

Bridging the Open Web and APIs: Alternative Social Media Alongside the Corporate Web

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Background

- Efforts to build alternative social media challenge concentrations of ownership and control among corporate web platforms.¹
- **IndieWeb** is a “people-focused alternative to the ‘corporate web’”.² Individually owned websites connect using IndieWeb standards, forming peer-to-peer social networks.
- **Bridgy** is a non-commercial web application used to:
 - (1) syndicate posts from a personal website to various social media platforms.
 - (2) pull comments, likes, and reshares from those platforms back to one’s personal website.
- Bridgy helps IndieWeb sites interoperate with the ‘corporate web’ to which they are an alternative.

Questions

- What challenges arise while building alternative social media that rely on corporate platforms?
- If challenges arise, how are they addressed?

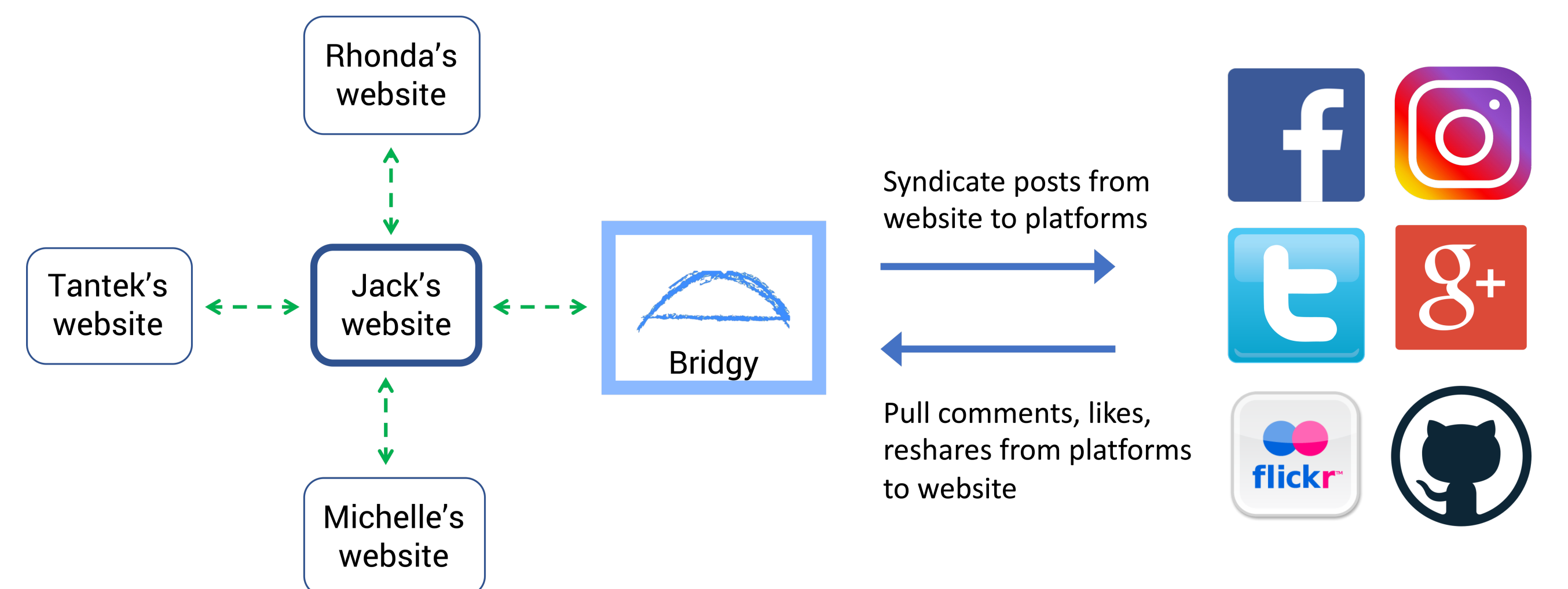
Method

- Analyzed 147 **issues** on Bridgy’s GitHub repository that concerned Bridgy’s use of Facebook’s API.
- Conducted open coding to categorize recurring and significant challenges. Followed links from issues to related **commits** to identify developer responses to these challenges.
- Followup semi-structured interview with Bridgy’s lead developer. Validated interpretations of GitHub data and highlighted his motivations.

GitHub glossary

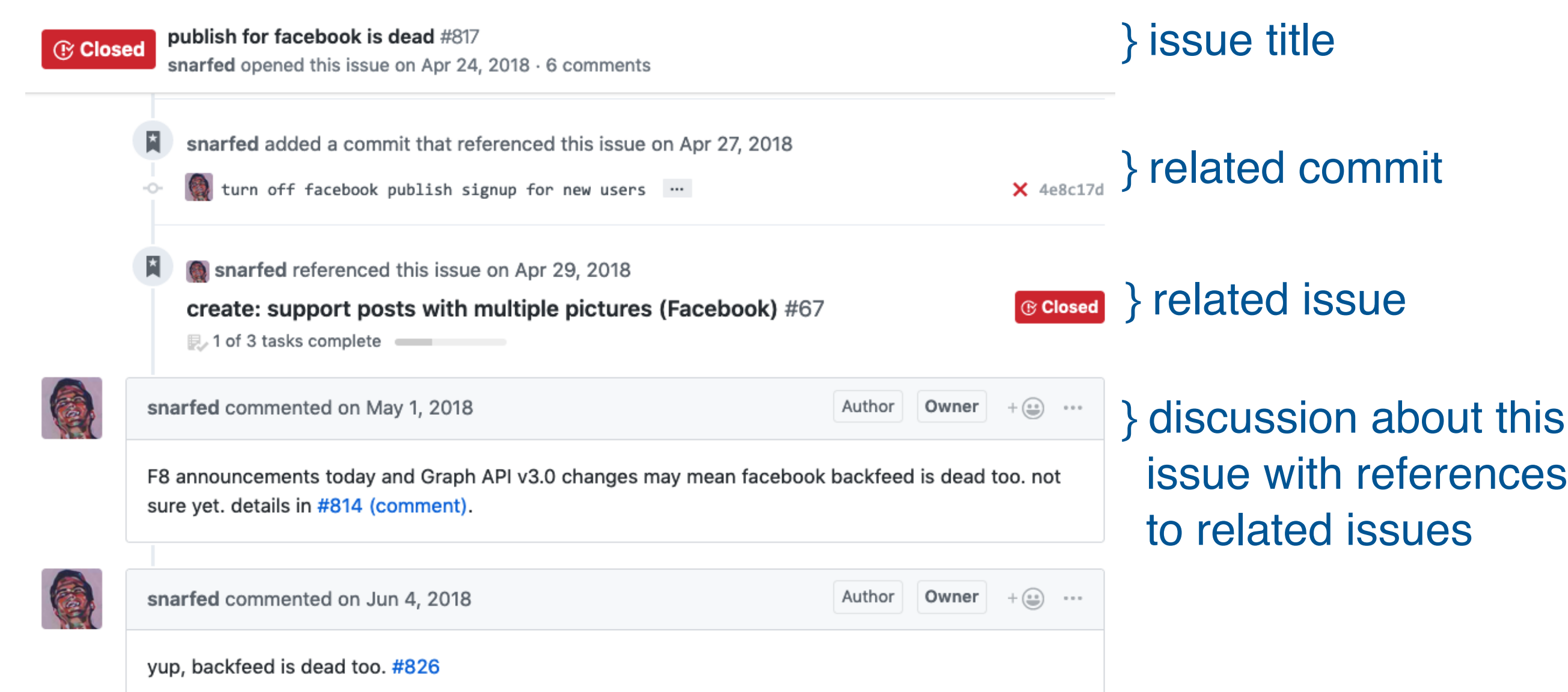
- **Issue:** A bug report or feature request. Each issue contains a discussion thread.
- **Commit:** A record of changes to a repository’s code or files. Can reference an issue (e.g. “This commit fixes a bug described in issue #20”).

Background: IndieWeb and Bridgy



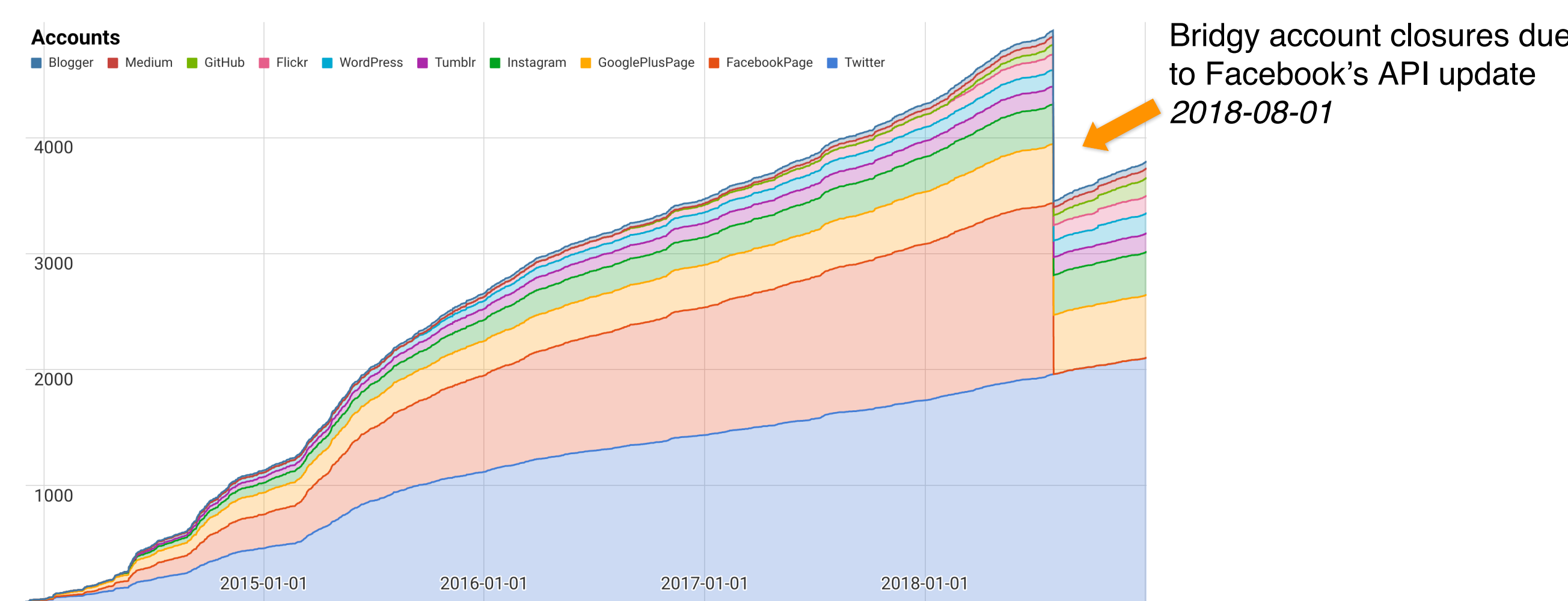
Left: IndieWeb sites can interact with each other directly using IndieWeb standards. Right: Bridgy connects personal websites to various platforms.

Method: GitHub Issues



<https://github.com/snarfed/bridgy/issues/817>

Result 3: Precarity and API Changes



https://snarfed.org/2019-01-02_bridgy-stats-update-4

Results

1. Mapping between personal websites and Facebook’s API

- Facebook’s design does not support Bridgy’s use-case of mapping between objects on the web (personal websites or through Facebook.com) and their equivalent inside Facebook’s API. Bridgy’s developers performed constant maintenance and articulation work to span this boundary.

2. Privacy ambiguity

- Sometimes Facebook’s API is unclear about whether content (usually photos) is public or private, even if the privacy status is clearly defined in Facebook’s user-facing interface.
- Bridgy only works with public posts, and ignores content if it cannot determine that it is public. Erring in this direction has been reported by some users as a bug.

3. Precarity and API changes:

- Facebook has frequently changed its API to improve privacy and security. These changes have modified and removed features relied upon by third-party applications like Bridgy.
- In late 2018, Facebook closed much of their API after the Cambridge Analytica scandal. Bridgy was forced to drop support for Facebook (see chart at bottom centre).

Implications

Third-party developers can contest the logics of corporate platforms, to a point.

Responsible use of APIs requires understanding their differences from user-facing interfaces. This is especially important with matters such as privacy and user autonomy.

Designers and researchers who rely on platforms must be prepared for ongoing maintenance and articulation work. Longitudinal access is laborious and contingent.

References

- ¹ Gehl, R. W. (2015). The case for alternative social media. *Social Media + Society*, 1(2), 1–12.
- ² IndieWeb.org. (2018).

Draft paper at jackjamieson.net/smsociety19
Feedback is welcome, Thank you!

