THE WAKE-UP CALL

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Prime, Pills, Profiles: What Amazon Is Really Selling

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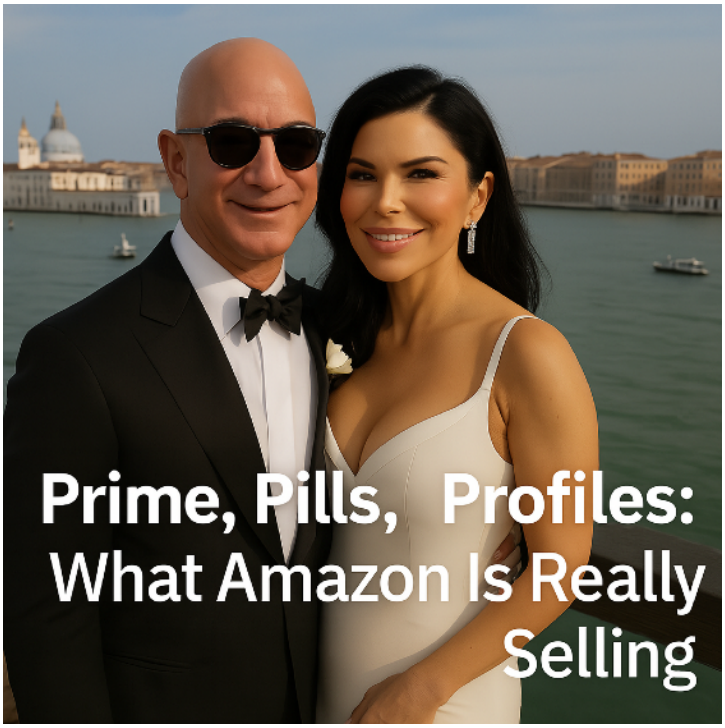

Bezos, Venice, and a €15 Wedding

A few days ago, Venice belonged to just one couple: Jeff Bezos and Lauren Sánchez. The island of San Giorgio Maggiore, parts of the Arsenale, and a dozen palazzi were closed off exclusively for their wedding.

Estimated cost: up to 48 million euros, not including the private jets.

Sounds excessive? For Bezos, that was just 0.020% of his wealth. For an average German with €76,000 in assets, the wedding would have cost about €15, the price of a movie ticket. In that light, Venice was actually cheaper for Bezos than a night at the movies is for us.

But why does this scene impress and outrage us so much? How did tech billionaires become this wealthy? How can a man with an online bookstore suddenly own $200 billion? What does Amazon really sell today?

Amazon: From Bookstore to Cloud Dominance

In 1994, it all began with an online bookstore in a garage.

It quickly became clear: this wasn't really about books, it was about data. “Customers who bought Milan Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* also bought…” was more than a helpful suggestion. It was the beginning of an algorithmic empire.

The books were merely the testing ground. The real goal was the cataloging of behavior.

With the launch of Amazon Web Services (AWS) in 2006, the transformation accelerated. Today, not only tech companies but also nine of the ten largest pharmaceutical corporations analyze their research and health data there.

In parallel, Amazon reached $56 billion in advertising revenue in 2024 through “Sponsored Products” and Twitch ads, ranking third after Google and Meta. The shipping giant had become a data machine. No longer just selling packages, Amazon was selling **profiles**.

The Sock as a Symptom: Health in the Consumption Profile

Every click feeds the algorithm: those who regularly buy socks display a certain level of organization. And that, as shown by a CVS Caremark study back in 2016, correlates with medication adherence. People who plan their shopping are also more likely to take their pills regularly.

An unexpected correlation, yet statistically significant.

Medication adherence is incredibly important for the pharmaceutical industry. The more consistently patients take their prescribed meds, the more effective treatments become in real-world settings, the more stable demand becomes, and the fewer costly complications arise.

From the industry's point of view, adherence is more than just sticking to therapy, it represents **revenue security**, **cost efficiency**, and **predictable supply chains**. Three central factors in a high-margin but high-risk market.

But the economic perspective is just part of the picture. Adherence is also crucial from medical, regulatory, and societal standpoints: it improves outcomes, reduces relapses, and eases the burden on healthcare systems globally. That's why more studies and health technologies focus on **real-world usage**, beyond idealized clinical trial settings.

Data-driven adherence models, Amazon-style, open up new possibilities: early warning systems, personalized reminders, or targeted communication that supports patients in their everyday lives. These tools reduce not just medical risks, but economic ones too.

The Algorithm as the Master Tactician

These data patterns may seem absurd, until you see their economic logic. Amazon is already testing this in real-time: with **RxPass**, $5 a month for 60 generic medications, the company links drug access to consumer behavior. The convenience of Prime logistics meets the precision of machine learning.

An ML model detects behavioral patterns: Are prescriptions refilled on time? Are orders placed regularly? How often does someone buy tissues, cough drops, or herbal cold remedies? Even activating gift wrap reveals social networks and special occasions, valuable insights for ad targeting or scoring models.

Everyday Life as a Data Trail

Our digital interactions constantly generate signals. They're not marginal, they're the **core of the modern data economy**:

- A 3-pack of socks can reveal household size or health status (e.g., diabetic socks).
- Gift wrapping activates the **relationship graph**, indicating occasions to market around.
- A voice command to Alexa, "Reorder cough suppressant?", is not just a need, it's a **pharmaceutical datapoint**.

Together, these form a digital model of our daily lives, **more precise than any patient record**. The algorithms don't just know what we buy. They know our **risk profile**.

It's no coincidence that the data formats Amazon uses in **HealthLake** adhere to official medical standards like FHIR (Fast Healthcare Interoperability Resources).

The Silent Shift in Business Models

Amazon began as a retailer, became a cloud provider, and is now a **data-driven prediction company**.

The real goldmine is no longer what we buy, but **when** we'll get sick, **how** we travel, **who** we love, **what** we believe, and **how** we behave.

Data is no longer a byproduct. It is the **business model**.

Where we once had human recommendations, we now face black-box systems that not only categorize, but "think" ahead. A subtle shift, with massive implications.

Legal Gray Zones

The GDPR protects our health data, but not consumption data that may correlate with it.

And that's where it gets murky: when algorithms **merge both data types** into a single behavioral vector.

Users never see the conclusions drawn from their shopping habits, nor who's buying that data.

Transparency is missing, and regulation lags behind.

The new EU Digital Services Act (DSA) is a start. But its main focus is on misinformation on platforms like Facebook and YouTube. It doesn't address companies that analyze or influence patient behavior via health data.

Today's **data brokers** operate in legal gray zones. Caught between legal ambiguity and economic strategy, they assemble personal data profiles that are often more accurate than medical diagnoses, yet never validated by doctors.

Convenience vs. Control: Our Daily Trade-Off

Bezos' extravagant wedding shocks us because we can **see** the millions spent.

Our Amazon orders, by contrast, feel harmless. But they're **not disconnected**. They're part of the same system.

What Can We Do?

Three simple, powerful levers are within our reach:

1. **Digital hygiene**: Activate tracking protection, use incognito mode, disable personalized ads. Tools like Privacy Badger or uBlock Origin help too.
2. **Support local**: Make conscious choices to buy from neighborhood bookstores, pharmacies, or shops. Every decision **against an algorithm** is a vote for human autonomy.
3. **Demand policy change**: Push for algorithmic audits, transparency requirements, and a **digital bill of rights** for platforms that don't just reflect our behavior, but shape it.
   If a sock becomes a medical record, we need a right to non-traceability.

Epilogue

Venice was a backdrop for a disturbing display of opulence. Jeff Bezos choreographed his obscene wealth like Louis XIV at Versailles.

But Amazon was never just a small bookstore that grew a little bigger. From the beginning, it was a **data-first business**.

Jeff Bezos didn't get rich because we like to read. He got rich because our data was **analyzed and sold with strategic intent**.

"Follow the money" isn't cynicism, it's insight. It's also a very good rule of thumb for life.

There's nothing inherently wrong with algorithms. Their ability to predict behavior is impressive.

But what matters is **why** they're used, **by whom**, and **whether we know about it**, or have any say.

Our data is ours. And anyone getting super-rich off of it deserves critical scrutiny.

Transparency is not a PR slogan. It's a democratic principle.

The new ultra-rich, tech billionaires with wealth beyond imagination, are a societal force we must reckon with.

Their influence on the course of history is massive and poorly understood.

What that kind of wealth does to the human mind is also a question worth studying. So far, the signs are not good.

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