How to Build and Monetize a Content Platform You Own

Workbook — Name the Trap: The Platform Economy

Marilva Berrenstein · MCJ Studio

How to use this workbook

Each lesson in this workbook follows the slides in the Genially course: the cover slide sets what you will learn, the teaching slide carries the idea, the activity slide is the work, and the quiz is a quick check. This workbook goes deeper than the slides and ends each lesson with questions that challenge you to apply the idea to your own business.

The workbook is structured in two sections. Section 1 covers the platform economy: who controls reach, how creators build real ownership before platforms make them visible, and what the shift to AI retrieval means for your web presence. Section 2 covers decay and the counter-move: the enshittification arc, how AI accelerates it, and the specific strategy that builds you out of dependency.

SECTION 1

The Platform Economy

This section establishes the foundational mechanics of platform power: who controls what gets seen, what real ownership looks like, and how your web presence has been transformed by AI retrieval.

LESSON 1.1

Who Controls What Gets Seen

WHAT YOU WILL LEARN

- Name the three layers platform owners control.
- Explain why reach is allocated, not earned.

THE IDEA, IN DEPTH

Every algorithmic platform runs on three things: attention, interaction, and engagement. The algorithm is not a mystery. It is a calculation made from data gathered from the people who use the platform. That data is the fuel, and the companies that own these platforms control three distinct layers: the algorithm itself, the infrastructure it runs on, and the extraction of the data that feeds it.

The implications of this ownership structure are precise. You do not control what gets seen. The owners do. They manage the economics through that control, while you supply the raw material for free. Your content attracts attention. The platform captures that attention, packages it, and sells access to it. You receive a fraction of the revenue generated from the audience you built, under terms the platform sets unilaterally.

The Three Layers of Control

Understanding who controls each layer clarifies what you can and cannot influence. The algorithm layer determines which content is surfaced and to whom. The infrastructure layer controls where the data is stored and how it is processed. The data extraction layer collects behavioral signals from your audience and uses them to refine the algorithm and improve the advertising product the platform sells.

Platform owners — companies such as Meta, ByteDance, and Alibaba — control all three. You have access to none of them. You can post content and observe its performance through the analytics dashboard the platform chooses to share with you, but you cannot inspect the rules governing distribution, negotiate them, or ensure they stay constant.

> The core reframe: stop treating reach as something you earn. Start treating it as something the owners allocate. Allocated reach can be recalled. This shift changes every decision that follows.

Reach Is Borrowed

Once you accept that reach is allocated rather than earned, the question shifts. The question is no longer how to optimise your content for the algorithm. It becomes: given that my reach here is borrowed and can be recalled, what am I building that does not depend on this allocation continuing? That question is the foundation of this course. Everything that follows is an answer to it.

WORK IT THROUGH

1. List every platform you currently depend on for audience reach or income.
2. For each one, name the company that controls the algorithm.
3. Write what you would still own if each platform disappeared tomorrow.

Outcome: You understand who controls what gets seen — and that it is not you.

QUESTIONS THAT CHALLENGE YOU

• List the platforms you depend on. For each, name who controls the algorithm and what you would lose if access was revoked tomorrow.

• What reach do you have that is not allocated by a platform algorithm? Write it down. • If you could not post on any platform for six months, what would still be working for you? • Where in your business are you treating allocated reach as if it were permanent?

LESSON 1.2

Creators Who Built Before Social Media

WHAT YOU WILL LEARN

• Run the disappearance test on your own business.

• Identify the biggest gap between what you own and what you rent.

THE IDEA, IN DEPTH

There is a pattern among creators who can walk away from any platform without their business collapsing. They built something of magnitude before social media made them visible, and they use platforms as distribution rather than as the foundation of what they own. The difference is ownership.

Creators who built owned infrastructure — email lists, communities, and monetisation structures they controlled directly — treat a platform as a channel, not a landlord. When a platform changes its terms or reduces their reach, it is a disruption to their distribution, not a threat to their survival.

Magnitude Built Off-Platform

The underlying principle is magnitude. When the thing you own is large enough, leaving a platform causes a dent in your visibility, not a disappearance from your market. A large, owned email list means you can reach your audience directly the day any platform closes or restricts your account. A community on your own infrastructure means your audience relationship does not depend on any single company's continued operation or benevolence.

Most creators have the relationship inverted. The platform owns the audience and the creator rents access to people who, on paper, follow them. The creator has no direct connection with their followers outside the platform's interface.

> The disappearance test: imagine every platform you use disappears tomorrow. Write what you would still own: email list, community, product, direct customer relationships. Whatever survives is what you actually own. Whatever does not is what you only rent.

Closing the Gap

The gap between your owned list and your rented audience is the most strategically important thing this course asks you to measure. The first off-platform asset you build closes that gap. The second makes you less vulnerable. The third begins to constitute the magnitude that means platforms become optional rather than essential.

WORK IT THROUGH

1. List every income stream and audience touchpoint in your business.
2. Mark each one: Owned or Rented.
3. Identify the single biggest gap between what you own and what you rent.

Outcome: You know exactly what you own and what you only rent.

QUESTIONS THAT CHALLENGE YOU

• Run the disappearance test: list everything you own if every platform disappeared tomorrow. What did you find?

• What is the single biggest gap between your owned assets and your rented reach?

- What would it take to close that gap by 50 percent in the next six months?
- Which creators in your field have built real magnitude off-platform? What specifically do they own?

LESSON 1.3

Everything Has Become Content

WHAT YOU WILL LEARN

- Explain what GEO is and why it matters for your web presence.
- Assess whether your platform is a destination or an archive.

THE IDEA, IN DEPTH

AI systems require human-generated data to improve. To obtain more of it, they pull more and more human activity into a form that can be collected and processed. Your website, your public social media posts, your podcast transcripts, your newsletter archives: all of this has become training data and retrieval material for large-scale AI systems, whether you intended it to or not.

Your website used to be a destination or a point of sale. People came to it with intent. Now it is also a data source that AI retrieval systems index, scrape, and extract from. This is what Generative Engine Optimisation (GEO) names: the practice of structuring your web presence so that AI systems can retrieve from it accurately and attribute it to you. The rules for being found by a person and the rules for being retrieved by an AI system are different, and web strategy must now account for both.

The Mirror Problem

One consequence of AI-generated content flooding platforms and the web is the mirror problem. AI detection tools attempt to identify AI-generated content using machine learning models trained on the same type of content they are trying to detect. The reported accuracy of these tools ranges from 60 to 84 percent. That range means the tools are unreliable as gatekeepers. False positives flag human content as machine-generated. False negatives miss AI content entirely.

Platform owners depend on AI to operate their systems, while that same AI floods their platforms with low-quality synthetic material they cannot reliably stop. The owners have an interest in the problem and an interest in the solution, and the technology serves both imperfectly.

> The practical question for your own platform: open your website with fresh eyes. Is it a destination, a place people come to and reside? Or has it become an archive that systems retrieve from while human visitors pass through without staying?

Making Your Platform a Place People Reside

A destination has a reason for people to arrive and a reason for them to stay. It offers something that cannot be extracted and reassembled elsewhere: a relationship, a community, a depth of perspective that requires the full context to make sense. An archive is a collection of outputs. AI can summarise it, recombine it, and serve its key points to a user without the user ever visiting. The work is to make your platform the first type, not the second.

WORK IT THROUGH

1. Open your website as if you are a first-time visitor.
2. Ask: is this a destination or an archive? Write your honest answer.
3. Name one specific change that would make it a place people reside rather than a place they pass through.

Outcome: You can see your platform the way a visitor — and an AI system — sees it.

QUESTIONS THAT CHALLENGE YOU

• Open your website with fresh eyes. Is it a destination or an archive? What is the evidence? •

What one thing would make someone want to stay rather than extract information and leave?

• How much of your web content is structured for human visitors, and how much is structured for AI retrieval?

• Where is your work being used as content for machines rather than value for a person?

SECTION 2

Decay and the Counter-Move

This section maps the structural decay of algorithmic platforms, shows how AI accelerates it, and names the specific counter-move that builds you out of dependency.

LESSON 2.1

AI Accelerates Enshittification

WHAT YOU WILL LEARN

• Map at least one platform you use onto the three stages of the enshittification arc.

• Identify what makes your work worth paying for.

THE IDEA, IN DEPTH

Platforms follow a predictable arc. They begin by being good to users: low restrictions, high organic reach, accessible tools for new creators. This attracts the content and the audience the platform needs to become valuable. Then they tilt to being good to business customers: organic reach narrows, pay-to-play distribution appears, monetisation terms change in the platform's favour. Then they degrade into a state that is bad for everyone: ad load rises past the point of usefulness, creator revenue falls, and the platform extracts value from creators and users alike until they leave or it collapses.

This arc has a name: enshittification. The term was coined by writer Cory Doctorow to describe the structural dynamics of platform decay. Meta, TikTok, and YouTube have each walked this arc. The specific details differ. The direction does not. The mistake is to treat today's terms on any platform as a settlement. They are a stage. The direction of travel is already set.

How AI Speeds the Decay

AI accelerates enshittification in a specific way. AI tools make it possible to produce content at industrial scale for a fraction of what human-produced content costs. The result is a flood of low-cost synthetic content competing for the same algorithmic distribution as your work. This has two effects. First, your content competes with a much larger supply of surface-level material, reducing the algorithmic reach of any individual piece. Second, as the supply of content rises, the per-unit value of ad inventory falls, reducing the revenue creators receive from platform monetisation programmes.

> The diagnostic use of the arc: once you know the three stages, you can locate any platform you currently use on its curve. That location tells you what to expect next and when to act. The time to build off-platform is before the next tilt arrives, not after it does.

What Makes Your Work Worth Paying For

If you are competing with content that costs almost nothing to produce, the only sustainable advantage is that your work is worth something the synthetic version cannot replicate: genuine depth, specific perspective, an established relationship with an audience that trusts you. The platform cannot price that for you. You have to price it yourself, in a space you control.

WORK IT THROUGH

1. Pick one platform you use regularly.
2. Map it onto the three stages of the arc: which stage is it in now?
3. Write what you expect next and the specific action you will take before it arrives.

Outcome: You can read the arc and act before the next tilt, not after.

QUESTIONS THAT CHALLENGE YOU

- Map at least one platform you use onto the three stages. Which stage is it in? What comes next?
- What has changed for you on that platform in the last twelve months that fits the arc?
- If synthetic content costs almost nothing to produce, what makes your work worth paying for? Write one sentence.
- Which platform would you move off first if you assumed the next tilt is coming this year?

LESSON 2.2

Control, Illusion, and the Counter-Move

WHAT YOU WILL LEARN

- Explain the chained elephant pattern and check whether it applies to you.
- Write your counter-move in one sentence.

THE IDEA, IN DEPTH

The instinct, when thinking about platform power, is to imagine that the owner holds all the control. The reality is more distributed. Control in the platform economy is held across at least six parties: owners, creators, consumers, advertisers, investors, and regulators. Each has leverage the others must account for. Creators can leave. Consumers can stop using the platform. Advertisers can move their spend. Investors can withdraw capital. Regulators can impose rules that change the operating environment.

The illusion is that owners are omnipotent. The reality is that AI is now reducing their need for creators, consumers, and advertisers simultaneously, which is loosening even the owners' own grip on what their platforms produce and how they function.

The Chained Elephant

Many creators believe they cannot leave their primary platform. Some tried once, found the exit too expensive, and concluded that departure is impossible. This is the chained elephant: an animal that stays tied to a stake not because the chain is unbreakable but because it learned early that pulling does not work and stopped trying.

The chain in this case is the belief that the rented audience you built on the platform is the only audience available to you. It is not. The audience you built there has characteristics: they are interested in what you make, they have demonstrated that by following you, and some of them will follow you off-platform if you give them a reason and a destination to go to.

> The counter-move in one sentence: build an off-platform ecosystem, use platforms as distribution channels, and put your deepest work behind a paywall on infrastructure you control.

The Decision Point

This lesson is where the diagnosis becomes a decision. The preceding lessons named the machine, mapped the ownership gap, described what has become content, and traced the decay arc. This lesson asks what you will do with that information. The move is not to abandon platforms. It is to stop treating them as your home and start treating them as your distribution. You leave the dependency the moment you make that shift. The building starts then.

WORK IT THROUGH

1. Name your off-platform home: the place you will build that you control.
2. Name the depth that will go behind your paywall on that infrastructure.
3. Write your counter-move in one sentence, clearly enough to act on this week.

Outcome: You leave this course with a decision, not just a diagnosis.

QUESTIONS THAT CHALLENGE YOU

- Are you a chained elephant? Write honestly: what would it actually cost to leave your primary platform?
- Name your off-platform home and the depth that will sit behind your paywall.
- Write your counter-move in one sentence. Is it specific enough to act on?
- What is the first thing you will build, and what is the date you will start?

Build your economy. Who pays stays.

MCJ Studio · Marilva Berrenstein