

Jeff Bezos -- benefactor or future James Bond supervillain?

Amazon's Unstoppable Flood

Amazon, the "Everything Store," is just that: its vast range of goods is unsurpassed by any other single online market, while its convenience is also unmatched. It recently beat out Netflix and Google to become the **best-loved brand** in America.

Aptly named after the vast river system that drains much of South America, Amazon is immense: the **largest internet company** in the entire world by revenue and the **second-largest employer** in the US.

It not only sells products on its own around the world, but it hosts **affiliate programs** that allow some *900,000* third-party sellers to carry Amazon ads for fees on their own sites, or even host storefronts on the Amazon website, allowing small retailers to use its payment and other services for a commission.

But the company is far more than the go-to place for books, movies, toys, household goods, etc., etc. Amazon is now extending its physical product prominence into local food and convenience stores with its purchase of **Whole Foods** and the beginning of the **Amazon Go** cashier-less (but **not cashless**) chain.

The corporation not only sells books, it publishes them as well, both in **ebook format** for its Kindle and Fire lines of readers and tablets, and **physically** with POD (Print On Demand) technology along with music and videos. Podcasts and **audiobook versions** are provided by **Audible** and other subsidiaries. Comic books are served up on cloud-based **ComiXology**. Amazon also owns **Goodreads**, the popular social book-cataloging and fan-based review site.

Amazon **streams video** to its Prime members while **Amazon Studios** busily cranks out video comedies and dramas, saving the epic **Expansive space series** after cancellation. (The show was just nominated for the Hugo for **Best SF Series**.) Amazon also owns **IMDb**, the vast Internet Movie Database, and the sports and game streaming service **Twitch** as well.

Amazon's reach even extends into **shipping goods** from China on leased ships, while it moves to **compete** with FedEx and UPS with its own truck line. Plus it is busily experimenting with **delivery by drones**.

With **Blue Origin**, founder Jeff Bezos' privately-owned space program, which has developed vertical landing and reusable rockets, not even the sky is the limit. Amazon's **Project Kuiper** plans to launch a constellation of no less than 3,236 satellites to provide broadband internet access to millions through a network of 12 ground stations around the world.

With AWS, **Amazon Web Services**, the marketing monster has become a dominant web presence. Amazon is not only the **largest ecommerce market** on the planet, but the **biggest internet cloud service provider** as well. Yet it is still not satisfied as its AI-powered voice assistant, **Alexa**, gradually infiltrates American households through their Echo smart speakers and their **Ring smart doorbells**.

All this even as their package delivery services cut delays -- the company just announced **one-day delivery** for Prime members -- and become ever more intrusive as well. In recent months it has offered **deliveries inside** customers' locked front doors, **garages**, or car trunks to avoid the growing threat of porch piracy. To apply for these services, Prime customers must buy special smart doorlocks or garage openers. What could possibly go wrong?

19th century tactics in the 21st century

Beyond the entertainment value found in browsing the online store, the remarkable ease and convenience of purchasing goods there, and all the other products and services Amazon provides, there are a number of dark sides to merchandizing behemoth.

May problems stem largely from its size and are of its own making. Theft of deliveries from porches, for instance, is largely due to Amazon's drive to deliver goods as quickly as possible by leaving packages by the front door when the residents are out. Their proposed solution? **Facial recognition systems**.

It's gotten so bad that in many areas, rings of thieves have been seen to follow USPS and UPS trucks around like vultures, waiting to snag packages as soon as delivered. Amazon offers **lockers at Whole Foods locations** for safe pick-up and delivery but the services where a delivery person actually enters the house, garage, or car are still generally untested.

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Many people suspect airborne **delivery by drones** may provide robbers with even greater opportunities, as well as target practice for irate or drunken neighbors with shotguns, aside from special cases, like sending medicines to or retrieving blood samples from distant clinics in third-world jungles.

As Google has spawned an entire industry of SEO experts and tweekers, Facebook is swamped with fake accounts generated by malicious overseas actors, and Twitter has millions of fake followers, so too, the Aladdin's Cave of Amazon goodies has led to the evolution of whole new breeds of scammers.

Many deal in **fake reviews**, gaming the review system which many customers rely on that is a large part of Amazon's product ranking system. Some sellers have **invested \$10,000** to weasel their way into top rankings. Others abuse the third-party sellers' marketplace, with **shoddy knockoffs**, hype, inflated numbers, **stealing or faking** art, and even **printing counterfeit** versions of self-published best-sellers.

There is also a certain ruthlessness to Amazon's own strategy that is more obvious and disturbing than that displayed by the other tech superpowers we've looked at. Partly this may be because Amazon deals so much in real physical goods, and contends with more hardball old-style competition of a kind that its Silicon Valley software rivals can safely ignore.

Amazon's great reliance on physical goods may also account for the way it constantly pushes to increase its presence in users' lives. Not content to merely offer a near-infinite variety of products to users, the company relentlessly pursues them as well. And of course, it already has all their customers' browsing and purchasing information to ignite their desires.

The **Alexa voice assistant** takes this to a new level as a listening device inside the home, ready to take orders at any moment, sometimes by **accident**. Since it constantly listens for cues, Alexa has been given to **creepy laughs**, saying **disturbing things**, has **sent recordings** to other users, and worst of all, Amazon **employees and contractors** may listen in, and they often know precisely where users live.

Amazon's much-hyped **Prime membership** began as a free shipping program for any size orders. The offerings have expanded dramatically, with free streaming video and music, all sorts of shipping options, Whole Food discounts, unlimited photo storage in the cloud, family discounts, and so on.

But its price has steadily been **raised**, too, to **\$119/year** or **\$13/month**. While Amazon offers a free trial for a month (charges automatically follow unless canceled), the entire program is meant to suck users into the Amazon universe and keep them there. It works, too. One reporter who tried going without

any access to Google and Facebook **admitted defeat** when it came to avoiding Amazon even for a week.

Yet what Amazon has done with the economic empire that Jeff Bezos built is also highly questionable. **Sellers complain** that the store unfairly competes with them, often marketing in-house cheaper versions of popular products. The **open source community** is alarmed, too, over AWS taking the work of others and marketing it as their own software.

Worst of all, the working conditions inside Amazon's huge warehouses resemble Victorian sweatshops with 21st century technology. Bezos uses an automatic tracking system which not only **tracks worker productivity** but can generate the paperwork to fire them automatically -- firing hundreds of workers in a single year's time from just one facility.

Workers have to wear a **newly-patented wristband** that tracks their every move, while supervisors patrol catwalks high above the warehouse floor to watch them labor. **Ambulances** have had to be stationed to care for workers fainting in uncooled facilities.

The alleged quest last year to find a second headquarters seems like a **scam** to make cities desperate for jobs cough up tax credits and information. And cough up they did -- billions. Amazon made **\$11 billion** last year, yet **paid no federal income tax** at all and in fact took in **\$129 million** in taxpayer subsidies.

While Amazon was certainly *not* the only corporation ripping off the government, its dominance, unfair competition, and the fact that it seeks to own entire cycles of products like books -- as publisher, seller, and reviewer -- places it in a league all its own.

Little wonder, then, that presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren has called for **Amazon's breakup**, along with that of Facebook and Google. It also doesn't help that Jeff Bezos chooses to look like Dr. Evil.

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