

From helplessness to sovereignty.

Matrix as a use case for fairer information infrastructure

Most people support some form of regulation.

Companies should have to follow rules

94%

strongly agreed, survey 1

I know the consequences of mismanagement

38%

strongly agreed, survey 1

Up to each company to decide

90 to 93%

disagreed, surveys 1 to 3

Tech workers have no trust in organisations' ability to self-regulate, whilst largely believing that **regulation is needed**, but either don't know what the consequences of mismanagement are or **they don't see any enforcement.**

Challenging the privacy paradox.

What the paradox assumes

- Users report concerns about privacy and share their data anyway (Barth and de Jong, 2017)
- This behavioural dissonance is read as irrational, or as a trade for convenience

What participants described

- Conditional trust in some companies and sectors, and not others
- Reluctant acceptance
 - “In the end felt I had no choice but to accept the conditions”
- Distrust, overwhelm and being unable to “escape” certain products

Fear based interventions do not last, especially when enforcement is virtually non-existent.

- “Everyone has heard of the massive fines associated with GDPR, so we had to adapt accordingly.” – 2019 participant
- Repercussions were cited less often over time, possibly because enforcement was lower than anticipated (Ruohonen et al., 2022)
- A sense of moral obligation, reported on average by 58% of participants, increased steadily
- Change happened and was sustained when people had **autonomy, time, resources and leadership they trusted**

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**...reclaim their autonomy through
decentralised or federated, end-to-end
encrypted services and platforms.**

Survey participant

Quoted in Almeida (2026)

Matrix as a use case.

Making workers accountable for black boxes they could not inspect.

- Participants had to use, implement and build on proprietary tools without being fully aware of how they worked, whilst remaining responsible for the compliance that came with them
- The services organisations depend on for hosting, marketing and day-to-day operations are mostly proprietary and concentrated in a few large providers
- A black box cannot be audited by the person accountable for it, so **the helplessness participants described as users carries into their work**

Principles for digital sovereignty.

Principle	What is it solving?	How is it applied in Matrix?
Transparency by design	Systems people cannot see into or audit	Open specification, open source homeservers and clients, audited cryptography
Participatory governance	The absence of “voice” (Kinchin, 2024) and agency	Public spec change process; protocol held by the Matrix.org Foundation
Interoperability and autonomy	Being unable to “escape” certain products	Federation by default; run your own homeserver and still reach everyone else

Matrix in the public sector today.

Selected deployments

Country	Deployment	Used by
France	Tchap	Government
Germany	BwMessenger	Bundeswehr
Germany	TI-Messenger	National healthcare system (gematik)
Germany	openDesk	Public-sector office suite
Luxembourg	LuxChat	Government to citizen communications
Intergovernmental	Ni ² CE Messenger	NATO Allied Command Transformation

Source: Element, Matrix in Europe (element.io/matrix-in-europe), accessed 16 October 2026.

Where open infrastructure still needs work.

- Open code gives little control to someone who cannot read it; independent audits and plain-language disclosure could be the answer
- Recovery, identity portability and choosing a homeserver still favour the technically literate
- Suppliers who repackage Matrix without contributing upstream weaken the maintainers the sovereignty case depends on
- Sovereignty is often reduced to where a supplier is based. The critical point is actually self-hosting and control over data: who runs the server, who holds the keys and who decides where data goes

Individual action to combat helplessness can start with asking the right questions.

- Who is building this product or service?
- Who is funding it?
- What am I exchanging by using a free service?
- Can I trust this organisation with my data?

However, collective action and infrastructural change are the real catalysts to build trust and sovereignty.

- Commission independent audits regularly
- Make the spec process accessible to non-technical populations
- Associate sustainable procurement initiatives with the funding of governance infrastructure
- Hold to a definition of sovereignty based on self-hosting and control over data
- Replace incumbent proprietary and centralised solutions with open alternatives

Thank you.

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