

TENTH ANNIVERSARY EDITION · APRIL 26, 2026

Principles of Self-Sovereign Identity

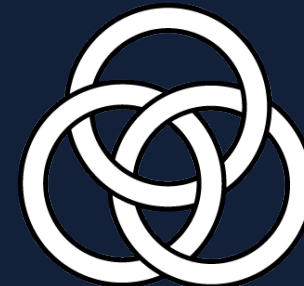
2026 Revision — First Community Draft

Christopher Allen

W3C Credentials Community Group

Ten years after The Path to Self-Sovereign Identity (2016).

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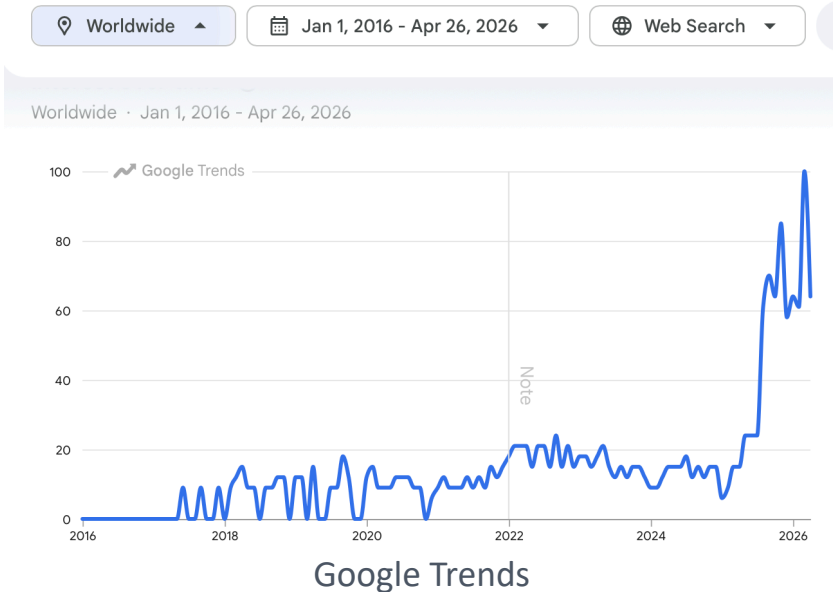


Stream 44 Systems

The 2016 ask — and what actually happened.

“I seek your assistance in taking these principles to the next level.”

— The Path to Self-Sovereign Identity, April 26, 2016



10 principles

became the conceptual foundation of an industry

1,000+

academic citations across law, design, policy, engineering

10 years

later — and the terrain has changed more than anyone foresaw

Three forces the 2016 principles could not have anticipated.

ECONOMIC

The commodification of behavioral data

What began as surveillance for ads matured into markets for the behavioral exhaust of ordinary life — attention, affect, inference. "Data ownership" became the rhetorical on-ramp to credential marketplaces.

POLITICAL

The normalization of surveillance capitalism and mandatory digital ID

Benefit-access digitization, vaccine-era identity mandates, and state-deployed ID regimes made "voluntary" participation increasingly theoretical. The 2016 list had no answer for coercion by necessity.

TECHNICAL

Generative & agentic AI, consumer eye-tracking and neural interfaces

Agents act at machine cadence; gaze-based inference & neural interfaces make mental privacy literal rather than metaphorical. Per-transaction consent breaks. The skull is now a privacy boundary to defend.

What the 2026 revision is — and what it isn't.

THIS IS

- A redline of the original ten
- Six new principles where coverage was missing
- A four-layer structure that carries ethical weight
- An invitation to iterate — not a finished document
- Released in redline form so disagreement is legible

THIS ISN'T

- A replacement for the 2016 ten — they're still recoverable
- A specification — it's a principles document
- Exhaustive — several 2036 frontiers are deliberately deferred
- Settled — every principle is open to revision this year
- An attempt to settle SSI — it's an attempt to extend it

Sixteen principles, four layers.

FOUNDATIONAL

What cannot be derived from anything else

1 • 2 • 3

RELATIONAL

How persons interact with systems and others

4 • 5 • 6 • 7 • 8

TECHNICAL

Testable properties of identity systems

9 • 10 • 11 • 12 • 13

POLITICAL

How the system holds up under real-world pressure

14 • 15 • 16

Ordering within each layer is logical, not hierarchical. Every principle is necessary; none is sufficient alone.

The 2016 ten are still here — just reorganized.

2016 #	PRINCIPLE	2026 #	LAYER SHIFT
1	Existence	1	<i>unchanged position</i>
2	Control	4	<i>now relational</i>
3	Access	6	<i>now relational</i>
4	Transparency	13	<i>now technical</i>
5	Persistence	9	<i>now technical</i>
6	Portability	10	<i>now technical</i>
7	Interoperability	11	<i>now technical</i>
8	Consent	5	<i>now relational</i>
9	Minimalization	12	<i>now technical</i>
10	Protection	14	<i>now political</i>

The unmarked text in the redline is byte-for-byte 2016. A reader can read unmarked portions only and reconstruct the original ten intact.

Six additions, each closing a specific gap in the 2016 ten.

2 **Inalienability**

Protects Existence from being converted into property

3 **Cognitive Liberty**

Protects the mind as a domain of sovereignty, not extraction

7 **Relational Autonomy**

Extends sovereignty from attributes to relationships

8 **Stewardship**

Names obligations where users cannot self-advocate

15 **Equity**

Refuses the reproduction of structural inequality

16 **Anti-Coercive Design**

Treats interface and ranking as infrastructure

What cannot be derived from anything else.

Foundational principles resist operationalization by design. Each protects the one before it from its most common attack: Existence protected from derivation, Inalienability from commodification, Cognitive Liberty from extraction.

- 1 Existence**

Expanded. Now explicitly resists operationalization. Refuses personhood claims for AI agents at the level of foundation.
- 2 Inalienability**

NEW Core identity cannot be converted into property. Prohibits credential marketplaces and identity-token trading.
- 3 Cognitive Liberty**

NEW Four rights: mental self-determination, privacy, integrity, and continuity. The skull is now a literal privacy boundary.

How persons interact with systems and with each other.

Each relational principle is vulnerable to being hollowed out: control without mechanism, consent without reflection, access without completeness, relationship without exit, stewardship without accountability.

- | | | | |
|----------|----------------------------|-----|---|
| 4 | Control | | Qualified as meaningful, not nominal. Technical mechanisms required. Strategic-scope authorization for AI agents. |
| 5 | Consent | | Heaviest revision. Meaningful, ongoing, revocable. Calibrated revocability. Attention-aware. |
| 6 | Access | | Extended to inferred data. Shadow-identities must be legible and contestable, not just declared attributes. |
| 7 | Relational Autonomy | NEW | Sovereignty over relationships: bilateral consent, unilateral exit, contextual boundaries, graph privacy. |
| 8 | Stewardship | NEW | Caring for another's identity is not ownership of it. Strongest obligations where power imbalance is greatest. |

Testable properties — specific enough to audit.

The most operationalizable layer, and therefore the most susceptible to compliance theater — satisfying the letter while defeating the spirit. Each principle must specify what the property must do, not just what it must be.

- 9 Persistence**
Narrative continuity across trauma, migration, life transition. Must survive paradigm rotation, not just key rotation.
- 10 Portability**
Open standards. Narrative portability. Survives jurisdictional disappearance. Statelessness ≠ digital statelessness.
- 11 Interoperability**
Pluralistic interoperability, not monoculture. Community issuers have equal technical standing.
- 12 Minimalization**
Extended to inferred data. Contextual integrity. Anti-aggregation constraints across contexts.
- 13 Transparency**
Now includes governance and incentives. Open code operated by opaque consortium fails this test.

How the system holds up under real-world pressure.

The youngest layer, and the most dependent on surrounding society. Unlike foundational principles, these must be practiced continuously; unlike technical ones, they resist full operationalization because the coercions they resist evolve faster than any static audit.

14 Protection

Full coercion spectrum: structural, economic, normative, cognitive. Interface coercion delegated to principle 16.

15 Equity

NEW

Must not reproduce structural inequality. Non-digital alternatives preserved. Dominant categories cannot be the only legible forms of self.

16 Anti-Coercive Design

NEW

Interface is infrastructure. Dark patterns refused; ranking and recommendation shaped by the same discipline.

Consent — a heavy revision in the list.

From the 2016 → 2026 redline

Users must ~~agree to~~ give meaningful, ongoing, and revocable consent for the use of their identity.

...

~~Note that this consent might not be interactive, but it must still be deliberate and well-understood.~~

Meaningful consent is deliberate (not produced by fatigue, manufactured urgency, or choice overload), reflective, durable against manipulation, and revocable on proportionate terms. Consent that is merely clicked through is not consent. Attention is the only non-renewable input to consent.

WHY IT CHANGED

Three pressures the 2016 version could not hold against:

Dark patterns. "Clicked through" is not consent.

Calibrated revocability. Exit neither prohibitive nor free.

Machine cadence. Per-transaction consent breaks when agents act faster than humans can review.

Protection — from one-axis defense to a coercion taxonomy.

From the 2016 → 2026 redline

The rights of users must be protected. When there is a conflict between the needs of the identity network and the rights of individual users, then the network should err on the side of preserving the freedoms and rights of the individuals over the needs of the network. To ensure this, identity authentication must occur through independent algorithms that are censorship-resistant and force-resilient and that are run in a decentralized manner.

Protection extends beyond network-versus-user conflicts to the full spectrum of coercion that can arise within a decentralized system: structural (marginalized users facing only nominal "choices"), economic (incentive structures that privilege issuers over subjects), normative (schemas that enforce conformity by making non-standard selves illegible), and cognitive (surveillance that produces self-censorship before any prohibition is issued).

FOUR COERCIONS

The 2026 addition names four dimensions the 2016 principle did not:

Structural. Marginalized users facing only nominal "choices."

Economic. Incentives that privilege issuers over subjects.

Normative. Schemas that enforce conformity by making non-standard selves illegible.

Cognitive. Surveillance producing self-censorship before any prohibition.

Behavioral coercion is delegated to Anti-Coercive Design (new #16).

What Existence is — and what it keeps getting misread as.

TWO FORMS OF A RECURRING MISREADING

In a notable share of the 600+ citations, Principle 1 has been rewritten into one of two shapes — neither of which is what it originally said.

Existence as a task for the person — to be established.

“Individuals must be able to establish their existence as a unified identity online and in the physical world.”

— LifeID, SSI Bill of Rights (2018)

Existence as a capability of the ecosystem — to be granted.

“An SSI ecosystem shall provide the means for any entity — human, legal, natural, physical or digital — to be represented by any number of digital identities.”

— Sovrin, Principles of SSI V3 (2022)

WHAT THE PRINCIPLE SAYS

“Any self-sovereign identity is ultimately based on the ineffable ‘I’ that’s at the heart of identity. It can never exist wholly in digital form.”

— 2016, preserved verbatim in 2026

**Systems witness
existence.
They do not grant it.**

State-ID failures show why this principle matters. A person excluded from a system has not ceased to exist.

Existence precedes the system.

I flagged this drift in [GitHub issue #6 \(2018\)](#). The 2026 revision adds an explicit operationalization-resistance clause because the misreading keeps recurring across the community — not because any single organization got it wrong.

Four places I am most uncertain — and welcome pushback.

01 Existence vs. AI-agent personhood

Refusing Existence for AI agents at the level of foundation may read as reactive. Is there a framing that does the protective work without sounding like a declaration of war on a category of entities?

02 Consent — the revocability calibration

"Not prohibitive, not always free" is the hardest balance in the document. Too much friction traps people; too little kills credible commitment. Emergency-exit definitions are notoriously gameable.

03 Interoperability vs. monoculture

Pluralistic interoperability still has to agree on something at the bridging layer — and that something becomes the point of capture. Is there a worked example that has actually survived scaling?

04 Anti-Coercive Design — where does it stop?

Extended late to cover ranking and recommendation, not just interface. Should this be split into an interface principle and an algorithmic-shaping principle, or is the whole point that they can't be separated?

What I'm hoping the CCG will do.

1

Read the redline

The full document lives in Google Docs and at RevisitingSSI.com. It is explicitly a first community draft — dissent should be legible.

2

Flag what I got wrong

Especially: where the new principles overlap existing ones, where the new language is weaker than what it replaced, where a deferred concern should actually be in-scope.

3

Bring the hard cases

The principles need pressure from real deployment contexts — identity-for-refugees, digital-ID-by-default benefit access, AI-agent delegation, neural-interface rollouts.

4

Help at IIW & RevisitingSSI.com

Sessions are being organized at IIW and online meetings via RevisitingSSI.com. If you work on any of the new principles (especially 3, 7, 15, 16), I want your fingerprints on this.

From first draft to v1.0 — six months, multiple venues.

APR 2026

MAY – AUGUST 2026

SEP 2026

First community draft

Iteration

v1.0 presentation

1

2

3

Community Draft Published in Google Docs & [RevisitingSSI.com](https://revisitingssi.com); sessions at Internet Identity Workshop (IIW)

W3C CCG Meeting (May 5th 9am PDT)
Online Meetings at [RevisitingSSI.com](https://revisitingssi.com)
(May 20th 10am PDT, 7pm CEST)

Global Digital Collaboration (GDC),
Geneva, Sep 1-3, 2026

The goal is not to settle the questions of self-sovereign identity. It is to make these principles worthy of the next ten years.

Thank you.

Christopher Allen

ChristopherA@LifeWithAlacrity.com

RevisitingSSI.com · BlockchainCommons.com

“I seek your assistance in taking these principles to the next level.” — 2016, and again.