

Why advertisers should back a global Digital Bill of Rights



Edward Snowden has shown the Faustian bargain of private data in exchange for free stuff has created a global monster. Photograph: Ueslei Marcelino/Reuters

I believe big data is becoming the driving force in our global economy and will drive a new kind of war. Advertisers need it to target consumers. Governments and law enforcement [agencies](#) need it to keep us safe and secure, [so they say](#). Internet platforms and technology companies, or the "[siren servers](#)" as Jaron Lanier aptly calls them in his latest book, need it to maintain their pivotal roles in our digital lives and to continue nurturing us with all those amazing free services, apps and platforms that we can't seem to do without any longer.

Consumers: Faustian deals no more?

In the mind of most digital consumers that crave a constant flow of cool new offerings that must by default be free, "paying with data" and therefore invariably becoming the content or the product, themselves, has become the new normal – until now. What looked like a somewhat reasonable deal ("I use you and you use me") is now starting to look like a fool's paradise: our boundless love and giddy admiration of Gmail, Google Docs and Search or the Android OS, for example, has in fact been quietly converted into fodder for "collect it all" [Captain Kirk wannabes](#) that crave information superiority under the disguise of national security.

The recent revelations by the NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden are becoming more mind-boggling by the minute; often reading like quotes from a Cory Doctorow science fiction novel. Edward's liberated intel has shown the world that this Faustian bargain of my-private-data-in-exchange-for-free-stuff has in fact already created a global monster that is now surfacing like an [angry Godzilla](#) from Tokyo Bay. We have sold our data and we

have become the content ie the product, ourselves – and now we have no control over any of it. Take it or leave it, shut up or put up. Pick [privacy or security](#). Love it or leave it.

Epicentre USA: breach of trust on a global scale

As Harvard's Yochai Benkler has [aptly pointed](#) out in a brilliant Guardian guest post, the NSA has already single-handedly declared a new kind of war on the internet as we know it, but all the while, our hyper-networked digital lives are now so heavily banking on the assumption that the basic trust, permission and control mechanisms are working. Events like this are shaking those beliefs to the core. Data is the new oil, trust is the new currency – and when trust is broken, business breaks, quickly, as well. The question is, then – who needs oil when there are no cars or aeroplanes to run on it?

Imagine being disconnected by and from the consumer: the end of cookies will be the least of it

Imagine a scenario where a significant chunk of the soon-to-be four billion internet users start to question the default Faustian bargain of "my private data in return for your connectivity, your cool platforms and amazing technologies". This could spell the end for any meaningful and standardised tracking methodologies, with users no longer eagerly broadcasting their locations and MAC addresses on their mobile devices, as well as the likely rejection of NFC/RFID technologies or any kind of digital money, no matter how enticing an eager purveyor would make it.

Imagine brands wanting to advertise to billions of upwardly-mobile and ready-to-buy users (aka consumers) but not having permission to know enough about who they really are, what they think and how to reach them efficiently. Imagine brands and advertisers being locked out of reaching consumers because they don't trust the media they may employ to reach us; and by extension they mistrust them. Imagine consumers wanting to be "off the grid" and off-the-radar because being on the grid is like walking naked down Madison Avenue.

You don't think this will happen? One fifth of the world's desktop internet users apparently [already use ad-blocking software](#) with their browsers. Mozilla wants to make "do not track" the default setting in Firefox, and many savvy users are now considering [even more dramatic action](#) to cloak themselves and escape from the global data hoovering and hyper-marketing that seems to have become a default mindset in many countries. Jeff Jarvis is correct when he says that we need [Big Tech to defend us against Big Brother](#); but what if Big Brother is married to Big Tech?

The consumers reaction is easily predicted: if my mere participation in this new and shiny SoLoMo (social-local-mobile) universe renders me subject to rampant mass surveillance and perpetual digital nakedness, if it turns me into a meticulously profiled yet unwitting

target for hyper-marketing while methodically addicting me to all the cool things that these new gadgets and software apps can now do for me, then... please count me out. This is not the game I signed up for a few years ago; enough is enough.

I recently migrated all my email and online document-sharing from Gmail (which is an unbelievably great product, of course, and really quite irreplaceable) and Google to my own servers, here in Switzerland, myself, exactly because I can no longer trust that US-based providers will – and can – "do the right thing").

Advertisers: rebuild trust or get locked out

If advertisers, marketers and brands, wielding their \$650bn advertising war-chest, don't just want to be pawns in the big data wars, they will need to be a lot more pro-active and act with conviction now. Protecting trust is protecting the ecosystem that you rely on. It is time for brands and advertisers to face the music: if trust breaks, so does business, so before you can even get close to selling anything to anyone you must make sure that this dawning digital ecosystem is actually functioning for all of us. It's time to stop the focus on building better mouse-traps; of mimicking the oil companies in their ruthless quest for domination and immediate profit.

Enter the Digital Bill of Rights

As a first step I think advertisers should get behind a global "Digital Bill of Rights" ([see what Mashable has already produced here](#)), a bill which must clearly be user-centric not provider centric, and which needs to lay down the law on who can mine, refine and sell what data, when and how, globally. For example, such a bill could regulate what data can be captured on mobile devices and apps, under which exact circumstances, and how long it would be available to whom. It could also specify what data-miners would need to offer in return for being being "paid with data".

Advertisers and marketers need to drive this process now, before it becomes a mission impossible because trust is lost. Such a "digital bill of rights" may also catalyse a new approach by governments around the globe, one that no longer merely sanctions the exploitation of our natural data resources just like it allowed the pillaging of our natural energy resources for the benefit of so very few.

Clearly, we need to take the internet back, [as Bruce Schneier points out](#), and we need brands and advertisers to join us. We need Google and Facebook, Yahoo and Microsoft et al to urgently start acting on our behalf, and unequivocally defend us against unwarranted surveillance, hyper-targeting, meta-marketing and blatant digital-addiction schemes. At the same time – and this is crucial – we need brands and advertisers to return the digital controls back to us, and to focus on creating trusted relationships instead of building big-data mouse-traps that profit from the governments' abuse of our digital footprints and

breadcrumbs.

Show us that you care, and maybe we'll start caring about you again.

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