Politics and Identity Management

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Extended synopsis

The field of identity management has changed dramatically in just a few years. Ten years ago we were huddled in the corner of cocktail parties excitedly discussing and dismissing X.509 certification. Five years ago we were begging for some attention from our governments, industries, and consumer protection institutions. Now, everyone seems to be in agreement that something must be done about identity management.

This is indeed a moment of validation. Identity Management's time has come. If you thought it was going to get easier now that everyone is interested, you are in for a big surprise.

As some companies like Microsoft have learned, as have any number of governments, implementing an identity policy is fraught with problems. In fact, the problem begins well before the implementation stage but rather with the process of developing an identity policy.

In the research from the London School of Economics and Political Science about identity policy schemes around the world, we have been able to identify a number of common threads within many of the political and technological debates. We summarise these as the dynamics of identity policy:

1. There are always political risks.
Even when governments and organisations are sure that they have complete buy-in, it is highly probably that political problems will follow. In the UK, New Zealand, and Australia support for new policies were at first above 80%, but quickly fell.

2. There are uncertain drivers for change.
Proponents of policy change are often unsure of how to sell their changes. They reach too often for convenient arguments rather than well thought out arguments. Evidence can be chosen amongst the many identity policy failures since the rise of terrorism concerns, or ineffectual identity fraud policies in the wake of growing consumer concerns. There is an increasingly common list of drivers for identity policy, many of which have little to do with the actual reasons for introducing policy change.

3. There is a divide between what proponents dream and what is deliverable.
There are far too few feasibility checks on both the goals of policy change and the actual implementations. Politicians and decision-makers get carried away with building vast new infrastructures of registration and processing without considering classical problems of implementation, such as market and network effects, and large-scale management challenges.

4. Choices are easily made but rarely are they effective.
Policy is quickly established, often in a rush to respond to new developments, but rarely with adequate consideration. New technologies are chosen without considering their limitations. It is not that the technologies may fail, but rather their ideal operating conditions are not conducive to the policy choices.

5. After the excitement of deciding upon new policies, costs always creep in.
Costs arise from design decisions, where costs are likely to rise in highly centralised, technology-driven solutions. The moment biometrics enter into the frame, costs are necessarily higher as we have to include registration centres, regular renewal of biometrics, and readers across the entire infrastructure. These are rarely considered within policy processes.

6. The shape of the policy is often dictated by the policy-owner.
Though this may seem quite a deterministic point, we have found that when law enforcement-oriented agencies are responsible for devising identity policies they develop one that reflects their interest in law enforcement. These lead to centralised systems that uniquely identify all individuals. But when administrative agencies develop identity policies they tend to create more flexible and possibly distributed schemes.

7. Identity policies usually cater for civil liberties and privacy at too late a stage.
Increasingly identity policies are driven by technological change and opportunities, or political debates that respond to events. These drivers often lead to schemes that then need to gain public acceptance, and it is usually at that point that decision-makers and technologists speak of civil liberties and privacy. Companies' and governments' projects have failed when they fell into this chain of events.

To conclude, identity policy's time has come, but at the same time we believe that this is the opportunity to finally raise the level of the debate.   Now that we no longer have to expend considerable resources in convincing people in the need for change, we may now finally start speaking about the true nature of problems and find evolved methods of deliberation and decision-making.

To date, the decision-making processes, whether the political processes within governments or the product-design discussions in companies, have not proven to be the best way to come up with design specifications for identity policy. They tend to be driven by ideals rather than consultation. These ideals may be of how to perfectly order society or how to perfectly harness new technological developments. When we are dealing with policies that affect large populations who may not share these ideals or face conditions that do not adhere to design requirements we are likely to see even further policy failures.

Identity management researchers must therefore begin considering the near-inevitable problem of politics. Only then we may better understand how identity works outside of both the laboratories and the corridors of power.