

Book Review

America identified by Lisa S. Nelson

This short book by Lisa Nelson essentially describes the results of a US-based study conducted by the author which investigated societal perceptions of biometric technology. Nelson attempts to set these results both within the context of wider political and social theory as well as some of the burgeoning literature on what is becoming known within the technological literature as the phenomenon of personal identity management. This area clearly overlaps with a whole range of societal issues of immediate concern to the citizen in the information polity such as the use of personal identification in access to government services, the potential for increased surveillance of the populace raised by data sharing and integration and the need to ensure the data privacy rights of individuals.

Biometric technology is clearly a whole area in itself. Since this is essentially a book of political not computer science, the author takes the pragmatic approach of providing a useful overview of the idea of biometrics, but without examining in any great detail the differences between different forms of such technology. Admittedly, the notion of a biometric itself is quite broad. A biometric is some pattern extracted from the physical makeup or behaviour of the individual such as a fingerprint, a retinal scan or a sample of handwriting. Biometric technology therefore consists of devices for both capturing such patterns, storing such patterns and matching such patterns either with records stored about individuals or further patterns captured at some point of identification.

Since this book essentially provides a US-centric view of the area it comes as no surprise to find an account of the rising awareness of biometric technologies within what the author refers to as identification systems (but which more broadly perhaps should be referred to as personal identity management systems) following the events of 9/11. This generally held assumption clearly contains a grain of truth in that these events were used as part of the rationale for the proposed introduction of a national personal identity management infrastructure in the other countries such as the UK. However, with the demise of our own national identity cards scheme there is a tendency to assume that many of the issues of personal identity management have been put in their proper place. This ignores the inevitable tide of identity management issues that increasingly permeates and is embedded within not only individual to organisation interaction but a growing range of individual to individual interactions through the mediated interface of communication technologies.

In a sense, the author is attempting to consider not only awareness of personal identity management amongst the US public but also in some way to determine how acceptable such technologies are in terms of the political ideologies held by individuals. Because of their prominence, biometric technologies appear within this study to be used almost as a proxy to explore some deeper issues surrounding personal identity and its management in the information age. Drawing upon her use of focus groups and a national survey she finds that people's trust and confidence in government institutions and the ways in which they configure the legitimacy of government interventions in many areas of life tend to help frame their acceptance of biometric technology. Hence, following 9/11 many individuals appear to have accepted the need for paternalistic intervention to combat the threat of terrorism, even if this involved greater surveillance through the application of biometric technologies. However, if the exercise of such paternalistic intervention is viewed as a threat to liberty without legitimacy then the public will not accept its exercise, including the technologies that are applied in its' exercise.

Therefore, the details in the book arising out of the study itself provide rich and additional background to our understanding of the socio-technical nature of the phenomenon of personal identity management. Even though such results clearly reflect the US context, many are probably generalisable across other comparable societies such as the UK. However, in making the case for the relevance of her results within various aspects of social and political theory the author draws upon a detailed rendering of the legal and governmental infrastructure of the United States. This demands some patience and perseverance on the part of the international reader. Nevertheless, this is a useful book for anybody wishing to explore the sense-making space which is contemporary personal identity.

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