Tomorrow's Affairs

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An online phenomenon in the real world: Trump as enshittifier-in-chief

'Enshittification' is definitely one of the words of the moment, with outlets and organisations as varied as Money Week, the Guardian and the Norwegian Consumer Council all piling on in the last few weeks and warning that the trend is rapidly overtaking online platforms, including AI.

But it's hard to concentrate purely on the virtual environment when IRL, a war is raging and there are so many other contenders for phrase of the moment: 'decapitation strike', 'regime change' and 'Strait of Hormuz', for example.

'Enshittification', a term coined and developed by journalist and writer Cory Doctorow, has a specific tech and online meaning, even though it also leaches into the real world. He explains it as a techno-feudalism stage of capitalism, aided by the opportunities that big tech offers for control.

Real-world events such as the war on Iran might not immediately appear linked to the three stages of enshittification: 1. Capture a big audience with a good, free or cheap product. 2. Start charging businesses and professional users more but keep the quality high for them (not for others). 3. Maximise profit from a captive user base and neglect the quality of service.

Yet, if enshittification is indeed gaining widespread acceptance as, if not the main, then a characteristic of the virtual backbone of our modern societies, does it not follow that it will have an impact on real-life behaviour?

A real-world example of enshittification

It's not too much of a stretch to liken the way the US behaves under Donald Trump to internet enshittification: He identified that the US had successfully completed stage one in previous decades.

Stage two started in his first term, when he demanded friendly countries pay more for existing services – NATO, for example. As if the US was not already profiting hugely from having a captive and obedient market and set of allies.

Now, in stage three, he's moved to outright extortion, while no longer even providing the levels of 'services' – protection, stability, economic cooperation – that were given before.

> The enshittification part of the Iran war lies in Trump selling out the interests of his closest allies

Just like tech companies are constantly changing terms of service, making free tiers worse, adding paid-for features that used to be accessible in other ways, etc. Trump is changing the terms for America's allies.

The enshittification part of the Iran war lies in Trump selling out the interests of his closest allies, in the Gulf and Europe, for the single-minded pursuit of his own goals, whatever those might be.

He then withdraws a previously provided service, let's say stability in the Persian Gulf and open navigation through the Strait of Hormuz. It remains to be seen what US allies and others will have to pay to restore this.

Urgent action needed

A group of civil society organisations and internet activists, including Doctorow, recently sent a letter to EU policymakers, stating: "The recent geopolitical uncertainty has highlighted how vulnerable the digital backbone of society becomes when relying on a few dominant companies. Urgent action is needed."

They also express concern at the EU's drive to dilute or delay its AI and internet regulations. The Norwegian Consumer Council, one of the signatories, then published a very funny video of the work of an 'enshittificator', whose job it

is to make everything worse.

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The tactics of online enshittification are numerous, for example, erecting illogical paywalls, imposing high switching costs – locking in users and making it almost impossible for them to migrate to another platform, sector dominance and lack of competition, degrading free services that already provided the platform with profitable data, advertising and other benefits, and more.

This is partly enabled by the en masse shift of the last 15 years or so to SaaS, software as a service, something you have a subscription for rather than own outright.

Many people now stack numerous monthly payments on top of each other just for what once was considered basic internet and computer use.

It is in the interest of the tech companies to constantly fragment their services and come up with new, ostensibly indispensable applications that they can then charge for separately.

From streaming to AI

The MoneyWeek article cites streaming services as one clear example of enshittification, having now added advertising and demanding more money for previously free, ad-free services.

The piece sounds a dire warning: "This trend of corporate decay threatens the very moral legitimacy of capitalism itself. To protect the free market, we must tackle the root problem head-on."

AI is going through enshittification faster than any previous application, reflecting its rapid uptake as well as its potential.

In recent months, AI was seen as a SaaS killer because of its effect on the share prices of established software companies. But that effect is fading, both as the difficulties of dislodging established software providers become clear and as AI itself enshittifies rapidly.

> AI companies have long profited from massive access to free data on the internet in general and from their free users in particular

Reports of a marked deterioration in the performance of free tiers of major AI platforms, such as ChatGPT, Google's Gemini and Anthropic's Claude, started emerging already last year.

This often comes on top of overt or hidden limits on free use, for example, not being able to use the latest models or only being allowed a limited number of queries.

One reason often given for this is the enormous outlays required to research and develop AI as well as run it. Yet, this ignores that AI companies have long profited from massive access to free data on the internet in general and from their free users in particular.

But even paid tiers are becoming more limited, as well as hampered by the phenomenon of the models training themselves on their own 'slop' and becoming degraded over time.

The crisis of liberal democracies

AI enshittification is not just an annoyance involving a convenient but not yet crucial service. It threatens to choke off open or at least somewhat equitable access to the entire internet.

This is partly because AI is taking over the

function of what search used to do. One recent Deloitte study in Belgium found that already close to one-fifth of young adults now rely on AI chatbots for news. One third of them never check the sources.

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In the meantime, regular search itself is being degraded. Google now often offers AI summaries first, leading to a decline in click-throughs to websites. And search results also suffer from SEO and AI slop.

This development will hugely increase the digital divide, not only between the Global North and South but also between corporate, professional users and lower-income users or freelancers.

Some touted solutions to this, such as open-source software or locally run AI, are either too complicated for mass use or not as powerful and effective, or both.

The enshittification crisis of capitalism that MoneyWeek warns of is, to some people, the inevitable culmination of political and economic developments, at least since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

It's unlikely to be a coincidence that it comes to the fore at what is widely perceived as a moment of crisis for liberal democracies and as the international system is breaking down.

Enshittification and Trump's transactional way of dealing with the world are two sides of the same coin. It's unlikely that one can be addressed without also curbing the other.