

Why Do Platforms Optimize Engagement Instead of Quality?

Reality Drift Visual Explainer #6

Engagement optimization, proxy metrics, and the Optimization Trap in modern digital systems.

Part of the Reality Drift framework (A. Jacobs, 2023–2026)

Many modern platforms evaluate success using measurable signals such as clicks, watch time, engagement, session duration, and growth metrics. These indicators are easy to track and scale, which makes them attractive targets for optimization.

But these signals are usually **proxies** for the things people actually care about — usefulness, accuracy, quality, or meaningful experience.

When systems begin optimizing the proxy instead of the underlying goal, the metric improves while the real outcome gradually deteriorates.

Social media becomes more addictive but less meaningful.

News becomes more engaging but less informative.

Products become more optimized but less satisfying to use.

This pattern appears across digital platforms, institutions, and AI systems. The system continues to function, sometimes even more efficiently, while its outputs slowly drift away from the reality the system was originally designed to represent.

The Mechanism

Most versions of this pattern follow the same structural loop:

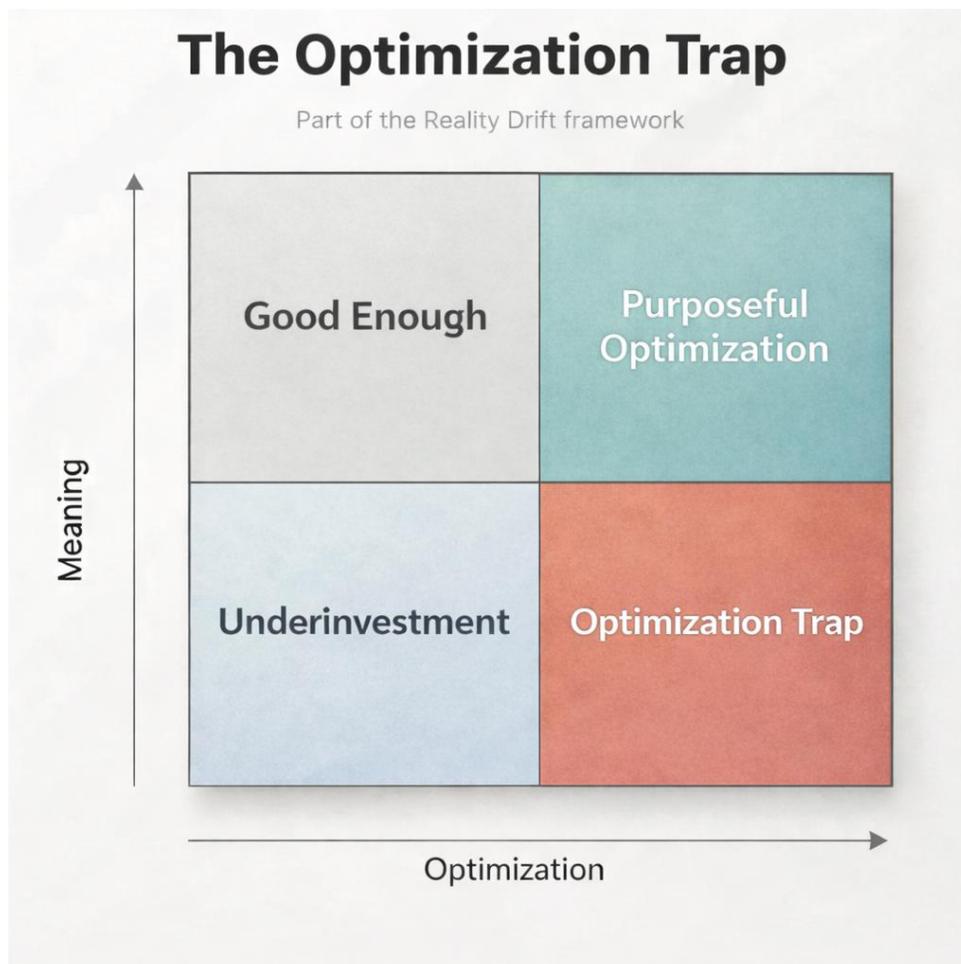
- A **measurable signal** is introduced to evaluate performance
- Systems begin optimizing behavior around that signal
- The signal becomes easier to manipulate than the real outcome
- The proxy gradually replaces the underlying goal
- Optimization continues while real-world alignment deteriorates

The result is a system that appears to be improving according to its metrics while the lived experience of users steadily declines.

This dynamic is sometimes described in specific domains as metric gaming, reward hacking, or enshittification.

Within the Reality Drift framework, this dynamic is known as the **Optimization Trap**, a structural failure mode where systems continue optimizing internal metrics even as those metrics become increasingly disconnected from the real outcomes they were meant to measure.

Diagram: Optimization and Meaning Loss



This diagram illustrates the Optimization Trap, a condition where systems increase optimization while alignment with real outcomes declines.

Related concepts: Reality Drift, Optimization Trap, Proxy Optimization, Metric Gaming, Reward Hacking, Enshittification.

