

Satires 4: The Great Enshittening

A user's guide to why everything you relied on has got worse, and why the people who did it have no plans to stop

Welcome to the Enshittocene. You didn't book a holiday here. The wifi doesn't work, the pool has been closed since 2019, and the customer experience ambassador seems very sincere about something, though it's unclear what.

Cory Doctorow coined "enshittification" to describe what happens to online platforms. But once you see the pattern, you see it everywhere.

The Three-Stage Trick

Stage one: the platform is good to its users because it needs them. Low prices, decent service, and a returns policy that feels almost too generous. This is the prototype phase, and it is genuinely delightful.

Stage two: having locked in users, the platform turns on its business customers. Fees rise, terms change, and the algorithm buries you unless you pay to be seen. But the users are still there, so the suppliers put up with it.

Stage three: the platform turns on its users. Growth has plateaued, shareholders want more, and the only untapped market is the existing user base. Quality falls, ads multiply, terms of service become impenetrable legal armour designed solely to protect the platform from ever being held accountable. The product was you all along.

Once you see this, you cannot unsee it.

Amazon: The Case Everyone Lives

Amazon's early promise was almost absurdly generous. Free next-day delivery. A returns process that asked no questions. A marketplace where small sellers could actually reach customers. The customer really was king.

Then Amazon got big, and the golden age ended.

Today, search results are stratified layers of "*Amazon's Choice*" products selected not for quality but for margin. Sponsored listings crowd out genuine recommendations. The returns process now requires a label, a trip to a drop-off point, and seven to ten working days. After which your refund arrives as a gift card, because Amazon would rather you spend the money with them.

The third-party sellers (once treated as partners in a grand retail democratisation) are now a squeezed middle, paying rising fees to reach customers who increasingly can't find them without paying for visibility on top. Amazon destroyed the alternative retail landscape, then filled the resulting crater with its own declining offerings. The lock-in was the point.

Facebook: The Social Abyss

Facebook began as a way to see what your old school friends were doing, punctuated by the odd farm invitation. It was fun. Pointless, but fun.

Then it got serious. Two billion users. Three billion. And the algorithm shifted.

The News Feed stopped being a record of your friends' lives and became a machine for keeping you angry. Research (including Facebook's own internal studies, later leaked) established that the algorithm prioritised 'engaging' content, and angry content is very engaging. So the algorithm learned to serve outrage. About vaccines. About elections. About whether your neighbour was walking their dog correctly.

Simultaneously, organic reach for businesses and community groups collapsed. To be seen, you had to pay. And then pay more. Local publishers (the small, the community-focused, the actually informative) couldn't afford the rates and fell silent. What replaced them was a feed optimised for division and optimised for advertising, in roughly that order.

The original promise — *come and see what your friends are doing* — is now delivered, if you are lucky, between long stretches of content designed to make you furious enough to keep scrolling. The friends are still technically there. They are just harder to find under the avalanche of things designed to make you afraid of them.

UK Mainstream Political Parties: Enshittification Without the Tech

The political parties have managed something remarkable: they have enshittified the democratic process without ever writing a line of code.

The basic dynamic is identical. A party secures a base of supporters. Then it optimises for the voters it doesn't yet have. Specifically, the voters it calculates it can peel away from the other side. The base, having nowhere credible to go, is taken for granted. Its concerns are addressed in the most nominal terms possible, in the full confidence that the voters will turn out anyway because the alternative is the other party, which is worse.

Look at Labour on trans rights. For a moment, the party seemed to be moving towards genuine equity. Then the polling was consulted, the focus groups assembled, and senior figures concluded that transphobia was sufficiently popular with a key demographic to make it worth adopting as a position. So they adopted it. MPs who knew better repeated the mantras anyway. The voters (trans people, their families, and their allies) had nowhere else to go. So the terms of service changed.

The Conservatives, for their part, have been in terminal decline for longer. Their base absorbed a decade of austerity. You know the form: degraded services, constrained pay, a voluntary sector hollowed out. While being assured that this was all happening for your own good and that the deficit was coming down. The lock-in was near-total. And when the product finally became unbearable enough that even loyal customers noticed, the party that had been delivering it for thirteen years was ejected from government.

The replacement is new. The pattern, we may safely predict, will be familiar.

The NHS: Enshittification of a Different Kind

The NHS cannot technically enshittify, because it is not optimising for shareholder value. The

mechanism is different. The outcome, for patients, is similar.

The Darzi investigation into the NHS, published in 2024, described a service in critical condition. Waiting lists at record highs. A&E departments failing to see patients within any reasonable timeframe. Staff are exhausted and underpaid. The report is a document of managed decline. Slow, measured, and, for those who work within it or rely on it, devastating.

The degradation has come through a combination of underfunding and deliberate marketisation. PFIs built hospitals that continue to drain public budgets into private balance sheets. Outsourcing created a layer of providers whose primary loyalty was to their shareholders rather than to patients. The internal market — introduced by the Conservatives, expanded by Labour — meant that the NHS itself spent increasing amounts of time and money managing contracts with private providers rather than delivering care.

The staff are the users who got locked in first. They raised the alarm. They were told there was no magic money tree. They were offered pay awards that didn't keep pace with inflation. And now the service that remains is so degraded that people who work within it cannot get the care they need from it.

The product they built is being withdrawn from them in slow motion, and they are being asked to be grateful that it still technically exists.

What Is To Be Done?

Doctorow's proposed solutions are regulatory: interoperability requirements that prevent lock-in, data portability rights, and antitrust enforcement that takes seriously the self-reinforcing nature of platform monopolies. These are not exciting ideas. They are the kind of boring, technical, entirely necessary things that regulators used to understand and then forgot and are now slowly remembering.

For public services, the answer is political will. The NHS will not be saved by a patient-facing app that gamifies your waiting room experience. It will be saved by paying its staff properly, by investing in capital rather than leasing it from private equity, and by treating the founding mission (healthcare free at the point of use) as something worth defending rather than something to be transitioned out of.

For political parties, the answer is harder, because the product is democracy and the customers are voters and the whole self-reinforcing machine runs on the reasonable-sounding idea that there is no alternative.

But perhaps — and this is where I permit myself a small, exhausted, but genuine flicker of optimism — the answer begins with naming the pattern. The enshittocene is not a force of nature. It is a choice. Made by people. For reasons they believed they could justify. And if it was designed, it can be redesigned.

Though I appreciate the Customer Experience Ambassador is very sincere about the pool reopening next quarter. She has been sincere about this for some time now.

One lives in hope. Though not, it has to be said, in the pool.
