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SUSAN Y. SOONG
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NORTH DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA
OAKLAND OFFICE

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
NORTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

KAW

In the Matter of the SEARCH OF A
RESIDENCE IN OAKLAND,
CALIFORNIA

Case No. **4-19-70053**
**ORDER DENYING APPLICATION
FOR A SEARCH WARRANT; ORDER
SEALING APPLICATION**

United States District Court
Northern District of California

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The Government is investigating two individuals believed to be involved in extortion in violation of 18 U.S.C. § 875(d). In brief, the suspects allegedly used Facebook Messenger to communicate with a victim, in which they threatened to distribute an embarrassing video of him if he did not provide them with monetary compensation. (Aff. ¶ 7.) The Government has submitted an application for a search and seizure warrant to seize various items presumed to be located at a residence in Oakland, California (“Subject Premises”) connected to the two named suspects. The Application further requests the authority to seize various items (identified in Attachment B), including electronic devices, such as mobile telephones and computers (“digital devices”). The Court has reviewed the Application and finds that there are sufficient facts to support a finding of probable cause to conduct a search of the Subject Premises.

The Government, however, also seeks the authority to compel any individual present at the time of the search to press a finger (including a thumb) or utilize other biometric features, such as facial or iris recognition, for the purposes of unlocking the digital devices found in order to permit a search of the contents as authorized by the search warrant. For the reasons set forth below, the Court finds that the Government’s request runs afoul of the Fourth and Fifth Amendments, and the search warrant application must be DENIED. The Government may submit another search warrant

1 application for the Subject Premises subject to the limitations outlined below.

2 **DISCUSSION**

3 The issues presented in the Application implicate the constitutional protections afforded by
4 the Fourth and Fifth Amendments. The undersigned has found no legal authority explicitly
5 restricting the Court from considering the privileges and protections afforded by the Fifth
6 Amendment prior to signing a warrant. In fact, the prejudice that suspects may suffer should the
7 Fifth Amendment be ignored at this juncture—both due to the practical difficulty in prevailing on
8 a motion to suppress and the fact that they are not represented in the warrant process—gives rise
9 to a moral imperative demanding consideration of the Fifth Amendment. To do otherwise would
10 be a miscarriage of justice.

11 **A. Fourth Amendment Analysis**

12 **i. Probable Cause Exists to Search the Premises**

13 The Fourth Amendment protects “[t]he right of the people to be secure in their persons,
14 houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures.” U.S. CONST. amend. IV.
15 “The ‘basic purpose of this Amendment,’ our cases have recognized, ‘is to safeguard the privacy
16 and security of individuals against arbitrary invasions by governmental officials.’” *Carpenter v.*
17 *United States*, 138 S. Ct. 2206, 2213, 201 L. Ed. 2d 507 (2018) (quoting *Camara v. Mun. Court of*
18 *City & Cty. of San Francisco*, 387 U.S. 523, 528 (1967)).

19 There are sufficient facts in the affidavit to believe that evidence of the crime will be found
20 at the Subject Premises, so the Government has probable cause to conduct a lawful search, so long
21 as it comports with the Fourth Amendment. If, however, law enforcement violates another
22 constitutional right in the course of executing a warrant, it inherently renders the search and
23 seizure unreasonable.

24 **ii. No Probable Cause to Use Biometric Features of All Present During Search**

25 In addition to the search of the premises, the Government seeks an order that would allow
26 agents executing this warrant to compel “any individual, who is found at the Subject Premises and
27 reasonably believed by law enforcement to be a user of the device, to unlock the device using
28 biometric features...” (Aff. ¶ 17h.) This request is overbroad. There are two suspects identified in

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1 the affidavit, but the request is neither limited to a particular person nor a particular device.

2 Thus, the Court finds that the Application does not establish sufficient probable cause to
3 compel any person who happens to be at the Subject Premises at the time of the search to provide
4 a finger, thumb or other biometric feature to potentially unlock any unspecified digital device that
5 may be seized during the otherwise lawful search.

6 **iii. Application Overbreadth**

7 Furthermore, the Government's request to search and seize all digital devices at the Subject
8 Premises is similarly overbroad. The Government cannot be permitted to search and seize a
9 mobile phone or other device that is on a non-suspect's person simply because they are present
10 during an otherwise lawful search.

11 While the warrant is denied, any resubmission must be limited to those devices reasonably
12 believed by law enforcement to be owned or controlled by the two suspects identified in the
13 affidavit.

14 **B. The Fifth Amendment Privilege**

15 Even if probable cause exists to seize devices located during a lawful search based on a
16 reasonable belief that they belong to a suspect, probable cause does not permit the Government to
17 compel a suspect to waive rights otherwise afforded by the Constitution, including the Fifth
18 Amendment right against self-incrimination.¹ The Fifth Amendment provides that no person "shall
19 be compelled in any criminal case to be a witness against himself." U.S. CONST. amend. V. The
20 proper inquiry is whether an act would require the compulsion of a testimonial communication
21 that is incriminating. *See Fisher v. United States*, 425 U.S. 391, 409 (1976). Here, the issue is
22 whether the use of a suspect's biometric feature to potentially unlock an electronic device is
23 testimonial under the Fifth Amendment.

24 The challenge facing the courts is that technology is outpacing the law. In recognition of
25 this reality, the United States Supreme Court recently instructed courts to adopt rules that "take
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27 ¹ For instance, a suspect arrested pursuant to an arrest warrant issued under to the Fourth
28 Amendment, does not waive the right against self-incrimination provided by the Fifth Amendment
absent a *Miranda* warning.

1 account of more sophisticated systems that are already in use or in development.” *Carpenter*, 138
2 S. Ct. at 2218–19 (quoting *Kyllo v. United States*, 533 U.S. 27, 36 (2001)). Courts have an
3 obligation to safeguard constitutional rights and cannot permit those rights to be diminished
4 merely due to the advancement of technology. *See Carpenter*, 138 S. Ct. at 2214 (quoting *Kyllo*,
5 533 U.S. at 34) (The United States Supreme Court has repeatedly sought to “assure [] preservation
6 of that degree of privacy against government that existed when the Fourth Amendment was
7 adopted.”) (internal quotations omitted). Citizens do not contemplate waiving their civil rights
8 when using new technology, and the Supreme Court has concluded that, to find otherwise, would
9 leave individuals “at the mercy of advancing technology.” *Carpenter*, 138 S. Ct. at 2214 (citation
10 omitted).

11 While securing digital devices is not a novel concept, the means of doing so have changed.
12 Indeed, consumers have had the ability to utilize numeric or alpha-numeric passcodes to lock their
13 devices for decades. Courts that have addressed the passcode issue have found that a passcode
14 cannot be compelled under the Fifth Amendment, because the act of communicating the passcode
15 is testimonial, as “[t]he expression of the contents of an individual’s mind falls squarely within the
16 protection of the Fifth Amendment.” *See Doe v. United States*, 487 U.S. 201, 219 (1988) (Stevens,
17 J., dissenting) (citing *Boyd v. United States*, 116 U.S. 616, 633–635 (1886); *Fisher v. United*
18 *States*, 425 U.S. 391, 420 (1976)); *see also United States v. Kirschner*, 823 F. Supp. 2d 665, 669
19 (E.D. Mich. 2010) (citing *Doe*, 487 U.S. at 208 n. 6); *Com. v. Baust*, 89 Va. Cir. 267, at *4 (2014).
20 Today, technology has provided citizens with shortcuts to entering passcodes by utilizing
21 biometric features. The question, then, is whether a suspect can be compelled to use his finger,
22 thumb, iris, or other biometric feature to unlock a digital device.

23 Testimony is not restricted to verbal or written communications. Acts that imply
24 assertions of fact can constitute testimonial communication for the purposes of the Fifth
25 Amendment. *Doe*, 487 U.S. at 208. Specifically, a witness’s “act of production itself could
26 qualify as testimonial if conceding the existence, possession and control, and authenticity of the
27 documents tended to incriminate them.” *In re Grand Jury Subpoena Duces Tecum Dated Mar.*
28 *25, 2011*, 670 F.3d 1335, 1343 (11th Cir. 2012) (citing *Fisher*, 425 U.S. at 410).

1 Notwithstanding, certain acts, while incriminating, are not within the privilege, such as
2 furnishing a blood sample, submitting to fingerprinting, providing a handwriting or voice
3 exemplar, or standing in a lineup. *Doe*, 487 U.S. at 210. “The distinction which has emerged,
4 often expressed in different ways, is that the privilege is a bar against compelling
5 ‘communications’ or ‘testimony,’ but that compulsion which makes a suspect or accused the
6 source of ‘real or physical evidence’ does not violate it.” *Schmerber v. California*, 384 U.S. 757,
7 764 (1966); *see also Doe v. United States*, 487 U.S. at 210.

8 **i. The Proposed Use of Biometric Features is Testimonial**

9 The Court finds that utilizing a biometric feature to unlock an electronic device is not akin
10 to submitting to fingerprinting or a DNA swab, because it differs in two fundamental ways. First,
11 the Government concedes that a finger, thumb, or other biometric feature may be used to unlock a
12 device in lieu of a passcode. (Aff. ¶ 17a.) In this context, biometric features serve the same
13 purpose of a passcode, which is to secure the owner’s content, pragmatically rendering them
14 functionally equivalent. As the Government acknowledges, there are times when the device will
15 not accept the biometric feature and require the user to type in the passcode to unlock the device.
16 (Aff. ¶ 17g.) For example, a passcode is generally required “when a device has been restarted,
17 inactive, or has not been unlocked for a certain period of time.” *Id.* This is, no doubt, a security
18 feature to ensure that someone without the passcode cannot readily access the contents of the
19 phone. Indeed, the Government expresses some urgency with the need to compel the use of the
20 biometric features to bypass the need to enter a passcode. *Id.* This urgency appears to be rooted in
21 the Government’s inability to compel the production of the passcode under the current
22 jurisprudence. It follows, however, that if a person cannot be compelled to provide a passcode
23 because it is a testimonial communication, a person cannot be compelled to provide one’s finger,
24 thumb, iris, face, or other biometric feature to unlock that same device.

25 Second, requiring someone to affix their finger or thumb² to a digital device is
26 fundamentally different than requiring a suspect to submit to fingerprinting. A finger or thumb

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28 ² The finger and thumb scans versus actual fingerprints are one example. The same rationale
applies to using facial recognition or an optical scan versus submitting to a lineup.

1 scan used to unlock a device indicates that the device belongs to a particular individual. In other
2 words, the act concedes that the phone was in the possession and control of the suspect, and
3 authenticates ownership or access to the phone and all of its digital contents. Thus, the act of
4 unlocking a phone with a finger or thumb scan far exceeds the “physical evidence” created when a
5 suspect submits to fingerprinting to merely compare his fingerprints to existing physical evidence
6 (another fingerprint) found at a crime scene, because there is no comparison or witness
7 corroboration required to confirm a positive match. Instead, a successful finger or thumb scan
8 confirms ownership or control of the device, and, unlike fingerprints, the authentication of its
9 contents cannot be reasonably refuted. In a similar situation, the court in *In re Application for a*
10 *Search Warrant* observed that “[w]ith a touch of a finger, a suspect is testifying that he or she has
11 accessed the phone before, at a minimum, to set up the fingerprint password capabilities, and that
12 he or she currently has some level of control over or relatively significant connection to the phone
13 and its contents.” 236 F. Supp. 3d 1066, 1073 (N.D. Ill. 2017). It is also noteworthy that many
14 smartphone applications providing access to personal, private information—including medical
15 records and financial accounts—now allow users to utilize biometric features in lieu of passcodes
16 to access those records. As Judge Weisman astutely observed, using a fingerprint to place
17 someone at a particular location is a starkly different scenario than using a finger scan “to access a
18 database of someone’s most private information.” *In re Application for a Search Warrant*, 236 F.
19 Supp. 3d at 1073. Thus, the undersigned finds that a biometric feature is analogous to the
20 nonverbal, physiological responses elicited during a polygraph test, which are used to determine
21 guilt or innocence, and are considered testimonial. *See Schmerber*, 384 U.S. at 764.

22 While the Court sympathizes with the Government’s interest in accessing the contents of
23 any electronic devices it might lawfully seize, there are other ways that the Government might
24 access the content that do not trample on the Fifth Amendment. In the instant matter, the
25 Government may obtain any Facebook Messenger communications from Facebook under the
26 Stored Communications Act or warrant based on probable cause. While it may be more expedient
27 to circumvent Facebook, and attempt to gain access by infringing on the Fifth Amendment’s
28 privilege against self-incrimination, it is an abuse of power and is unconstitutional. That the

1 Government may never be able to access the complete contents of a digital device, does not affect
2 the analysis.

3 **ii. The Foregone Conclusion Doctrine Does Not Apply**

4 The foregone conclusion doctrine is an application of the Fifth Amendment “by which the
5 Government can show that no testimony is at issue.” *In re Grand Jury Subpoena Duces Tecum*
6 *Dated Mar. 25, 2011*, 670 F.3d 1335, 1343 n. 19 (11th Cir. 2012). Specifically, “[w]hen the
7 ‘existence and location’ of the documents under subpoena are a ‘foregone conclusion’ and the
8 witness ‘adds little or nothing to the sum total of the Government’s information by conceding that
9 he in fact has the [documents],’ then no Fifth Amendment right is touched because the ‘question is
10 not of testimony but of surrender.’” *In re Grand Jury Subpoena, Dated Apr. 18, 2003*, 383 F.3d
11 905, 910 (9th Cir. 2004) (quoting *Fisher v. United States*, 425 U.S. 391, 411 (1976)).

12 Notwithstanding, a witness’s response to a subpoena designed to elicit potentially incriminating
13 evidence is testimonial. *United States v. Hubbell*, 530 U.S. 27, 43 (2000). The foregone conclusion
14 doctrine not does not apply when the Government cannot show prior knowledge of the existence
15 or the whereabouts of the documents ultimately produced in response to a subpoena. *Id.* at 45.

16 Today’s mobile phones are not comparable to other storage equipment, be it physical or
17 digital, and are entitled to greater privacy protection. *See Riley v. California*, 573 U.S. —, 134
18 S. Ct. 2473, 2445, 2489 (2014) (An unlocked smartphone cannot be searched incident to arrest
19 other than to determine whether it may be used as a weapon.); *see also Carpenter*, 138 S. Ct. at
20 2220. In so finding, the Supreme Court acknowledged that smartphones are minicomputers with
21 the capability to make phone calls, a search of which “would typically expose to the government
22 far more than the most exhaustive search of a house: A phone not only contains in digital form
23 many sensitive records previously found in the home; it also contains a broad array of private
24 information never found in a home in any form—unless the phone is [present].” *Riley*, 134 S. Ct.
25 at 2491. Further, “[i]n the cell phone context . . . it is reasonable to expect that incriminating
26 information will be found on a phone regardless of when the crime occurs.” *Id.* at 2492. Thus,
27 mobile phones are subject to different treatment than more traditional storage devices, such as
28 safes, and should be afforded more protection.

1 It follows that any argument that compelling a suspect to provide a biometric feature to
 2 access documents and data is synonymous with producing documents pursuant to a subpoena
 3 would fail. As the *Riley* court recognized, smartphones contain large amounts of data, including
 4 GPS location data and sensitive records, the full contents of which cannot be anticipated by law
 5 enforcement. *See Riley*, 134 S. Ct. at 2492.³ Consequently, the Government inherently lacks the
 6 requisite prior knowledge of the information and documents that could be obtained via a search of
 7 these unknown digital devices, such that it would not be a question of mere surrender. *See*
 8 *Hubbell*, 530 U.S. at 44-45. Additionally, the Government would be unable to articulate facts to
 9 compel the unlocking of devices using biometric features by unknown persons the Government
 10 could not possibly anticipate being present during the execution of the search warrant. Indeed, the
 11 affidavit makes no attempt to do so.

12 For these reasons, the foregone conclusion doctrine does not apply.

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 23 ³ Compelling a suspect to unlock a phone to allow the viewing of applications installed on a
 24 smartphone could be self-incriminating and not be a foregone conclusion. For example, a mobile
 25 application for a previously unknown cloud storage service—e.g. Dropbox on an iPhone, which
 26 also utilizes iCloud—is tantamount to identifying the location, and ultimately producing the
 27 contents, of a locked filing cabinet that the Government did not know existed. *See Hubbell*, 530
 28 U.S. at 45 (act of production testimonial, because the Government had no knowledge of the
 existence or location of documents); *cf. Fisher*, 425 U.S. at 411 (Compliance with a summons
 directing the taxpayer to produce the accountant’s documents was not testimonial, because the
 Government knew of the existence of the documents and who had possession of them, and did not
 rely on the testimony of the taxpayer to prove authenticity.). Similarly, a suspect’s access to a
 mobile application for bank accounts could aid in “following the money” even if the accounts are
 not in the suspect’s name and were otherwise unknown to the Government.

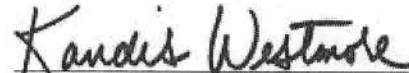
CONCLUSION

For the reasons set forth above, the Government’s search warrant application is DENIED. The Government may not compel or otherwise utilize fingers, thumbs, facial recognition, optical/iris, or any other biometric feature to unlock electronic devices. Furthermore, the Government may only seize those digital devices that law enforcement reasonably believes are owned and/or possessed by the two suspects named in the affidavit. The Government may submit a new search warrant application consistent with this order.

Finally, the undersigned hereby SEALS the search warrant application, including all attachments thereto. This order, however, is a matter of public record and shall, accordingly, be issued a case number and docketed by the Clerk of the Court.

IT IS SO ORDERED.

Dated: January 10, 2019



KANDIS A. WESTMORE
United States Magistrate Judge

United States District Court
Northern District of California

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