The Tyranny of Smartphones and Dumb Covid Passports

Description

Already tethered to the digital by devices that used to be novelties, we face the prospect of a vaccine-enabled “Paper’s please!” future.

In a striking passage near the beginning of his contribution to the *Penguin History of the Church*, R.W. Southern writes:

> The identification of the church with the whole of organized society is the fundamental feature which distinguishes the Middle Ages from earlier and later periods of history. At its widest limits it is a feature of European history from the fourth to the eighteenth century—from Constantine to Voltaire. In theory, during the whole of this period only orthodox and obedient believers could enjoy the full rights of citizenship. … Just as the modern state requires those who are its members by the accident of birth to keep its laws, to contribute to its defence and public services, to subordinate private interests to the common good, so the medieval church required those who had become its members by the accident (as one may call of) of baptism to do all these things and many others.

Nowadays even Christians who hold orthodox views about the theological implications of baptism—that it “cleanses us from original sin, makes us Christians, children of God, and heirs of heaven”—will have a hard time understanding the role it once played in demarcating the boundaries of civilization. Whatever one’s opinions might be concerning its theological efficacy, baptism is understood today as a private act, and belonging to the Church might be compared to holding a membership card that allows one to take part in certain private functions for which the barrier to entry is otherwise extraordinarily low (anyone can show up and throw a few frames, but only league members can participate in the Tuesday Night Double Disco Bowl-a-Thon).

What is the contemporary equivalent of baptism, a discrete status that grounds our formal membership in the political community? The most basic premise of modern liberalism is that there is none. Apart from the exigencies of birth within a particular jurisdiction—one is born, say, a citizen of the United States—there is no necessary condition that must be fulfilled in order for me to exercise full

membership in the political community. I am a member simply by virtue of my existence as an American citizen, and there is no contingency that could remove or revoke my membership, no creeds or formulas that must be recited or other extraneous criteria that must be met. Into this void one is set loose (in the words of Anthony Kennedy) “to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.”

For many years now it has been clear that this is an inadequate account of what constitutes membership in our political community. Birth within a particular jurisdiction is at once too parsimonious—de facto participation in modern American life is the province of countless persons born outside our borders without relevant documents attesting to their formal citizenship—and too generous. Just as it was theoretically possible for some persons to live within the geographic expanse of Christendom while remaining essentially outside its society, so too are there people today who despite having been born American citizens are not in any meaningful sense participants in our broader public life.

I am talking, of course, about people who do not use smartphones.

In ways with which we have barely begun to grapple, smartphone ownership is essentially coercive: These devices that combine the functions of what we once quaintly referred to as “mobile telephones” with those of personal computers have subsumed so many facets of our existence that is almost impossible now to think of a field of human activity or a concrete act—visiting a friend or neighbor, going to a restaurant, traveling, or even taking a short walk—that has not been transformed for the vast majority of the population by digital augmentation. Moreover, smartphones have accomplished all of this at a far more rapid pace than other technologies that have changed the basic nature of our political (and I daresay our economic) life.

In this sense, the smartphone is different (for example) from the rise of the automobile, which was as much a by-product of the already emerging shift from agricultural life during the end of the great period of American industrialization as it was a disruptive technology; indeed, more than a century after the advent of the Model T, it remains vastly easier to live in both large cities and in small towns without a car than it is to do so without a smartphone. (The suburbs are a different matter.)

The extent to which universal ownership of what was once considered an emergency device or a luxury good has become one of the basic governing assumptions of our leaders was brought home during last year’s lockdowns. For those lucky enough to remain employed, one’s duties were neatly performed in an entirely digital space; accessing unemployment benefits from shuttered government offices, becoming informed about the actions (including those unrelated to the virus) of state and municipal governments, and countless other actions were simply impossible without the use of applications such as Zoom. Meanwhile governors were able to issue so-called “alerts” informing citizens of the requirements to which they would become immediately subject via compulsory text messaging. On a day-to-day basis, as nearly every aspect of civilized life was suspended on the basis of an ever-shifting series of rationales, it was not even clear to me how various decisions could have been communicated otherwise.

For all of these reasons, I think every decent American should be horrified by the prospect of so-called “vaccine passports.” The idea of using smartphones as a registry of persons who have been vaccinated against Covid-19 was uncritically endorsed by our leaders months before vaccines had been introduced among the general population or even tested. This is unfortunate. Vaccine passports

should be regarded with loathing by everyone, including their loudest proponents—namely, the sorts of people who also suggest that having to present photo identification in order to vote in a public election is a hideous encroachment upon the freedoms guaranteed to individuals. As it happens, I share their instinctive distaste for identification cards, not only in polling places but in bars, convenience stores, banks, and virtually every other space in which they are required, which is why I do not see the wisdom of expanding the “Papers, please!” mindset, according to which we are all criminals or enemies of the state until we can offer definitive proof to the contrary.

So far from being a straightforward addition to the aforementioned inconveniences or a new value-neutral public health technology, digitally abetted vaccine passports represent a point of no return, after which it will be impossible to imagine a world in which basic freedom of movement and action exist except on sufferance granted by the algorithms. Sooner or later the same technology that requires persons to demonstrate that they received certain shots six months ago will force them to show that they have voluntarily undergone more recent medical interventions, or that they have agreed to “terms of use” agreements in which they abjure certain opinions said to be in violation of the code of conduct enjoined by, say, the global casual dining chain whose neighborhood franchise one is attempting to enter. (The very real possibility of payment processing and banking services being denied to persons for ideological reasons has been discussed at some length by those who are in a position to understand how absurdly simple it would be from a technical perspective and how effortlessly it could be justified by the powers that be.)

We already live in a society in which we are quite literally adjuncts of whatever data has been emitted by the devices we are forced to carry in order to perform tasks as simple as parking our cars or entering a baseball stadium. Machines that were once meant to facilitate communication (who now remembers the sheepish arguments that used to run as follows: “I know they’re kind of silly, but I like to have one in case of an emergency”?) have become obstacles to the most ordinary human intercourse. Digital devices have not only overtaken commerce; they have monopolized our attention spans, they have destroyed even the informal etiquette of friendly conversation and casual dining; they have virtually erased the distinction between our time and that of our employers; they have made us not slaves but actual commodities, consumer products to be rated and analyzed.

The future opened by the widespread use of digital vaccine passports is one in which an escape from the barely understood tyranny of these screens becomes impossible. I am not a Luddite. But I believe that it is our duty to confront the implications of the horrifying new role that these devices have come to occupy thanks largely to the indifference of politicians who could not have guessed how rapidly our civilization would be remade in the white heat of technology. Too much that we value has already melted.

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