Diversity and Inclusion – the Next Debates for Identity Documents

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In the socio-political dialogue, topics such as gender, diversity, participation and accessibility – in other words, diversity in general – play a more important role now than ever before. What all these have in common is that ultimately they emphasise identity, the 'I'. This discussion – of its own accord – radiates out to the ID verification issue. Primarily, with passports, identity cards and driving licences. In this respect, it must be discussed whether and to what extent the area of ID verification is up-to-date.

The aforementioned documents have long since left the track of only providing proof of ID. The possession of passports has also long ceased to be proof of privilege of being able to afford to travel or, as was the case for a long time in the Eastern world, to be allowed to travel.

These documents became, in the best sense of the word, self-evident mass goods. The design clearly takes this into account. Besides the security elements, the documents reflect socio-political realities very clearly as well as needs that go beyond the pure character of a security document, for example self-sovereign nationality, often also historical references.

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Be it through buildings, people or historical processes or as a story. The new US and Netherlands passports are examples. The German passport, with its Brandenburg Gate and federal eagle at its centre, also represents this approach. The new EU regulations for identity cards also follow this perspective. An EU logo is now to be used uniformly without the documents losing their national character.

Following this flow, it is necessary to think about a few things:

- Do the ID documents reflect the 'me' of the holder in a sufficient and appropriate way?
- Are evolving social norms such as gender, diversity and accessibility considered in a timely manner?
- Is the necessary and feasible integrated to a sufficient extent?

These questions are not addressed to the technical experts, but to politics and administrations on the one hand and civil society on the other. With the entries male, female, diverse, for example, one follows the evolving legal requirements. It is right and good that the 'I' of the personality/document owner is now better taken into account.

The real question is rather, is the entry gender still needed today? This entry dates back to the times when height, gender and special characteristics were necessary, because the comparison of person and document was only possible with the help of this information. But the information no longer has this function. The reference to special characteristics and height has long since disappeared in European ID documents. The information on gender can also be omitted without any real loss (one only has to think about it). Having to identify the holder via descriptive characteristics is no longer necessary due to the biometrics that have now been implemented worldwide. The link between document and person can be reliably established with the help of biometric data and the verification technology used.

Structurally unresolved, however, are the political and legal positions surrounding accessibility. It is indisputable that accessibility is a topic that has become much more visible in recent years. This is not only due to the requirements, mainly based on the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities[1,2],

but also due to the changing zeitgeist. All social responsibility strategies of public institutions and companies now include very clear measures to promote diversity, inclusion and accessibility. Wheelchair accessible entrances are at the same time a symbol and a piece of everyday life and normality (they have an effect far beyond the usefulness for the users, showing and carrying the topic).

Accessibility of ID documents and other official documents means that their written contents are also accessible to people who cannot read. Reasons for this can be visual impairment and blindness, or cognitive impairment, ignorance of the Latin script commonly used in the EU, or illiteracy.

People in western societies are enjoying much longer lives, getting older, which is often accompanied by visual impairment. Regardless of this, 60% of all people over the age of 16 need glasses or contact lenses. And most importantly, in the EU member states, an average of almost 20% of the population is considered functionally illiterate. There are 447.7 million people in the EU, and so around 90 million people who cannot really read.

This shows more than clearly that, on the one hand, barrier-free access to information is also needed for ID documents and, on the other hand, that there will be more demand for them in the future. Merely saying that the passport / ID card has a passport photo and that even those who cannot read can recognise it is true as a fact, but as an answer it is clearly too shallow and cannot do justice to the topic. In this respect, ID documents cannot and must not be left out. And since these proofs are issued by state institutions, it is also obligatory not optional to act here.

In Council Regulation (EC) No 2252/2004 of 13 December 2004 on standards for security features and biometrics in passports and travel documents issued by member states, Article 4 (1) states: 'Without prejudice to data protection rules, persons to whom a passport or travel document has been issued shall have the right to verify the personal data contained in the passport or travel document and, where appropriate, to request rectification or erasure.' Of course, this can be complied with, if a third party checks. But in terms of accessibility, this must be possible without outside help.

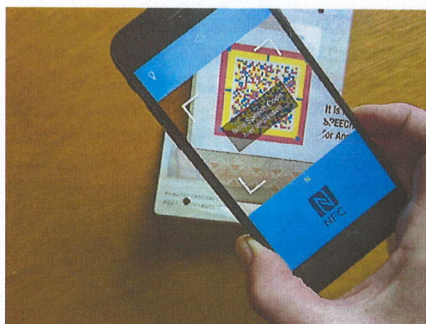1   www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/RightsOfDisabledPersons.aspx
2   www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/CRPD/Pages/ConventionRightsPersonsWithDisabilities.aspx

Diversity and Inclusion *(Continued)*

So far, the regulation only contains the above-mentioned principle. The regulation does not contain an obligation for accessible design. This will have to be considered. Some EU countries already provide accessible passports, eg. Portugal was the first EU member state to introduce a Braille version of the ePassport. However, Braille has the disadvantage that only a fraction (20-25%) of all blind people are proficient in Braille. The aforementioned millions of other people with reading problems cannot benefit from Braille.

Malta is implementing a different, much more accessible approach. Together with Identity Malta and stakeholder organisations, audio format was chosen as it enables accessibility for many more people. SpeechCode, a special QR code, was selected for implementation from autumn 2019. It contains the passport data directly in the code, so no internet access to sensitive databases is necessary.

Scanned with the free, accessible SpeechCode app, the data is shown on the display in large letters and with strong contrasts and is simultaneously read aloud.

Example of encoded speech generator (© SpeechCode).

There are also solutions where the Braille information is available on request and then is applied to the document by means of a special sticker. This reaches those who are Braille literate, but follows the practice of having to identity yourself as visually impaired. At the same time, everyone can see the special feature, even if the holder does not actually want this. In this respect, it is about solutions that benefit everyone and at the same time are discreet – in the best sense of the word.

In conclusion, accessibility is a societal challenge that also applies to ID documents. There are not only socio-political and legal requirements and regulations, but also an increasingly critical and questioning public as well as a developing demand. There are technical solutions that comprehensively address the issue which are currently considered niche but will, at some point, become mainstream. This topic is one that requires productive thinking, firstly in deciding what should be done and then in making it a reality.

Upcoming Events

14–16 MARCH 2022
HIGH SECURITY PRINTING LATIN AMERICA
Mexico City, Mexico
hsp-latinamerica.com

11–13 APRIL 2022
OPTICAL & DIGITAL DOCUMENT SECURITY
Vienna, Austria
opticaldigitalsecurity.com

16–18 MAY 2022
TAX STAMP & TRACEABILITY FORUM
Malta
taxstamptraceabilityforum.com

13–15 JUNE 2022
HIGH SECURITY PRINTING EMEA
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