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Prying into privacy and ridiculous red tape



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What is it about retailers and the intrusive questions they ask?

Last weekend I was shopping for a bed at a large store in Dubai that sells furniture and other household goods. To qualify for a small discount my husband and I agreed to sign up for the store's "privilege" card, which means that every time we shop there we get a few points towards a voucher.

The form was unbelievably offensive. It asked for our monthly salaries, when we got married, how many children we had, their ages and gender. Obviously I refused to answer it – I got the card anyway.

That evening I tried to get the internet set up in our house and was faced again with more irritatingly personal forms to fill out. This time I had to show the salesman a copy of my lease with the rent. Why does anyone need to know how much I pay in rent before I can surf the internet? It was a blatant attempt to sell our details to marketing companies and unfortunately there do not seem to be many laws here that prevent such intrusions on our privacy.

It reminded me of an anecdote related to me several years ago by a former colleague working for a major Canadian newspaper. The reporter was working in Jerusalem and got fed up with the endless stream of paperwork from the Israelis and Palestinians asking him about his personal beliefs. In the boxes marked religion he would write "Protest", leaving officials with the impression that he was a Protestant. In fact he was protesting about the nature of their inquiries.

Picture the scene: a kindly nurse offers a few words of Christian comfort to a person recovering from a terrible illness in a hospital.

To most people this would be an act of charity. Even if you weren't religious it would seem like the decent thing to do for a person in distress. If I were lying in a hospital bed I'd gladly accept all prayers.

But in Britain the department of health has said that discussing religion in hospital wards could be seen

as an attempt to convert people and hence, it amounts to harassment. Last year a nurse, Caroline Petrie, was suspended from her job at a hospital because she offered to pray for one of her patients. The subject of "spiritual care", to use health care jargon, is very sensitive.

This week the annual conference of the British Medical Association, essentially the doctors' trade union, will debate a proposal that hospital staff working for the public health care system, the NHS, should not be disciplined for this.

Many of my Arab and Asian friends accuse those of us who have been raised in the West of being excessively formal, even cold, in our interactions with each other. I've just given them more fodder for that argument.

In Gaza two little boys are stranded in a different type of bureaucratic hell. Elias and Qasem Elkafarna are American citizens but one of them has an expired passport and the other's passport is just about to expire. Thanks to the Israeli blockade they cannot leave the Gaza Strip to travel to the nearest American embassy and get new documents. Their father, Kaman, was studying for a master's degree in engineering at George Washington University when their mother gave birth to the two children.

The boys cannot get new passports because they can't leave Gaza and they can't leave Gaza because they don't have valid passports.

I am not comparing my situation to these poor little boys in any way but I can understand the frustrations of officialdom.

A few years ago I went to a Canadian embassy to get my passport replaced because it had expired. The woman behind the desk wanted some proof of identification when I arrived. Fair enough, but she refused to accept the passport as ID.

"We cannot officially confirm this is still you because the passport is no longer valid," she said.

So suddenly I was no longer valid? What is it about bureaucracy that makes people lose all common sense and perspective?

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