



Press release

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Bundesnetzagentur publishes discussion paper on interoperability between messaging services

The Bundesnetzagentur has today published a discussion paper on interoperability between messaging services.

"Many people use messaging services like WhatsApp. We're seeing a strong market concentration in the sector, with the Meta group services being particularly popular in Germany," explained Jochen Homann, Bundesnetzagentur President.

"Interoperability – opening up closed communication networks to stimulate competition – is a means to an end. The effects of interoperability on competition, consumers, data protection and data security need to be considered together to avoid unintended consequences. If we enable communication across providers, we have to prepare it carefully and provide long-term regulatory monitoring. The Bundesnetzagentur has a lot of experience working with other EU regulators on such issues and is well-prepared."

Examining the effects and requirements of interoperability

The market concentration in the messaging sector and the de facto dependence on dominant providers may be attributed to network effects. This is when users of a particular messaging service benefit from a greater number of users of the same service, because they can usually only communicate with each other. On the other hand, there is nothing preventing users from having several messaging services at once.

The Bundesnetzagentur takes the view that interoperability obligations could encourage competition. However, depending on the type of obligations, they could also pose challenges, for example in the field of data protection and data security, affecting both the processing and encryption of communication data. A possible impact on the further development of services and desirable innovation would also have to be taken into account.

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The aim of regulation would be to break the market power of dominant providers and reduce dependence on them. There are calls for the largely closed communications networks to be forcibly opened up for providers of competing messaging services. This interoperability between different messaging services would enable users to communicate regardless of their provider.

The Bundesnetzagentur's discussion paper provides an overview of different technical interoperability approaches for messaging services as well as using key questions to analyse the need for interoperability. It also looks at the various effects of possible interoperability obligations.

Changes in the use of telecommunications services

Messaging services have significantly changed telecommunications usage in Germany. A recent consumer survey by the Bundesnetzagentur shows that 88% of Germans regularly communicate using these internet-based services, up from 83% in 2020. The most-used messaging services in Germany are WhatsApp (93%, previously 96%), Facebook Messenger (39%, previously 42%) and Instagram Direct Messages (25%, previously 30%). All three are provided by Meta (formerly known as Facebook). Competing services from other providers are much less popular, although nearly three quarters of those surveyed use at least two different messaging services in parallel ("multihoming").

Messaging services: background

Unlike traditional telecommunications services such as telephony and SMS, messaging services are provided via the internet. They enable people to communicate with each other using voice and video calls, voice messages and images, group chats, etc. As of December 2021, the new German Telecommunications Act (TKG) has included messaging services, as "number-independent interpersonal telecommunications services", in parts of the regulatory regime. The aim of this is to create fair competitive conditions between new services, such as messaging, and traditional telecommunications services like telephony and SMS. The law also permits



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interoperability obligations to be imposed on messaging services under certain conditions.

The Bundesnetzagentur discussion paper has been published online at www.bnetza.de/InteropMessenger. Market participants and other stakeholders are invited to give their views on it.

The Bundesnetzagentur is an authority under the responsibility of the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy. Its core tasks include supervising the energy, telecommunications, postal and railway markets.

As part of its mandate, the Bundesnetzagentur ensures that as many undertakings as possible can use the infrastructure in these sectors so that consumers benefit from competition and favourable prices.

The authority employs over 2,900 people at its headquarters in Bonn and Mainz and its 46 regional offices.