

Review of: "Building a digital republic to reduce health disparities and improve population health in the United States"

Michael Strange

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The current version of the article (as of 17th August) provides a compelling argument for improved welfare access within the US, pointing out that many of those legally eligible for social benefits are currently unable to access such services, that this undermines human health and well-being, and that a possible solution would be to develop digital-IDs such that individuals could more easily access services.

To help the article achieve its potential, there is a need to engage more critically with the numerous examples of what the authors present as existing 'digital republics'. In many of these countries, whilst it is easier for individuals to access information, often it remains highly complex and challenging. This is true with tax filing, for example, but also other aspects. We also know that in many countries with advanced e-government that they can create a sub-society where a significant part of the population is unable to access those digital systems. Sometimes this can be due to digital illiteracy, but in many of the most advanced states we see cases where individuals are excluded via being given a different form of digital-ID due to being legally resident but not citizens. Whilst individuals might be legally entitled to services as residents, being given a different form of digital-ID nevertheless prevents them from accessing that entitlement. Beyond residency status, we also see examples where lacking access to a secure internet connection prevents parts of the population from using digital services.

As a way into this issue it would be nice to see the authors engage more with literature on access-to-social services during the pandemic within some of the advanced states they are using as examples of digital republics. Where individuals were banned from accessing health clinics in person, for example, there is research showing that the move to digital-only healthcare guidance led to some feeling alienated and abandoned by their healthcare providers. Looking into that research within advanced states would help the authors better understand the obstacles to a digital republic, and how such a US version might be built so as to avoid some of the exclusions it risks.

On a different theme, the authors need to note whether individuals should retain the right not to request welfare support. Such a right is important to a small minority due on ideological grounds perhaps, but there will be a larger group who choose to avoid welfare payments so as to be free of the conditions attached, such as participation within mandatory training schemes some individuals find unhelpful, etc.

There is need to define what the authors mean by 'economic well-being' and why it is prioritised. Is it meant in relative terms, as in equality, or rather just absolute terms where individuals have more personal wealth? Also, is that more important that healthcare provision, housing, and education? Is there a simple causal relationship between these factors, or is it more complex? It is important to also note that many social benefits include conditionalities which individuals

experience as constraining and, potentially, counterproductive to the stated goals of the policy.

How do you see the apparent decline of the US' global power leading to political momentum towards a digital republic?

There is a connection but it needs to be clearly articulated.

What role would the for-profit sector have in managing data within a US digital republic? How does it overlap with existing private forms of a digital republic in the US, such as Amazon Prime?