

# Neo-Liberalizing Welfare: Politics and Information Technology in a New Era of Governance

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When it was announced in 1995 that Metropolitan Toronto would be putting in place a system to digitally fingerprint welfare recipients, alarms were raised in respect to a number of key issues, most notably the privacy and dignity of subjects and the criminal implications of what was proposed. This is in large part due to the imagery of an Orwellian 'Big Brother' state (1990 [1949]) and Bentham's panoptic surveillance society (Foucault, 1979). The association here is to state-sponsored regulation of population groups through advanced technologies. This concern is to be expected, as welfare clients have traditionally carried the label of 'deviant' (Dean, 1991), and the practice of fingerprinting for identification is still used primarily for criminal populations.

There is no doubt that these are salient issues and worthy of further investigation, but the introduction of this kind of technology in light of recent neo-liberal welfare reform merits serious and critical consideration. The practice of subjecting welfare recipients to biometric identification is an important development in and of itself, but we need to examine how technologies such as biometrics can be and are being used as political tools for advancing neo-liberalism in government and governance. The use of welfare program clients as a test population is interesting in this light, as it allows us to critically examine one aspect of the unfolding progression of neo-liberalism. This is a style of governance which promotes individuation, targeted services,

business-style cost efficiencies and economies of scale, and a consumer choice model (O'Malley 1992; Simon, 1987). Unfortunately for the poor, the features of this kind of governance often differentially affect citizens according to their economic and social status. The empowerment of the individual vis-à-vis neo-liberal governance is not likely to be positive when that individual has little power in the first place. For this reason, many sceptics of biometrics in welfare programs have been critical of claims of increased convenience and control for the client (Toronto Star, July 8, 1996: A12).

Taking this kind of perspective on technology and governance allows us to make better sense of the broader implications of the technology as well as to understand how politics plays a critical role in its development, deployment, and rationalization (Barry, Osborne and Rose, 1996). While there remains the spectre of conspiracy theories and Orwellian dramatics, I contend that a clearer assessment of how these new technologies and politics interact presents a picture that is more accurate and more complex than the image of 'Big Brother.' It may also assist in understanding how the relationship between citizen, state and the private sector is being transformed and transfigured through new information technologies.

In this article, biometrics is presented as an example of technologies that are being introduced as part of the neo-liberalizing of welfare reform. It is suggested that the timing and