
The security week that was: 04/24/09

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Published: Apr 24 2009 - 12:38pm

Subtitle: A weekly surveillance of the news shaping your professionByline:

By Geoff Kohl, editor-in-chief

Millimeter wave gets ready for prime time

Earlier this month, I wrote about how millimeter waves were going to replace metal detectors, and the same was happening with a [Slate Magazine story we picked up](#) for SIW's readers. One of the toughest things going on for the American public, as that Slate article discussed, was the concerns of privacy.

Unlike metal detectors, which give a pass/fail alarm, active millimeter wave machines provide a visual image of a naked human being. The machines scan through the soft parts of clothing to try to spot hidden threats.

I had the chance to look at this system up-close-and-personal at Schipol Airport in Holland on Wednesday. We took a look at a real-life scan from one of the machines, and the detail is quite good. The faces are blurred out to protect the identity, but the image quality of these machines (this one was from L3) is quite good. You can see the line where the top of a sock has made an impression on the calf muscle. You can spot the keys that were left in the persons pocket. You can see the buttons of their shirt, and yes, the detail of "private parts" is certainly there.

Like the TSA, Schipol Airport puts the person analyzing the scanned images in a room separate from the person being scanned. The operator in the box simply alerts the officer at the portal as to whether the person in the scanner, and the images aren't saved. Personally, I have no qualms about using the technology. It seems less invasive than a pat-down, and even as a fairly conservative, Christian-raised person who is quite happy that Adam and Eve have covered themselves since they left the Garden of Eden, I couldn't see the privacy issues in this technology.

In terms of throughput, these machines are quite good. According to Miro Jerkovic, the senior manager for security research and development at Schipol Airport, the average throughput at metal detectors at Schipol is four persons per minute. The millimeter wave portal tends to average slightly less, at 3-1/2 persons per minute. In our totally unscientific test, a group of five bumbling security analysts and journalists were able to empty their pocket made it through the machine in one minute. I actually think that the throughput is going to be more affected by how quickly people can pull laptops out of their bags and empty their pockets of keys, change and other objects, than by how quickly the images can be analyzed. And if people have emptied their pockets and taken off their jackets and belts, the images become rather simple to analyze.

There's an added benefit, says Jerkovic. While the image quality is indeed quite good nice, every nation and airport also has to balance the costs of security. Schipol has found that it can, on average, use one less officer per security checkpoint station by using millimeter wave scanners rather than metal detection portals. Schipol is using 15 of these machines in actual security checkpoints right now, and it sounds like they're ready to ramp this technology up to replace metal detection. Likewise, I think we'll see the technology also be ramped up quickly in the U.S., and I think we might even see combined portals that use both millimeter wave and metal detection.

However, the #1 reason why this technology might be adopted quickly in the U.S. is the following: You don't have to remove your shoes!

GE's Homeland Protection unit goes to SAFRAN

French firm that owns Sagem Securite to buy division from GE

Speaking of airport security technology, [GE Security is planning to sell its Homeland Protection business unit to SAFRAN](#), a French company that owns biometrics and ID firm Sagem Securite. Related to the millimeter wave story, I asked Dennis Cooke (president/CEO of GE's Homeland Protection unit) as to whether the company is involved with millimeter wave technology. The answer is that the company is not developing millimeter wave technology, but is working on machine vision algorithms that would allow software to look at the images of the scanners instead of human beings. A good algorithm could mean even more privacy for travelers and decreased staffing requirements for the airports or TSA.

In other news:

Bank social engineers security; RILA and NRF merge, more...

One bank is asking its customers to [remove hats, sunglasses, hoodies](#) and other such coverings when entering their banks. There is no word yet on whether stocking-wearing armed robbers will comply with the request to remove facial coverings. ... Stanley CSS is [merging its U.S. and Canadian operations](#) and putting Tony Byerly atop both efforts. ... Speaking of mergers, the Retail Industry Leaders Association and the National Retail Federation are [merging into a single trade association](#) . Both were known for their [retail loss prevention conferences](#) and training efforts. ... Security officers for the 2010 will be living on cruise ships that are to be docked for temporary housing.

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