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Passport chips raise privacy concerns

By Christine Boese
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(CNN) -- A controversy is brewing over a U.S. State Department decision to put identification chips inside all new passport covers, a program scheduled to start by late 2005.

The passport chips differ from those now commonly used for building entry or identifying the family dog. Those chips only provide one piece of information -- a unique identification number -- when pinged by a radio receiver.

The passport chips will hold much more data, from 64 kilobytes to eventually 514 kilobytes, as much as the first personal computers. They will hold the same information as a paper passport plus a digitized photo and face template for the still-unproven facial recognition software, which also is supposed to identify you from a distance, unnoticed.

The fact that passport data can be read unencrypted, with no physical contact, from up to 30 feet away, according to the American Civil Liberties Union, upsets privacy advocates for two reasons.

First, groups such as the ACLU note that information on your activities could be collected by government agencies (or commercial and marketing interests) without your knowledge.

The ACLU obtained documents through the Freedom of Information Act that it says show how the U.S. government pushed the idea of unencrypted chips through the standards-setting International Civil Aviation Association over objections from Germany, Britain and other nations. The ACLU says the United States is trying to get a global biometric database online with little debate within the United States, where there is strong resistance to a national I.D. card (see the link to the ACLU white paper in the sidebar to read more).

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Second, many people are concerned that criminal or terrorist "data-skimmers" could set up chip readers to grab information from your passport and find out more about you, or "clone" your information and make fake passports, again without your knowledge.

The State Department says it doesn't want to encrypt that data because the system will be too expensive for poorer nations to implement. It says it is still working on a way to block the free range broadcast of unencrypted personal information, and for now at least, the readers are too big for criminals to carry around.

Privacy advocates say a "smart card" swipe system like credit cards would have been just as efficient and far more secure, but passports couldn't be read without a person knowing about it. Awareness that one is being watched seems to be a key sticking point on both sides of this issue.

If the system is implemented, there are steps you can take to protect your personal data from skimmers.

Wrapping your passport in aluminum foil actually works. It is called a "Faraday Cage," and it's the same thing that protects you from the microwaves as you watch your popcorn pop. The foil blocks electromagnetic waves so a nearby chip reader can't force your passport chip to perk up and say "howdy."

Try it out with your work I.D. card or a toll-booth pass. I wouldn't recommend wrapping your micro-chipped dog in Reynolds Wrap, however. Neighbors might think you were planning a barbecue.

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