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Reading Activity : Non Fiction Comprehension Practice 2

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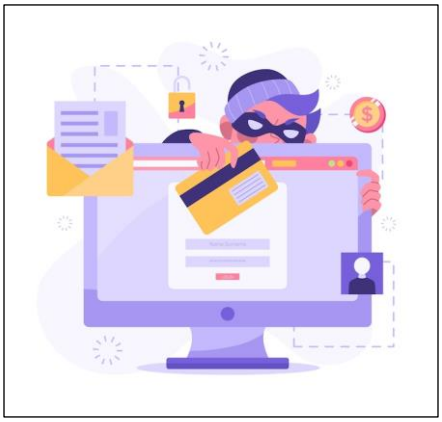
ID Cards are the ultimate identity theft

by Ian Angell

The ID card project is still on track — more or less. Jacqui Smith is just the latest in a long line of Home Office ministers to sell us the benefits of ID cards, while casually informing us of the latest rise in costs or slippage in its implementation schedule. Ms Smith is also yet another Home Secretary who subscribes to the 'pixie dust' school of technology: computation is a magic substance to be sprinkled over problems, that, hey presto, then vanish. Little wonder that Britain has an appalling record in government IT projects.



The ID project is one of the biggest computer systems envisaged-far more complex than the failing NHS system. And it's another disaster waiting to happen. Still the politicians naively claim there will be no problems: it will be totally secure due to **biometrics.** Apparently iris scans, finger prints, face-recognition software will all work perfectly, be amazingly cheap to implement-and all foolproof. It must be true as they've been told this by the people a selling this technology. Baroness Anelay of St. John's , with a group of parliamentarians, was given a demonstration of a facial recognition system . It failed; indeed the system subsequently crashed , twice. The reason? The baroness was told her face was too bland.

The only property that all systems have in common is that they fail. And the bigger the system – 60 million entries on a compulsory ID card database – the greater the opportunity of failure. Systems are much like any life form: they degrade over time, they **entropy**. In the case of databases, they pick up errors and then build data error upon error. The **DVLA** in Swansea in 2006, for instance, admitted that a third of entries contained at least one error, and that the proportion was getting worse.

We've all had encounters with computer systems that get it wrong. Barclays Bank once refused one of my transactions because they said I was accessing an account owned by a teenage girl named Ian Angell, who lived at my address and was a professor at LSE. I still had to take a morning off work to explain that a fourteen-year-old couldn't own an account that, according to their own records, had been open for 35 years.

And however scrupulous the managers might be, errors leak and take on a life of their own. They are sampled by other databases, known as 'farming errors', and even when corrected in the original database, live on elsewhere.

But the ID project will be different, we are told. According to the **rhetoric**, an ID card, one central point of reference, will be so much more efficient and beneficial than you having to prove your identity, by producing driving licences, gas bills and so on. Its proponents fail to see that if any of these documents is erroneous, then we don't use the one with, say, a mistake in the address to prove our identity. With the ID card, we won't have the choice.

However, the ID card itself isn't the real problem: it's the ID register. There, each entry will eventually take on a legal status, In time, all other proofs of identity will refer back to the one entry. If the register is wrong, and remember fallible human hands will at some stage have to handle your personal information – then all other databases will be wrong too. Given the **propensity** of officialdom to trust the details on their computer screen, rather than the person in front of them, you will have to conform to your entry in the register – or become a non-person.

In effect, your identity won't reside in the living flesh and blood of you, but in the database. You will be separated from your identity; you will no longer own it. All your property and money will **de facto** belong to the database entry. You only have access to your property with the permission of the database. **Paradoxically**, you only agree to register to protect yourself from identity theft and instead you find yourself victim of the ultimate identity theft – the total loss of control over your identity.

Errors won't just happen by accident. It's possible to imagine workers on the ID databases will be corrupted, threatened or blackmailed into creating perfectly legal ID cards for international terrorists and criminals. Then the ID card, far from eliminating problems, will be a one-stop shop for identity fraud, foreign terrorists, illegal immigrants will be waived past all immigration checks.

At a recent Ditchley Park conference on combatting organised crime, a persistent warning from the law enforcement authorities was that criminal gangs had placed 'sleepers' in financial sector companies and they were just waiting for one big hit. The perpetrators of 80 per cent of all security lapses are not hackers but employees. **Cryptographic** systems don't help if the criminal has been given the keys to the kingdom. Why should the ID centre be immune, especially when there will be nearly 300 government departments logging in. Furthermore, the register will be the No. 1 target for every hacker on the planet: the Olympic Games of hacking.

So why is the government so keen to force ID cards on us? Is it because ministers are control freaks who, having read *1984*, only saw it as a wish list? John Lennon may have been right: 'Our society is run by insane people for insane objectives. I think we're being run by maniacs.' More likely, ministers have been dazzled by the myth of the perfectibility of computers.

Now answer these questions

1) *' Mr Smith is yet another Home Secretery who subscribes to the ' pixie dust'school of technology ; computation is a magic substance o be sprinkled over problems that, hey presto, then vanish.'*

   What point is the writer making about computers in this quotation ?

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2) Why is the phrase ‘farming errors’ in inverted commas ?

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3) In the paragraph beginning with ‘ We’ve all had …’ explain how the writer tries to help the reader feel more involved?

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4) Ian Angell uses the following arguments in his article. Number the according to the sequence in which they appear .

- Your identity will be owned by the computer data base not you. ☐
- Computer systems are highly fallible ☐
- Once there is a mistake in the ID database , it will be hard to correct ☐
- The ID database will inevitably be a taret for computer hackers ☐
- There will be deliberate attempts to abuse the ID database by criminals. ☐

5) How does the last paragraph link back to the first paragraph ?

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