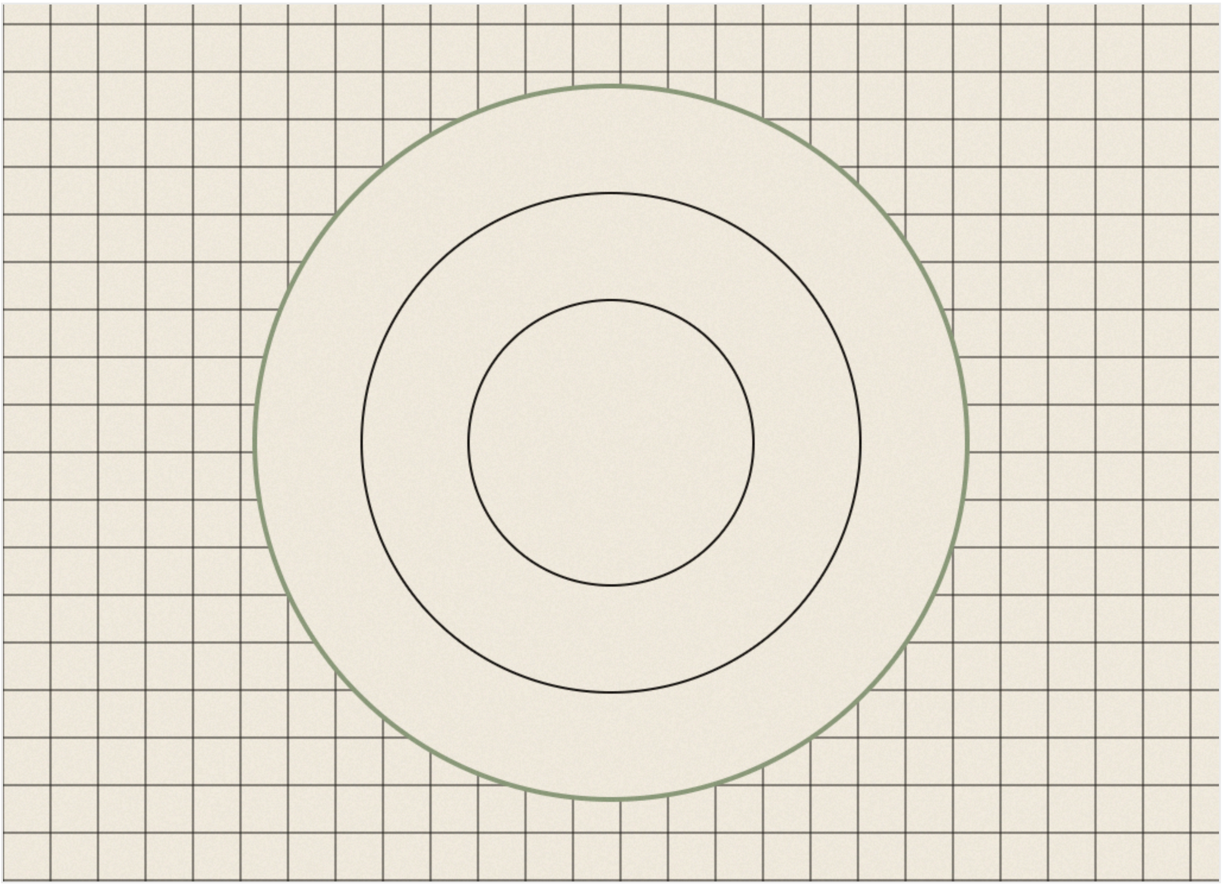
Technology

Software Isn’t Free

The largest public-goods experiment in history is paid for by advertising and resented most by the people who benefit most from it.

By Emmanuel Awosika ▪ December 11, 2025 ▪



An extraordinary amount of the software that runs modern life is handed to us at no charge. Search, email, maps, messaging, encyclopedias, translation, navigation: services that would each have been unthinkable luxuries a generation ago are now background utilities that hundreds of millions use daily without paying a cent. This is one of the strangest economic arrangements ever assembled, and we have grown so used to it that we mostly resent it.

The arrangement is not charity, of course. The bargain is that the service is paid for by advertising, which means paid for by attention, which means paid for by the collection and modeling of behavior at scale. Nothing here is actually free. The price is simply not denominated in money, and because it is not a number on a bill, it feels like an imposition when we notice it rather than a cost we agreed to pay. The person using a free map to avoid traffic every day and then complaining bitterly about being tracked is describing the two halves of a single trade as if they were unrelated.

It is worth sitting with the scale of what this model has delivered before rushing to condemn it. Access to a decent slice of human knowledge, once gated behind wealth and geography, now reaches a teenager with a cheap phone in a poor country. Communication that used to cost real money is effectively unlimited. Tools that professionals paid for are available to anyone. Whatever its sins, the advertising-funded internet has been a genuine and enormous act of distribution, and the people it has lifted the most are often the ones with the least.

None of this makes the model benign, and the costs are real. An economy funded by attention will optimize relentlessly for attention, which means for whatever holds the eye, which is often not what is good for the person attached to the eye. The incentive to collect ever more behavioral data has no natural limit and has produced a surveillance apparatus that no one would have accepted if presented as a bill. These are not small objections. But they are the terms of the specific bargain that produced the abundance, not a separate evil bolted on afterward.

The confusion worth clearing up is the belief that we could keep the abundance and simply subtract the cost, that the same services would exist, free and universal, if only the companies were less greedy. That is not how the thing was built. The scale and the price are joined. You can argue, seriously, that the trade is bad and should be restructured, that some of these services should be public infrastructure or paid for directly. But the honest version of that argument admits what it is proposing to give up. The software was never free. It was paid for in a currency we chose not to look at, and pretending otherwise is how we end up wanting the meal without the bill.