Enshittification

How digital platforms decay over time — exploiting users, businesses, and value itself

What Is Enshittification?

A term coined by **Cory Doctorow** describing the predictable three-stage decline of online platforms:

1

Stage 1: Good to Users.
Platforms use capital to offer deals and lose money on services to lure a massive user base.

2

Stage 2: Good to Business Customers.
Once users are locked in, the platform pivots to favour advertisers and merchants.

3

Stage 3: Harvesting Value.
The platform extracts all value for itself, leaving only a "homeopathic residue" for everyone else.

Stage One: The Golden Age

Initial Value to Users

Platforms offer exceptional, user-friendly services designed purely to attract and delight audiences.

- Clean interfaces with minimal distractions

- Features that genuinely solve user problems

- Free or low-cost access to build community

- Rapid innovation and responsiveness to feedback

The goal: Build a large, engaged user base and network effects

Stage Two: The Pivot

User Exploitation for Business Customers

Once users are locked in through habit and network effects, platforms shift focus to monetisation.

Data Harvesting

User behaviour, preferences, and personal information become products to sell

Attention Economy

User attention is sold to advertisers and business clients at premium rates

Lock-in Tactics

Switching costs increase: friends, content, and history keep users trapped

Stage Three:
Maximum Extraction

Abuse of All Stakeholders

The platform's primary goal becomes extracting maximum value for shareholders and executives, sacrificing everyone else.

Users Suffer

- Degraded interfaces cluttered with ads
- Privacy erosion and data breaches
- Algorithmic manipulation
- Reduced organic reach and visibility

Businesses Suffer

- Rising advertising costs with declining returns
- Platform competition from in-house products
- Unpredictable algorithm changes
- Forced participation in auction systems

Amazon – Phase 1 (Be Great to Users)

Goal: Rapid growth and user loyalty

- Low prices and fast delivery
- Excellent customer service & easy returns
- Prime offers strong value
- Trust and convenience prioritised

Value flows to USERS

Amazon – Phase 2 (Exploit Users for Sellers)

Goal: Monetise the user base

- Sponsored listings dominate search results
- Fake or low-quality reviews increase
- Cheap third-party products flood the platform
- Harder to find the best product

Value shifts to SELLERS & ADVERTISERS

Amazon – Phase 3 (Exploit Everyone)

Goal: Maximise platform profits

- Rising seller fees and forced ad spending
- Amazon copies successful seller products
- Users face clutter, lower quality & higher prices

Value flows mainly to AMAZON

How Platforms "Lock In" Users

- **High Switching Costs:** Users stay to avoid losing access to digital assets, such as **Kindle books or Audible libraries**, which cannot be moved to other platforms.
- **Collective Action Problems:** People stay on social media because their friends are there, even if they hate the platform's management.
- **Digital Rights Management (DRM):** Platforms use encryption to ensure your media stays on their platform if you leave.

Case Study: amazon
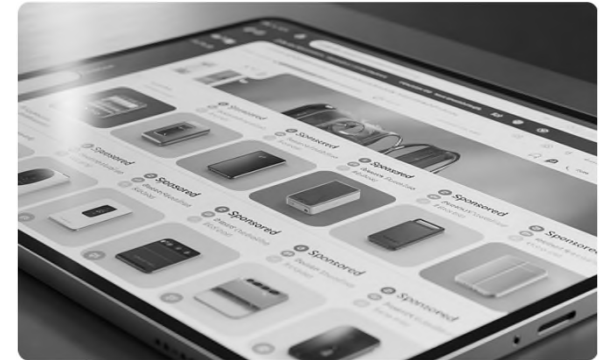
- **Search Manipulation:** Results are now **"pay-for-placement."** The best match for a user is often hidden **17 places down** or on the second screen.
- **Junk Fees:** Amazon now takes **45p to 51p of every pound** earned by third-party merchants.
- **Amazon's own products** promoted over third-party sellers
- **Dependency:** Merchants become trapped because Amazon has decimated high streets, making it the only place where customers can be found.

Case Study: Google Search

- **Monopoly Power:** Google holds a **90% market share** by buying "shelf space" as the default engine on almost all phones and browsers.
- **Growth Demands:** To satisfy Wall Street, Google has **deliberately made search worse** to force more searches and show more ads.
- **Declining Quality:** Results are now filled with **SEO slop**, ads that look like organic links, and incorrect AI summaries.

Google

Case Study:
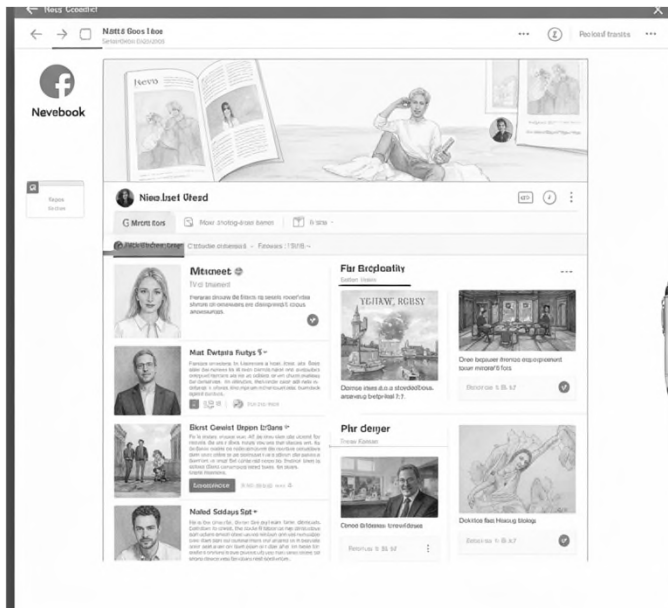
- **Broken Promises:** Facebook originally promised privacy and no spying to attract users away from MySpace.
- **The Pivot:** Once users were locked in by their social circles, Facebook began spying on them to sell targeted access to advertisers.
- **The Metaverse:** This represents the final stage of enshittification—an attempt to imprison users in heavily surveilled virtual world

Case Study:
YouTube Demonetisation

Why Creators Are Angry

- Opaque policies undermine creator livelihoods
- Automated enforcement, vague rules
- Serious content is financially punished

What Demonetisation Means

Ads limited or removed

Video stays online

Income drops sharply or disappears

The Core Problem: Vague Rules

Terms like 'controversial' and 'not advertiser-friendly'

No clear definitions

Inconsistent application

Automation First, Humans Later

AI SCANS WORDS, TONE, THUMBNAILS

CONTEXT OFTEN IGNORED
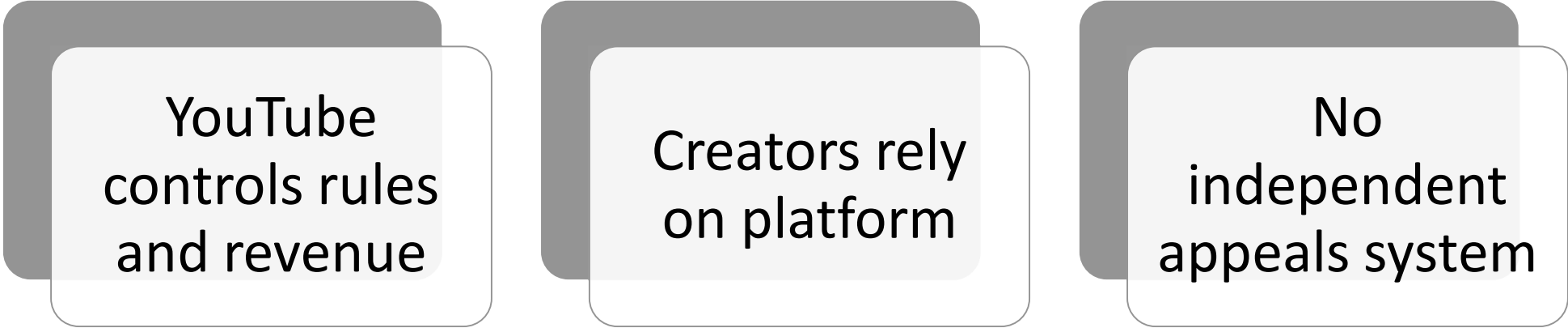
APPEALS ARE SLOW AND RISKY

Important Topics Get Penalised

Politics and war reporting

Mental health and social issues

Educational but uncomfortable subjects
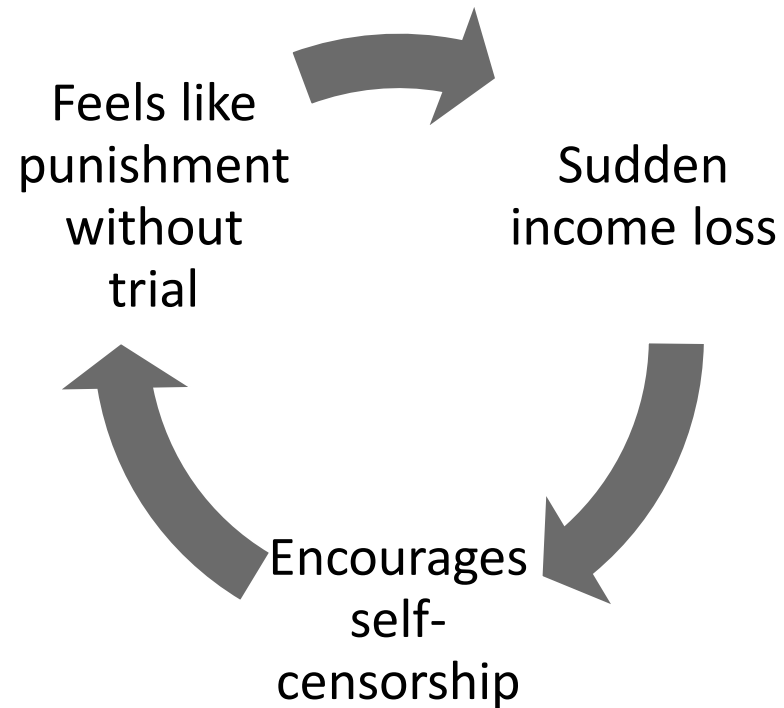
Power Imbalance

YouTube controls rules and revenue

Creators rely on platform

No independent appeals system

Why Creators Call It Punitive

Feels like punishment without trial

Sudden income loss

Encourages self-censorship

Wider Impact

BLANDER CONTENT FOR AUDIENCES

INDEPENDENT VOICES STRUGGLE

MONEY SHAPES PUBLIC DISCOURSE

Beyond Digital Services

Even Physical Products Degrade

Smart TVs exemplify enshittification extending into hardware:

Initial Promise

Sleek devices with streaming apps, voice control, and regular updates

The Reality

Mandatory firmware updates that slow performance, inject unskippable ads, and harvest viewing data

The Trap

Expensive hardware becomes a Trojan horse for ongoing data extraction and advertising revenue

Why Does This Happen?

01

Profit Maximisation

The relentless drive to increase shareholder value incentivises cutting costs, boosting revenue, and extracting every pound possible

02

Monopolistic Power

When platforms dominate markets, users have no viable alternatives. Captive audiences can be exploited without fear of losing them

03

Business Model Shift

The core mechanism: transitioning from serving users to serving business customers destroys the original value proposition

04

Network Effects as Prison

Once everyone you know is on the platform, leaving means losing connections — social lock-in enables abuse

The Broader Implications

For Society

- Erosion of digital commons and shared spaces
- Surveillance capitalism becomes normalised
- Information ecosystems corrupted by profit motives
- Democratic discourse undermined

For Innovation

- Monopolies stifle competition and new entrants
- Short-term extraction replaces long-term value creation
- Trust in technology companies collapses
- Interoperability and openness disappear

The pattern is predictable: without regulation, competition, or accountability, platforms will inevitably prioritise extraction over value creation.

Why Individual Choice is Ineffective

- **"Voting with your wallet"** fails because the wealthy have "thicker wallets" than average consumers.

- **Systemic vs. Individual:** Trying to solve monopolies by "shopping carefully" is compared to trying to solve the **climate emergency** solely through recycling.

- **Policy Failure:** The problem is not just "terrible men" like Musk or Zuckerberg; it is a policy environment that rewards bad behaviour.

Can We Stop Enshittification?

The Power of Collective Action

Antitrust Reform:
Lobby for **muscular competition regimes** that punish bad behaviour and prevent massive consolidation.

Organised Movements:
Join pressure groups like the **Open Rights Group** to fight for systemic, political change.

Worker Power:
Tech workers should **unionise** to gain the power to discipline their employers from within.

Restoring the Internet

- **Technological Self-Determination:**
  We must recover the freedom of the early internet
  while maintaining modern ease of use.

- **Rejecting Fatalism:**
  We must reject the idea that "there is no alternative" to
  abusive platform practices.

- **A Vital Tool:**
  A healthy internet is essential as a **"digital nervous
  system"** to organise mass movements against global
  crises like fascism and the climate emergency.