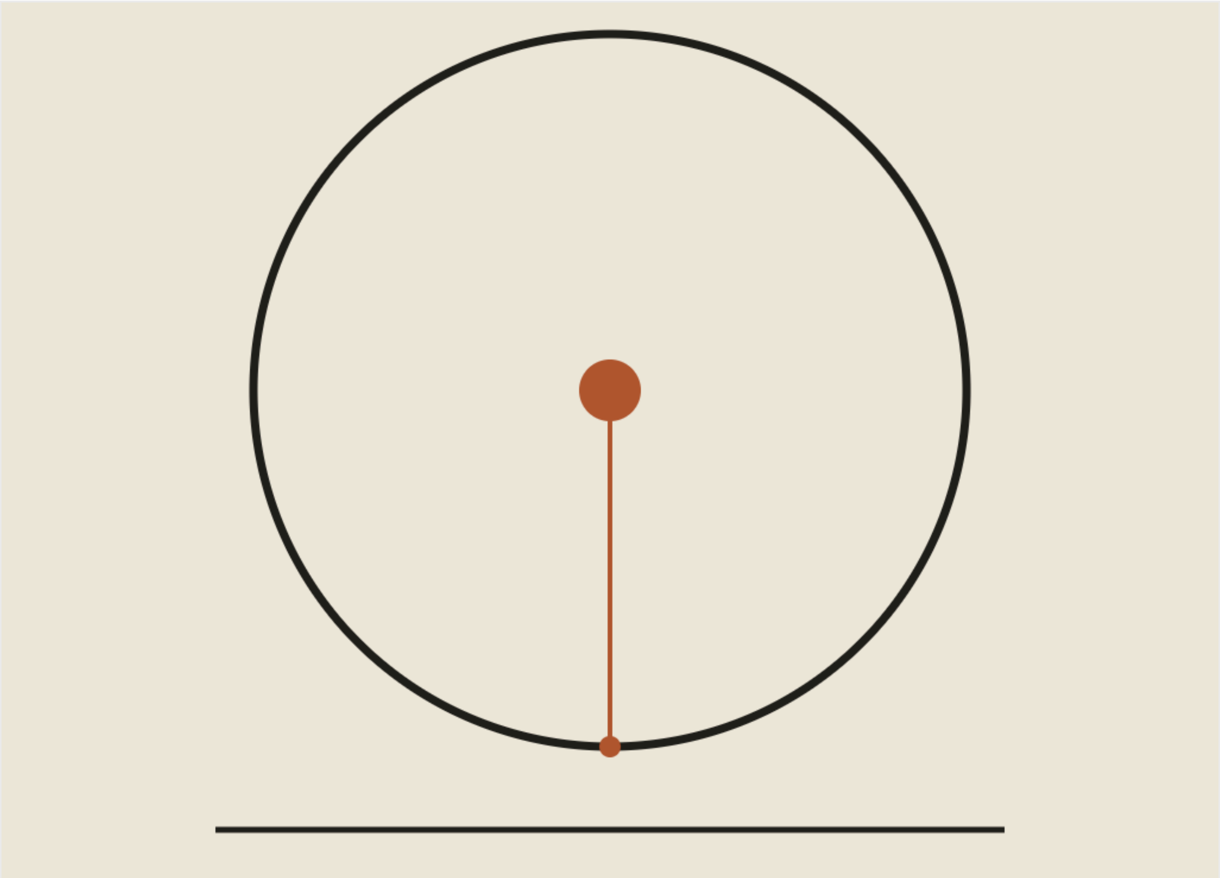
Technology

Your Data Isn’t Worth What You Think

The “data is the new oil” panic assumes your clicks are treasure someone is stealing. Individually they’re worth a fraction of a cent, and the real asset was never you.

By Emmanuel Awosika ▪ December 16, 2025 ▪



The phrase “data is the new oil” has done more to confuse the privacy debate than almost any other. It plants an image in which your personal data is a barrel of crude, intrinsically valuable, and the companies are drilling it out from under you and getting rich on the proceeds. From there the natural demand follows: pay me for my data, since you are clearly profiting from it. The image is vivid, memorable, and mostly false.

The blunt fact is that your individual data is worth almost nothing. The going rate for a person's attention, sold through the advertising machinery, is measured in fractions of a cent per impression. A single user's browsing history, purchase record, and location trail, sold on its own, would not buy a coffee. The companies are not sitting on a fortune extracted from each of us. They are running a business whose per-user margin is tiny and whose profit comes entirely from doing it at enormous scale.

What actually has value is the aggregate, and the model built on top of it. No advertiser cares about you specifically. They care about reaching ten million people who resemble a buyer, and the asset that makes that possible is the statistical pattern learned across everyone, not any one person's records. This is why the demand to be paid for your data misunderstands the product. You are not the oil. You are one indistinguishable drop, and the refinery runs fine if any particular drop opts out.

Seeing this clearly should change the privacy argument rather than end it. If the case against surveillance rests on the claim that you are being robbed of something valuable, it collapses the moment someone points out the numbers, and the companies are happy to point out the numbers. The stronger case never depended on price. It rests on the fact that being continuously profiled, sorted, and nudged is a harm to human dignity and autonomy whether or not the data fetches money, and that a system able to model a population's behavior can be turned to ends far worse than selling shoes.

Framing privacy as a pricing dispute plays directly into the hands of the people it aims to constrain, because it concedes that the whole thing is a market transaction to be settled with a fairer rate. It is not. The objection worth making is not that they are underpaying you for your data. It is that some things about a person should not be collected and modeled at industrial scale at any price, and the cheapness of the data is precisely why the market will never protect them on its own.