

# Dutch student sells his data for €350, but at what price privacy?

April 18 2014, by Anya Skatova

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Now for lot 56: a rare collection of Graham's angry emails to his ex-girlfriend.  
Credit: portableantiquities, CC BY

A dutch student has taken the bold decision to sell all his data at auction.  
It's a decision that should make us think about the future of our own  
information.

In an auction on 12 April, Shawn Buckles sold his complete "[data](#) soul" –

his location records, his medical records, his personal calendar, the content of his emails and all the information from his social media communications. He sold his online conversations, his consumer preferences and his internet browsing history. The lot. And for his soul he received €350.

Like Buckles, we all generate vast amounts of data on a daily basis and it is used by various companies for various purposes, such as to tailor online advertising. People don't generally understand the value of their data, which is partly what Buckles was commenting on when he sold his.

It might seem that exchanging your personal data for benefits will not feature in the near future but Buckle's auction shows us that a scenario in which we commercialise our [personal information](#) is not necessarily that distant.

As yet there is no market on which an individual can sell their personal data. While it is already to some extent clear what companies such as Google, Facebook and Tesco can get out of it, it is unknown how much a data soul is worth nor how one might use all the pieces of data that one person produces as a single package.

Perhaps luckily for Buckles, his auction is unlikely to provide any answers. The winning bidder was technology news company The Next Web, which Buckles says will use his data to highlight the issue of online privacy rather than to a more sinister end.

The sale is also probably not an accurate measure of the true market value of a person's data soul. It is plausible that in the future the value of personal data will be determined through an emergent market that can leverage it effectively.

There is demand from the health research sector, entertainment

industries and [insurance companies](#), to name but a few. If a more established market was operating to serve this demand, we could probably expect to get out of the data what it actually worth.

That said, it is also possible that a market could emerge that would see us exchanging our data for something other than money. Insurance companies might reduce insurance premiums based on lifestyle data collected through life-logging. Information from apps that monitor your sleep, activity or exercise could work for both you and the company. In fact, this type of exchange is already happening in car insurance, where premiums depend on your driving record.

Benefit doesn't have to imply direct monetary value to the person, either. We might in the future decide to use our data as a philanthropic resource. Instead of or as well as giving a monthly donation to our favourite charity, we might donate our data. A disease research charity could benefit from your health records, for example.

Buckle's auction also raises important ethical questions, of course. At what point do digital records of human behaviour stop being personal? Obviously the content of Buckle's inbox is personal but is a calculation of the average number of emails per day per country personal? Is GPS data averaged across millions of people personal?

The first ever data soul auction has certainly raised more questions than answers. Buckles is in a sense ahead of the pack. We are all growing increasingly aware that our [personal data](#) is valuable but while we continue to struggle to define what we are willing to accept in exchange for its use, companies are already basing their business models on the contents of our internet history. Would you accept €350 euros for digital soul? You may have to decide on your price sooner than you think.

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