

The  
Economist

Store

**Books**  
**Pocket World in  
Figures 2015**Fingertip access to essential  
figures with this annual  
bestseller

SHOP NOW

**SUBSCRIBE**  
ENJOY 4 RISK FI  
WEEKS AND S  
UP TO

More from The Economist

My Subscription

Subscribe

Log in or register

The  
Economist

World politics

Business &amp; finance

Economics

Science &amp; technology

Culture

Blogs

Debate

Multimedia

Print e

## Schumpeter

Business and management



Comment (17)

Prin

E-mail

Peri

Reprints &amp; permissions

Previous

Next

Latest Schumpeter

All latest updates

**Big data and education**

# Withered inBloom

Apr 30th 2014, 17:41 by K.N.C.

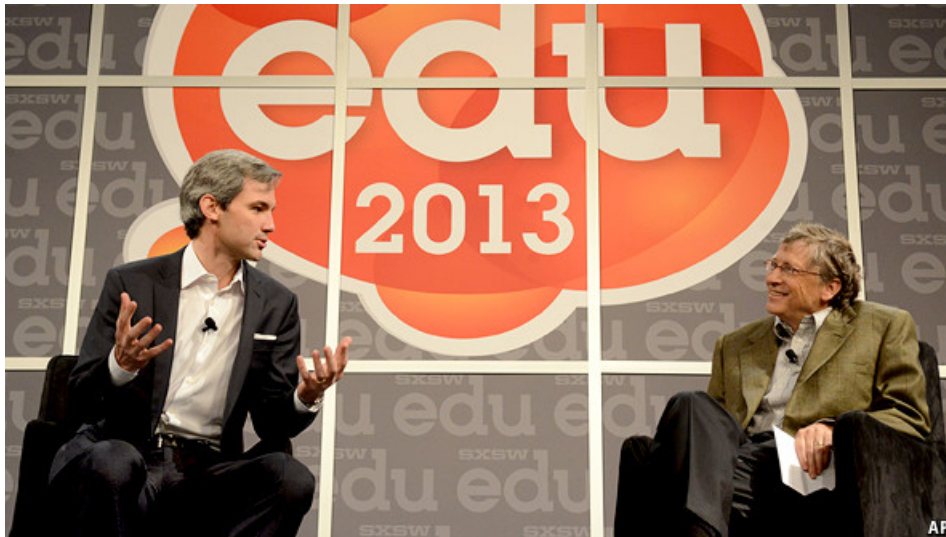


Like

121

Tweet

63



A FEW years ago a group of American educators got together to talk about a common problem. School systems were being swamped by data—like every other sector of the economy. And like other industries, they had no idea how to respond. But unlike businesses, most schools aren't competitors. So they looked at how they could team up to solve their problems.

They created a computer system to store data in a secure, common format that gave the schools complete control over what data they collected, how it was used and with whom that data was shared. In a nod to transparency and civic responsibility, the software was open source. A non-profit organisation was formed to run it, backed with \$100m from the Gates and Carnegie foundations. A blue-ribbon board of directors was formed, mainly

### About Schumpeter

Our Schumpeter columnist and h consider business, finance and r blog named after the economist J Schumpeter

Follow @EconBizFin

1.0M followers

RSS feed

Advertisement

The  
Economist

Events

### Securing Data:

Minimising Risk in a  
Hyperconnected Wo

October 2nd 2014 | 9 am ET



Register

### Economist video

educators but also Bob Wise, a former governor from West Virginia.

And so inBloom was born. But on April 21st, less than two years later, the group announced it is shutting down.

Why the flame out? After being warmly embraced by school districts in America, inBloom saw them pull out after parents and privacy advocates heard about the plans and feared for student privacy.

InBloom is one of the first major big-data casualties—a victim of exaggerated fears and a misunderstanding about the technology. Rather than a diabolical plot to sell student data to the highest bidder (as it was often mischaracterised by critics and in the press), inBloom was meant to be a solution to the problem of data in education. And it was also a clever way to enable the use of data to improve learning and teaching.

It is worth bearing in mind that schools have been keeping electronic records for decades. In the 1983 film “War Games,” Matthew Broderick plays a fun-loving geek who, to impress a girl, changes her biology grade from an F to an A after breaking into the school’s computer system (watch film clip [here](#)).

But managing the technology is a struggle for schools: how to store, process and provide access to the data—not just student grades, but things like attendance, disciplinary actions, sports activities, medical records and so on. The data are often in different databases, incompatible formats and require different passwords. As a result, the data are not used effectively. For example, by aggregating them one might find that a certain teacher is particularly good with certain students (say, shy boys or rowdy girls) and organise schedules so that they teach those pupils. And the data are difficult to access (by a parent, for instance) or share (if a student transfers schools).


InBloom solved these woes, by providing a service for schools to store and set controls for their data—in the same way a computer operating system lets users store their content and chose their software to access those files.

Yet inBloom was grossly unprepared for the backlash against its technology. Instead of fighting critics directly, they left it to their customers—the school districts—to educate parents and make the case. This was a miscalculation, since it was easier for those facing the criticisms to retreat rather than walk further out on a limb.


This is a pity. It will put a brake on attempts to use big data to improve education (which *The Economist* has discussed [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#)). Worse, inBloom’s collapse will probably cast a chill over other promising entrepreneurs and tech-philanthropists who want to solve similar problems in other industries. For example, shouldn’t we have an inBloom for health care, so patient records can be easily accessed by qualified caregivers? The best way to lower the costs and improve the quality of medical service is by the effective use of data. But after inBloom’s beating, who would take the risk? (Indeed, the British government recently delayed plans for an inBloom-like health-care data platform after a public outcry.)

Among the lessons inBloom’s leadership take from the experience is the need to better communicate the benefits of using data. “We thought they were clear and obvious,” says Iwan Streichenberger, inBloom’s chief executive (pictured above with Bill Gates).


#### Recent Activity


[Log In](#)


Log in to Facebook to see what are doing.




**Why does liberal Iceland want pornography?**  
1,058 people recommend this.



**Russia's wounded giant**  
391 people recommend this.

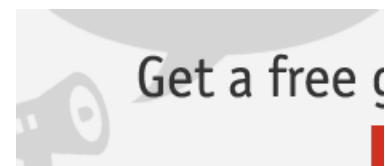


**Mysterious Mariano**  
2,204 people recommend this.



**Married to the job**  
1,178 people recommend this.

Facebook social plugin



#### Follow *The Economist*

#### Latest updates »




**The Economist explains**  
presidential election was t  
The Economist explains | 3 hour



**Air strikes against the Is**  
Consensus, but for what?  
Democracy in America | Sep 23r

Moreover, society's approach to privacy needs to change. Just as society made progress on the environment when the thinking shifted from the "negative" to the "positive"—from imposing fines to promoting a company's green credentials—so too must we shift our thinking about privacy.

Despite inBloom's closure, the system may survive. It is an open-source project and several school systems still use it. So there's a glimmer of hope that it can quietly continue to evolve. InBloom hit the wall not because it had the wrong idea, but one that was ahead of its time. It failed to overcome privacy fears that, although not groundless, were exaggerated and fixable. Whenever a timid ignorance obstructs progress, the loss is all of ours.




**Previous**

**An interview with Peter Munk:** You've got to hedge your bets

**Next**

**Huawei:** Mr Ren opens up



Like

121

Tweet

63

Share

73

g+1

0

## Featured comment

**KEHaines** May 1st, 02:34

[View thread](#)

I find it disturbing that you do not explore the very real concerns raised by parents and educators and present a more balanced picture. Because this is "student identifiable data" it is incredibly upsetting to many parents, especially because inBloom included some very sensitive data points such as Autistic, A.D.H.D., Removed by child protective services, Homeless, Pregnant, etc. There was no option for parents to opt-out if they were opposed to having their child's information released to third party vendors, which would seem to be in conflict with FERPA. There's no proof that this type of data mining benefits students in any way. And, there are legitimate security concerns that personal information (BY NAME) about a child could fall into the wrong hands. Ultimately, this would just become one more "unfunded mandate" forced upon our school districts while budgets continue to be cut. I haven't met one educator who "warmly embraced" this concept.

[Recommend](#)

14

[Report](#)
[Permalink](#)
[View all comments \(17\)](#)

## More from The Economist

**Difference engine:** Tesla's high-stakes gamble

**Canada's foreign fighters:** And don't come back

**Ivy League grade inflation:** Grade

**The Economist explains:** Why so many



**Babbage: September 23**  
need laws too

Babbage | Sep 23rd, 18:02



**Theatre:** Return to Wond

Prospero | Sep 23rd, 17:07



**Strikes against Islamic s**  
swift sword

Pomegranate | Sep 23rd, 16:00



**Tesco's accounting prok**  
orange

Business and Finance | Sep 23rd



**Daily chart:** Mortal comb

Graphic detail | Sep 23rd, 15:18

[More latest updates »](#)

## Most popular

Commented



**1 Ukraine**  
Win some

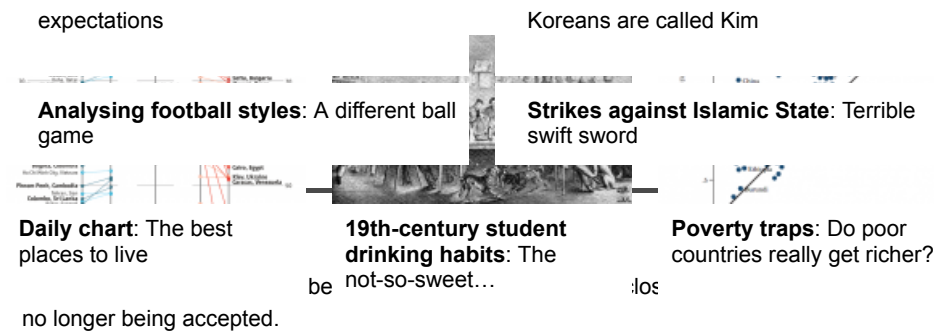
**2 The rise and rise of Xi Jinping:**  
obeyed

**3 Scotland's referendum:** Britain's

**4 Russia and Ukraine:** A brief inte

**5 Inequality and the narrowing ta**  
reliant on the few

Advertisement



Sort: [Newest first](#) | [Oldest first](#) | [Readers' most recommended](#) | [Featured](#)

**Stavros Saripanidis** May 1st, 19:59

Dear Editors,

Massive numbers of young people in the South of Europe, especially Italy and Greece, lack IT skills and cannot be employed or fill vacancies.

Education systems are outdated.

References

<http://www.chartcourse.com/skills-shortages-worsening/>  
<http://www.cityam.com/article/1389586440/firms-say-skills-gap-keeping-eu...>  
<http://www.businessinsider.com/mckinsey-report-on-education-skills-gap-2...>  
<http://www.marketplace.org/topics/economy/study-reveals-skills-gap-betwe...>  
<http://euobserver.com/news/122712>  
<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jul/01/youth-unemployment-...>  
<http://lline.fi/en/article/research/13422/need-of-enhancing-core-skills-...>  
<http://www.computerweekly.com/news/2240147322/Young-Europeans-lack-basic...>  
<http://globalnews.ca/news/889279/workers-lack-skills-in-countries-with-m...>

Recommend **43** Report Permalink

**KEHaines** May 1st, 02:34

I find it disturbing that you do not explore the very real concerns raised by parents and educators and present a more balanced picture. Because this is "student identifiable data" it is incredibly upsetting to many parents, especially because InBloom included some very sensitive data points such as Autistic, A.D.H.D., Removed by child protective services, Homeless, Pregnant, etc. There was no option for parents to opt-out if they were opposed to having their child's information released to third party vendors, which would seem to be in conflict with FERPA. There's no proof that this type of data mining benefits students in any way. And, there are legitimate security concerns that personal information (BY NAME) about a child could fall into the wrong hands. Ultimately, this would just become one more "unfunded mandate" forced upon our school districts while budgets continue to be cut. I haven't met one educator who "warmly embraced" this concept.

Recommend **14** Report Permalink

**bampbs** May 1st, 00:30



**Books**  
**Style Guide** :  
 "Clarity of writing follows clarity of thought"  
**BUY NOW »**

## Economist blogs

Erasmus | Religion and public policy  
 Americas view | The Americas  
 Feast and famine | Demography and  
 Analects | China  
 Free exchange | Economics  
 Babbage | Science and technology  
 Game theory | Sports  
 Banyan | Asia  
 Graphic detail | Charts, maps and info  
 Baobab | Africa  
 Gulliver | Business travel  
 Blighty | Britain  
 Newsbook | News analysis  
 Buttonwood's notebook | Financial markets  
 Pomegranate | The Middle East  
 Charlemagne | European politics  
 Prospero | Books, arts and culture  
 Democracy in America | American politics  
 Eastern approaches | Ex-communism  
 The Economist explains | Explaining the world

## Products and events

### Have you listened to *The Economist* Facebook?

*The Economist* Radio is an on-demand listening platform that allows you to recommend *The Economist* audio content.

### Test your EQ

Take our weekly news quiz to stay current on headlines.

### In Other Words

Try our new audio app and website, reporting and analysis from our correspondents.

What fantasyland do you live in? American school boards neither know nor care about what you're saying. Big data is going to change how the schools are run? No it isn't. We can't even find enough good teachers to handle everyday teaching [I'm suspicious of anyone who refers to himself as an educator]. The American school system needs to be torn down and rebuilt from the bottom up. The idea of fine-tuning something that is broken is ridiculous.

Let's get everyone to agree on evolution and the age of the Earth, before dabbling with expensive frills.

Recommend

8

Report

Permalink

**guest-sieminn** in reply to KEHaines May 1st, 21:49

First of all, I warmly embrace this concept. I am a teacher with a Master's degree in Special Education. I thoroughly would enjoy having a system that inBloom's cloud could support. Second, the information parents are so concerned about people having access to is already online. If one wanted to retrieve that information without permission, it could be done. It seems that some people have no problem using their credit card in a store or online. However, these same people are afraid someone might hack into a system and find out their child is diagnosed with Autism or a Learning Disability. No one should be ashamed of having a disability and if there's something on record that one should be ashamed of, then just like in adulthood, that shame is the consequence of the negative behavior. If your child's information getting into the wrong hands is sincerely your concern, I assure you, a Cloud system that stores student information would have way more information security criteria in place than businesses that store your credit card number.

Recommend

6

Report

Permalink

**Adam Onge** Apr 30th, 20:05

Big Meta-Data = Big Meta-Business for Big Brother

Recommend

5

Report

Permalink

**jouris** Apr 30th, 20:22

Big data is definitely not a cure-all. That said, the biggest source of resistance seems to be neo-Luddite hysteria. Actual concern about privacy, etc. is relatively low -- even though such concerns are frequently used to fight it.

And why should those opposed care about something like improving education? A large fraction of them seem to be opposed to education in general. At least, education which includes anything outside their personal ultra-narrow view of what truth *should* be. And certainly any education which might include suggestions of skepticism and methods for evaluating evidence.

Recommend

4

Report

Permalink

**Leonie Haimson** May 3rd, 18:40

around the world every weekday

### Want more from *The Economist*?

Visit The Economist e-store and you carefully selected products for busir pleasure, Economist books and dial more

### Sponsor Content

New connectivity corridors

Watch a video from GE Lookahead on how chains are getting smarter

Trade Horizons delivered by UPS

Trade Horizons features regularly update videos, articles and commentary to help businesses navigate the global trade landscape and successfully increase cross

### Advertisement

## Free eBook from Pantheon™

[getpantheon.com](http://getpantheon.com)

Learn the 7 Steps to /  
Successful and On-Tir



this is one of the most offensive articles I have read on the inBloom saga; and shows your reporter has learned nothing from the lessons of its demise. "For example, shouldn't we have an inBloom for health care, so patient records can be easily accessed by qualified caregivers?" You mean drug companies and other for-profit vendors? Absolutely not! And this: "society's approach to privacy needs to change." No. It is the tech vendors & their boosters who must realize that their cavalier approach to student privacy must change.

Recommend 3 Report Permalink

**KEHaines** in reply to guest-sieminm May 3rd, 13:01

Of course nobody should be ashamed of having a disability. Nor should they have shame if they had disciplinary problems as a child, which you seem to suggest. Regardless, my issue is that the article disregards the concerns being raised by my parents and educators so it seemed very one-sided. To mention "exaggerated fears" but not address them, even to dispute them, is not what I would expect from a piece in the Economist. When over 40 superintendents in NYS give back RTTT funds in a symbolic gesture to show opposition to inBloom I think it should be explored.

Recommend 3 Report Permalink

**guest-siewins** in reply to KEHaines May 2nd, 15:32

Hi there, Your comment unfortunately goes to show that you don't understand inBloom's proposition. InBloom had NO ACCESS to any student identifiable data. The use of ANY and ALL data was in the hands of the people that it is now (ie the district) but it would be MORE secure since it's heavily encrypted and therefore never needed to be downloaded into an excel.

What's more, what exactly are you concerned about when you say 'it could fall into the wrong hands'? This data wasn't being given to advertisers, colleagues, classmates, friends etc. It was being given to EXACTLY the same people who have access to it now!

Stop your paranoia and realize this is a huge loss for education.

Recommend 3 Report Permalink

**guest-sieaimi** May 1st, 15:18

It is not going to be the first failure example I am afraid. Misunderstanding is always bad but in the field of big data, I think this is just a small bump on the road. I will post a link to this article on bigdatarelated.com, first it is on The Economist and two we like to show the good and the bad in Big data.

Recommend 3 Report Permalink

**Anjin-San** May 1st, 03:23

Could it have been a subtle ploy by GAFA to squelch any PUBLIC big data that could become a long-term threat to their business model? This episode has that "Game of Thrones" touch.... :P

Recommend 3 Report Permalink

**guest-siweoje** in reply to guest-siewlms May 5th, 23:05

I'm sorry but your claims just aren't true. Data are identifiable and it was to be put in the hands of advertisers et al.

Recommend 2 Report Permalink

**guest-siweoje** in reply to Leonie Haimson May 6th, 00:28

Interesting that HIPAA was enacted to curb the "what's yours should be ours" attitude expressed by this reporter.

Want a chilling look into the data leaks in hospitals so far this year? <http://www.privacyrights.org/data-breach/new>

Recommend 1 Report Permalink

**guest-siweoje** May 6th, 00:25

The Economist knows very well what can happen in the event of a cloud-data security breach. Info exposure happens frequently and articles regarding such incidents are often found in this journal. For any doubters out there, please be aware that just last week Iowa State reported a serious a data breach of one of their systems that exposed a large amount of data of individuals who were enrolled in the university over the past 17-year period. At least 19,00 social security numbers were exposed to unknown hackers. Earlier on March 7th, officials at John Hopkins University announced a data breach of their Department of Biomedical Engineering's Design Team course web server. One day before that, North Dakota University System had a security breach of a computer server that stores personal information on students, staff and faculty. Over 209,000 people's data were exposed to unknown hackers. And on and on it goes. This is a very real problem. Children's data should not collected to the intrusive degree Gates is suggesting and ANY data should NEVER EVER be uploaded to the cloud. For further information --> <http://www.privacyrights.org/data-breach>

Recommend 1 Report Permalink

**guest-siweoje** in reply to guest-sieminn May 6th, 00:01

If those such security criteria existed. But as of yet, they don't.

Recommend 1 Report Permalink

**beef tartare** May 4th, 04:52

It's not clear to me why the program had to be shut down completely to satiate concerns about personally identifiable information. NCES, the research wing of the Dept. of Education, often doesn't allow its data to be disaggregated below a n of 5 in order to prevent targeted abuse of data.

Obviously such a move would have curbed a lot of inBloom's potential, but hardly as much as summarily shutting down the enterprise. Standardizing big data on education, by putting it all on the same platform, is the stuff that dreams are made of, making it worthy by itself.

Recommend 1 Report Permalink

KEHaines in reply to guest-siewlms May 3rd, 13:19

My point is there were several concerns raised by parents and educators that were not satisfactorily addressed by inBloom. They are also not addressed in the article. Security, privacy, opt-out, funding, student benefits, etc.

Since when is questioning something "paranoia"?

Recommend 1 Report Permalink

Classified ads



Deutsche Gesellschaft  
für Internationale  
Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

Advisor (m/f)  
Competency Based  
Trai...

Jobs.economist.com



\$12  
for  
12 Weeks

SUBSCRIBE NOW



Policy Analyst,  
Consumer Policy

Jobs.economist.com



Economist

Jobs.economist.com



Australian Institute  
of Family Stud...

Jobs.economist.com



- Contact us
- Help
- My account
- Subscribe
- Print edition
- Digital editions
- Events
- Jobs.Economist.com
- Timekeeper saved articles

- Sections**
- United States
  - Britain
  - Europe
  - China
  - Asia
  - Americas
  - Middle East & Africa
  - Business & finance
  - Economics
  - Markets & data
  - Science & technology
  - Culture
  - Multimedia library
- Debate and discussion**
- The Economist debates
  - What the world thinks
  - Letters to the editor
  - The Economist Quiz

- Blogs**
- Americas view
  - Analects
  - Babbage
  - Banyan
  - Baobab
  - Blighty
  - Buttonwood's notebook
  - Charlemagne
  - Democracy in America
  - Eastern approaches
  - Erasmus
  - Feast and famine
  - Free exchange
  - Game theory
  - Graphic detail
  - Gulliver
  - Newsbook
  - Pomegranate
  - Prospero
  - The Economist explains

- Research and ins**
- Topics
  - Economics A-Z
  - Special reports
  - Style guide
  - The World in 2014
  - Which MBA?
  - The Economist GM.
  - Reprints and permis
- The Economist G**
- The Economist Inte
  - The Economist Inte
  - The Economist Cor
  - Ideas People Medic
  - Intelligent Life
  - Roll Call
  - CQ
  - EuroFinance
  - The Economist Stor

View complete si



