The Icelandic kennitala
by Ian Watson

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Harvard University, 19 November 2015
180170-2359 is my kennitala. Everyone in Iceland has one. It is ten digits long. People use it more or less like their name. They use it on tax returns, at the doctor, pharmacy, library, school, bank, or when paying a bill.
If, say, I take one of my children to the doctor, they want to call up the right record. So the receptionist asks not for my daughter's name in words, but rather for her name in numbers. Then they double-check by saying her name in words and asking me to confirm.

Receptionist: “Kennitala?”
Me: “270210-2440.”
Receptionist: “Anna Lára.”
Me: “Yes.”

By the way, the first six digits of the kennitala are the person's birthdate. So everyone can figure out that my daughter will be six years old next February 27th.
Icelanders do not hide their kennitala or try to keep it secret. For example, look at this petition, which was tacked up in a public area at the University of Iceland. (It calls for longer opening hours at the library.)
In fact, in Iceland, everyone's kennitala is listed in an online database. That also means anyone can find out your birthdate.
The kennitala is just one variety of personal address in Iceland

Óli
nickname, used with people he knows well

Óli Hrafn
more ceremonial version of nickname

Ólafur Hrafn
full name, used with people he knows less well

Ólafur Hrafn Júlíusson
full name with patronymic, used in formal circumstances

130171-5249
kennitala, used when unique reference is important
Icelandic children get their kennitala at birth, but are traditionally not named until a few weeks later. Until then, they are listed as “boy” or “girl” in the National Register.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kennitala</th>
<th>Nafn</th>
<th>Heimili</th>
<th>Pólstang</th>
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<td>Daniel Eddie Watson</td>
<td>Glerárgata 30</td>
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<td>Haga</td>
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Residence registration is important

Residence registration makes the Icelandic identification system more secure. The name and address that correspond to each kennitala are public.

So a paper notification of any transaction executed against a given kennitala can be mailed to the legal residence of the person holding that number. Icelanders can now also register an e-mail address for communication with government bodies.

Identity theft in Iceland is virtually nonexistent and concern about identity theft is not really visible in public discourse.
Corporate and institutional use of the kennitala

Corporations and organizations are free to use the kennitala as a client or customer ID number and they generally do so. That includes insurance, schools, the power company, the library, associations that you belong to, and so on.

There's nothing to stop them using their own internal ID schemes as well. But providing corporations, organizations, and associations with a single unique name for each person is a public service. It's not all that unlike naming streets and numbering houses. For example, universities do not need to use resources to maintain a separate student ID number system.
Icelanders do not use ID cards

There is no national ID card in Iceland — only the ID number. When people have to prove their identity in face-to-face interaction, they usually use a debit card or driver's license (both carry the owner's photo, kennitala, and signature). There are now systems for online authentication as well.

Actually there was once an ID card too (in the 1960s), but it has fallen out of use. Today, the system is not built on a physical token — only on a sort of numerical mantra, the kennitala.
There has sometimes been public debate in Iceland over the proper design of the kennitala system. These two civil servants had a friendly public disagreement about this from 2000-2004. But on the whole it seems to be a stable institution that people are happy with.
Representative Sam Johnson, Republican of Texas, has introduced legislation to end the public disclosure of the master file altogether. “The decades-old practice of publishing personal death information that anyone can buy needs to end,” he said, “and now.”
I think the key difference between the American and Icelandic systems is that there is no value in knowing my kennitala. In America, social security numbers can be “stolen.” But in Iceland the idea of stealing your kennitala makes no more sense than the idea of stealing your name. There's nothing to monetize in either case.
Humbly presented takeaways

(1) Open national ID number systems, where all the numbers are public, may actually be more “secure” than those which are laden with supposedly protective security features. (Compare open versus closed-source software.)

(2) The issue of national ID numbers is linked to the issue of residence registration.

(3) Icelanders have desacralized the difference between “linguistic names” and “numerical names.”

(4) You can have a functioning national ID system with numbers alone, and no cards.
A broader study of national identification numbers in all five Nordic countries (not just Iceland) might help inform debates in other parts of the world.

A short history of national identification numbering in Iceland

Ian Watson

Abstract: Iceland created national identification numbers in the early 1950s as part of the process of automating civil registration. Numbers were based on a person’s birthdate. In 1959, an additional “name number” for each person was created, based on the position of the person’s name in alphabetical order. After Iceland began to issue personal identity cards showing the name number in 1965, the practice of using the name number as a unique personal identifier slowly penetrated through all of society. By the 1980s, the name number space became exhausted, and in 1987-1988 the name number was replaced by the birthdate-based number, rechristened the “kennitala.” Compared to other countries, the kennitala is very widely used, and its status approaches that of an alternative name. As well, the databases that allow conversion between a given per-