

Beyond Identification: Biometrics, Everyday Life, and the State

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Opening Remarks as Panel Organizers

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Opening Remarks:

How many of you have experienced trouble with machines that are supposed to read your fingerprints to identify who you are, for example, TouchID for iPhones or the Fingerprint scanner for your smartphone?

While the failure of such authentication systems is mundane and there are easy workarounds at least to access your phone, the more you broaden the scope of what is at stake when an authentication device fails to read biometric details of a person accurately, the more challenging it becomes to overcome such failures and work around them.

This is one of the many possible ways by which we can explain why these panel sessions are organized around two separate themes. The first theme is centered on biometrics as a mundane technology that is used in everyday encounters to overcome a deficit of trust such as in Lauren's work on ankle monitors and Michelle's talk on the use of biometrics in campus dining halls or to achieve quantified measures of the body as theorized by Yuliya.

To talk a little bit more about these presentations, Lauren outlines the aesthetics of the design of ankle monitor devices. While their normative aesthetics situate public safety to be more important than offender rehabilitation, Lauren argues that their material aesthetics enables them to act as an alternative form of incarceration rather than an alternative to incarceration. Moving onto quantification as a matter of concern, Yuliya will focus on the nature of the biometrics-based quantified body to explore how synchronizing digital flows of data with the flows of hands, limbs, and bodies increasingly calls for a flexible, agile body capable of going along with this flow. Finally, Michelle takes us through implementation of biometrics-based identification systems, which are commonly considered as security and surveillance technologies into the unexpected context of campus dining halls. While these identification systems are integrated into preexisting university infrastructures and designed to "keep track" of students and their meal plans, Michelle argues that they also shape the spatial and subjective experiences of accessing, eating, and working in university dining halls.

On the other hand, the second theme centered on biometrics and the state broadens the scope of the stakes involved in making use of biometrics to questions of determining citizenship, recognition of personhood by a bureaucracy, and exercise of biopower in modalities of governance. We have Vasilis who explores the use of biometrics to identify asylum seekers and undocumented migrants and the transformation of an administrative tool for managing refugee information into a forensic database and a tool for surveillance. Next, we have Daniel who takes us back into early history of fingerprint identification as Chinese governing praxis through the case of the Fingerprint Society, a professional association established in 1920s Beijing under the Ministry of Interior's police academy. He further explores biometrics as a solution to the problem of deficit of trust in securing effective state-citizen relationships. Finally, we have two presentations on Aadhaar, which means Foundation in English and is the largest biometric database in the world currently being implemented in India. While Ursula is going to

take us through the use of Aadhaar to achieve unique identification of beneficiaries in last mile delivery of social welfare, Bidisha will explore how the state, market, and individual Aadhaar enrollees cope with the addition of Aadhaar as a new layer on top of all databases of social welfare schemes.

We hope that you will be able to attend both of these panels because we think that the concerns raised in the first panel are not only implicated in the next, but they also situate the multiple contexts and meanings that can be attributed to biometrics as a technology that aims to produce a one-to-one correspondence between a digital record of a person and their personhood. We encourage you to think through these set of four questions that we think are important in thinking through the emergent ubiquity of biometric technologies as preferred methods of identification, and their inscription into everyday digital infrastructures, which is reshaping the governance of social life across national, social, political, administrative, institutional, infrastructural, and technological contexts.

Some questions that drove panel discussions:

1. What is the promise of biometrics? You can think of it in terms of socio-technical imaginaries or you could think of it in terms of assumptions made by designers of biometric technologies in various contexts. How is this promise practically accomplished and how is it reconfigured as biometric technologies get imbricated into pre-existing modes of identification necessary to achieve a variety of administrative and bureaucratic goals?
2. Why and how has a deficit of trust become a central concern in imagining and proselytizing the use of biometrics? Is it just a rhetorical justification for using biometrics or does this suggest the emergence of new modes of accountability in the design and use of identification systems?
3. Considering that new meanings are attributed to technologies in practice as they are put to use, how are the multiple meanings of biometrics-in-use reconciled? For example, how is the tension between the security, surveillance and privacy implications of biometrics and its use for last mile delivery of social welfare accountably resolved?
4. And last but not the least, what is the nature of state-citizen relationship that emerges in the use of biometrics as a technology for unique identification? What are the implications of biometrics as a mode of identification in the exercise of biopower or management of populations?