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Comment 1 on OII Issue Brief No. 3, *Identity Cards: Social Sorting by Database* by David Lyon.

The Key to ID Cards: ‘Identity Card Usages’, not ‘Identity Usages’

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In his OII Issue Brief on identity (ID) cards, Lyon (2004) outlines the main issues at stake and explains the nature of identity card systems. Here, I would like to add a few observations, particularly in terms of the significance of aspects of ID card usage, such as cost-benefit analyses.

The main reasons for the current interest in ID cards

Three reasons make identity cards a topic of great interest now: more countries are starting to use them; there is strong pressure to include biometric data for anti-terrorism and police purposes; and the time has now come when the capabilities of electronic chips relating to electronic identity are ready to be used, for example for electronic authentication and signature.

On the first issue, I would just comment that this question has already been solved – although many citizens and governments may not know it. What country does not have a material way of knowing who is entitled to stay on its territory? This can be a driver’s licence, a resident’s card, a birth certificate, a proof of tax payment, of health insurance, of a right to work, ..., or a combination of two or more of these. Obtaining and carrying such proofs are more or less difficult or expensive. An identity card is usually a ‘secured’ card, given to an identified citizen after a face-to-face interview, during which he or she produces appropriated proofs. Its main usage is similar to the passport usage: allowing citizens free, but potentially controlled, circulation in authorized areas.

On the second issue, adding biometric data is a way of controlling more securely the matching of information in the card with the bearer, both for bearer’s benefit and the benefit of his or her counterpart. Questions related to the constitution of a database of this personal, and eventually biometric, information are of an ethical nature, with the fine tuning between security and liberty to be decided by concerned populations. Usually, a minimum of centralization is required for efficiency, which raises appeals for new laws to protect privacy.

Secondary usages tend to be found when a 'transportable identity form' exists somewhere, for instance showing a driver's licence is a condition to write a cheque in the USA. In France, the real development of (non-mandatory) identity cards started with the development of paper cheques. By securing a higher level of certainty about the identity of bearers, electronic means of identification could allow higher confidence in the usages enabled by ID cards. In turn, this would help e-business and e-government, in a similar way to the assistance given by post-war paper identity to developing post-war economies and government. This third issue may appear simpler, but raises many unsolved questions.

Understanding economic factors

Electronic identity cards are coming, but economic factors still have to be clearly defined. Individuals usually resist the idea of a single ID card that includes all information about themselves under their 'unique number'. On the other hand, their wallets offer a too-limited space to carry one card per usage. As a result, many experts forecast that individuals will carry one card for health and insurance usages, one for banking and payments, one for professional usages, one for personal government identification, and eventually one or two more.

Three simple questions to this key issue should be raised:

1. What important usage can be offered through an electronic identity card, that is not available without a card?
2. What is the cost of:
 - a) implementing such a system;
 - b) distributing cards to millions of bearers;
 - c) granting bearers secured online access (e.g. through computers, Internet links, and cards readers); and
 - d) developing and maintaining applications defined in Question 1?
3. Are the savings identified in Question 1 higher than the costs of Question 2?

If the answer to Question 3 is 'Yes', you have just found a model that can support the implementation of electronic identity cards.

The development of this kind of practical insight to important questions, such as those surrounding electronic identity cards, is an important part of the mission of e-Forum, a non-profit organization involving academic researchers, industry professionals, and local and central government managers across Europe (www.eu-forum.org). Launched and financed by the European Commission in

2001, its purpose is to identify best practices in e-government and to disseminate them through conferences, practical working groups, research papers, targeted learning journeys, and participation in European research projects.

References

Lyon, D. (2004), 'Identity Cards: Social Sorting by Database', *OII Issue Brief No. 3*, Oxford: Oxford Internet Institute.