The TSA is ramping up its use of biometrics for flyers. Here's why that's important.

By Sheldon H. Jacobson

The Transportation Security Administration screened more than 2.9 million people on Nov. 26, the highest number on record. As the volume of passengers continues to rise, what will airport security checkpoints look like in 2035, when such high daily volumes are the norm?

To understand this future, one need only look at where the TSA is making substantial investments.

The TSA is ramping up biometrics, namely facial recognition, as a critical tool to keep the air system safe. Facial recognition is not only a welcome addition to airport security strategies, but it also is necessary to transform the airport security paradigm well into the future.

The TSA uses multiple layers to secure the nation's air system. Identity authentication is one such layer, and a critical one.

Credential Authentication Technology ensures that your form of identification (such as a driver's license or a Global Entry card) presented at airport security checkpoints is authentic and that you are the person scheduled to and eligible to fly that day. Incorporating facial recognition as well, the presenting person is then matched to the ID, providing a rigorous identification confirmation process.

Why is identification confirmation so important? Those with intent to cause harm to the air system must either hide or misrepresent their identity. If they can do that, they pose a risk to the air system and to all travelers.

Despite the security benefits offered by facial recognition, many are crying foul, citing that it is an invasion of privacy and a violation of civil liberties and expressing other concerns. The naysayers include a group of lawmakers who want to put the brakes on such technology, going

Travelers wait to be screened by Transportation Security Administration employees at Midway Airport on Nov. 17.
E. JASON WAMBSGANS/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

so far as to craft a bill that would ban it. They are gravely ill-informed and misguided.

Before jumping on the "ban facial recognition" bandwagon, let's look at the situation for what it is and the potential that it offers.

At present, the TSA does not store photos taken for facial recognition. Once the person's identity is confirmed, each person's photo overrides the previous person's photo, with all data cleared by the end of the day. This means that the data is typically stored for a few seconds, or at most a few hours.

As for security breaches, the short time span of photos available is so small that any such risks are negligible.

For those who have privacy concerns about facial recognition, think about how people post their photos and personal information on social media. The same holds true for information accessed via some smartphones and via

public Wi-Fi. Such data is far more vulnerable to misuse than a 10-second photo taken at an airport security checkpoint. The vulnerabilities that many of us are voluntarily subjecting ourselves to dwarf the risks of facial recognition misuse at airport security checkpoints.

So what is the real reason that the TSA is moving forward with facial recognition?

The primary focus of airport security has mostly remained unchanged since Sept. 11, namely, keeping prohibited items from entering the sterile side of the airport and into the air system. The technologies used to achieve this have evolved, but the strategy continues to focus on threat item detection. The TSA has been detection-centric since its inception, which costs taxpayers billions of dollars per year.

Yet prohibited items are a surrogate for the actual threat, which are bad actors with nefari-

ous intent.

When the TSA launched its popular and well-received PreCheck program in 2011, it began to traverse the risk-based security highway that incrementally moves the focus away from prohibited items and focuses on passengers. By vetting passengers for eligibility in PreCheck, the cost of physical screening was reduced, without compromising the security of the air system, a win-win situation for travelers and taxpayers.

What facial recognition does is move the ball further along the risk-based security highway. It permits the TSA to gain knowledge about the travelers who present themselves for entry to the sterile side of airports. Such information is invaluable to separate benign passengers — or nearly every traveler — from the few travelers who may have nefarious intent.

But what is the endgame?

Airport security configurations must eventually transform from checkpoints to tunnels.

Passengers walk through a security tunnel where their identity is confirmed via facial recognition and matched to those scheduled to travel that day. For those who cannot be matched, they are pulled aside for questioning and more traditional physical screening procedures.

For most passengers, there would be no formal carry-on bag screening and no walking through metal detectors or advanced image screening. Limitations on liquids would be nonexistent. The process would be seamless, effortless and, most importantly, more secure than any physical screening in place today.

The TSA's updated Checkpoint Requirements and Planning Guide depicts security tunnels and pathways.

Such a future depends on a robust facial recognition system, which requires more research and testing. That is why any efforts to halt such advances will place headwinds on security tunnels, keeping airport security locked into its current detection-centric mindset.

As much as people fear facial recognition, the potential benefits that it offers are tremendous. Like any new disruptive technology, time is needed to adapt to its limitations and capabilities.

The future of airport security is in sight, and incorporating biometrics is a critical step forward. Halting such advances would serve no one's interests.

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