Scraping costly and controversial proposals for identity cards

Dr Edgar Whitley helped persuade the UK coalition government to scrap the controversial identity card scheme soon after taking office.

What was the problem?
In 2004 the UK government proposed a national scheme of identity cards linked to a central database. No such scheme then existed anywhere in the world. The proposed database would hold a broad range of information on citizens, including confidential personal data and face, eye and fingerprint scans. Concerns about privacy, human rights, data security and overall cost dominated the debate about this highly controversial proposal.

What did we do?
In January 2005 LSE initiated its Identity Project in response to the government’s proposals. LSE’s work on identity cards drew on more than 15 years of research into the complexities that arise when technology drives policy instead of responding to it. To be effective, policies must reflect how stakeholders engage with the proposed technology, and they must take into account the complex interplay between technology, business and society at large.

For sensitive issues such as identity cards, public perceptions of privacy are a particular concern. This was amply borne out by two earlier LSE studies, one on stakeholders’ views of electronic medical records and the other on legislation regulating the powers of public bodies to intercept communications for national security purposes. LSE researchers also questioned whether using fingerprint recognition in such an ambitious national scheme would be workable, given the UK Government’s poor record of implementing large-scale IT projects.

Their specific concerns included the risk of unauthorized access, hacking, the reluctance of businesses to invest in the necessary smartcard technology and the serious consequences of computer malfunction in such a centralized scheme. They also judged the scheme’s costs to be vastly underestimated. In contrast to government estimates of some £5.86 billion spread over ten years, LSE researchers estimated costs to range between £10.6 billion and £19.2 billion over the same period.

Co-ordinating the work was Dr Edgar Whitley, Reader in Information Systems, together with Simon Davies and Gus Hosein, both Visiting Senior Fellows until 2011. An advisory committee of 16 LSE professors oversaw the project, to which many LSE staff and an international team of more than 60 researchers contributed, offering expertise in information systems, government, law, media, economics and social policy and reflecting practical concerns expressed by industry and regulators.

What happened?
The LSE Identity Project played a prominent role in shaping parliamentary debates on the Identity Cards Bill, highlighting the scheme’s many problems.
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About Alina Vasile

Alina Valise was the editor of the Management with Impact blog between February 2016 – January 2017.

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