Airport biometric data collection takes off despite public concerns

Article

The news: The **United Arab Emirates** began rolling out iris scanners to authenticate passengers' identities during air travel, per the Associated Press. The new initiative reportedly affects **122 "smart" gates** at the Dubai International Airport starting this month. The move will add a layer of convenience by removing the need for a boarding pass or human contact at check-in, but comes with increasing concerns about the potential for abuse.

How it works: Emirates Airlines passengers lean into a kiosk at check-in where a machine scans their eyeball. The scanner links the passenger's **biometrics data** with their boarding pass and other flight information, allowing them to pass through security, immigration, and even reportedly enter Emirates Lounges without any supporting documentation. Since Emirates Airlines is owned by the UAE government, the airline reportedly partners with the government to link a passenger's iris to a national facial recognition database.

Emirates and UAE officials claim the new initiative can deter COVID-19 by limiting human-to-human contact at airports and says the iris scanner, like other biometric identifiers, will cut down on the long, laborious lines many have come to associate with air travel.

How we got here: Iris scanners and facial recognition have quietly seeped their way into airports across the US and around the world in recent years. Since 2019, **American Airlines**, **Delta**, **British Airways**, and **JetBlue** have all experimented with facial recognition to speed up check-ins, and in some instances, used face scans to replace boarding passes. While these airlines limit collection to face data, iris scanning technology companies like **AOptix** are reportedly trying to bring the tech to the US.

At the same time, **US Customs and Border Patrol** has spent recent years expanding its facial recognition capacities through its **Biometric Exit Program**. Currently implemented in at least 27 US airports, the CB program reportedly uses passenger face scans, gathered from partners, like the airlines listed above, and compares those images to a cloud-based database of visas, passports, and other immigration documents and to determine whether noncitizens have overstayed their visas, or run afoul of other immigration policies. According to a 2020 Homeland Security report, Customs and Border patrol expects its biometric program will affect **60%** of travelers by **2022** and **97%** of travelers by **2024**.

The big takeaway: Biometric identifiers will likely see continued expansion in airports despite growing regulatory oversight and activist backlash over the tech. While **just 15%** of US respondents polled by Pew **in 2019** said they found advertiser use of facial recognition in public spaces acceptable, **59%** said law enforcement use of the technology in public was. Similarly, the recent emergence of city and state laws limiting biometric data collection won't hold much sway over airports, where security is conducted by federal agencies.

Passengers are also reeled in by the allure of convenience: A 2019 Experian survey found that **70% of global consumers** were willing to share more personal data if that sharing came with perceived benefits. In the case of airports, passengers are likely to continue relinquishing

personal data in exchange for promises of heightened security and quick, lineless, efficient experiences.

Do US Adults Think that Facial Recognition Technology Is Acceptable in Select Situations?
% of respondents, June 2019

	Acceptable	Not acceptable	Not sure
Law enforcement assessing security threats in public spaces	59%	15%	13%
Apartment building landlords tracking who enters or leaves their buildings	36%	34%	15%
Companies automatically tracking the attendance of their employees	30%	41%	15%
Advertisers seeing how people respond to public ad displays	15%	54%	16%

Note: ages 18+; numbers do not add up to 100% due to the exclusion of responses from those who have not heard of facial recognition technology
Source: Pew Research Center, "More Than Half of US Adults Trust Law Enforcement to Use Facial Recognition Responsibly," Sep 5, 2019

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