

OWNED

We have become tenants on our devices.

BY ZEYNEP TUFEKCI

A decade ago, Amazon abruptly deleted copies of George Orwell's *1984* from the Kindles of its American customers. The move instantly evoked the "memory holes" in the novel's totalitarian dystopia, and it inspired about equal measures of shock, outrage, and jokes. (If a fictional Amazon in a dystopian novel had performed the same mass deletion, critics would have said it was too on the nose.) But in hindsight, Amazon's action was also a striking harbinger of a shift that has only become more pronounced since then: our wholesale tilt toward becoming a tenant society.

In that particular case, Amazon said the books had been added to the Kindle Store by a vendor who didn't actually have the rights to them. "When we were notified of this by the rights holder, we removed the illegal copies from our systems and from customers' devices, and refunded customers," said a spokesperson at the time. Amazon quickly apologized and said that in the future it would leave books on people's devices even if there →



was an error in how they got there. But one thing the company couldn't take back was the demonstration of its sheer power. Even the biggest traditional retailer could hardly dream of reaching into people's houses and taking back what it had sold them.

Today, we may think we own things because we paid for them and brought them home, but as long as they run software or have digital connectivity, the sellers continue to have control over the product. We

charged exorbitant sums for even simple repairs. And they lose crucial time heading out to the shop during the harvest season. Desperate farmers have taken to hanging out in shady internet forums, looking for software that will get around John Deere's locks, trying to assert their right to repair the tractors they ostensibly own.

Apple, too, has waged a scorched-earth campaign against anyone with the audacity to repair its products or replace its batter-

But this isn't merely a fight over prices and profit margins. What happens when you do something with your car, phone, or other object that corporate headquarters really doesn't like? Our connected devices can simply be bricked on command. Cars have been immobilized, for example, when the ostensible owner fell behind on payments by as little as three days. John Deere tractors with "unauthorized repairs" have been similarly taken out of commission. How long

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are renters of our own objects, there by the grace of the true owner.

Of course, "smart," connected machines do come with plenty of upsides. A modern washing machine doesn't just agitate the clothes around for a fixed amount of time; it senses water levels and dampness and can adjust how long it spins so your clothes come out at just the right level of dryness. Cars are more fuel-efficient because their computers optimize many aspects of their operation, from fuel injection to braking. All of this is good for the environment and your wallet.

But that is not all that's happening. Connectivity and embedded intelligence are being used by large corporations to increase their profits and to exercise as much control as they can get away with. Perhaps the most egregious example involves John Deere tractors—those iconic, bright green giants that rumble across big fields, noisily harvesting wheat, corn, and soy. For generations, farmers have repaired their tractors right on the farmstead. But in its push toward building ever more automated, sensor-packed agricultural equipment, John Deere has put draconian software locks on its tractors, forcing customers to visit the company's own repair shops. Farmers complain they are

ies. In 2017 it came to light that the company was secretly throttling iPhones with older batteries, slowing down their performance. Apple said it was doing so only to keep the aging phones from crashing outright. This technical reason for the move made sense; the fact that it was secret did not. And it was hard to ignore the ways the policy might also benefit the company. Users with increasingly slow phones were, in effect, being nudged to purchase a new device, allowing Apple to increase its already hefty profit margins.

After the scandal, an embarrassed Apple offered cheap replacement batteries. It soon became clear why the company held the line against them for so long. New iPhone sales went down; Tim Cook told shareholders that increased repairs were "a factor" in this trend.

More recently, Apple has reportedly cut a deal with Amazon to remove "unauthorized" refurbishers of Apple products—people who resell repaired machines—from the Amazon marketplace. In return, it will let Amazon sell new Apple products: a win-win for the two giants, but not for consumers. Apple also forces recyclers to shred old iPhones and Macbooks rather than reuse their parts and materials. That's definitely bad not just for consumers but also for the environment.

before other devices start behaving as spies and taskmasters in our own home? Will the coffee maker let us have that seventh cup that the doctor advised us against?

It's true that repairs of complicated gadgets may sometimes need to be done by licensed parties. But rather than more secrecy and exclusive control, companies could expand the base of people capable of doing the work. It's also true that connectivity is necessary for devices that run software; bugs need to be fixed and software updated. But there is no reason for that to be an unbounded license to brick a device or erase its content.

In March, US senator and Democratic presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren called for Congress to pass a national right-to-repair law that "empowers farmers to repair their equipment without going to an authorized agent." But it's not just farmers. It's all of us. We have fewer rights as digital tenants than we do as tenants of real estate, where eviction is subject to due process. If we purchase something, it is ours. We shouldn't let ownership go down the memory hole. ■

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