

PayPal Ponders Mark-of-the-Beast-Style Username System

If you hate keeping up with passwords as much as I do, be encouraged: PayPal, the online payment service, is working on solutions. Company executive Jonathan Leblanc recently speculated with *The Wall Street Journal* about possible new methods of identity verification.

Ingestible capsules could identify the body's unique internal features. Thin silicon chips could be implanted into the skin; their sensors would monitor the heart's unique electrical activity and communicate the data via wireless antennae to "wearable computer tattoos." The company says "we have no plans to develop injectable or edible verification systems," but such technology may be in our future. I'm not sure this is good news.

Is there such a thing as too much knowledge? When I visited President James Madison's Virginia home recently, I was struck by our fourth president's assertion: "Knowledge will forever govern ignorance. And a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives."

He's right, of course. A democracy depends on the engagement of the "demos," the people for whom the democracy exists. But in Madison's day, the average person had access to less information in his or her lifetime than a single issue of today's *New York Times* contains. The knowledge upon which the founders' democracy depended was largely practical in nature—how to farm, run a business, raise a family, conduct one's affairs. So much of our knowledge today is esoteric—interesting but irrelevant to the essentials of life. As a result, we live in the illusion that we are informed, when it may be that we're just entertained.

In 2004, Jane Jacobs published a frightening book titled *Dark Age Ahead*. Given the plethora of knowledge available to us, her title was surprising. But the “dark age” she envisioned is cultural, not informational. She warned that we are choosing consumerism over family, academic credentials over high-quality education, economics over science and the power of special-interest groups over the general welfare. According to Jacobs, “A culture is unsalvageable if stabilizing forces themselves become ruined and irrelevant. This is what I fear for our own culture.”

What is the solution? Jacobs says: “Any culture that jettisons the values that have given it competence, adaptability and identity becomes weak and hollow. A culture can avoid that hazard only by tenaciously retaining the underlying values responsible for the culture’s nature and success. That is a framework into which adaptations must be assimilated.”

What are the “underlying values” responsible for our “nature and success”? In his 1796 Farewell Address, George Washington told the nation: “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports. ... Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle. ... Virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government.”

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