

More people are calling on others to cancel their Amazon Prime subscriptions. Why'd it take us this long?

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Prime-branded boxes in an Amazon fulfillment center in Hemel Hempstead, England on November 13, 2018. *Leon Neal/Getty Images*

I've covered Amazon for the past few years, but now something feels different. Sure, there are still the infinite roundups of Amazon's best Black Friday and Cyber Monday deals — which won't be going anywhere as long as [publishers are able to monetize them](#).

But what I haven't seen as much prior to this year are media companies and people — largely New Yorkers who work for media companies and can afford to shop at the city's many stores — encouraging people to cancel their subscriptions and openly discouraging readers from shopping at Amazon. There was this Ringer piece on [how to wean yourself off](#) by using other online retailers, and a story from the tech site Gizmodo, which previously called Prime “[the best deal in tech](#),” calling for a [Prime Day boycott](#).

They come during a time when the number of [Prime subscribers has been growing steadily for years](#). As of this [spring, there are more than 100 million of them worldwide](#), with one analyst predicting that number will [more than double to 275 million in the next decade](#). A Prime membership, which now costs \$119 a year and offers free two- and same-day shipping and access to Amazon's streaming services, also means that on average, shoppers will [spend \\$300 more per year than the average Amazon customer](#), which makes it Amazon's key driver of retail business.

A massive exodus of Amazon Prime subscribers is still far from our present reality. Yet there are some voices trying to turn the tide. In part due to a [slew of negative press](#), [condemnations from politicians](#), and very public [worker strikes](#).

This isn't anything new, of course. People have been aware of Amazon's controversies for decades, from its [monopolistic practices](#) to [tax avoidance](#), poor treatment of [both white- and blue-collar workers](#), [union-busting](#), [environmental damage](#), and most recently, the [year-long publicity stunt of HQ2](#), a bad-faith ploy to extract private data from US cities that ended with Amazon plopping its supposedly economy-boosting offices into the [two most established markets on the East Coast](#).

And right now, journalists and writers — a small segment of the population, sure, but many of whom have sizable spheres of influence online — are much more willing to vocalize anti-Amazon sentiments. On Thanksgiving, Jia Tolentino of the New Yorker [tweeted](#) that she had canceled her Prime subscription during a week when [many on Twitter encouraged their followers](#) to do the same.

Tolentino tells me that even though she felt her own Amazon patronage was inexcusable ever since [Mac McClelland's 2012 piece about going undercover as a warehouse worker](#), the final straw was the [10-figure tax breaks the city of New York promised to Amazon for HQ2](#). "I had directly contributed to this situation and I felt like shit," she says.

Another writer, Julia, who asked me not to use her last name because she works for a production company that could conduct business with Amazon Studios in the future, says she canceled her subscription after seeing [the film *Sorry to Bother You*](#), which offers a stark critique of capitalism.

"I had Amazon Prime for about a year, and during that time, I watched my whole approach to consumption change," she says. "A stack of boxes started to accumulate next to my recycling bin, and I was sort of horrified to realize how greedy I'd become. We've all become so accustomed to getting whatever we want, whenever we want, at little to no cost. But when anything is that cheap, there's always someone paying for it."

The efforts of those who speak out against Amazon seem to be influencing others as well, even if it's contained within the echo chamber of Twitter. Podcaster Kyle Amato says he finally cut the cord when Marian Bull, a writer and ceramist, [offered a free handmade cup to anyone who canceled their Prime membership](#) last week. "I was being a hypocrite if I just kept using Prime while speaking out against Amazon proper," he says.

"The backlash has actually grown slower than I would've thought, given that Amazon's labor abuses have been well-documented for a long time," says Tolentino. "The worker strikes have done a lot. But Amazon succeeds in large part because the entire labor economy is overheating and everyone's safety nets are disappearing: people are so busy, people have less and less money to spare outside rent and health care, and so it's easy to just close your eyes and cut corners by getting that free shipping when you can."

And for many, that free shipping and convenience is a lifesaver. In a [recent Twitter thread](#), social work student Carey Kirijo explained their complicated feelings about the wave of people publicly canceling their Prime subscriptions, noting that for those with disabilities or mental health issues, as well as those who live in rural areas, the decision is much more fraught.

Kirijo explained that their disabling mental illness sometimes prevents them from leaving the house for long periods of time, and social anxiety means that tight aisles and bright lights have the potential to trigger panic attacks, which makes online shopping a huge help.

“I really, really love online retail as a tool,” Kirijo says, “But I think that with the lack of regulation, especially massive corporations like Amazon, there are opportunities for retailers to take advantage of workers and the system as a whole. Amazon workers should be allowed to unionize, and other steps should be taken to protect working conditions. We need to be having this conversation about Amazon, and I’m happy we’re having it, on the understanding that Amazon probably isn’t going anywhere anytime soon.”

And there is the other question: Even if lost subscribers becomes a major problem for Amazon, it won’t undo the damages its success has wrought on the world. A [New York Times investigation earlier this fall](#) explained that in a rush to compete against Amazon, other retailers like Verizon have exploited warehouse workers, too many of whom have fainted or even experienced miscarriages while on the job due to grueling conditions.

What, then, could Amazon do to fix these problems? “If Amazon warehouse workers were unionized, and if the Postal Service union were able to successfully advocate for better conditions for the [delivery drivers who are overwhelmed with Amazon packages](#), that’d be good,” Tolentino offers.

“I think we’ll have to sacrifice a *lot* of conveniences to allow for humane conditions at Amazon,” Amato adds. “It’s such a beast at this point. It either needs to be broken up or nationalized, and I’m not sure where to start. I can only fight with my wallet.”

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