

Reality Drift and Enshittification

How platform deterioration continues to produce evidence of success

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Enshittification

Enshittification describes a platform lifecycle in which a service first attracts users, then shifts value toward business customers or advertisers, and eventually extracts more value for itself. The platform remains useful enough to retain participation while the experience becomes more commercial, constrained, and difficult to leave. The concept identifies a specific political-economic trajectory. Reality Drift addresses a different question. How can a degrading platform continue to appear successful according to the representations that govern it?

The Reality Drift Connection

Platforms cannot optimize user value directly. They rely on proxies such as activity, retention, conversion, advertising yield, seller volume, and subscription revenue. Proxy substitution occurs when these indicators become the practical definition of value. Proxy optimization begins when the platform reorganizes decisions and incentives around improving them.

The pattern develops as user value is translated into measurable activity, measurable activity becomes a monetization proxy, the proxy becomes a platform target, and users adapt their behavior to the new conditions. That adaptation can then return to the platform as apparent evidence that the optimization is working.

The Optimization Trap develops when improvements within the representation become easier to demonstrate and reward than improvements in the underlying experience. Each local gain supplies evidence that the strategy is working. The system responds by deepening the same optimization, even when users encounter more advertising, worse search, lower-quality recommendations, or greater dependency.

Adaptation Becomes Evidence

Users and businesses adapt to the altered platform. They learn new visibility rules, pay for access that was previously organic, tolerate additional friction, and concentrate activity where the platform still controls the audience. The platform then interprets continued participation as evidence of preference rather than evidence of dependency and adaptation.

This is representational inversion. The platform changes the territory, forgets the degree to which it changed it, and reads the territory's response as independent confirmation of the platform's model.

Why Correction Weakens

Complaints, declining quality, employee knowledge, and user frustration may all remain visible. They become corrective feedback only if they can change the objective. When revenue, retention, or market power absorbs those signals without altering direction, feedback remains present but loses force. The resulting system can remain profitable and operational while losing contact with the conditions that originally made it valuable. Deterioration becomes survivable because users bear dispersed costs while the platform records concentrated gains.

What Reality Drift Adds

Enshittification describes the platform's deterioration and transfer of value. Reality Drift explains how deterioration can continue generating successful internal evidence and therefore persist without correction.

The platform does not merely get worse. It loses the ability to interpret worsening conditions as disconfirming evidence.

Where This Pattern Appears

This pattern appears when search results are displaced by sponsored or platform-preferred listings, when organic reach is replaced by paid visibility, and when marketplace rules increasingly favor platform extraction. It also appears when services introduce additional friction while internal revenue, retention, or other performance indicators continue to improve.

Source Note

Cory Doctorow coined enshittification to describe the degradation of online platforms as value shifts among users, business customers, and platform owners. Related Reality Drift concepts include proxy substitution, proxy optimization, the Optimization Trap, feedback weakening, and representational inversion.