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G8 Countries Call for Biometric Data of all Travelers to be Recorded and Stored

The eight industrial countries that regularly meet as the G8 Group intend to make the security industry a gift of a very special kind. Nothing less than the upgrading of the passports of all travelers worldwide with biometric features is what the grand get-together has in mind. heise online is on possession of a planning protocol to that effect confirming the "universality," "urgency" and "technical reliability" of the concept.

The immigration experts of the group of states have already agreed on an initial list of principles. This -- together with projects to create a comprehensive databank about the exchange of child pornography, as well as projects on the employment of undercover investigators -- is to be completed during the first meeting of the group of major powers under the future presidency of France at the beginning of 2003 and then implemented with the aid of international standardization bodies. In the paper the G8 working group emphatically recommends the development of a "complete, common technical interoperability standard," upon the basis of which all nations of this world are to introduce the machine-reading of identity papers with biometric features. The working group reckons that this measure will enhance the capacity to fight international terrorism. At the same time the experts are fanning the fear that a delay in the implementation of such a global, interoperable system would "unnecessarily increase the risks to our populations."

In devising the standard the immigration body is working together with the International Civil Aviation Authority ICAO. That Montreal-based body of the UN has for years now, as a driving force behind the moves to harmonize passport types and systems, been a vigorous proponent of facial features recognition as a global biometrics feature. Fingerprint recognition and iris scanning too are, according to the G8 report, being "actively" surveyed.

The G8 suggestions read in large part like a massive brochure of the growth industry that has sprung up around biometrics, which ever since September 11th can hope to garner major orders of ever increasing size. The costs alone of building the infrastructure that will ensure the readability of visas with biometric features, which will be officially required to enter the United States from next year on, are calculated to amount to 3.2 billion US dollars. "We have become convinced," the G8 working group writes, "that biometric authentication is able to enhance the individual's private sphere, ease travelling and improve security." However, "proper" implementation was called for, they added. "Careful scientific tests" should be carried out to permit the "enormous promise" inherent in biometric technologies to be realized.

Assurances of this kind have been given for years- yet tests repeatedly show that biometrics technologies cannot as yet be applied within the framework of large-scale projects. "The technology suitable for mass consumption for identifying and authenticating the identity of persons on the basis of their physical features is obviously still in its infancy," was the final conclusion reached by c't´s editors when they examined a range of eleven distinct biometric access protection devices and their programs this spring. Indeed, during a field test by the Pentagon the FaceIt software by Visionics failed in 51 percent of cases. The head of BioTrusT (a project supported by the German Federal Government) Henning Arendt on the other hand estimates the average failure rate of facial feature recognition systems to amount to "only" about ten percent. For him it would be "inconceivable," though, for every tenth person to be forced in future to face problems when crossing a border.

"Besides the question of suitability for every-day use and of security, many legal implications" were "still to a large extent unclear," the Research Committee of the Bundestag, Germany's lower chamber of parliament, concluded in its introduction to the Report on biometric identification systems by the Office of Technology Assessment. Data watchdogs, moreover, warn against piling up uncontrollable mountains of data, point to the dangerous possibility of

ethnic screening and highlight the threat of camouflaged investigations being introduced.

Nevertheless, the German Federal Government as early as a year ago laid the foundations with its controversial second package of anti-terrorist legislation for incorporating biometric features in identity papers in machine-readable form. At the time the data watchdogs had vigorously protested against the plan to fingerprint and photograph the entire population and had argued by way of criticism that biometric mass mobilization was an unsuitable means of fighting terrorism; as, for instance, the 9-11 suicide suspects had been in possession of valid US visas. Systems for monitoring citizens more closely still are nevertheless still gaining ground. Thus, for instance, the new EU visas, which from April 2003 onwards will also be issued in Germany, are already calibrated to conform to biometrics. What is more, the Interior Minister of the German federal state of Bavaria, Günther Beckstein, this November presented automatic facial features recognition projects in operation at the border crossing points of Waidhausen and Nürnberg airport. (*Stefan Krempl*) / (*Robert W. Smith*) / (jk/c't)

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