Book Review

Nelson, Lisa S. 2011. *America Identified: Biometric Technology and Society*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

258 pp. Hardcover, \$32.00 (US), ISBN 978-0-262-01477-9

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The surveillance studies literature now includes a handful of monographs devoted substantially to the analysis of biometric technologies, with more on the way. Like the interdisciplinary field of surveillance studies itself, these works draw on the theories and methods of a range of disciplines to make sense of their object of analysis: the application of digital technologies to the identification of bodies. It is not surprising that the effort to bind identities to bodies over information networks is attracting scholarly attention from a range of fields, given the level of interest and investment such efforts have received since September 11, 2001. Biometrics promise to provide security and access control to the sources and sites of value in a network society, and it is up to social science, legal analysis, artistic expression, and other forms of inquiry to explore the implications of these technologies for the societies that are developing and adopting them.

Lisa Nelson's *America Identified: Biometric Technology and Society* (MIT Press, 2011) offers a major contribution to the analysis of biometrics from the perspective of political science and policy studies, focusing on the question of societal acceptance. Her stated intention "is to use societal perceptions of biometric technology to map the public policy considerations that are important and consequential to the integration of the technology into our lives" (4). To make sense of the values and norms that affect societal acceptance of biometrics, Nelson draws on data she gathered from a national survey and focus groups conducted in the United States, supplementing this empirical research with extensive detours through political theory. *America Identified* offers a thoughtful and thought-provoking analysis of how issues of acceptance and adoption of biometrics are tied up with key democratic values like security, privacy, autonomy, trust in institutions, and paternalism. Rather than set up simple dichotomies, Nelson carefully unpacks the complexity of these relationships, preferring to see them not as given in advance but contingent on policy, design decisions, and the political ideology of users. She maintains that values like privacy and autonomy are themselves radically indeterminate and historically variable, with new technologies and changing conceptions of personhood presenting "novel challenges to existing notions of privacy" and other values, while also impacting the relative importance ascribed to them (85). To say that biometrics infringe on privacy, autonomy, or other individual rights is to oversimplify what is in reality a more complicated set of changing relationships between individuals, institutions, and technologies.

One of Nelson's key points of departure is that users matter to the development and the deployment of biometrics. The beliefs and attitudes that users have about biometrics, and especially their level of acceptance of these technologies, is key to their success or failure as new technologies of identification. Here, Nelson employs the term "user" in general sense, and so a question arises that should be addressed more explicitly: namely, how different user groups are constituted and their relative power or importance

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in shaping biometric system development. In the introduction, for example, Nelson uses the precedent of the telephone to frame her analysis of “how the politics or political ideology of users...figure into the conditions of success or failure of a technology” (8). The example of the telephone is instructive, and Nelson might have explored the comparison in more depth, using the social history of the telephone to consider more carefully the question of “users” and the constitution of user groups. There are important differences between telephone and biometric systems with respect to the political ideology of users and their attitudes and beliefs about these distinct technologies. Individuals are not adopting biometrics for the same purposes, or in the same way, as individuals adopted the telephone. On other hand, there are also important similarities. As it was with telephony so it is with biometrics: there is not just one but multiple user groups that have a part in shaping the form these technologies are taking. Importantly, the *institutional* users of both technologies have considerably more power to shape the configuration of networked systems than the individual “end users”. In the case of biometrics, certain individuals do become consumers of these devices, purchasing biometrics or biometric-enabled devices for their own “personal security” needs. However, in most cases, individual “end users” are people *subjected to biometric identification* as a result of decisions made by institutions with which they interact, like employers, banks, and government agencies.

The differentiation of user groups seems especially pertinent in Nelson’s chapter of the history of identification systems. Although she addresses the formidable early development of fingerprinting and other forms of bodily identification in the projects of colonialism and exclusionary immigration practices, she chooses not to explicitly connect that history to contemporary uses – or “users” – of biometrics. Doing so might have introduced new dimensions to the issue of societal acceptance, raising the unavoidable question of who gets to belong to the society and who does not, as well as whose acceptance of the technologies matters and whose does not.

Nelson does begin to get at these issues later in the book, in chapters on “anonymity” and “paternalism”. In her discussion of anonymity, she considers how the rhetoric of justification for the use of surveillance technologies attenuates the value that individuals place on anonymity and decisional autonomy. The rhetoric of justification, she notes, draws on salient political ideals and persuades people to accept the use of surveillance technologies “in certain institutions, *on certain targeted groups*, and in various societal contexts” (109, emphasis added). The penultimate chapter, on “paternalism”, is I think the strongest chapter in the book, and raises important questions that might have reframed earlier discussions on the question of users and their differentiation. Here she devotes considerable attention to the relationship between the institutions deploying biometric systems and the individuals interfacing with them. In the context of a discussion of those circumstances where individuals might accept paternalistic interventions into their lives, she calls attention to the issue of illegal immigration and the relative importance the different individuals ascribe to this issue. Not surprisingly, her data indicates “a positive relationship between respondents’ perceived level of concern with illegal aliens in the United States and the perceived acceptance of using biometrics to do a background check on all foreigners” (169). Paternalistic interventions, Nelson adds, “may benefit one class of individuals while...interfering with the liberty of other individuals” (169).

One key finding of Nelson’s study was that both survey respondents and focus group participants expressed greater comfort levels with biometric technologies when assured that system deployments would be accompanied by procedural protections for regulating institutional uses of biometric data (188). To advance this goal, Nelson outlines in the conclusion some of the strengths and weaknesses of a number of existing privacy protection frameworks, including those developed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the U.S. Federal Trade Commission, and the European Commission. Such policy protections help advance the cause of societal acceptance of biometrics, according to Nelson, alleviating some of the anxieties of those individuals whose objections to these technologies might matter. Ultimately, Nelson argues, “the norms, values, and expectations of users must inform the development

and deployment of biometric systems of identification” (196). Unfortunately, while the acceptance of certain classes of individuals clearly matters to the successful deployment of biometric systems, not all “users” are created equal.

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