliation body serves as a point of contact for consumers regarding transparency, breaches of the law by platform and service providers, and reporting channels.
- Reporting systems are in place and are continuously assessed for their effectiveness and usability.

2.3 Funding (and financial frameworks)

2.3.1 *Objective*

The open infrastructure of the Open Social Web enables a wide range of applications and services that serve public discourse, information and entertainment, as well as social and political participation. To achieve this, two conditions are required. First, the infrastructure itself needs secure long-term core funding from public sources, with opportunities for private investment. Secondly, sustainable business models must be possible at application and service level, building on that infrastructure.

To this end, appropriate financial frameworks and incentives must be put in place at both the infrastructure and application levels. Strengthening the OSW in this way serves

both to boost the economy and promote social development. It strengthens free-market mechanisms against existing monopoly-like conditions and dependencies on the currently dominant big tech platforms (e.g. through advertising monopolies, lock-in effects or one-sided algorithms/market design) and ensures that consumers have a genuine choice between several services that respect fundamental rights. While the basic infrastructure is designed to serve the public good and is available to everyone on an equal basis, the applications and services built on top of it may be profit-oriented. The Alliance may set out different terms and conditions for commercial and non-commercial offers in order to accommodate both.

2.3.2 Infrastructure funding

Long-term funding for infrastructure comes from several sources:



Government **start-up funding** of €10 million ensures the development and maintenance of key infrastructure components and enables technical gaps to be closed and design elements relevant to the project's appeal to be developed; this evaluates and scales up the experience gained from the pilot funding schemes run by the Prototype Fund, Sovereign Tech Agency and Sprin-D.



Public service media – funded via the **broadcasting fee** – should help to enhance the appeal of the OSW.



A **transformation fund**, financed by a digital levy on large, for-profit tech companies.



Low **usage fees** for commercial providers operating services on the OSW's infrastructure go directly towards the maintenance and operation of servers and software (depending on turnover). Non-commercial uses are exempt from charges. Further developments will also receive financial support, in line with users' wishes, under the auspices of the Alliance as the governing body.



To finance this, **government levies** may be used, such as a levy on terminal equipment, similar to the levy on printers, or a digital levy on advertising, or platform profits.

The funding will be used to ensure basic operational capability and strengthen resilience, for example by ...



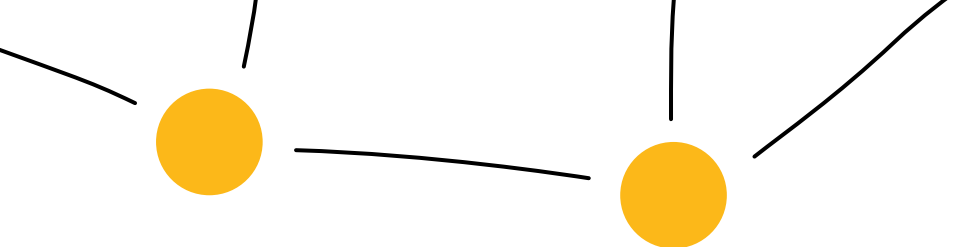
Maintaining a core level of server capacity for digital public communication.



Maintenance grants for the ongoing maintenance of the technical stack.



Support for the development and testing of new features that are in high demand among users.



2.3.3 Application-level funding options

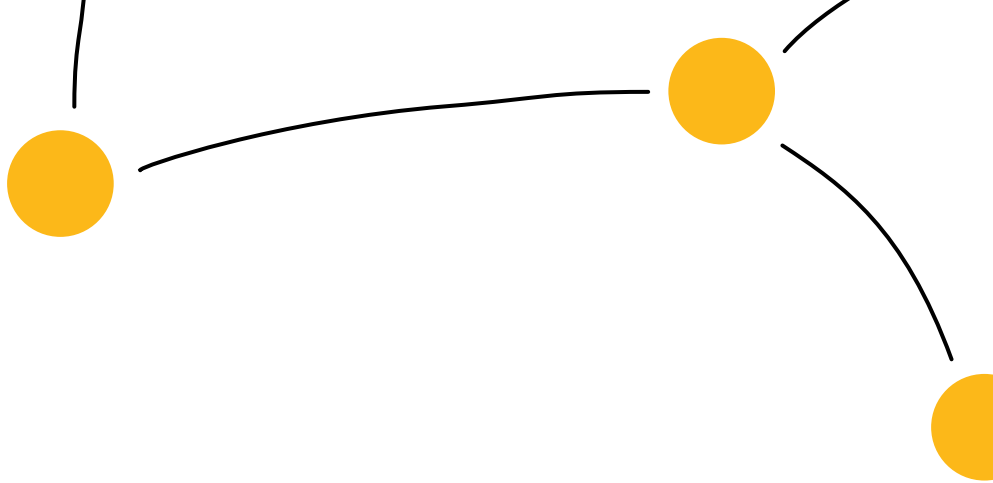
There are various funding models at the application level; for example, financing could be provided through ...

- ... Context-based advertising (as opposed to personalised advertising).
- ... Funding from the Transformation Fund.
- ... Applications developed by public authorities or public-service media organisations.
- ... Referrals and subscriptions.

Support at the application layer includes, for example:

Modular designs and features for easy market entry:

On behalf of (public) funding organisations, the Alliance identifies modules to be funded or developed that enable financing at the application level (e.g. payment services, subscriptions, non-personalised / context-based adverts, the integration of crowdfunding or donation platforms, order or payment buttons). These must not dominate the user experience and must fully comply with the principles of 'Safety by Design' and 'Transparency by Design'. The OSW infrastructure makes it possible to provide a portable library of such designs and features, enabling businesses to enter the market easily and in compliance with legal requirements, while allowing them to focus on their content.



Support for innovation and business development for scalable alternatives:

The state must intervene to correct market failures caused by platform monopolies and stimulate start-up and growth momentum in the OSW, e.g. in the form of an investment fund of €20 million from private and public funds.

Supporting both non-commercial and commercial offerings:

The OSW can only be successful if there is a sustainable balance between non-commercial use and commercial (and therefore financially contributing) offerings. Support for commercial services must not be at the expense of non-commercial use. It is the Alliance's responsibility to ensure this.

Indicators:

- A funding scheme for OSW applications exists and has its own budget (link to for the Prototype Fund or the Sovereign Tech Agency, for example). The funding explicitly covers professionalisation and scaling (product development, UX, operations, market entry).
- Funded applications demonstrate measurable growth in user numbers and/or turnover after the funding period ends.
- Funding is available to both commercial and non-commercial initiatives, without favouring commercial over non-profit offerings.

2.4 Attractiveness

2.4.1 Objective

A vibrant digital public sphere can only emerge if large numbers of people use open networks on a long-term basis. The key factor is how appealing it is to two groups: for users who want to stay informed, interact and be entertained, as well as for creators, cultural organisations, media organisations and service providers seeking reach, reliable distribution channels and sustainable

revenue models. A public-interest focus alone is not enough – OSW applications must offer tangible added value in everyday life, be intuitive to join and enjoyable to use. The aim is to break the chicken-and-egg dilemma: without engaging content and high-profile creators, there are no users; without users, there are no creators.

2.4.2 Model design

New applications offering added value: Anyone planning to launch a second Facebook, TikTok or X as a first step is setting their sights too high. Rather, OSW infrastructure provides the basis for new, open services with their own added value, such as ...



A sustainable platform for the dissemination, monetisation and discussion of journalistic content.



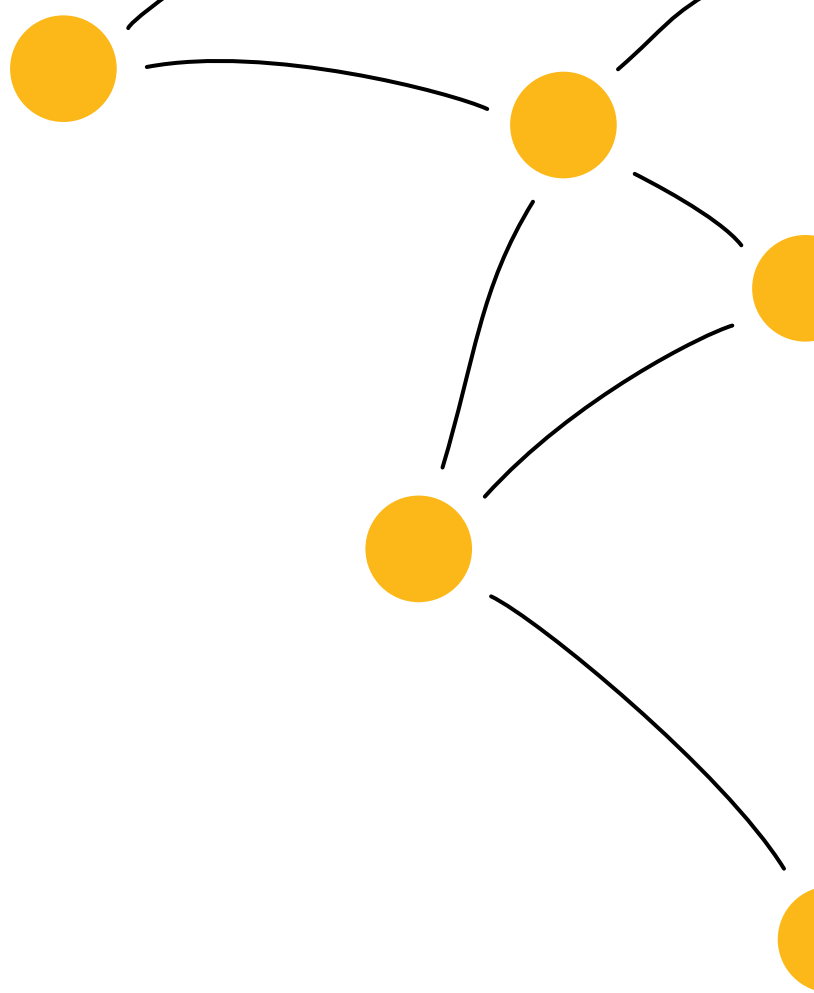
The extension of existing offline communities with their own specific requirements in the digital sphere (libraries, museums, theatres).



Linking open information resources across silos, such as public transport timetables with theatre programmes and cultural coverage in the local press.



In addition, there needs to be an easy way to get started and switch platforms, greater freedom for users to customise their experience, as well as incentives for creators and publishers.



2.4.3 Benchmarks

1

An easy way in and a smooth transition

Onboarding without any prior technical knowledge; switching platforms without losing followers or content.

Indicators:

- The time between first opening an application to the first interaction (first account followed, first post) is less than five minutes.
- Curated recommendation lists and starter packs are integrated into the onboarding process as standard.
- Onboarding abandonment rates are measured and decrease continuously.
- A change of account, including transferring social graphs and content are possible in fewer than five steps; user surveys show $\geq$ an 85% satisfaction rate with digital migrations.

2

Adaptive, inclusive and safe design

An intuitive, safe design that provides marginalised groups, in particular, with the greatest possible security and freedom of action, while allowing for modular content.

Indicators:

- UX/UI and user research resources permanently funded for OSW applications with more than 500,000 users, enabling ongoing evaluation.
- Design based on scientifically validated methods.
- Ideas and adjustments regularly tested with marginalised groups.

3

User-autonomous, democracy-friendly curation

Rather than feeds optimised for outrage and idle time, the focus is on recommendation systems that allow users to select or deselect content, and which are designed to foster democratic opinion-forming.

Indicators:

- In OSW applications, users are free to select or deselect multiple feeds and recommendation algorithms, including those from third parties; the default feed is optimised for communication and its underlying logic is publicly documented.
- The impact of curation on the quality of discourse and polarisation is independently investigated and published.
- At least 10 tried-and-tested, 'democracy-friendly' reference algorithms are available under an open licence.

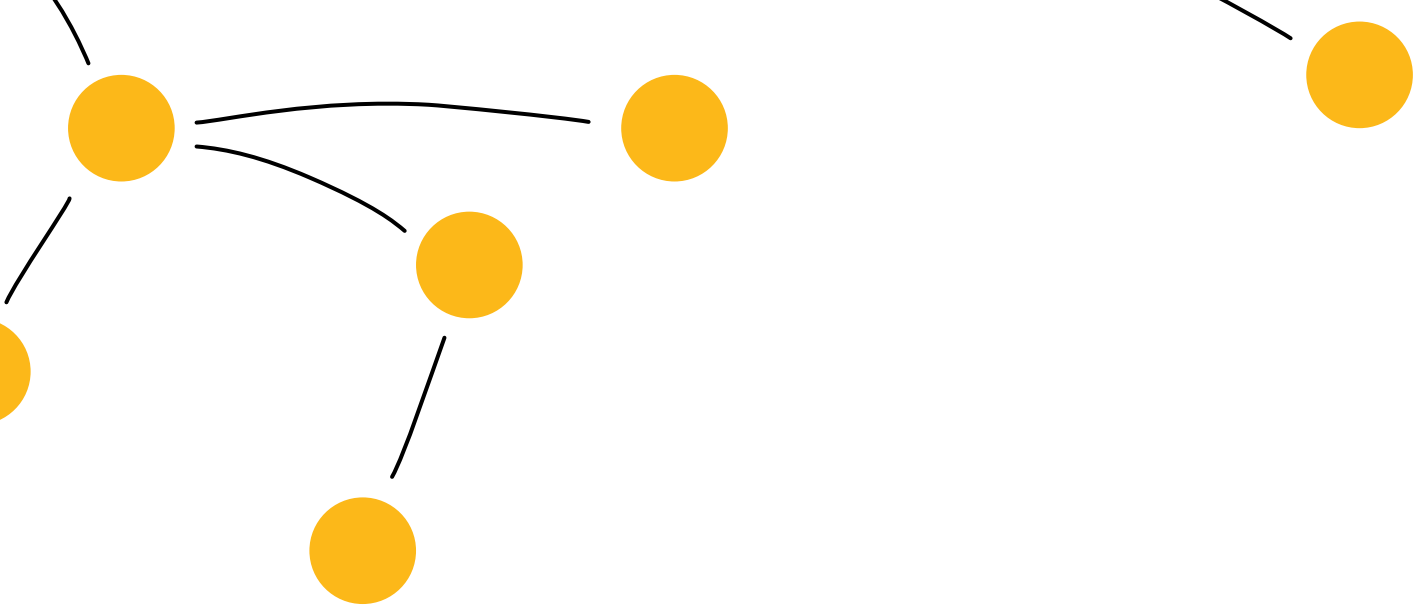
2.5 Public mandate

2.5.1 Objective

The Open Social Web is a matter of public responsibility. The state and other public institutions have a duty to help shape digital public infrastructure and spaces and to create the conditions in which they can thrive. Ever since the founding of the German Federal Republic, broadcasting law and the public service media have aimed to ensure that radio – which was then a new and influential medium – serves democracy, rather than once again becoming a vehicle for fascist propaganda. This mission must now move into the digital age. Freedom of the media, as enshrined in the Constitution (Art. 5 of the Basic Law), must also be protected more effectively in the digital sphere.

The public sector's responsibility for an open social web consists of two elements:

- 1 Ensuring a public-interest-oriented OSW basic infrastructure and the distribution of public service content in the digital sphere in line with demand.
- 2 A modern regulatory framework.



2.5.2 Model design

Regulatory framework:



The European Commission and the German Government should launch an **implementation sprint for effective digital laws** and close legal loopholes. For example, the silos of the dominant Big Tech platforms should be broken down by implementing Article 7 of the DMA on interoperability. Legislation on non-profit organisations should provide legal certainty for free and open-source projects committed to the public good, and for the institutions responsible for maintaining them.



Media law must make the transition to the digital age. The focus of efforts to safeguard the free formation of digital opinion must no longer be solely on content or creators, but must finally also extend to the design and optimisation objectives of platforms and open networks. In addition to the framework provided by the Digital Services Act (DSA), national legislators must also recognise the systemic nature of their regulatory remit: bridging algorithms, curbing manipulative design, strengthening context-based advertising.

Basic infrastructure for the Open Social Web and the distribution of public service content in line with demand:



The states share responsibility. The **Digital Media State Treaty** (DMStV) must enshrine the expansion and promotion of the Open Social Web in law. The aim of the DMStV is to pave the way for a level playing field between traditional and digital media and platforms in terms of competition. The remit of public service broadcasters “as a medium and a factor in the process of the free formation of individual and public opinion” (Article 26¹² of the MStV (interstate media treaty), must also include the provision of an OSW infrastructure and applications (such as the media library) in 2026. The scope of that remit must likewise include the distribution of public service content via appropriate open infrastructures.



Digital community management – i.e. facilitating constructive digital discussions on public service content – is just as much a part of journalistic and editorial work in digital media as the creation and dissemination of the content itself. This responsibility must be embedded in the public-service remit. This is one of the clearest differences compared to the dominant big tech platforms, whose business model is geared towards outrage algorithms.



Support for journalism must be aimed at facilitating sustainable digital business models and media companies in the OSW. This could, for example, lead to the development of applications that combine journalistic and editorial content from both private and public sectors – to the benefit of all market participants. The necessary amendments to antitrust, competition and media law are long overdue.

2.5.3 Benchmarks

The federal states will amend the (Digital) **Media State Treaty** by 2027 in order to ...



Expand the public service remit to include the operation of OSW infrastructure, the dissemination of its content and active community management as part of the democratic formation of opinion in the digital sphere.



Link the use of funds by public service broadcasters to the media consumption patterns of their target audience (increasingly digital, less linear broadcasting) in order to drive forward the digital transformation of these organisations.



Use their legislative powers to safeguard diversity of opinion on digital platforms as well, and above all by addressing the systemic threats to freedom of expression (bridging rather than fuelling outrage; optimisation geared towards democratic opinion-forming rather than idle time).

The public service broadcasters:



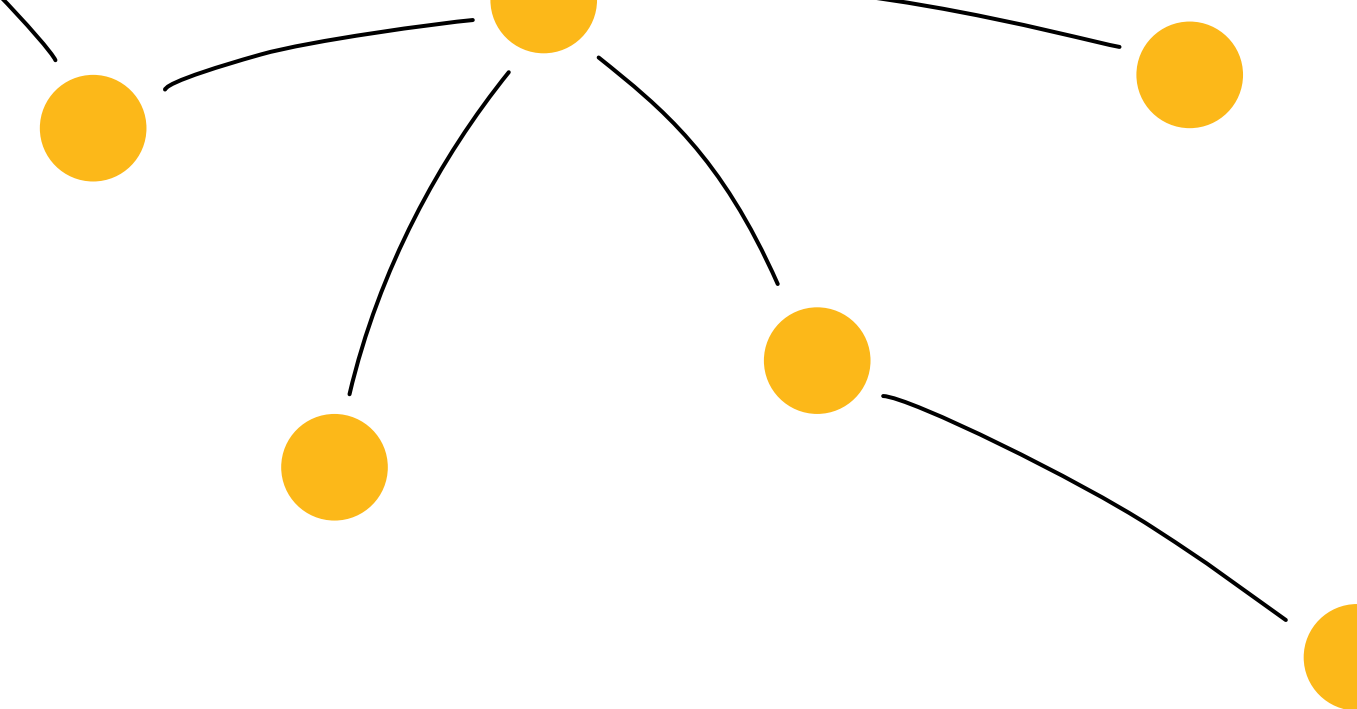
Will transition their OSW-related pilot project, **the “Public Spaces Incubator”**, into **regular operation** for the majority of its online services by early 2027.



Will make the OSW infrastructure the basis for their online services, meaning that the ARD and ZDF media libraries, with their several million registered users, can develop into a central part of the OSW.



will allocate **one-fifth of their budget to purely digital offerings** (content, services, distribution technologies) by 2030; this does not include merely republishing existing content.



The **federal government**:

- Will, **by 2027**, implement the plan set out in its coalition agreement to integrate competition law (GWB) with the federal states' media concentration legislation and create a **competition-law exemption for cooperation within the media sector**, covering both public-service and private media.
- Will, **by 2027**, implement the plan set out in its coalition agreement to impose a **digital levy** on the advertising revenue of major digital platforms, and will use the revenue to support the OSW infrastructure and innovative services, among other things. This includes a fund for digital innovation in journalism, with an initial allocation of €100 million. This is also intended to initially fund new journalistic initiatives within the OSW.
- Regularly advocate at European level for the consistent and effective application of EU digital laws, such as the DSA, and push for a legal framework that is more strongly geared towards promoting decentralised and public-interest-oriented alternatives.

3. The foundations are already in

To anyone who feels that the vision and roadmap for a thriving Open Social Web are too ambitious, rest assured: It's not that far away. Many of the solutions are already on the market. Rather than repeatedly developing similar concepts, we should build more consistently on proven successes and existing components.

If you're looking for guidance or would like to try out using the Open Social Web, you'll find a range of good examples and support resources here.

- [ATmosphere Starterpacks](#), which make it easier to find interesting accounts and, for example, add them to your own feed by grouping them into themed lists
- [Bridgy Fed](#) allows accounts and content to be mirrored between the Fediverse and Bluesky. Functionality can be enhanced and improved through targeted sprints and hackathons
- [European Social Stack](#) is a joint declaration of intent by numerous key players in the Open Social Web, in which they commit to shared principles while also identifying priorities for further development
- [Euroskey](#) – Create an account or migrate from Bluesky to host your data on European servers
- [Fediverse](#)- and [Mastodon](#)-**Starterpacks**, which make it easier to populate what can initially be an empty timeline
- [IFTAS](#) is the point of contact for training programmes and legal advice, as well as policy guidance on the operation of instances. The report on ‘Trust and Safety’ in the social web can serve as a starting point for wider user surveys and more in-depth studies on diversity, visibility and security.
- [Ghost](#), [Bonfire Mosaic](#) and [WhiteWind](#) as publisher applications on ActivityPub and AT Proto, which incorporate context-based advertising and can deliver content across various applications (also as an alternative to, for example, Substack)
- Validated design interventions that enhance protection and participation for users can be found at [Pro Social Design](#)
- The guide published by the [Data Protection Foundation](#) regarding the secure operation of instances in the Fediverse should be used as a basis for minimum operational standards and undergo further development
- [Save Social](#) brings philanthropic organisations and foundations into the Fediverse via stiftungen.social
- The [Newsmast Foundation](#) supports, among other things, media companies in moving their content to the OSW – thereby enabling both monetisation and democratic discourse
- Through the [Public Spaces Incubator](#), international public service broadcasters (including ARD and ZDF) facilitate constructive and moderated discussions among their users on current political issues, linking both the Fediverse and ATmosphere.

4. About this Initiative

Between December 2025 and June 2026, we held half-day meetings once a month at the Heinrich Böll Foundation's offices. At each session, we addressed a pre-defined challenge relating to the scaling of public-interest social networks.

In order to organise our work more effectively, background information was gathered before each meeting and initial ideas for possible benchmarks and indicators were set out in writing. At the start of each session, we invited one or two additional experts, who provided us with specific insights into the challenge under discussion and answered our many questions. We then discussed the draft benchmarks together, analysed them in detail and subjected them to stress tests based on our findings. We would also like to thank our two facilitators, Sanga Lenz and Quincey Stumptner, who guided us through our sessions with great professionalism and creativity.

We are:

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Björn Staschen @ Save Social

Catherine Tait @ New_ Public

Sebastian Vogelsang @ Eurosky

**Mirko Vossen @ State Chancellery of
Rhineland-Palatinate**

Eileen Wagner @ UX-Designer

Further literature

On the Open Social Web and its design:

- Cathleen Berger and her co-authors analyse the added value of decentralisation for democracy
*Decentralisation as democratisation:
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- Torben Klausen analyses how the OSW can become mainstream
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On polarisation and the role of algorithms:

- Tiziano Piccardi and his co-authors analyse how content rankings influence polarisation
<https://www.science.org/doi/epdf/10.1126/science.adu5584>
- Philipp Lorenz-Spreen classifies research findings using X as an example
<https://www.sciencemediacenter.de/angebote/soziale-medien-x-posts-koennen-polarisierung-verstaerken-25221>
- Pilot study on how bridging algorithms work
<https://kgi.georgetown.edu/research-and-commentary/better-feeds/>

On the role of online advertising:

- Report by the Greens/EFA Group in the European Parliament on the online advertising market:
<https://extranet.greens-efa.eu/public/media/file/1/7267>

On the work and promotion of open-source communities

- Elisa Lindinger analyses the support measures that could be used to strengthen open-source communities working on public infrastructure:
<https://recommendations.implicit-development.org/>
- The Prototype Fund team explains how digital civil society is developing community technologies:
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