

# Disenshittify U

AI Log reviews Enshittification: Why Everything Suddenly Got Worse and What to Do About It

[Rob Nelson](#)



Photo from [Getty Images](#).

**What we fear is the fully braudrillated society; in**

**which the tyranny of materials is replaced by the tyranny of images; where man is not starved by being denied bread, but starves for believing bread is out of fashion...What fashion shall we set, in such a mutual hell, to make our neighbors crowd together against us, and force us out and into Paradise.**

**—John M. Ford, *Growing up Weightless*—quoting the fictional French social theorist, Claude François Ronay**

The slogan *touch grass* reminds us that the material world has not disappeared, even as our attention is consumed by images on our screens. You can always go for a walk, or to sleep. And you don't need more data to prove the value of doing either. The datum of our own experience tells us it would be unwise to spend another hour online. Too often, we do anyway. We blame ourselves. Speak of addiction. Resolve to change.

Cory Doctorow doesn't believe that sort of thing gets us far. Your New Year's resolution to de-Google or stop shopping at Amazon is not going to fix the problem.

[Enshittification: Why Everything Suddenly Got Worse and What to Do About It](#) (2025) is about what will. And it starts not with putting our screens away, but with using them to change things for the better.

Amazon, Facebook, Google, Twitter, Uber and several other brands you probably hate but still use, grew by being very good to their customers. They delayed

profitability to spend revenue to improve their users' experience, keep prices low, and buy the competition. Once they dominated the market, they began using their platforms to extract value relentlessly, first from their users, and then from their business customers. This process created profits for them and misery for everyone else. That's enshittification.

Having nearly everything online covered in it is pretty awful, but the answer is to get to work cleaning, and figure out ways to direct [the flow to better purpose](#). Yes, digital computers are used to surveil citizens, pollute culture, and trap people on platforms that make them miserable. But Doctorow believes computers are double-edged. Every computer is a universal machine: "There is no known practical way to make a computer that only runs the programs its manufacturer approves of." Networked computers are, therefore, tools for undoing the bad things that have been done with them: "Every enshittificatory gambit has a potential disenshittificatory countermove."

Those gambits, embedded in digital applications and platforms, are "the result of specific policy decisions, made by named individuals." Those individuals are the villains in the book, and the story of why everything got worse boils down to a handful of very rich and influential people trying to rig the system in order to become richer and more influential.

# Techno-feudalism

Having built their startups into towering bureaucracies of monopoly and monopsony power, the founders and their big investors are trying to pull up the ladder behind them. They beat markets into submission by commercializing the digital commons. In so doing, they got rich, of course, but more important, they came to control the most populated and fertile parts of the internet. Now they want to rule as the Norman conquerors did after 1066. As Doctorow puts it, the reason “so many self-professed ‘capitalists’ seem hell-bent on abolishing capitalism and replacing it with feudalism” is they want to preserve their power and control. Markets are brutal, unforgiving machines that, like war, subject all participants to uncertainty and loss. So the new oligarchs spend their profits to make their victory permanent, attempting to change law and custom so they charge rents rather than compete.[1](#)

Such attempts are nothing new, and neither is political resistance. The antitrust cases making headlines this year are based on laws that are over a hundred years old. Like the robber barons buying the 1896 election for William McKinley, the tech lords bending their knee to mad king Trump are merely attempting to preserve what they feel is rightfully theirs. Yet, the chaos unleashed by Trump’s second term is destroying the political and legal systems that sustain Silicon Valley’s influence.[2](#)

Doctorow was based in Europe for much of the last decade, so his account of the dynamics there helps make clear the global dimensions of Trumpian chaos. Silicon Valley has long relied on the US federal government to strengthen its negotiating position with the European Union, but Trump's support for authoritarianism abroad, his faith in tariffs, and his explicit renunciation of support for long-time allies is dismantling leverage built up over the past several decades. Europe is now free to enforce rules around privacy and competition, and turn [interoperability](#) into a principle that lets people make the universality of computers work for them. Their experiments limiting US tech's influence is a model for the rest of the world.[3](#)

In the US, both major political parties look to channel growing public frustration about the new layers of enshittification Silicon Valley is adding with generative AI. The end of 2025 saw Trump's [executive order challenging](#) efforts by states to regulate AI, but it also saw [a letter](#) from the National Association of Attorneys General putting Google, Apple, Meta, and OpenAI on notice that they "may be held accountable for the outputs of their GenAI products." This year will see [a range of AI-related state laws and regulations](#) coming into effect.

*At the heart of the book is a hope that Silicon Valley overreach and Trump's chaos will result in a backlash that inspires young people to revive the labor movement and energizes tech regulation.*

Demands to regulate access and outputs is one dimension of how are going for Silicon Valley's hopes for generating revenue out their AI investments. This year will also begin to resolve the bets that management of technology companies made about the capacity of language machines to automate knowledge work. Transformer-based language models, like the personal computer and the steam engine, are automating tasks and changing how people work, especially in software development. Three years in, generative AI is starting to [feel normal](#), and, like all previous digital technology, is a mixed bag of utility and frustration.

Those who preached artificial general intelligence and the dream that everything, everywhere, would change in a matter of months were either fooling or being fooled. Now we'll see how the oligarchs will react to the lesson that modern technology seldom keeps the promises its early prophets make.

## **Google history**

2018 was a good year for workers at Google. They steered the company away from temptation. The strategy was simple. Shine a spotlight on some secret, bad thing management wanted to do. Threaten to walk out if it didn't change. That worked twice to deliver Google from evil. Project Dragonfly, which Doctorow describes as "a neutered search engine designed to mollify Chinese state censors and pave the way for the company's reentry into

the Chinese market" was cancelled. So was Project Maven, a small-stakes push to enter the giant market in military technology. These projects were secret for a reason, and once the secret was out, they ended.

Emboldened by the success, workers really did walk out on November 1st when it became public that Google had paid Andy Rubin \$90 million dollars after he was fired for sexual harassment. Forcing an abused subordinate to arbitrate her complaint in secret while slipping a massive golden parachute to her abuser was a different kind of evil, but evil is evil. The walkout resulted in tangible gains for worker rights: an end to forced arbitration, freeing workers to pursue claims of discrimination and harassment in court. As Doctorow says, at the end of 2018, there was a sense that "Googlers had their bosses on the run."

It didn't last. One of the first visible signs was the 2019 firing of four of the most outspoken organizers of the internal resistance to Google's breaking bad. The reason? An [internal memo said](#) they were involved in "systematic searches for other employees' materials and work" and that they "repeated this conduct even after they were met with and reminded about our data security policies." The fired workers said they were targeted because "they took a stand and organised for a better workplace."

Was it "union busting" or reasonable enforcement of rules? A bit of both? The [firing of Timnit Gebru](#) a year later

sent a clearer message, one that continues to reverberate. As large language models began to capture the imaginations of Google's management, the open culture and collaborations with academic researchers emerged as a problem. Management's response to the [now famous paper](#) analogizing LLMs to stochastic parrots made it clear that critical analysis of the dangers of commercializing generative AI was unacceptable and foreshadowed something more drastic.

In 2023, Google fired 12,000 workers kicking off mass layoffs by other technology companies. "Tech workers enjoyed decades of absolutely top-tier workplace conditions," explains Doctorow. This wasn't because founders and their corporate managers wanted to make them happy. "It came out of a cold-blooded calculation that tech workers were very hard to replace, and in enormous demand, so they had to be kept happy or they might defect to a rival." When that calculation changed, engineers and designers were made to understand that, in the eyes of their corporate managers, they are no different from the people building mobile devices in Asian factories, driving delivery routes through suburban neighborhoods, and cleaning office buildings in Silicon Valley.

## **Make the internet great again**

Until the layoffs, there was a large constituency of tech workers whose salaries depended on not understanding

what their bosses were really up to. The top-tier, and those who aspired to it, weren't just there for the paycheck, or the cornhole and kombucha on tap. They believed that, like the bosses in their younger days, they were "doing well by doing good." Those promises proved empty just as hype about generative AI cranked up. The California dreams of a post-pandemic return to normalcy burst in the party game of [P\(doom\)](#), the swirl of Elon's purchase of Twitter, the WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes, and the bosses writing big checks to Trump.

As the founder heroes who commercialized the World Wide Web got older, weirder, and more distant from operational decision-making, their corporate managers have acted...well, like corporate managers. They never cared much for building digital god or dreaming of cybernetic meadows. Management focuses on efficiencies and margins, and nothing makes numbers go up like replacing expensive, unreliable human capital with machines. Set aside the science-fiction prognostications about AGI and the future of transformer-based language models is just a series of questions about how many jobs can be eliminated and how soon, along with how many new jobs the technology will create.[4](#)

What will twenty-somethings get up to as entry-level technical and managerial jobs disappear along with admissions to graduate programs? Doctorow wants them organizing and building countermeasures like [Para](#), putting digital tools in the hands of workers and activists.

At the heart of the book is a hope that Silicon Valley overreach and Trump's chaos will result in a backlash that inspires young people to revive the labor movement and energizes tech regulation.

Fixing the internet might seem like a first-world problem compared to climate change, US military actions at home and abroad, and mass murder in distant lands, but Doctorow's answer to that charge is that global problems require global solutions. This means a technical infrastructure capable of coordinating global social and political movements. That's what the internet of twenty years ago provided. Doctorow wants it back, stronger and better.

We *can* build a better, enshittification-resistant digital nervous system, one that is fit to coordinate the mass movements we will need to fight fascism, end genocide, and save our planet and our species.

## **Fear of a fully braudrillated society**

But doesn't it feel like the internet is part of why everything got worse? Sure, the markets were hijacked by technofeudalists, but it wasn't the tech lords and their minions alone who created toxic cesspits that seep addictive poisons into the flow of information through our devices. Consumer desires and the unwisdom of crowds explain a lot of what's happened. The tyranny of images chaining us to screens is a collective creation, the outcome of digital culture tied to algorithmic systems of distribution. Those systems are an out-of-control machine preventing us from building what humans need to flourish materially and spiritually.

Thoreau's call to "Let your life be a counter-friction to stop the machine" and Mario Salvio's elaboration of that line

feel like righteous resistance to the mutual hell we have created.

There's a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can't take part, you can't even passively take part, and you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you've got to make it stop!

Luddites quoting these guys have a point. It is not so easy to disentangle the good elements of the techno-social apparatus from the bad. Changing who sits at the top doesn't change the system. The billionaires playing the role of puppet master delude themselves as well as their audience about the extent of their power. Tinkering on the edges is a distraction. Maybe the answer is to wreck it and get to building human systems that avoid technology, or at least slow its development. Using digital tools to build better systems traps us in digital hell.

To his credit, Doctorow takes on this position directly. He calls Audre Lorde "manifestly wrong" that "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." Doctorow ignores the context of her words, but then so do those who brandish the line to argue against using digital technology for social justice.[5](#)

The advantage of Doctorow's focus on putting tools to good purpose is that it avoids hand-wringing about habits

of mind induced by new technologies or apocalyptic warnings of imminent cultural collapse. Both would sound familiar to someone living two hundred years ago. The feeling that everything is getting worse is as old as modernity and as new as the latest story in your feed. So is the sense that we need to do something about it, and uncertainty about where to start.

## **Disenshittify U**

The value of *Enshittification* is not how it explains the feeling that everything is worse. It is in translating that feeling into action. Doctorow could insist that the word he coined means just what he says it means. In fact, he says *enshittification* "isn't just a way to say 'Something got worse.'" But then, recognizing the expansive *everything* in his subtitle, he adds a footnote: "Though it's fine with me if you want to use it that way!"

### [The Unaccountability Machine: Why Big Systems Make Terrible Decisions—and How The World Lost its Mind](#)

(2024) by Dan Davies offers an account of this more expansive sense of enshittification. Davies agrees that everything really did get worse. He explains this as a decrease in accountability, more a systems problem than evil deeds. Bureaucracies have separated the life-changing decisions made by corporations from people who could explain those decisions and do something to fix bad ones. Organizational complexity is a long-standing feature of modern life, captured by terms like Kafkaesque,

catch-22 and [bike-shedding](#). The increasing separation of persons employed in organizations from the decisions being made has “weakened the failsafe concepts of accountability that protected us from bad decisions and bad people.” Life got more complicated, and now there is no one able to help navigate the complications.

This is consistent with Doctorow’s account of how bad people running giant technology companies ruined the internet. They deliberately added complexity, and hid it behind frictionless interfaces that trap consumers.

Platform enshittification explains other ways life got worse. Think about the hours spent trying to correct an error with your health insurance or resolving a problem in your employer’s HR system. The most egregious forms are when governments add layers of reporting to the social safety net, forcing those who lose their jobs, can’t afford groceries, or become disabled to spend hours and hours submitting information online or stand in a queue to talk to a person. By design, this means many who need those benefits don’t receive them because they cannot navigate the bureaucratic demands or quit trying in frustration.

Adapting the old Anglo-Saxon word into something that means poop smeared across digital platforms is a silly, juvenile way of describing this situation. We need more language like it. The value of *enshittification* is that it undercuts the theoretical seriousness of explaining postmodern conditions and the social scientific demand

to gather data, always more data, to validate what we feel is real. Yelling *Stop!* gives voice to the feelings but offers little more than a return to the garden. Yelling about how the internet turned into the *shitternet* is a call to collective action.

Disenshittify your government! Disenshittify your university! Disenshittify your life! This is a call to bring out the tools to clean the machines. It offers a sense of joyful engagement with dirty work that needs doing. It turns us all into custodians, workers who do the necessary and important work of taking care of people and their shit.[6](#)

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From the beginning, the new regime subjected technology companies to what Elizabeth Lopatto, writing at *The Verge*, calls [gangster tech regulation](#). Her [piece on Friday](#) explains Apple's and Google's [utter cowardice](#) in refusing

to ban Grok when it added child porn features as the outcome of Tim Cook's and Sundar Pichai's decisions to pay fealty to the kleptocratic alliance of Trump and Musk. Their [trained incapacity](#) blinds them to the political and moral consequences of their actions.

#### 4

To be clear, no one knows the answer to these questions. Taking uncertainty as the starting place does not generate as many clicks as confident predictions based what rich people what to read.

#### 5

Hollis Robbins [offers an interesting take](#) on the (lack of) value of this and other aphorisms in understanding the complexities of our current moment.

#### 6

If the idea of creating a new moral political economy grounded in the work of building a pluralist democracy and caring for one another appeals to you, I recommend [The Renovator](#). If your tastes run academic, see also the [Winter 2023](#) issue of *Dædalus*.