The Real Problem Isn't Just AI — It's Systems That Don't Work Together or Alone

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Introduction: It's Not Just ChatGPT

The media loves to debate whether artificial intelligence is good or evil — helpful or dangerous, creative or extractive. But in real-world practice, the biggest frustrations I feel add to these concerns both the problems working with the tools and the problems of the lack of a common language that allows these tools to work together.

Our project — Navigating Our Future (NOF) — uses ChatGPT, Notion, Airtable, Google Drive, and Wix to develop and publish bioregional stories, systems education materials, and contributor databases. These tools, however, don't speak the same language. What should be a seamless workflow often becomes a maze of reformatting, data loss, and repetition.

The problem isn't just AI. The problem is systems that don't talk to each other — and too often, don't even work on their own.

It's Not Just Between Systems — It's Within Them Too

Let's be clear: the problem isn't only about integration failures between platforms. It's also about internal fragility within individual applications. ChatGPT, for instance, can lose formatting, forget confirmed instructions, and regenerate outdated versions of content even in isolated use. Its memory system, while promising, is still inconsistent — especially in handling structured, long-form documents that require precision across sessions.

In our case, we've experienced memory drift, export corruption, and formatting breakdowns that have forced multiple rounds of rework. And this isn't unique to ChatGPT. Similar issues arise in Notion (with database syncing and API limits), Airtable (in view management and filtering), and Wix (in custom CMS integration).

The Hidden Cost of Disconnected Systems

When tools can't integrate or function reliably, the burden shifts to the user. We end up building workarounds, maintaining separate backups, and translating the same data across systems — all while hoping nothing breaks. This fragmentation leads to lost time, increased error rates, frustrated collaborators, and a constant erosion of trust in the tools themselves.

In knowledge and publishing work, this is more than an inconvenience. It threatens the integrity of the work itself. For educators, civic planners, or systems thinkers like us, reliability isn't a luxury — it's essential.

What We Actually Need

We don't need more features or smarter AI. We need platforms that can maintain structural fidelity, communicate with each other, and offer predictable behavior. That means:

• A common language for cross-platform data
• Stable memory and formatting systems
• Built-in interoperability — not just fragile plug-ins
• Transparent export and version control mechanisms

Without this, even the most advanced AI becomes just another broken link in a disjointed chain.

Who's Working on It

Several initiatives are beginning to take this seriously:

• The Block Protocol and Composable Software Movement are trying to build tools that are modular and interoperable by design.
• Notion, Airtable, and Google are slowly introducing better APIs and cross-platform syncing tools.
• The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) and Solid Project (by Tim Berners-Lee) advocate for open data standards.
• OpenAI itself is rolling out memory, custom instructions, and tool integrations — but current support for long-form publishing and formatting remains limited.

These are encouraging steps, but adoption is slow. Most commercial platforms are still designed for vertical lock-in, not horizontal integration. And users are left to build the bridges themselves.

A Systems Perspective

The irony is that our work at NOF is rooted in systems thinking — the idea that we must understand parts in relation to the whole. Yet the tools we use to communicate that very worldview are themselves fragmented. This isn't just a tech inconvenience. It's a reflection of deeper structural disconnects in how digital tools are imagined, built, and deployed.

To fix this, we need more than new apps. We need a shift in design philosophy — toward coherence, interoperability, and real-world resilience.

What We're Doing

At Navigating Our Future (NOF), we've taken a layered and determined approach:

• Use ChatGPT for early drafting, not final formatting
• Use Notion to lock final protocols and documents
• Store and back up final Word/PDF files in Google Drive

• Maintain manual reference tables in Airtable when automation fails

Despite these setbacks, we've continued to move forward. These workarounds haven't just been patches — they've been small acts of system design. And they've shown that with care, rigor, and resilience, it is still possible to create meaningful public resources even within broken ecosystems.

Final Thought: Integration is the Innovation

The real opportunity isn't to make AI smarter. It's to make the systems around it coherent. Until platforms can talk to each other — and function reliably on their own — we'll remain stuck in a digital loop of repeating ourselves. Integration isn't a feature request. It's the future of usable technology.

And the sooner we recognize that, the sooner we can start building tools worthy of the intelligence they carry.

Take Action: Help Build the Future of Interoperable Tools

If you've felt these same frustrations — with ChatGPT, Notion, Airtable, or any other platform — you're not alone.

Here are a few ways you can take action:

• Share your story. Tag @OpenAI, @NotionHQ, @Airtable, or @Wix using the hashtag #FixTheFlow
• Support open interoperability efforts like https://blockprotocol.org or https://solidproject.org
• Encourage transparency and user-centered design in the software tools you use
• Read our white paper for deeper analysis of system fragmentation and pathways forward: https://navigatingourfuture.org/interoperability

Let's build systems that work together — and that actually serve the people using them.

Sources and Acknowledged Voices

• Block Protocol – https://blockprotocol.org
  Advocates for interoperable, modular web components.

• Solid Project – https://solidproject.org
  Led by Tim Berners-Lee to promote open data and user-controlled platforms.

• John Maeda – Design in Tech Reports – https://designintech.report
  On design-system fragmentation and tech culture blind spots.

• Ethan Zuckerman – https://ethanzuckerman.com
  Writing on civic tech, public interest design, and interoperability challenges.

- Data Futures Lab – https://datafutures.org
  Working on civic digital infrastructure and ecosystem coordination.