

Digital Dignity

The greatest phenomenon of our lifetime is the full-scale digitization of every aspect of our lives: communications, news, photos, music, film, gossip, books, relationships, shopping, work, play, dreams, intentions, you name it.

What amazes me is the total lack of concern regarding one's basic ownership of one's personal data. Why are we not paid when someone reads our data, stores our data, translates it into something compelling to advertisers and other third parties, and then sells it at incredibly high profit margins? Why are we not paid when a spammer sends to our email address or Twitter account unwanted emails about idiotic advertisements?

Why should Reid Hoffman be worth billions from exploiting other people's career data on Linked In? Why doesn't he pay his Linked In members every time he accesses their personal file? Even pay them with virtual goods, credits, goods-in-kind, some kind of compensation? This type of exploitation is akin to slavery.

And naturally these companies are more successful with the young, the needy, the gullible, the less-empowered in society. Of course these services appeal to the voyeur in all of us, to the narcissist and to all the other biologic behaviours and attitudes. It is simply populism. Just look at what people actually do on Facebook. Or ChatRoulette. Or YouTube.

When Facebook uses targeted ads based on what members have in their files, it is no different from a landlord looking through your apartment and selling your bedroom walls to advertisers. Let's say people don't care about privacy now. Shouldn't we at least be paid?

This is a call to arms. A manifesto. Our personal digital lives are not free for you to exploit, like some land in a western frontier, or some abstract electronic spectrum rights, or some rubble-strewn field on Mars. Pay us for our personal digital data. Pay us for what we inherently own, and continue to own after we die. It is the decent thing to do. Every person has his or her own digital dignity. And it has intrinsic market value.

Where is the John Locke or Voltaire of our times? Who will stand up to Google and Microsoft and demand that search engines put at the top of people searches our own personal websites, with some validation assurance like you see for celebrity names on Twitter? Instead of them putting first all the paid-for search engine optimized spam of a thousand startups trying to re-sell our data...

The time for action is now, given the rate at which we are becoming digital. Our every credit card transaction can be made public, our every physical movement, even our personal genomes. If investment bankers can calculate a valuation for Facebook and Twitter and Linked In, then somewhere in their models there are calculations of the value of each individual member's data, a Net Present Value per member.

Don't get me wrong. I am as capitalist as the next person. I just want to be paid what I am worth. If your model says Facebook is worth \$12 billion, and Facebook has 400 million members, then each member is worth \$30. Facebook should be paying their members at least \$15 each as one of their costs of doing business.

For people and their data are not free, whether in physical or digital form.

It is time for digital dignity.