

Data Archives as Digital Platforms

written by Jeremy Huggett | 12/07/2023



From Cory Doctorow's article, based on a 1936 original drawing by Wanda Gag for 'Hansel and Gretel' by the Brothers Grimm.

Cory Doctorow recently coined the term 'enshittification' in relation to digital platforms, which he defines as the way in which a platform starts by maximising benefits for its users and then, once they are locked in, switches attention to building profit for its shareholders at the expense of the users, before (often) entering a death-spiral (Doctorow 2023). He sees this applying to everything from Amazon, Facebook, Twitter, Tiktok, Reddit, Steam, and so on as they monetise their platforms and become less user-focused in a form of late-stage capitalism (Doctorow 2022; 2023). As he puts it:

... first, they are good to their users; then they abuse their users to make things better for their business customers; finally, they abuse those business customers to claw back all the value for themselves. Then, they die. (Doctorow 2023).

For instance, Harford (2023) points to the way that platforms like Amazon run at a loss for years in order to grow as fast as possible and make their users dependent upon the platform. Subsequent monetisation of a platform can be a delicate affair, as currently evidenced by the travails of Musk's Twitter and the increasing volumes of people overcoming the inertia of the walled garden and moving to other free alternatives such as Mastodon, Bluesky, and, most recently, Threads. The vast amounts of personal data collected by commercial social media platforms strengthens their hold over their users, a key feature of advanced capitalism (e.g., Srnicek 2017), making it difficult for users to move elsewhere and also raising concerns about privacy and the uses to which such data

may be put. Harford (2023) emphasises the undesirability of such monopolisation and the importance of building in interoperability between competing systems to allow users to switch away as a means of combatting enshittification.

None of this is new – as John Naughton (2023) reminds us, it's been a feature of the Internet for some 25 years. However, Doctorow's neologism is new, and seems to have struck a chord more widely – for example, Inger Mewburn's (2023) reflections on the relationships between academia and social media, and Mike Masnick's series of commentaries on the activities of internet companies (e.g., Masnick 2023abcd).

So what has any of this to do with archaeology? I recently wrote a paper on the development of the digital data infrastructures in archaeology that support archaeological practice (Huggett, forthcoming). While recognising the significance of such infrastructures in the management of archaeological data and the creation of archaeological knowledge, one of the characteristics that became apparent is the relative fragility of these systems. As users, we become increasingly reliant upon them as they largely become taken for granted components of our practice. In turn, these platforms are reliant on a mixture of personal, cultural, and economic factors at a regional, national, and international level, with an often-complex web of financial arrangements combining core funding (if not direct management) from government bodies, grants awarded in open competition at national and international level, commercial funding through deposit charges, and so on. For example, the **Archaeology Data Service (ADS)** has been under varying degrees of financial stress over the 27 years of its existence as funding and funding sources ebbed and flowed, and the same is experienced by archaeological data archives elsewhere (e.g., **the Digital Archaeological Record**). Surmounting difficult and changing funding circumstances presents major challenges to staff and resources with implications for operational priorities and activities more generally, and I argue in this paper for the importance of open debates over aspects of infrastructural developments and an understanding of their successes and failures. For example, archaeology has a long tradition of open access to digital data but in the face of financial challenges how long can a data archive continue to ensure free access to both the searchable data catalogue and to the underlying data? After all, providing free access to search and charging for access to the detailed results is a common commercial approach (see any genealogy website, for instance), but one we would surely not wish to see any archaeology data provider pursue.

I'm not suggesting that archaeological infrastructures risk the same enshittification as social media platforms, but some of the principles suggested by commentators to address enshittification may be equally relevant to archaeology. For example, Masnick (2023c) suggests seven principles for CEOs to avoid enshittification which I've adapted below and which might usefully reinforce our approaches to ensuring the maintenance of open archives:

1. **In it for the long haul:** archaeological platforms have to plan for long-term sustainability, including an exit strategy, in the face of often short term, one to five-year funding cycles. In such an environment, persuading users and funders that this paradox can be resolved in the longer term can present considerable challenges for an archive.
2. **Community is everything:** the importance of building a user community that then advocates for the platform, provides ideas for further development and improvements,

etc. This goes beyond the classic identification of 'users' as 'stakeholders', recognising that the community of practice also incorporates the developers, the system managers, the archives and collections managers, as well as those cultural and governmental bodies who are perhaps primarily concerned with regulation and funding of the platform. Each influence in different but equally important ways.

3. **Add value:** providing access to data is valuable but insufficient on its own without the additional contextual information, guidance on how to access the data, etc. But 'value' is more than simply monetary – values govern the development and use of the infrastructure, and so may introduce particular norms, expectations, and practices. These therefore need to be as transparent as possible to the wider community.
4. **Empower your community, then trust them:** as Masnick (2023c) describes it, "Push the power to make your service better out from the service *to the users themselves* and watch what they do. Let them build. Let them improve your service. Let them make it work better for you." Part of this is to recognise that experiences of a platform are not necessarily positive for everyone, and the more negative aspects which may obstruct or disrupt are often underestimated and hence unrecognised.
5. **Find ways to make money that don't undermine the community or the experience:** here, Masnick's advice is to "Focus on *adding more scarce value*, and figuring out ways to charge for those new things which can't be easily replicated" (2023c), rather than attempting to charge for things that users have already come to rely on. Identifying such things for archaeological platforms isn't straightforward but, for example, tools which enable the pooling of datasets as part of some kind of online data processing facility might be one area where monetisation could apply without affecting the fundamental user experience.
6. **Never charge for what was once free:** as Masnick (2023c) says, introducing charges for something that was free removes value and breaks trust with the community; "... always look for something new that is worth paying for above and beyond what you already offered. Make it so that it's *worthwhile* for people to pay, rather than acting like they need to pay you for the things they got for free until now." Since the majority of archaeological data archives start out as free in all respects other than for data depositors, this restricts what can be charged for in future with implications for sustainability and so requires investment in services that can subsequently be charged for.
7. **Don't insult the intelligence of your users:** Masnick (2023c) emphasises the importance of honesty and transparency with the community. Although archaeological data archives don't have the same kind of user relationship as a social media platform, the management of change still requires delicate handling and debate rather than imposition without consultation. If the success of a data archive is measured in terms of its embeddedness in day-to-day practice, then abrupt changes in policy or availability will be highly disruptive and unpopular.

Interestingly, many of these principles characterise ways in which that the Archaeology Data Service has sought to develop over the years in the face of its funding challenges. Several also characterise some of the reasons behind the failure of the **Archaeological Data Archive Project**, for instance. Building and maintaining a community of committed users is a key factor in the success or failure of any platform, whether archaeological or not.

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