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**Transition:** Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.

**Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](https://MaximumFun.org) and is distributed by NPR.

**Music:** “Huddle Formation” from the album *Thunder, Lightning, Strike* by The Go! Team—a fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.

**Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. Now, a warning before we start our next segment. I am about to say a swear word. So, if you are listening to this interview on the podcast, you will hear the swear word. If you're listening to us on the radio, it will be bleeped. But we wanted to give you a heads up in case you or somebody with whom you are listening to this is sensitive to swears. Anyway.

Every year the American Dialect Society meets and does Dialect Society stuff. They probably have a banquet lunch, and then they put their heads together, and they brainstorm, and they pick a word of the year. Sometimes it's a few words. One time “dumpster fire” won. “Insurrection”, “covid” in 2020. And for the year that just passed, the American Dialect Society chose a word that, if you are listening to this on radio, we are going to have to partially bleep. “Enshittification”. The term was coined in a 2022 blog post by my guest, Cory Doctorow. He defined it pretty succinctly. “Here's how platforms die. First, they're 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.”

If you used just about any social media platform for any extended amount of time, you can probably attest to that. Instagram, Myspace, Facebook, Twitter—they aren't what they used to be. Some of them aren't even around anymore, at least in any recognizable form. If you used to get something out of those platforms—connections with old friends or little jokes or, you know, whatever—pictures of what celebrities are up to. That change, that drain circling, it's a drag. But Cory Doctorow doesn't think that enshittification is inevitable or irreversible. In fact, his new book outlines how the internet can become a better and more rewarding place. It's called *The Internet Con: How to Seize the Means of Computation*. It's out now. It is fascinating and inspiring. I'm so excited to talk with my old pal Cory this week. Let's get into it.

**Transition:** Jazzy synth.

**Jesse Thorn:** Cory Doctorow, welcome to *Bullseye*. It's nice to talk to you!

**Cory Doctorow:** Thank you. This is—without wanting to blow smoke up your butt, this is kind of a dream come true! I love *Bullseye*.

**Jesse Thorn:** You're supposed to save that part for the end. You butter me up at the end, not at the beginning.

**Cory Doctorow:** Well, no, now you're gonna go soft on me, which is like the whole point here!

**Jesse Thorn:** I appreciate it. Well, most people I invite on this show, it's so that I can go hard on them.

*(Cory agrees.)*

I'm known for doing that.

**Cory Doctorow:** This is one of those ambush interview shows. I understand that my exes are gonna come out next and give me a litany of all the things I've done wrong in my life.

**Jesse Thorn:** Yeah, exactly. *(Chuckles.)* Let's start with this essay that you wrote that, you know, went viral a few months ago about a word that you have coined that I'm gonna say. And goodness knows what the kind folks in Standards and Practices at NPR will make of it, but the word that you coined is “enshittification”.

**Cory Doctorow:** Yeah, I am reliably assured that at NPR headquarters they beep that. But—

**Jesse Thorn:** *(Chuckles.)* I think it's somewhat—the product is as described on the package. But what does enshittification mean?

**Cory Doctorow:** It really is about describing a specific life and death cycle of platforms in the 21st century, particularly the last decade, that I believe is contingent on a bunch of different factors. Some of them policy, some of them tech, some of them commercial. And it is a process that is normally quite slow but that has accelerated and spread really quickly so that every day all of my inboxes and social telephones are ringing off the hook with people going, “Did you see this thing that just—?!” Like, there were three of them today. And so, we're kind of living through the great enshittening.

**Jesse Thorn:** Maybe give me an example of a big technology company with which everyone is familiar—one that a lot of the people listening might use every day and how it went through this process.

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**Cory Doctorow:** Yeah, so I think the canonical example is Facebook. You have this platform—and a platform, it's like the endemic form of the internet, right? It mediates between business customers and end users. With Facebook, it's, you know, advertisers and publishers on one side and people who want to talk to their friends on the other. Uber's got like drivers and riders. Every platform's got its own different version, and you will recall the early halcyon days of the internet when we were all excited about disintermediation. And what we got was reintermediation. And that's the platform economy.

And so, in the beginning Facebook was flush. It had all of these—what economists call surpluses, which are just like goodies, things that it could freely spend. In that case, it was a bunch of investor capital that let it run its service without worrying about how to make money. So, it turned to its users, and it said, “Hey, I know you're all using Myspace, but—I don't know if you know this, but it's run by this like senescent, crapulent, evil Australian billionaire who spies on you with every hour that god sends. Come and use Facebook. It is the service where we'll never spy on you. All you need to do is come here, articulate your social network by telling us who matters to you by following them and denoting how your relationship works with them. And then whatever they post for consumption by the people that follow them, we're just gonna show that to you.” That was the original pitch.

**Jesse Thorn:** More still to come with Cory Doctorow. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

**Transition:** Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

**Jesse Thorn:** I'm Jesse Thorn. This is *Bullseye*. My guest is writer Cory Doctorow. He was one of the editors of *BoingBoing* and an acclaimed novelist. He also is the man behind the new book *The Internet Con: How to Seize the Means of Computation*.

Previously, Facebook got everybody to come in with this great promise. Which was we'll essentially share the largesse of our capital investors by giving you a platform that is free and smooth and works in a lovely way that is apparently less evil than Myspace and certainly smoother and prettier than Myspace.

**Cory Doctorow:** Yeah, I mean, it was less evil. Like, they didn't spy on you. Right? That was the thing.

**Jesse Thorn:** And so, they have this thing that they're giving you. It's courtesy—you know, it's paid for by their capital investors to some extent. And then once they've got you locked into this system, it costs too much to you to leave, because you would lose your friends.

**Cory Doctorow:** That's correct.

**Jesse Thorn:** I know I would no longer know what's going on with my Aunt Debbie or anything about the real estate market in Northern Virginia, where she lives.

**Cory Doctorow:** (*Chuckles.*) Well, there's also things like your kid's little league team, and you won't be able to carpool to the little league games, and all these other things where they're kind of locking you in.

**Jesse Thorn:** Yeah, so once you're stuck there, that's when they figure out how to stop giving you capital that they've raised from other people and start making operating profits.

**Cory Doctorow:** Mm, no, not quite. No, no, no. That's when they start to withdraw from you and start to lure in the businesses, right? Because you are a lure for a business.

**Jesse Thorn:** Got it. I skipped to step three or four, here.

**Cory Doctorow:** Yeah, you skipped to step three. So, step two is to make things nice for business customers. So, first they turned to the advertisers, and they said, “Hey, you remember when we told those rubes that we weren't going to spy on them? We were totally lying. We're spying on them comprehensively, and we're going to let you target them with ads. Those ads are going to be dirt cheap. They're going to have really fine-grained targeting, and we've got a whole building full of engineers who are going to track down ad fraud so that if you pay to see an ad—to show an ad, rather—someone's going to see it.”

And then they went to the publishers, and they said, “Hey! Do you remember when we told those rubes that we were only going to show them the things they asked for? That was a lie too. All you need to do is take excerpts of the content you publish on your own website, stick a link underneath it, and we will non-consensually ram it into the eyeballs of people who never asked to see it, and that will be like a free traffic funnel to your website where you can make money off of them however you want.”

**Jesse Thorn:** Or at the very least, when you say non-consensually ram into the eyeballs, you're talking bare minimum about the privileging of information—often to extraordinary extents. That if I have 15 or 30 friends on Facebook, I probably see everything that they post just because I've only got 15 or 30 friends there, and they post one thing a day, and I can read 15 or 30 things a day. When I have 2,000 friends on Facebook and I've liked 500 brands, then all of a sudden there is a supermarket shelf space issue, and Facebook is charging those businesses for the right to be at the front of the line to see my eyeballs.

**Cory Doctorow:** You are once again jumping ahead a step here. I'm just talking about the recommendations, right? I'm talking about brands you never asked to follow, right? Just all of a sudden there's—it's not just ads that are showing up in your feed that you never asked to see.

[00:10:00]

It's things that aren't ads that commercial operators, publishers have put onto Facebook and Facebook's now cramming them into your feed ahead of the things you asked to see. So, one of the things that makes enshittification a digital process and not a process that relates to, you know, eyeglasses or bottle caps or vitamin C—which are also very monopolized sectors, you know; like, one company makes all the eyeglasses. A French Italian conglomerate—

**Jesse Thorn:** Luxottica.

**Cory Doctorow:** Luxottica, Essilor, raised the price of glasses 1000% in the last decade. They own LensCrafters and Sears Optical and Target Optical, and they stole your eyes. But as evil as that is, they can't do this, right? Because what Facebook can do, what digital platforms can do is they can use the flexibility of digital to change the rules from moment to moment and second to second. So, if you're running like a retail outlet, right? If you're like Jeff Bezos, grocer, owner of Whole Foods, and I walk in, and Jeff Bezos knows something about me, he just doesn't have like an army of teenagers on roller skates who can go around and reprice everything based on what he thinks I'll buy or change the order of things on the

shelves. But Jeff Bezos, owner of Amazon Fresh, clicks a mouse and everything changes, right? So, there's all this flexibility.

So, to the advertisers, they said, “You know, the price is going up. The amount of ad fraud we're going to police is going to go down.” And that really gets to quite a terrible position. Like Procter & Gamble cut their \$100,000,000 a year programmatic ad spend. These are surveillance ads of the sort that Facebook serves. And their sales drop—well, do you want to guess what their sales dropped by when they cut out the \$100,000,000 a year they were spending on these surveillance ads?

**Jesse Thorn:** Gosh, Cory, I don't want to guess, but I'm going to guess \$100,000,000 a year, and it was a perfectly efficient system.

**Cory Doctorow:** Yeah, no. They saw no drop in sales. Because at least a majority, if not a super majority, of ads that advertisers pay to place never get seen by anyone. And so—and not just because you're like running an ad blocker, but just because there's so much ad fraud out there. So, they said to the advertisers like, “We're gonna charge you more. We're gonna do less to deliver your ads.”

And to the publishers, they start to twiddle the knobs as well. And they're like, “Actually, you gotta put more and more of your stuff into each post if you want us to show it to people. Actually, you've got to put the whole thing up. Actually, you don't just have to put the whole thing up, but if you put a link in, maybe that link is malicious. So, for security, we're not going to show it to anyone.” So, you just have to be a Facebook-only website, right? You can't publish anywhere else and then drive people to it, right? And when they complain—like Facebook quotes the Darth Vader MBA, right? “I have altered the deal; pray I don't alter it further.”

And then they turn around and they kind of—and this is the part that you were talking about. They say, “Actually, we're not even going to show the stuff that you're posting to the people who subscribe to it. Right? The people who we like recommended it to and then we're like, ‘Yeah, show me more of that.’ You're going to have to pay to boost it.” So, now you reach the third stage—right? Because you've locked in the business customers—advertisers and publishers. You've locked in the end users; the end users were bait for the advertisers and publishers.

**Jesse Thorn:** And at this point, Cory, those publishers—and when we say publishers, we're talking about people who are creating all kinds of things. Not just—you know, you might be imagining the *Washington Post*; maybe that's a bad example since it's owned by Jeff Bezos.

*(Cory laughs.)*

But you might be imagining the *Los Angeles Times*, and that certainly is included among that group of people. But you're also talking about somebody who has a blog. You're also talking about somebody who makes web videos.

**Cory Doctorow:** Yeah, or you know, a podcaster, right?

*(Jesse confirms.)*

It could be the announcements of new episodes of Maximum Fun podcasts, right? I don't know if we're allowed to mention Maximum Fun on NPR.

**Jesse Thorn:** Sure. Or NPR podcasts. Either one. Or both, ideally.

**Cory Doctorow:** Good, good. Or NPR podcasts! Other podcasts are available. So, yeah. So, this is a way to start withdrawing surpluses from both of those groups, right? And by the same token, the advertisers are famously on Facebook—not just Procter & Gamble, but like—you know, the local kids' ballet school that is like targeting like moms who have kids who are under seven, who have—you know, whatever, who live within a certain radius. You know, like all of those other kinds of businesses that do advertising as well. They're all getting implicated in this withdrawal of surplus from the business customers as well.

And the goal here is to draw out all the surplus except for the bare minimum needed to keep both business customers and end users locked to the service, right? To find an equilibrium between nearly so bad that everyone leaves and so bad that everyone leaves and to surf that wave. And that equilibrium, it's very, very brittle, right? One giant privacy scandal like Cambridge Analytica, a whistleblower like Frances Haugen, and people—they can just tip over from like, “I can't believe I'm still here” to “Why am I still here? I'm going.”

[00:15:00]

And when that happens, you get the final stage of enshittification, which tech platforms call pivoting, but which is better known outside of tech circles as panicking. And so, you have Mark Zuckerberg, who's like, “Well, for a while we were the social media company. Now, we're the company that is dedicated to converting you and everyone you know into a legless, sexless, heavily surveilled cartoon character in a virtual world we stole from a 25-year-old cyberpunk novel. And you know, as many billions as it takes, that's what we're going to do.”

And so, that's when everything turns into a pile of shit. And you may be—if you are as skeptical of big tech as I am at this point—thinking like why don't we just let them all collapse? And the problem is that they have provided something valuable and useful to both end users and business customers. And if we just let them collapse, that value and use disappears, and people get harmed, right? If you're part of a support group for people with a rare disease on Facebook, and Facebook shatters it because they fall apart, you might never be able to reform that community. And it might be something very important to you. Or it might just be the little league team never has an efficient carpool again, right? Like, there are so many ways.

Like, we could solve the problem of people living in harm's way in the fire zones in California by waiting until they all burn to death. But that is like an obviously suboptimal way to deal with that problem.

**Jesse Thorn:** We'll finish up with Cory Doctorow after a quick break. When we return: we know that the internet ain't what it used to be. So, how does Cory think that we can make it better? The answer, after the break. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

**Promo:**

**Music:** Bright, brassy music.

**Alex Schmidt:** Most of the plants humans eat are technically grass.

**Katie Goldin:** Most of the asphalt we drive on is almost a liquid.

**Alex:** The formula of WD-40 is San Diego's greatest secret.

**Katie:** Zippers were invented by a Swedish immigrant love story.

**Alex:** On the podcast *Secretly Incredibly Fascinating*, we explore this type of amazing stuff.

**Katie:** Stuff about ordinary topics like cabbage and batteries and socks!

**Alex:** Topics you'd never expect to be the title of the podcast: secretly, incredibly fascinating.

**Katie:** Find us by searching for the word (*whispers*) “secretly” in your podcast app.

**Alex:** And at [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org).

*(Music fades out.)*

**Transition:** Thumpy rock music.

**Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, my guest is Cory Doctorow. He's a writer who publishes regularly on the legendary blog *BoingBoing*. He's also a science fiction novelist and the author of the new book, *The Internet Con: How to Seize the Means of Computation*. Let's get back into our conversation.

So, this is a bleak vision. But your book is not called *The Internet Con: Why the World is Ruined Forever*.

*(Cory laughs.)*

And in fact, you—Cory—have a long history. You know, look. You're an old timey internet guy. You believe in the liberatory power of digital communication. You know? You like—

**Cory Doctorow:** You can say that without laughing! (*Laughs.*)

**Jesse Thorn:** I don't know. I mean, I remember when you moved to my neighborhood in 1995—you and your people. It was a lot.

**Cory Doctorow:** (*Laughs.*) It's okay. I got mugged like every six months.

**Jesse Thorn:** Yeah. And you earned it.

(*Cory laughs.*)

But—

**Cory Doctorow:** It was worth it for the burritos.

**Jesse Thorn:** But you believe that this is in some way fixable. But what are the forces here that could possibly go up against capital? Because I feel like the idea that we're all gonna, for example, buy and use open-source software or get free and use open-source software kinda didn't stick. I'm not saying nobody does, and I'm not saying there aren't instances where it's worked. But I'll tell you you're recording right now in a program called Audacity that's a free, open-source audio recorder. I'm not, because I hate it, because it stinks.

(*They laugh.*)

**Cory Doctorow:** But you're using Mac OS, which is built on BSD, which is an open-source operating system. And you've probably got an Android phone—if not in your own pocket, in the pocket of someone you love. And that's built on GNU Linux, which is a free operating system. And every web server you interact with—right? Chrome—

**Jesse Thorn:** Okay, okay, okay, however—however. So, individual action and even that kind of collective action that you described have not solved these problems yet.

**Cory Doctorow:** No, you're right. You're right.

[00:20:00]

**Jesse Thorn:** So, what are the ways—what are the powers that can go up against these structural challenges and against the—you know, substantially what you're describing is the problem of accumulated capital, right? That like these systems are built by huge amounts of speculative investment where that investment is primarily spent on preventing people from competing. So, what are the forces that can change this?

**Cory Doctorow:** Well, I'm glad you pointed out that these are not individual problems with individual solutions. I grow very frustrated with the idea that if we just shopped better, we could resolve our problems. I mean, one of the reasons I've worked for the nonprofit Electronic Frontier Foundation for more than 20 years is I think systemic problems have



systemic answers. And EFF's quite good about finding, you know, leverage points—often litigation but sometimes activist campaigns and sometimes both—that can move a lot with a very small effort. Or not a small effort, but the effort—the large effort of a small group like ours can make a big difference.

**Jesse Thorn:** And in the interest—sorry, in the interest of disclosure here, I'll mention that many years ago, a patent troll targeted the podcast industry. And the EFF was—including this company that makes this show. It was terrifying for me, and I thought I was going to lose my entire life and never podcast again and have to go get a different job in a different field. And EFF was very helpful in standing up to that.

**Cory Doctorow:** Yeah, we got the patent overturned.

**Jesse Thorn:** Yeah, ultimately, effectively. But go ahead.

**Cory Doctorow:** Yeah. So, I think that when you understand the three factors that gave rise to this very bad internet that we're living in now, then you can imagine how we could create a new good internet that would be a worthy successor to the old good internet. Because it wasn't the great forces of history that did this; it was specific policy choices.

The first one was allowing market concentration. And that's kind of the original sin, because when a sector dwindles to four or five companies, it becomes so concentrated that they can resolve the collective action problem. They can all gather around a table and decide what their lobbying priorities are. If you remember the Napster wars in the late '90s—you know, there were like seven entertainment companies that were, in aggregate, much smaller than the couple hundred tech companies whom they were jousting with in the policy sphere. And they just ran circles around these tech companies, because the tech companies were squabbling rabble. I mean, they couldn't even agree on like how to cater their annual industry association meeting, much less what they would tell Congress. Whereas the entertainment industry sang with one voice.

And the reason tech sings with one voice now is because the internet has turned into what Tom Eastman calls “five giant websites filled with screenshots of text from the other four”. Right? That they are now a small enough group that they all know each other, and they can all agree. So, we need to de-monopolize through breakups and merger scrutiny. And there's a lot of stuff going on there. And like, one of the interesting things about de-monopolization is that it has a lot of partisans who don't necessarily care about tech but do care that two companies control all the beer or that three companies control all the world's sea freight. And they kept telling their regulators like, “Look, Poindexter. You do what you do. We're going to keep making the shifts bigger, and I promise you none of them are going to get stuck in the Suez Canal.” Right? Or you know, the company that stole all of our eyes by taking over the whole eyeglass market and then buying Sunglass Hut and LensCrafters and EyeMed Insurance—the largest eye insurer.

All those people are partisans for corporate breakups. And that's why in the US, the UK, Europe, even in China we are seeing anti corporate concentration efforts of the sort not seen in two generations—since the Carter administration, right? French competition enforcers, as

we record this, kicked down the doors of NVIDIA's Paris headquarters. Literally, knocked down the doors to get at their files to prove illegal anti-competitive conduct.

**Jesse Thorn:** And there have been some successes in that area. I mean, I'm looking at my iPhone that's sitting on my desk. It has proprietary connectors. I can't connect to my computer without a thing that only Apple controls. Recently, the European Union forced Apple to use an interoperable connector—USB-A it is, I think. Right?

**Cory Doctorow:** C. C.

**Jesse Thorn:** C, thank you. A is the regular USB.

*(Cory confirms.)*

You know what was good about USBs? You know what I like about USBs? How they made like four different ones that looked in operated the exact same. And so, you never knew which cable you had and how fast it was going. But anyway.

**Cory Doctorow:** It's okay! Now we've got USB-C, where all the cables look the same, but they all do different things. It's a much superior outcome. *(Laughs.)*

[00:25:00]

**Jesse Thorn:** Exactly. So, our thanks to the European Union for forcing Apple into that position that they, you know, finally had to use a connector that connects with everything and that everyone has access to equally, relatively speaking.

**Cory Doctorow:** But more profoundly, you know, the DOJ and the FTC have just published new merger guidelines where they're just not going to let these companies buy each other anymore. Right? Like, that's—you know, it's nice to see some retrospective action. But like, the best way to fight a monopoly is to stop it from forming. You know, we let IBM get very big, mostly by letting it cozy up to the military industrial complex. And then when the DOJ came for it in 1970, it embarked on a 12-year program we called Antitrust's Vietnam, where it outspent the US government on outside counsel to fight the DOJ every year for 12 consecutive years, spending more on lawyers in the entire US government DOJ antitrust division every single year.

So, like once you let the monopoly form, it can be very hard to take apart. It took 69 years to get rid of AT&T's monopoly, and then we stopped enforcing antitrust law and all those companies merged again. And the one thing that the tech sector has no shortage of is crises, because there is no stable configuration in which one mediocre creep like Mark Zuckerberg is the unelected social media czar of 4,000,000,000 people's lives. And it still wouldn't be stable if like we got a better person to do that, right? There is no person who should have that job. That job needs to be abolished.

And so, we've got an absolute surplus of crisis in inventory. And we're squandering those crises. We need some good ideas lying around, so that the next time the crisis strikes, and we

say something must be done, we know what to do. And that's the point of this book. And that's the point of coming on and talking to you today.

**Jesse Thorn:** Well, Cory, thank you for your help, and we'll hope for another few years that structural forces favor the relative interoperability of podcasts and writing on the World Wide Web.

**Cory Doctorow:** Nice talking to you.

**Jesse Thorn:** Cory Doctorow. You can get his new book, *The Internet Con: How to Seize the Means of Computation*, at your local bookstore or at [Bookshop.org](http://Bookshop.org).

**Transition:** Cheerful synth.

**Jesse Thorn:** That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around Greater Los Angeles, California. My thanks to former *Bullseye* producer Nick White, who this week came over to my house after I realized that my van was full of hardware flooring, but the boxes were too heavy for me to move by myself. We got them out of there. Pretty soon there'll be a floor!

The show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Bryanna Paz. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music is by DJW, also known as Dan Wally. Our theme song is "Huddle Formation" by The Go! Team. Thanks to them. Thanks to their label, Memphis Industries.

*Bullseye* is on Instagram, [@BullseyeWithJesseThorn](https://www.instagram.com/BullseyeWithJesseThorn). See pictures of me and guests and what's going on and all kinds of stuff. We're also on Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook, and I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

**Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and is distributed by NPR.

*(Music fades out.)*