Europe's relationship with American technology increasingly resembles an addiction. The patient knows it's bad for them but cannot quite bring themselves to break it, because they don't not know where to start. And yet everyone agrees that the longer the addict waits, the higher the price of the addiction becomes.

That is the real question that decades of conferences on what we rhetorically call Europe's "digital sovereignty" have talked around without ever answering.

What Europe has lost is not simply any leadership in what are called "digital markets" – it is actually losing control over the data that now runs every other industry. This is steadily eroding the lead of the entire European economy from the automotive industry to pharmaceuticals. It is vital that we walk the talk and ensure EU digital policies are both robust and effective.

Technological dominance

Development economists — and plain common sense — suggest that autonomy from another country's technological dominance is won by carving out protected space in which a domestic alternative can grow. Building European alternatives to American (and, to a lesser degree, Chinese) technology also matters for the opposite scenario: that if someone else decides to cut Europe off from connections it has come to depend on.

European alternatives already exist for almost everything, and someone has even catalogued them, aptly, on a website called European Alternatives. France's Qwant and Germany's Ecosia are search engines to rival Google (albeit ones that still run partly on Microsoft's infrastructure). And Nokia still sells mobile handsets (although they run on an US Android operating system).

America's technological edge is real even if US firms depend on partnerships that are themselves global. However, its decisive advantage is that everyone already uses its platforms.

France has a video-conferencing service, Visio, no less capable than Zoom, that almost nobody uses for the simple reason that few people seem to know about it (except for the civil servants who are obliged to use it for their virtual meetings). This is precisely why it looks increasingly undeniable that Europe should — in some areas, and through a gradual plan — create a protected space that its own industry could occupy.

Europe of the future

A protected space is, in essence, what allowed China to build the only systemic competitor to the US at the start of this century: a shield against American platforms, in a country with the scale to grow its own champions — Alibaba, Tencent, TikTok, DeepSeek. However, China in 2005 could make choices that would not suit Europe today. We have neither the institutional settings, nor the geopolitical position that enabled China to execute drastic choices.

This brings us back to the question of where it might be useful, affordable and legitimate to launch a plan Europe has not yet had the nerve even to discuss.

A recent conference on The Europe of the Future, held in Siena, northern Italy, put the question directly and came back with three criteria.

First, areas where it is possible to gradually disconnect from non-European technologies so that Euro companies can have priority, should be chosen by weighing up three factors. The cost of disconnecting in that area must be low (currently it is prohibitively expensive to discontinue Microsoft Office). The cost of continued dependence is high and rising. And the investment and the time needed to close the gap with today's market leaders should not be too big – it's next to impossible, for now, to challenge Nvidia's latest AI chips.

Second, any industrial policy has to be built on law and on rules Europe has legitimately set itself, rather than on the retaliatory logic of tariffs and executive orders, which shreds the stability everybody needs. That also means revising, in the meantime, rules that must be refocused on the very objective of making European digital offers emerge.

Third, Europe should weigh its own negotiating leverage against countries unwilling to cooperate.

Surprisingly, it's not true that our only bargaining chip is 450 million relatively rich consumers. ASML, the company that makes the machines allowing Nvidia and TSMC to cut the semiconductors powering AI, is entirely European.

It's true Mastercard and Visa can be ordered, theoretically, to prevent Europeans from using their platform; but most cross-border payments made by American banks go through SWIFT, the system used for international transactions which is based in Brussels.

Targeting social media platforms

Apply those three criteria, and social media is probably the first target a serious European industrial policy could take on.

The cost of losing, say, an American-owned dating site like Tinder would not be devastating. But the damage Facebook has done to teenagers in particular is being proven even in the US, suggested by owner Meta reaching an $18 billion settlement with US states and territories.

The gap to be closed between European and US digital platforms is not big, and the German social media network Mastodon is possibly already at the technological frontier. Crucially, the European Union’s Digital Services Act 2024 already supplies more than enough legal grounds to plan a disconnection.

The method for developing a plan to identify the actions in the short and medium-term needs to stay dynamic, because all the factors discussed above are constantly shifting. But dynamic or not, Europe badly needs it, if its digital policy is to acquire teeth.