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America Identified: Biometric Technology and Society (MIT Press)

Lisa S. Nelson

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The use of biometric technology for identification has gone from Orwellian fantasy to everyday reality. This technology, which verifies or recognizes a person's identity based on physiological, anatomical, or behavioral patterns (including fingerprints, retina, handwriting, and keystrokes) has been deployed for such purposes as combating welfare fraud, screening airplane passengers, and identifying terrorists. The accompanying controversy has pitted those who praise the technology's accuracy and efficiency against advocates for privacy and civil liberties.

In *America Identified*, Lisa Nelson investigates the complex public responses to biometric technology. She uses societal perceptions of this particular identification technology to explore the values, beliefs, and ideologies that influence public acceptance of technology. Drawing on her own extensive research with focus groups and a national survey, Nelson finds that considerations of privacy, anonymity, trust and confidence in institutions, and the legitimacy of paternalistic government interventions are extremely important to users and potential users of the technology. She examines the long history of government systems of identification and the controversies they have inspired; the effect of the information technology revolution and the events of September 11, 2001; the normative value of privacy (as opposed to its merely legal definition); the place of surveillance technologies in a civil society; trust in government and distrust in the expanded role of government; and the balance between the need for government to act to prevent harm and the possible threat to liberty in government's actions.

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