

MOTHERBOARD

Private Data Is the Ultimate Luxury Good

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Image: Addie Wagenknecht

What if an SD card was worth more than a diamond?

In a society where information is paramount, how do we value something we cannot see? What do we hold precious in an age that has become increasingly beholden to data?

psk series is a series of jewelry—rings, necklaces, bracelets—with the diamond or gem that would typically be featured replaced with something far more valuable per square millimeter: data.

Co-creators Addie Wagenknecht and Pirate Bay co-founder Peter Sunde want the jewelry to reflect the literal distributed modes of creation and exchange, which challenge people's concept of value in traditional economies. A "wearable comment on scarcity and valuation of material vs. ephemeral goods," Wagenknecht said.

As Wagenknecht told me, "What we often don't realize is so many markets, if not all, ride on artificial scarcity. 'Limited editions,' 'special editions,' and 'invite-only' [are] just marketing terms for 'we can charge you more for this because there is less of it.'"

psk series taps into cultural norms and anxieties of the desired object, the covetable product that no one else has or will own. When you are told that something is valuable—that it is rare, irreplaceable, or one-of-a-kind—your interest is naturally piqued.

Except in this case, we are forced to realize the actual value of data, something which we often give away without any consideration of its true worth. You may not be able to see it, but as we operate across the internet, through devices, screens, and services, we create a unique and valuable data profile, one we are often willing to give away in exchange for access to certain spaces online.

Consider Facebook and its efforts to spread internet connectivity beyond wealthy countries. The goal of Facebook's internet.org project is to provide affordable internet access to people in the developing world. Except that for Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook is the internet. On connecting to the internet through internet.org, users can only access a limited amount of websites that are curated and approved by Facebook.

Acting as a gatekeeper proved controversial for Facebook; many of its Indian partners initially claimed the service violated net neutrality principles. Nikhil Pahwa, founder of Medianama, an Indian telecommunications publication, wrote at the height of the controversy in late 2014, "What Zuckerberg means by internet for all, is essentially Facebook for all, along with a few non-profit services thrown in to give it the appearance of philanthropy,"

In this case, it is a luxury to have an internet that is not using your participation as a commodity, your data as capital, and your time as money.



Image: Addie Wagenknecht

To Wagenknecht and Sunde, psk series shines a harsh light on technology industry business models that rely on users' data (instead of direct payment) to fund their operations.

Considering utopian aspirations for the internet imagined by those such as John Perry Barlow, co-founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation digital rights activist group, and the members of pioneering online community Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (commonly known as The WELL), the internet has arguably become just another marketplace for our personal information rather than an accessible,

educational, ideal. Open source advocates themselves, Wagenknecht and Sunde channeled these concerns into their creation of psk series.

“We thought the internet when it started was going to be this Wild West cornucopia of decentralized, [peer-to-peer] spaces where everyone was equal, everything was free and beautiful and open,” Wagenknecht said. “But instead we made the mistakes of underestimating and not determining how the web would affect existing markets, so it became a few corporate spaces for the majority of society.”

In an effort that is perhaps more opportunistic than subversive, there are services that will directly help you sell your data. One such service, Handshake, estimates that the average person could net between \$1,600 and \$8,000 per year in directly selling their data to companies.

And with the average diamond ring costing around \$4,000, according to a 2013 report by Jewelers of America, perhaps there’s something in the rewards you can reap if you’d rather sell your data than encrypt it.

For Wagenknecht, cementing data in the physical form is important in order to communicate it as something that can be sold, exchanged, or given away, or even stolen—a process that is hard to communicate from looking at lines of code. In this sense, seeing is believing. Even bitcoin, the digital currency, has found its way into the material world. It seems we still need to hold something in our hands to know that it is truly worth something.

psk series is a story itself, a narrative that is embedded within decades of myth creation and perpetuation around objects and their perceived value or control on what that value may be. As Wagenknecht explained, “by re-contextualizing data as a physical object—something we recognize, replacing that already universally valuable object, the diamond, with it—we want to hack the implications of [peer-to-peer] contributions to the web and digital society.”

Therefore, as in the case of the physical bitcoin, we need to anchor to an object to understand its worth, to tap into the materiality of scarcity. To not only subvert the things we currently find precious and place a spotlight on their fabricated position in society, but also to position them in a history and narrative of capitalism that defines value.

Ultimately, psk series is about interrogating what we find valuable and why, while simultaneously creating an actual valuable object that we may not immediately consider irreplaceable. However, Wagenknecht and Sunde’s work doesn’t suddenly call for the eradication of currency. As Wagenknecht explained, “We don’t have an issue with money, there is nothing wrong with that—it’s the markets we have set up, the fake value of unlimited resources/data, and the cost in empathy or human value that are never even questioned that we want to challenge.”