

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

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Potential competing interests: The author(s) declared that no potential competing interests exist.

There is no question that improvements in uniform, secure, and equitable method of identification of at least the individuals accessing healthcare and social services is critically needed in the USA. The antique system of access to lab results, X-rays, progress notes and medications used by our patients prevents us from seeing in real time critical health care information. The electronic medical systems used in the USA do not talk to each other and healthcare data on the same patient who is seen by physicians in different healthcare corporations is not shared automatically and often not at all. I often wonder how we can plan to send people to Mars but I can't access the urine culture of the patient who was seen in hospital few blocks away from my office as "the hospital" is part of different healthcare system. Such a state of affairs impedes providing cost-effective and timely care: we often have to repeat a test because an access to healthcare information about specific patient still relies on office calls, faxes, and paper trail.

Hence the premise of this article is timely, if not critically needed. Authors believe that the uniform and unique electronic ID if adopted in the USA will allow for easier access to healthcare information as well as allow to provide needed resources like vouchers, healthcare access, and financial assistance to these in need.

However the examples the authors use of Estonia, a small European country with the population of bit over a million citizen with uniform political system, and public healthcare and educational system does not meet any basic principles of socioeconomic comparisons and analysis; such huge differences exist between the cultural, social, political, educational system of the USA and Estonia or South Korea in 2022.

Authors fail to discuss demographic and historic differences between the USA and the e-ID countries "electronic Republic" like Estonia, China, or South Korea. There are huge differences in system of individual values, fears, hopes and wishes deeply embedded in individual members of the society in the USA and the Estonia for example. The fact that Estonia regain its freedom in 1990s and had to be build as a free democratic society from nothing gave the unique opportunity to think outside the box and created electronic ID society. Such a dramatic shake up of American society facing existential and radical change is not going to happen during our life-time hence the change for better will have to be progressive and will require education of members of American society about the benefits such implementation of universal ID will bring to the members of the society.

I think authors are bit naive in assuming that members of society who needs resources the most will suddenly exhibit level of knowledge and understanding of concept of digital Republic that their grasp of where and how and when to sign up for such ID and then how to enter the information about their health status, education, income, living situation will be sufficient

to benefit from the universal ID. I think the article neglects to consider that we will need a cadre of community volunteers, informed family members, social workers and paid patients advocates, combined with massive public advertising and education in addition to purely information technology solutions. These have to be parallel approaches: we need people to help other people to get access to the universal ID and at least initially assure that the data stored in decentralized systems is accurate and up to date.

I think realistically we need to suggest and study solutions which starting with healthcare system and social services will eventually allow me as a practicing physician and scientist to see my patients results, notes from other docs at the same time as I see the patient in my office. For today it is not so. I believe that authors need to be more cognate of realistic solutions which will bring the most benefit to the members of society who needs the services the most. Yes being able to streamline job application process by having access to cross-systems information about the individual sounds fantastic but in reality we do not apply for a job every month or so but many of our sickest patients or members of society need the help with meeting basic needs like personal safety, shelter, food and medications on daily and on going basis. Hence our goal should be to build the “digital republic” first for those who by often no fault of their own need easier and more efficient access to healthcare and social services. I think the worse outcome of the push for “digital republic” would be sole benefit for educated and well-off members of society as the universal ID will cut down on waiting in line at DMV, getting their tax credits and refunds faster, while these members of society who who are marginalized today would face more challenges in access as a result of complicated technological advances needed to navigate and live in the “digital republic”.

Still I congratulate the authors on forward thinkin and optimism that we can change as a society so the benefits of technology touch the lives of all and not only lucky few.