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Do You *Pay* for a Product? If Not, YOU are the Product.

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Maybe not always, but hopefully, we know there is no such thing as a free lunch by this point in our lives. Advertising is something we have come to accept or at least ignore for most of our lives. We expect commercials on television, the radio, newspapers, magazines, and movies and accept this advertising knowing that the revenue generated pays for or subsidizes the entertainment and information we want.

The Internet takes advertising to a new, more personal level. We see ads directed to us as individuals rather than generic advertising. The first time we see ads based on a recent search, we know advertising has reached a new level of personalization. The entity selling ads is obviously using information about us to direct advertising to our eyes.

## Facebook

In early April, yet another personal data breach was recently disclosed. Since some time in 2019, the personal data of over 533 million Facebook users was compromised via their phone number. In this case, Facebook users became more of a "product" than most users had ever anticipated. Many Facebook users only recently realized that Facebook is an advertising entity that collects a lot of data on each user.

Free (with advertising) has been a successful business model for a long time. However, the recent Facebook disclosure (along with other accidental and deliberate data breaches) causes some to wonder if this is evidence that consumers have been treated poorly by this business model.

## Aren't you always the product?

And just because you pay doesn't mean you're not the product. Cable and satellite television companies take our money PLUS sell us (via advertising) to the various sponsors. Magazines take our money and still sell ads; banks and credit cards can charge us money for the service of having and helping us manage our money.

Any business that has a "loyalty card" takes our money for products, services, and entertainment but gives us a discount or other benefit in exchange for the ability to monitor what we are doing. In other words, we routinely become "the product" even when we're already paying.

All businesses treat their customers with varying levels of respect and provide different levels of value to us. There is often no direct correlation between how much money we pay and the value of the service we receive.

For example, someone might pay a couple of dollars a week for online, or a little more for delivered paper subscriptions, to *The New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal* or the local newspaper, or some other publication*.* Yet this same information is available to people who read these papers at their local library or coffee shop at no charge. So, in effect, we are not paying for the product; we pay for getting the product in a way we find much more convenient.

This example is much more complicated than the black and white "you're the product" logic allows. For instance, some users get the service virtually for "free" in an airplane, using accumulated points or a "bump" coupon. Other travelers pay big bucks for the benefit of being transported to the same destination! So, who or what is the product?

## Individual responsibility

Many entities whose services you pay for treat their users well, and others treat users poorly. There are all sorts of business models online. Some work in some cases, others work in other cases. But to argue that "free" services mean you're "the product" and thus not treated as well isn't true. In the online world, each of us must decide if the value of the product we receive is worth the inevitable compromise in our privacy that takes place.

Suppose we accept the privacy compromise inherent in most online experiences. In that case, it is incumbent on each of us to understand, compromise, and share only as much information as necessary.

