



EMBARGOED TO 00:01 GMT ON MONDAY 25th MAY 2026

PRESS RELEASE

FREE ISN'T FREE: NEW REPORT FINDS BIG TECH AND AI EARN UP TO \$160,000 FROM THE DATA OF EACH INTERNET USER WORLDWIDE OVER THEIR LIFETIME

- Big Tech calculated to harvest up to \$162,492 per person in inflation-linked commercial value from internet users worldwide over a lifetime, according to first-of-its-kind report
- Across the world's estimated 6,000 million internet users the report's upper lifetime estimate would amount to approximately \$745 trillion in commercial value.
- The study, which assessed 129 major companies, found Amazon, Alphabet, Microsoft, Meta and Anthropic are some of the most significant benefactors of data capture.

London, United Kingdom - 25 May 2026: Web3 Foundation today launched '*The Hidden Price of Free: What Your Data Is Really Worth*', a groundbreaking report revealing that Big Tech and AI companies earn up to \$160,000 in commercial value from each internet user over a digital lifetime. This equates to a staggering \$745 trillion across the combined global population of internet users over a period of 60 years.

The study calculated the companies earn up to \$8,500 per year from USA internet users per year, up to \$2,206 per user in United Kingdom and Europe and \$407 in the rest of the world. Globally this equates to an annual amount of up to \$908 per internet user.

Over a lifetime that means the commercial value for a user in the USA is \$511,869, UK and Europe \$132,387, \$24,424 in the rest of the world and overall \$54,499 globally – or a huge \$1.08m in the USA, \$260,542 in UK and Europe, \$72,821 elsewhere and \$162,492 globally when inflation-linked.

In relative terms, the lifetime figure is equivalent to almost five years of full-time employment in the UK, using the ONS 2025 benchmark of \$52,474 per annum. On an inflation-linked basis, the US lifetime figure of \$831,301 is roughly equivalent to two times the Q1 2026 median sales price of a new US house. Amazon, Alphabet (Google), Anthropic, Microsoft and Meta are explicitly listed in the report, each earning up to \$1,000 annually on a single internet user.

The report shows that the modern internet is not free but paid for through personal data. Searches, clicks, locations, purchases, prompts, messages, images, preferences and behavioural signals are collected, analysed and monetised by some of the world's most powerful companies, usually without users having meaningful visibility, bargaining power or participation in the value created.

Unlike previous attempts to estimate the value of personal data, which have focused mainly on advertising revenue per active user, Web3 Foundation's methodology takes a broader view of how human data is monetised in the modern digital economy. The study examines advertising, AI subscriptions, enterprise licensing, API access, data brokerage, marketplaces, algorithmic recommendations and AI-driven cost savings.

This allowed the findings to account not only for social media and search platforms, but also for emerging AI firms, hardware-linked digital ecosystems and data brokers whose business models increasingly depend on collecting, analysing and reusing personal data at scale.

The report stresses that the figures are not presented as precise valuations or direct cash entitlements owed to individuals. Instead, they are intended as a benchmark for understanding the scale of commercial value associated with personal data and the extent to which that value is captured by companies rather than users.

Why AI changes the data economy

Web3 Foundation argues that artificial intelligence makes the imbalance more urgent. Personal data is no longer used only to target adverts. It is used to train models, improve recommendations, power enterprise systems, build behavioural profiles, create predictive products and generate new forms of machine intelligence.

Every search query, location signal, online purchase, social interaction, uploaded image or chatbot prompt can become part of a wider data economy. As AI systems become more capable, human-origin data becomes more valuable, while users remain largely excluded from the economic upside.

Web3 as a different model

The report says Web3 offers a fundamentally different vision for the internet. Rather than relying on centralised platforms that collect and monetise user data behind closed doors, Web3 technologies are built on decentralised digital infrastructure that can give individuals greater control over their identity, assets and online activity.

In a Web3-enabled internet, users could decide what data they share, with whom and on what terms. The report argues this could shift power away from dominant technology platforms and towards the individuals who generate the underlying value.

Quotes

“For too long, the internet has operated on an implicit bargain that users do not fully understand: convenience in exchange for surveillance. This report helps expose the scale of that imbalance. The modern digital economy is powered by human data, yet the people generating that value have little visibility, control or participation in the upside. Web3 technology can offer a path toward a more equitable internet, where individuals have genuine ownership over their digital lives rather than simply being the raw material for someone else’s business model.” - **Gavin Wood, Founder, Web3 Foundation**

“The internet does not have to work this way. For decades, digital platforms have been built around centralised control, where users hand over their data, identity and value in exchange for access to services. Web3 represents a fundamentally different model, one where individuals can own their digital assets, verify their identity without surrendering personal information and participate more fairly in the online economy. As AI accelerates and data becomes even more valuable, building a more transparent, user-led internet is becoming increasingly urgent.” - **Bill Laboon, Vice President, Technical Operations, Web3 Foundation**

Methodology at a glance

The study screened 150 companies drawn from the first 100 companies in *Forbes Global 2000 2025* and all companies in *Forbes AI 50 2026*. Of these, 129 qualified as Big Data companies under the report’s seven-criterion framework. They included 65 AI-first subscription or API companies, 31 ad-funded platforms, 14 hardware-bundled companies and 19 data brokers.

The model produces Conservative, Central and Expansive scenarios to reflect uncertainty around revenue attribution, regional monetisation, user numbers and AI-driven uplift. The report uses PDAV as its headline benchmark because it is designed to capture the broader commercial value associated with active user participation, data generation, behavioural signals and AI-driven revenue growth.

Table 1 – Global findis:

Measure	Conservative	Central	Expansive
Per person per year	\$485	\$694	\$908
Per person over a 61-year digital lifetime	\$29,127	\$41,651	\$54,499
Per person over a 61-year digital lifetime, inflation-linked	\$86,845	\$124,184	\$162,492

Table 2 – USA findings:

Measure	Conservative	Central	Expansive
Per person per year	\$4,816	\$6,565	\$8,531
Per person over a 61-year digital lifetime	\$288,969	\$393,878	\$511,869
Per person over a 61-year digital lifetime, inflation-linked	\$610,029	\$831,497	\$1.08m

Table 3 – North America findings:

Measure	Conservative	Central	Expansive
Per person per year	\$3,390	\$4,654	\$6,090
Per person over a 61-year digital lifetime	\$203,394	\$279,253	\$365,386
Per person over a 61-year digital lifetime, inflation-linked	\$429,376	\$589,518	\$771,350

Table 4 – UK and Europe findings:

Measure	Conservative	Central	Expansive
Per person per year	\$938	\$1,605	\$2,206
Per person over a 61-year digital lifetime	\$56,273	\$96,274	\$132,387
Per person over a 61-year digital lifetime, inflation-linked	\$110,746	\$189,470	\$260,542

Table 5 – Rest of the world findings:

Measure	Conservative	Central	Expansive
Per person per year	\$155	\$265	\$407
Per person over a 61-year digital lifetime	\$9,270	\$15,909	\$24,424
Per person over a 61-year digital lifetime, inflation-linked	\$27,641	\$47,435	\$72,821

**For media enquiries, get the full report and technical brief and to arrange interviews
contact: Tom Collins on tom@zebek.co.uk and +44 7904 496117**

NOTES TO EDITORS

Comparison Points:

1. In the USA, the annual PDAV Central figure of \$6,563 is equivalent to almost a full month of median household income. Median US household income was \$83,730 in 2024, making the annual PDAV figure about 7.8 per cent of that benchmark.
2. Over a lifetime, the US PDAV Central figure of \$393,785 is close to the Q1 2026 median sales price of a new US house, which was \$403,200. On an inflation-linked basis, the US lifetime figure of \$831,301 is roughly equivalent to two such homes.
3. Set against retirement savings, the US lifetime figure is larger than many people's entire pension pot. Vanguard reported an average 401(k) account balance of \$148,153 in 2024 and a median balance of \$38,176. The US lifetime central figure is about 2.7 times the average and more than ten times the median.
4. The average UK monthly mortgage repayment is around \$1,707, based on average house prices, a 15 per cent deposit, a 25-year mortgage term and prevailing two-year fixed mortgage rates. This is almost exactly the same as the annual PDAV Central figure for the amount per year, and less than PDAV Expansive sum.
5. In the UK, the average pension size at retirement is £145,900, less than both PDAV Central and Expansive figures when inflation linked.
6. The Rest of World annual central figure of \$265 appears modest in isolation . Over a lifetime, however, it becomes \$15,899, or \$47,404 when inflation-linked. This shows how small annual values can compound into significant lifetime value.

What is Personal Data Annual Value:

The report uses Personal Data Annual Value, or PDAV, as its headline benchmark. PDAV estimates the annual commercial value associated with personal data across multiple types of company and revenue model, including advertising platforms, AI subscription businesses, API providers, enterprise software providers, data brokers and hardware-linked digital ecosystems. It goes beyond traditional ARPU analysis by recognising that value is created not only from active users, but also from non-users, scraped data subjects, inferred profiles, public-corpus subjects and content contributors.

This gives an estimate of both extraction value – the revenue firms earn or save through the monetisation improvements driven by human-origin data – and the raw resale value, meaning the market price of isolated data points or identity bundles traded through data brokers or exchanges. Over the course of a digital lifetime, a single user may generate thousands in platform value, while fragments of their raw identity may individually sell for little more than the price of a coffee.

The paper does not claim that PDAV is a precise cash entitlement owed to every individual. Rather it is a vital benchmark for understanding the scale of commercial value associated with personal data. It shows that the current internet economy depends on a vast transfer of value from individuals to companies, usually without meaningful visibility, bargaining power, compensation or control.

About Web3 Foundation:

Web3 Foundation supports the development of a decentralised and user-led internet. It funds research and development teams building decentralised web software protocols, with a focus on giving users greater control over their identity, data, digital assets and online interactions. The Web 3 Foundation will be hosting the Web3 Summit at Funkhaus Berlin on 18-19 June 2026, bringing together the builders, technologists, investors and policymakers shaping the next phase of the internet. Media passes and interview opportunities are available.

Disclaimer:

This press release contains summaries and extracts from the accompanying report and is qualified in its entirety by the assumptions, qualifications, limitations and disclaimers contained in that report. Readers should review the full report before relying on any statements contained herein.

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