

FARMIing Consent: Meta’s EU ‘Consent-or-Pay’ Model and the Re-Making of Personal Data as Commodity, Labour, and Gift

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January 2026

Abstract

Meta’s EU “consent-or-pay” subscription model - pay for an ad-free experience or consent to personalised advertising - has become a flashpoint in debates about privacy, platform power, and the commodification of personal data. This essay analyses the model as a contested attempt to reformat personal data as an object of exchange. Drawing on economic anthropology and adjacent scholarship on valuation, digital labour, and privacy legitimacy, it argues that the interface simultaneously treats personal data as (i) a commodity whose refusal can be priced, (ii) a form of labour-like value production embedded in participation, and (iii) an entrustment that is morally bounded by context. I propose the analytic concept FARM (Forced Alternatives for Refusal Monetization) to describe a wider platform tendency to monetise refusal via paid or degraded alternatives. By reading platform texts, EU regulatory guidance, and civil society critiques against each other, the essay shows that the controversy is a struggle over what counts as “choice”, whether privacy can be commensurated into money, and whether refusal should be a baseline entitlement rather than a premium.

1 Introduction

In late 2023 Meta introduced an EU-only subscription option for Facebook and Instagram: either pay a monthly fee and stop seeing ads, or keep using the platforms for free while consenting to personalised advertising (Meta 2023). On its face, this is a compliance move. Yet as soon as the interface appears, a different question surfaces: what is being exchanged,

who sets the equivalence, and what kind of economy is being normalised when refusal is priced.

My core argument is that the Meta case crystallises a broader platform logic: **personal data is treated as a commodity, and privacy appears as a scarce good that is distributed through unequal capacities to refuse**. In other words, even when “consent” formally exists, the practical ability to secure privacy is constrained by pricing, interface design, and network dependence. The result is a sliding condition where *privacy becomes a luxury position* rather than a baseline feature of participation.

To name this wider phenomenon, I use the analytic concept **FARM** (*Forced Alternatives for Refusal Monetization*). FARM describes an institutional and interface arrangement where refusing data processing is not treated as a simple baseline right, but is channelled into an alternative that is either paid (a subscription or fee) or degraded (reduced reach, repeated prompts, extra clicks, or other forms of friction). FARM captures the move from “consent” as a legal-ethical ideal to refusal as a priced and managed alternative, where opting out becomes a costly path rather than a baseline entitlement.

This essay asks how consent-or-pay turns refusal into a priced and managed alternative.

The essay proceeds in five steps. Section 2 introduces the materials and method. Section 3 sets out the analytic framework from economic anthropology. Section 5 situates the Meta case in its EU regulatory trajectory. Sections the commodity analysis—the gift/entrustment analysis develop three readings of data as commodity, labour, and gift. The final sections return to governance and generalise the argument beyond Meta.

2 Empirical corpus and method

This essay is built as a “desk ethnography” of a specific controversy: the EU-wide spread of *consent-or-pay* (also called *pay-or-ok*) interfaces, with Meta’s Facebook/Instagram subscription model as the central case. The empirical material is therefore **public, textual, and interface-based** rather than based on long-term participant observation. That is a limitation, but it is also appropriate for the object: the controversy is fought through documents, product flows, and interface prompts that translate data practices into “choices”.

Empirical materials. I use four clusters of materials:

1. **Platform texts and product announcements:** Meta’s privacy policy (Meta 2025) and its EU-facing announcements and updates about Subscription for No Ads and “less personalised ads” (Meta 2023; Meta 2024).
2. **Regulatory and quasi-regulatory texts:** the EDPB’s Opinion 08/2024 on consent-or-pay (European Data Protection Board 2024); the European Commission’s Digital

Markets Act (DMA) decision summary on Meta’s consent-or-pay model (European Commission 2025c) and related Commission communication (European Commission 2025a); and the Commission-coordinated consumer protection action (CPC network) (European Commission 2024).

3. **Comparative “adjacent” cases:** empirical studies on cookie paywalls/pay-or-tracking walls beyond Meta (Morel et al. 2022; Müller-Tribbensee et al. 2024); and documentation showing how other firms frame “choice” over tracking (e.g., Google’s Privacy Sandbox shift toward user choice (Google 2024; Competition and Markets Authority 2026)).

Method. I treat these texts and interfaces as *valuation devices*: they do not merely describe value, they actively *produce* commensurabilities (data ↔ money, “choice” ↔ consent, refusal ↔ detriment). The analysis is a close reading of how actors propose equivalences, assign responsibility, and stabilise a moral economy around “free” digital services.

What this method can and cannot claim. The goal is not to estimate the monetary value of personal data or to prove causal effects of one interface design. The acceptable claim in this genre is interpretive and relational: to show how “consent” is made into a tradable token, how refusal is priced, and how these moves redistribute agency between platforms, regulators, and users.

3 Analytic framework: exchange, value forms, and valuation devices

3.1 Gifts and commodities as social relations

Mauss’s gift theory begins from the insight that exchange is not only about goods but about social bonds and obligations (Mauss 1990). Gifts create relationships; they are not “free” because they establish expectations of reciprocity and trust. This matters for platforms because the cultural story of the “free service” often relies on a gift-like framing: users share content and sociality, and the platform provides access, connection, and visibility without a visible monetary price. The gift frame can make participation feel relational rather than commercial and can obscure the asymmetry of extraction.

Polanyi’s concept of *fictitious commodities* captures capitalism’s tendency to treat as market goods things that were not produced for sale and that are essential to social life (Polanyi 2001). Land and labour are classic examples: commodifying them can generate social disruption and protective countermovements. Personal data resembles a fictitious commodity because individuals do not “produce” behavioural traces for sale in the way a

factory produces goods. Yet platforms treat data as an input to prediction, targeting, and measurement and build markets around it.

A Polanyian lens helps interpret EU pushback as more than technical law. If personal data protection is framed as a fundamental right, treating privacy refusal as a purchasable option threatens the universality of that right by tying it to purchasing power. In this sense, governance resistance can be read as boundary work that aims to keep certain aspects of personhood outside normal commodity exchange, or at least to constrain how commodification happens.

3.2 Data as labour and “free labour”

Digital labour scholarship provides a third lens. Terranova argued that online culture generates “free labour”: users participate, create, and communicate in ways that feel voluntary and pleasurable, yet these activities are systematically valorised and monetised by firms (Terranova 2000). Fuchs extends this through a Marxian analysis of social media, arguing that users produce value through attention and interaction, and platforms appropriate surplus value by selling targeted access to users to advertisers (Fuchs 2014).

Consent-or-pay makes this productive relation visible by offering a paid route to exit from targeted advertising. It creates an implicit choice between remaining in the ad-funded regime where user activity produces data value, and purchasing a different relation that reduces some of that extraction. Arrieta-Ibarra et al. propose treating data as labour to correct distributive imbalance by compensating individuals (Arrieta-Ibarra et al. 2018). Meta’s model can be read as an inversion: instead of paying users, the platform monetises the user’s attempt to withhold labour-like data production from the targeted advertising system.

3.3 Valuation, commensuration, and market devices

A fourth lens concerns valuation. Espeland and Stevens define commensuration as transforming different qualities into a common metric, a process that changes what can be compared, justified, and governed (Espeland and Stevens 1998). Fourcade and Healy argue that markets “see” through classifications and numbers that format persons as comparable units and reorder inequality (Fourcade and Healy 2017). Consent-or-pay involves commensuration because it tries to translate privacy into euros and to present the resulting price as a legitimate equivalent.

Market sociology and STS further suggest that markets are performed through devices (Callon 1998). Consent interfaces are devices: they do not simply reflect preferences; they format the user as a chooser and define the currencies of exchange. In a consent-or-pay interface, the device asserts that the relevant currencies are money and consent to profiling; it frames refusal as subscription; and it presents the trade-off as an acceptable

consumer decision. Whether that formatting succeeds depends on power, dependency, and institutional acceptance.

3.4 Legitimacy of information flows: contextual integrity

Finally, Nissenbaum’s contextual integrity approach defines privacy not as secrecy, but as the appropriateness of information flows relative to context-specific norms (Nissenbaum 2004). Users may accept sharing within a social context but reject flows to advertisers or cross-service profiling. Consent-or-pay attempts to legitimate contested flows by framing them as chosen. But if refusal is costly, consent does not necessarily signal contextual appropriateness; it can signal constrained adaptation. This is why legitimacy in the data economy cannot be reduced to individual clicks. It is a social and institutional achievement that depends on whether the exchange is experienced as fair and whether meaningful refusal is protected.

4 Anthropological deepening: personhood, moral economy, and infrastructures of refusal

The analytic lenses developed so far can be strengthened by making the anthropological stakes more explicit. The issue is not only whether “data” is treated as commodity or labour, but what kinds of *persons* and *relationships* are presupposed when platforms present privacy as a purchasable feature. Economic anthropology has long argued that commodification is not simply the moment of sale. It is a process that changes how things are classified, who is authorised to exchange them, and what moral evaluations make those exchanges seem acceptable or unacceptable.

Kopytoff’s notion of the “cultural biography of things” is useful because it treats commoditisation as historically and socially contingent (Kopytoff 1986). In different settings, the same object can move between commodity and non-commodity states. Reading consent-or-pay through this lens avoids the simplistic claim that “data is a commodity” in all contexts. Instead, it highlights how the interface tries to stabilise a commodity state for personal data by specifying an exchange format (pay money or consent to profiling) and by framing refusal as a priced option. In other words, the consent screen is not only a legal form. It is a classificatory device that tells users what is being exchanged and what counts as a legitimate trade-off.

A second anthropological push concerns *inalienability*. Weiner argues that some possessions remain bound to persons and groups even when they circulate, because they carry identity, continuity, and claims to belonging (Weiner 1992). Personal data is not a possession in a material sense, but it behaves like an inalienable trace: it can be copied and

traded, yet it continues to refer back to embodied persons, relationships, and lived histories. This helps explain why the commodification of data is never complete. It requires constant institutional and technical work - policies, consent banners, advertising infrastructure, and legal arguments that translate person-linked traces into exchangeable resources.

Third, the controversy can be read as a conflict of *moral economies*. Thompson described moral economy as shared expectations about fairness, obligation, and legitimate exchange, especially where market logics threaten what people take to be basic entitlements (Thompson 1971). In the EU case, institutional claims about “freely given consent” and public claims that “rights are not for sale” function as moral economy arguments: refusal should not be punished, and privacy should not become a luxury good. This lens clarifies why even a formally voluntary subscription can be experienced as coercive. A moral economy is violated not only when options disappear, but when the terms of exchange are perceived as unfair relative to a shared norm.

Finally, an anthropological approach treats platforms as *infrastructures* rather than as ordinary consumer products. Larkin stresses that infrastructures are not neutral pipes; they organise social life, produce dependencies, and shape what becomes thinkable as normal (Larkin 2013). Social platforms increasingly function as infrastructures of communication, community, and visibility. That infrastructural role is precisely what makes “choice” ambiguous in practice. When a service becomes infrastructural, opting out is not simply leaving a market. It can mean losing access to social worlds, public discourse, and practical coordination. This is one reason the essay’s claim that privacy is becoming difficult to sustain should be understood as a structural argument: not that refusal cannot be performed, but that refusal is made increasingly costly because infrastructures convert autonomy into priced or degraded options.

4.1 User perspectives: resignation, cynical compliance, and the routinisation of consent

To keep the analysis grounded in lived experience, it helps to draw on qualitative work on how people talk about privacy in everyday platform use. Rather than describing privacy as a preference they can consistently optimise, many users report a sense that control is continually promised but rarely practical. Draper and Turow call this condition *digital resignation*: people may value privacy, yet come to treat meaningful control as unrealistic under opaque data flows, complex settings, and repeated requests to decide quickly (Draper and Turow 2019). In this light, consent becomes less a moment of informed choice and more a recurring interaction that many people learn to complete with minimal attention.

A closely related orientation is what Hoffmann, Lutz, and Ranzini call *privacy cynicism*. Users can recognise privacy risks and still continue using services because protection feels ineffective, too costly in effort, or incompatible with social and economic participation

(Hoffmann et al. 2016). This matters for the essay’s FARM argument because it shows how coercion can be experienced even when options exist on paper. If users anticipate that privacy is not really attainable, then a priced or friction-heavy refusal path is likely to be experienced as punishment rather than as a neutral alternative.

Work on consent interfaces helps specify the mechanism that turns privacy management into routine compliance. Nouwens et al. show that consent pop-ups often use design choices that systematically shift opt-in rates, including hiding refusal behind additional clicks or presenting acceptance as the default (Nouwens et al. 2020). Even when law demands “choice,” the interface can make the cost of refusal show up as time, attention, and repeated friction. Finally, these user perspectives also underline that privacy is relational and contextual rather than purely individual. Marwick and boyd’s interview-based analysis of “networked privacy” shows how people manage disclosure through situated strategies in networked publics, even when platform affordances constrain individual control (Marwick and d. b. d. 2014). Together, these studies support the essay’s claim that privacy is increasingly difficult to sustain in practice, and that platforms can format that difficulty into economically meaningful choices.

Together, these anthropological lenses refine the essay’s core argument. They show that what is being commodified is not merely data in the abstract, but fragments of relational personhood. They also show that the contested boundary is not only legal but moral, and that refusal is shaped by dependency rather than isolated individual preference. This strengthens the concept FARM by specifying the mechanism: forced alternatives do not merely extract value, they reorganise the moral and relational conditions under which refusal can be practiced.

5 The Meta case in the EU: why consent-or-pay became a flashpoint

Meta’s consent-or-pay model should be read against a longer EU trajectory: behavioural advertising was increasingly constrained by court and regulator insistence on meaningful consent, and large platforms were pushed away from relying on implicit legal bases for cross-context profiling. In October 2023, Meta moved EU users toward a more explicit consent logic and introduced Subscription for No Ads: a user could either (i) subscribe and stop seeing ads, or (ii) continue for free with personalised ads (Meta 2023). Importantly, this did not simply “offer a paid tier”; it transformed refusal into a priced exit and made privacy legible as a purchasable product.

By 2024, the model had become a regulatory flashpoint. The EDPB’s Opinion 08/2024 emphasised that “consent or pay” models implemented by large online platforms raise structural concerns about whether consent can be freely given when refusal requires

payment, and it stressed the importance of providing a real alternative that does not force users into a binary of paying or being tracked (European Data Protection Board 2024). In parallel, the EU’s Consumer Protection Cooperation (CPC) network warned that Meta’s framing of the services as “free” could be misleading and that users might be pressured into consent (European Commission 2024).

In April 2025, the controversy moved from guidance into enforcement. The European Commission adopted a non-compliance decision under the Digital Markets Act (DMA) related to user choice, and later published a decision summary describing how the model required users who refused consent to pay a fee, thereby likely suffering a detriment, rather than being offered an equivalent alternative (European Commission 2025a; European Commission 2025c). In December 2025, the Commission acknowledged Meta’s undertaking to introduce a new option with “less personalised ads” for EU users (announced rollout in January 2026) (European Commission 2025b). This sequence matters for economic anthropology because it shows how a platform’s revenue model is contested through multiple regimes of legitimacy at once: consumer law (misleading “free” claims), data protection (valid consent), and competition/market regulation (gatekeeper obligations).

In other words, Meta provides a concrete scene where the price of privacy is not only a business decision but an ongoing argument about what counts as coercion, what counts as a reasonable equivalence, and whether “choice” can be treated as a market exchange at all.

5.1 The 2026 “middle path”: equivalent alternative or redesigned FARM?

Meta’s January 2026 rollout of an additional option framed as “less personalised ads” matters because it turns the controversy into a concrete test of what counts as an “equivalent alternative” under EU platform governance. In principle, a third pathway could reduce coercion by making refusal more viable for users who neither want to pay nor accept full profiling. However, equivalence is not only a technical property; it is a judgement about detriment in practice. If choosing “less personalised” reduces functionality, worsens reach, adds friction, or triggers repeated re-prompts, then refusal is still penalised even if it is no longer priced directly. This is why the Commission’s own approach emphasises post-rollout monitoring and evidence collection rather than treating the new option as self-evidently compliant (European Commission 2025b).

From the perspective of FARM, the key analytic question is whether the middle option withdraws from monetising refusal or simply reshapes it. If the option mainly preserves the advertising value chain while shifting to a thinner, re-described form of profiling, then the structure can remain FARM-like: refusal is managed into an option that protects the extraction regime while presenting itself as greater choice. In that case, the “middle path” becomes another stage in the cultural biography of platform consent: the

exchange format changes, but the underlying commodification logic persists. Conversely, if the option is presented symmetrically, is easy to select, and substantially reduces data combination and targeting intensity, it could count as a partial de-commodification move. The essay therefore treats the January 2026 change as an empirical hinge point rather than a resolution (Meta 2024; *Regulation (EU) 2022/1925 (Digital Markets Act) 2022*).

6 Analysis I: Data as commodity - pricing refusal and selling equivalence

6.1 Putting a price on non-surveillance

Consent-or-pay constructs personal data as commodity by turning the absence of behavioural advertising into a priced subscription. The critical move is that payment is tied to *refusal*. The user pays in order not to be profiled for targeted advertising (or to reduce certain profiling practices). The “free” option becomes conditional on agreeing to commodifying uses of personal data. Refusal does not lead to a baseline service; it leads to a bill.

This is a commensuration claim: privacy reduction is translated into euros. The subscription price implicitly states that the user’s ad-funded value has a monetary equivalent. Even if users never see internal advertising metrics, the model suggests that their profiles, attention, and behavioural traces are worth roughly the subscription price. Economically, it is plausible that the price is informed by expected advertising revenue per user; socially, the price is also a normative claim about what it is reasonable to charge for an exit from profiling. The controversy suggests that many EU actors do not accept that claim, precisely because privacy is framed as a fundamental right rather than a premium feature.

6.2 The fictitious commodity tension

Polanyi’s fictitious commodity lens helps explain the backlash (Polanyi 2001). When something essential and person-linked is treated as a normal commodity, social and institutional counter-movements often emerge. Personal data is person-linked in an unusually direct way: it indexes the body, relationships, preferences, and social life of individuals. Even when a user clicks “agree,” the data continues to reference them and may circulate across contexts. That makes personal data difficult to render fully alienable in Gregory’s commodity sense (Gregory 1982).

From this perspective, the EU resistance is not merely about the size of a subscription fee. It is about the moral boundary between rights and markets. If privacy and data protection are universal rights, then pricing refusal undermines universality by making

protection depend on purchasing power. Consent-or-pay thus appears as a shift in the moral status of privacy: from baseline entitlement to purchasable upgrade.

6.3 Equivalence as a political construction

The DMA’s requirement of an “equivalent alternative” makes the commensuration problem explicit (*Regulation (EU) 2022/1925 (Digital Markets Act) 2022*). What counts as equivalent when personalisation is reduced? Equivalence is not a natural fact; it is a negotiated judgement. If refusing consent leads to worse service, then refusal is costly in experiential terms. If refusing consent leads to a subscription fee, then refusal is costly in monetary terms. Either way, the platform structures the cost of saying no.

Valuation studies suggests that equivalence claims are central to market-making: they define what can be compared and therefore traded (Espeland and Stevens 1998). Meta’s introduction of a “less personalised ads” option can be interpreted as an attempt to manufacture equivalence: refusal of some profiling can be compatible with a free service that still serves ads. But the dispute over whether such options are meaningful shows that equivalence remains contested. The platform seeks to define the bundle; regulators seek to prevent the bundle from being constructed in a way that exploits dependency.

7 Analysis II: Data as labour - the paid exit from participation-as-work

7.1 The user as productive subject

A labour lens shifts attention from price to production. Facebook and Instagram generate advertising revenue through users’ continuous presence, attention, and interaction. Users do not merely consume; they produce behavioural signals that are used to target ads, measure engagement, and optimise recommendation systems. Terranova’s “free labour” concept captures the paradox: participation feels voluntary and social, but it is systematically valorised (Terranova 2000). Fuchs argues that this is a form of exploitation because surplus value is appropriated by the platform (Fuchs 2014).

Consent-or-pay can be understood as a redesign of this labour relation. The free tier implies: continue participating in ways that generate targeted advertising value. The paid tier implies: you may participate socially without contributing (as much) to advertising value. In other words, money buys partial withdrawal from platform labour obligations. This is analytically similar to paying to avoid work, except that the work in question is the production of data and attention as advertising inputs.

7.2 Inverting the “data as labour” proposal

The contrast with Arrieta-Ibarra et al. is instructive (Arrieta-Ibarra et al. 2018). Their proposal aims to recognise data production as labour and create compensation mechanisms that empower individuals. Meta’s model recognises that data has value, but it uses that recognition to charge for the right not to contribute. The inversion reveals a structural feature of platform capitalism: even when alternative political imaginaries exist (pay users for data), the dominant actor can reframe the situation as a consumer choice (pay the firm to avoid targeting). This does not refute the data-labour analysis; it illustrates how platforms can co-opt its basic insight (data generates value) while maintaining asymmetric control over valuation and distribution.

7.3 Stratified refusal and the politics of dependency

Labour analysis also foregrounds distribution. If privacy is purchased, the capacity to refuse profiling becomes stratified. Those who cannot pay remain in the data-producing class; those who can pay buy partial autonomy. This is not simply “inequality” in the abstract; it changes the social meaning of privacy. Privacy becomes a consumption good, similar to living in a gated community or paying for premium healthcare. Economic anthropology has long shown that when basic protections are marketised, moral discomfort and political contestation often follow because market distribution collides with ideals of universality.

The EU regulatory response can be read as an attempt to prevent this stratification from being institutionalised. EDPB guidance and consumer protection actions repeatedly emphasise that the absence of a realistic refusal option undermines the meaning of consent (European Data Protection Board 2024; European Commission 2024). From a labour perspective, this is also about the ability to withdraw from a productive relation: can users reasonably withdraw from being used as advertising labourers, or are they forced into that role unless they pay?

8 Conclusion

Meta’s EU consent-or-pay model provides a concentrated case of how platform capitalism attempts to stabilise data extraction by marketising refusal. The interface reconfigures personal data as commodity by pricing the absence of behavioural advertising, and it reconfigures refusal as a premium option. It reconfigures personal data as labour by making explicit that participation in the “free” service is productive for advertising markets, and that users can pay to reduce that productivity. The EU governance response demonstrates that this translation is contested. EDPB guidance, DMA obligations, and consumer protection actions all challenge the market framing and insist that meaningful refusal is a

condition for legitimate consent. For economic and business anthropology, the controversy shows that the data economy is constituted through valuation devices, interfaces, and institutional boundary work. The concept FARM helps generalise the insight beyond Meta: platforms increasingly monetise the right to refuse by offering forced alternatives whose costs are structured by corporate valuation and user dependency. Whether such models become normalised or resisted will shape not only privacy law but also the moral economy of digital participation.

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