

This article was downloaded by: [Monash University Library]

On: 19 July 2011, At: 00:42

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



The Information Society

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/utis20>

A Review of "Global Challenges for Identity Policies"

Larry Stillman^a

^a Faculty of Information Technology, Caulfield School of Information Technology, Monash University, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

Available online: 15 Jul 2011

To cite this article: Larry Stillman (2011): A Review of "Global Challenges for Identity Policies", The Information Society, 27:4, 269-271

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01972243.2011.583831>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

BOOK REVIEW

***Global Challenges for Identity Policies*, by Edgar A. Whitley and Ian R. Hosein. Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 283 + xix pp. \$53.00 cloth. ISBN 0-230-54223-9 (cloth).**

Reviewed by Larry Stillman

*Faculty of Information Technology, Caulfield School of Information Technology,
Monash University, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia*

This book is a significant study of a large political social-technical failure: the highly contentious UK biometric National Identity Card (NIC). As such, the book offers important insights about the politics of “total” government databases in democratic societies, where issues around privacy and civil liberties come into conflict with advanced technologies of data storage, matching, and control. The book first examines, through a historical and policy narrative, the development of a technology project with strong surveillance overtones in the particular political culture of the United Kingdom, and second, includes a theoretical study of the social-technical relations that arose from this episode. Third, the book also includes a survey of ID schemes around the world, but this survey is somewhat dated and has to be supplemented by more current information, easily found online. It also needs to be noted that the issues reported in the book to the end of 2008 have been superseded by more recent political decisions—namely, to cancel the whole project, but this in no way negates the significance of the book’s content.

The history of the NIC project is as follows. From 2002, after several years of policy development and considerable argument in parliament and the public sphere concerning an originally narrowly focused “entitlement card,” legalization was finally passed under a Labour government in March 2006. However, the whole project was scrapped by the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition in May 2010. All ID cards have been made invalid since January 11, 2011, and the accompanying National Identity Register was to be destroyed by February 11, 2011. How much money the entire project would have cost is disputed, with the London School of Economics (with whom the authors are associated) at one point estimating

£12–19 billion over ten years. The UK government had claimed that total cost would be about 15 percent of this. The current UK government claims that £292 million had been already spent on research and development before the program was scrapped.¹

The authors (and others) were drawn into controversy over the NIC when they prepared an alternative policy analysis of the project in 2005, known as the LSE Identity Project.² A rationale for the ID card project was that government claims about the efficacy, cost, security, and social benefits of biometric data collection “were being accepted at face value.” Political language revolved around the idea of “progress” coupled with “gold standard” hyperbole from the government, including the Home Office Minister claiming that the scheme would become “another great British institution.” One thinks of what happened to British Rail and “great British institution” when its core technical knowledge was gutted during privatization (J. Rose 1999). For their policy efforts, the authors—and others at the London School of Economics—were strongly attacked by politicians for casting a critical eye on the entire project, calling their work “technically incompetent” (79ff), with constant reference to global best practice, governmental technical expertise, or the societal imperative to go biometric. Although the authors do not dwell on this point, the project should also be considered as another example of New Labour’s Third Way moralism, which tried to outdo the Tories in their law-and-order obsession in defining and classifying insiders (good citizens) and outsiders (the undeserving poor, immigrants—legal or otherwise, terrorists, criminals, to the British way of life). It is also of interest that such a project arose in a country that has in its cities an extraordinary number of CCT

cameras, which, despite their presence, failed to prevent the London bombings or the abduction and terrible murder of little James Bulger in 1993. Thus, despite the “cultic” obsession with crime and control, the “technology” does not solve the problem, although it can record the problem (bombers, murderers; Petit 2010).

The book documents the ID card mess. Despite an original rationale that the project would have a democratizing, citizen-centric perspective in providing a universal form of identity for easing all sort of transactions, its aims and benefits were subject to a government-centric agenda in the punitive public policy environment of the United Kingdom. (People would have to pay for the card!) Although the system was meant to be voluntary, it would be compulsory for the purposes of getting a passport, and one minister had the nerve to suggest that travel was a voluntary choice for which there were certain requirements. Passports are also relevant in this discussion because despite the putative infallibility of biometric systems: the Mossad was caught out in forging passports for a number of countries in 2010.³ Thus ends the security argument for biometric products.

From a science and technology studies (STS) perspective, the book uses concepts drawn from the work of Bruno Latour to look at explaining why the project has been so contentious (Latour 1999). This framework is summarized in an article (Whitley and Hosein 2008), but the book provides an important narrative which should be used if the episode is to be used as a teaching case study.

Picking up on Latour, the authors argue that the NIC scheme was a kind of victim of perplexity and ambiguity between the political/public service sphere and the way that science and politics are “done” and translated into action around a social-technical system. They write that “the political deliberation of the science and technology associated with the National Identity Scheme was short-circuiting the consideration of the perplexities associated with both the use of biometrics and the single, centralized database associated with the National Identity Register (NIR). The LSE report therefore sought to contribute to the scrutiny of the Scheme by explicitly raising these . . . perplexities” (145). Short-circuiting of more considered processes is of course endemic to politics, and is particularly exaggerated in an era of spin and self-talk, including self-talk about the benefits of information and communication technologies (ICTs). But at the same time, in the development of a policy dialogue between politicians, public servants, and technical specialists, intentional ambiguity is also used by politicians as a means of avoiding future embarrassment or setting the ground for plausible deniability. Even the meaning of the word “billion” was debated (American or British?) when it came to discussing the cost of the program (171). In addition, while technical specialists may seek to avoid technical ambiguity, there

is a natural mistranslation of what they are on about (and multiple viewpoints about what artifacts “mean”) by non-specialists, whether politicians, public servants, or civil society (or the press). And of course, specialists may themselves engage in unclear or ambiguous discourse between themselves and present “science” in discordant ways. The problems of translation also occurred between the different parties and Houses of Parliament.

Drawing on an STS perspective, the project can also seen to be a “victim” of a culture of technological and political determinism—to the twenty-first century and beyond!—and the authors analyze critical incidents, including leaked e-mails that pulled the rug from the government’s rational and “scientific” approach to the matter (182ff). Technical artifacts are political (Winner 1980) and feature in governmentality (N. S. Rose 1999).

However, the authors seem committed to a belief that more effective and rational methods of social decision making and design can prevail in countries that are strongly committed to civil liberties and scrutiny of electronic systems design, so that decisions do not result in a panopticon that permeates through “capillaries of power” (Foucault and Gordon 1980, 96). I am not so sure whether this is possible, since those who govern us—in particular, bureaucrats—are overwhelmingly, and by necessity generalists, not specialists in social-technical design, and politicians’ lives are a practice governed by strategic necessity, ambiguity, plausible deniability, and rhetoric. Both, in turn, are dependent on advice from technical specialists and vendors whose perplexing “translations” are not always well understood or adequately critiqued. Consequently, as systems become increasingly complex and more powerful (look at Facebook as an example of commercial technology that is “translated” as a public space, and its “unintentional” privacy breaches), politicians will almost inevitably be attracted to what can be sold as the best thing and the potential abuse of e-identity systems is bound to increase (Marx 2001). Perhaps the best that should be developed is specific systems, such as those intended for medical-record sharing, that cannot be used for “function creep” or perceived and potential abuse by the zealous. Setting out to build one big, perfect database is a dangerous project.

Finally, even though the book is couched as “global,” from a research perspective it is clearly targeting the UK policy and academic audience with “Recommendations” appended to its chapters. It could have been enriched by not just looking at problems in ICT projects in other countries and the role that national culture and resistances to the supposedly rational and progressive benefits of modernization through ICTs. The work that Avgerou summarizes, for example, based on studies of implementation in Mexico, Cyprus, Greece, Europe, and the United States, and Zheng’s work on ICT implementation in Africa

offer increased nuance on the complexities of cultural factors in social-technical interaction (Avgerou 2002; Zheng 2007). Furthermore, there is considerable debate over the structure-agency continuum in social-technical relationships, and deeper exploration of this could have offered more perspective from recent literature (Leonardi and Barley 2008). But despite these limitations, the book offers many lessons and insights into problems in designing contentious projects for government and provides a very useful teaching or reflective resource.

NOTES

1. <http://www.wips.gov.uk/cps/rde/xchg/ips.live/hs.xsl/1972.htm> (accessed February 3, 2011).
2. <http://identityproject.lse.ac.uk/> (accessed February 3, 2011).
3. See, for example, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/israel/8224391/New-Mossad-chief-to-apologise-for-use-of-UK-passports-in-Dubai-killing.html> (accessed February 3, 2011).

REFERENCES

- Avgerou, C. 2002. *Information systems and global diversity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Foucault, M., and C. Gordon. 1980. *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972–1977*. New York: Pantheon.
- Latour, B. 1999. *Pandora's hope: Essays on the reality of science studies*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Leonardi, P. M., and S. R. Barley. 2008. Materiality and change: Challenges to building better theory about technology and organizing. *Information and Organization* 18(3):159–76.
- Marx, G. T. 2001. Technology and social control. In *International encyclopedia of the social & behavioral sciences*, ed. N. J. Smelser and P. B. Baltes, 15506–15512. Oxford: Elsevier Science.
- Petit, C. 2010. Smile, honey, you're on candid camera. *New Statesman* May 21. <http://www.newstatesman.com/ideas/2010/05/surveillance-film-cctv-camera>
- Rose, J. 1999. *Towards a structurational theory of IS, theory development and case study illustrations*. Paper presented at the Proceedings of the 7th European Conference on Information Systems, Copenhagen, Denmark. June.
- Rose, N. S. 1999. *Powers of freedom reframing political thought*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Whitley, E. A., and I. R. Hosein. 2008. Doing the politics of technological decision making: due process and the debate about identity cards in the U.K. *European Journal of Information Systems* 17(6): 668–77.
- Winner, L. 1980. Do artifacts have politics? *Daedalus* 109(1):121–36.
- Zheng, Y. 2007. *A structurational conceptualization of information literacy: Reflections on research in rural South Africa*. Paper presented at the Proceedings of the Fifteenth European Conference on Information Systems, St. Gallen, Switzerland. June 7–9. <http://is2.lse.ac.uk/asp/aspecis/20070195.pdf>