At DFW Airport, your face could someday replace your boarding pass

December 7 2018, by Conor Shine

Credit: CC0 Public Domain

On a recent weekday morning, hundreds of passengers lined up at Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport to board Japan Airlines Flight 11 to Tokyo.

After a standard check of boarding passes and passports, passengers were asked to do one more thing before walking down the jet

bridge—pose for a picture.

The facial recognition captures—using tablet-sized monitors with cameras—take a few seconds each and are used to keep record of people exiting the country.

The scene is one from a rapidly approaching biometric future at U.S. airports that could bring facial and fingerprint scanning technologies to points throughout the travel journey, from self-checking a bag and navigating security checkpoints to boarding a plane and renting a car at your final destination.

It's a world that promises increased security and new convenience for passengers that airlines and airports are quickly rushing toward, even as the technology raises a new round of questions about privacy.

DFW is one of many large airports around the world embracing the technology, with a pilot program currently being run at two gates operated by Japan Airlines and British Airways in Terminal D.

DFW plans to bring the facial recognition technology to more than 75 gates in the coming months, where it will be used to track people leaving the country by comparing their facial captures to an existing government database culled from passport or visa photos. This month, the company signed a two-year, $630,000 contract to license biometric software.

For now, the facial screening is predominantly aimed at foreign nationals—U.S. passport holders can opt out—to comply with federal requirements put in place after Sept. 11, 2001, to better track people entering and exiting the country.

But airports, airlines and technology makers see widespread possibilities for biometrics.

DFW is looking into bringing biometric technology into its international arrivals hall to speed up customs lines. Next year, it will pilot a program for a DFW-to-London flight that will give passengers the option to use biometric technologies at as many points along the journey as possible, from booking to their hotel.

The airport's strategy is to leave as much of the decision-making up to passengers about how and when they make use of the technology, said Julio Badin, DFW's senior vice president of customer experience.

"The experience itself will be much more seamless; the customer is now even more in charge of how they want to use it," Badin said. "A simple example would be I don't have to take out my passport, I don't have to take my ticket. ... It really simplifies the things that don't have to be difficult."

A recent study by technology provider SITA found that while only one in five global airlines have major biometrics programs in place, more than half are researching the technology or have tests underway. By 2021, about half expect to have biometrics play a role in the boarding process.

Delta and JetBlue have led the way among U.S. airlines, with Delta beginning tests as far back as 2016. In September, the Atlanta-based carrier announced an end-to-end process at one of the terminals at Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport that covers check-in, luggage drop, the security checkpoint, boarding flights and arrival processing at customs.

American Airlines recently began testing the technology for international departures at Los Angeles International Airport and is looking at other ways to incorporate it, spokesman Ross Feinstein said.

"It takes a lot of collaboration to make this work. ... We want to see how the technology works within our systems," he said. "We're going to have to continue to figure out how we can make the process easier for our customers while enhancing aviation security. ... We also have to maintain the privacy of our passengers."

Passenger privacy is one of a number of legal and technical concerns that biometrics technology will have to address before it becomes widespread.

While airports, airlines and government agencies maintain that protecting passenger data is a top priority, a 2017 report by the Georgetown Law Center on Privacy and Technology raised questions about increasing government surveillance and how accessible the data is to third parties using the technology.

"If the federal government is going to use biometric technologies on American citizens, then three things, as a baseline, should be true," said Harrison Rudolph, who co-authored the report. "Compelling evidence should exist to show biometrics are necessary, the technology should be proven to be accurate, unbiased and privacy protective, and the legal authority should be crystal clear. (The Department of Homeland Security) has come up short on all three."

Concerns about the accuracy and reliability of face-scanning technologies have been raised as well, with a recent audit from the DHS Office of the Inspector General showing that biometric technology was only able to confirm the identity of 85 percent of passengers screened over several months in 2017.

Reasons for that ranged from network connectivity issues to lack of staff and rushed boarding processes, and the report also found the technology performed worse for certain demographics, including younger and older

travelers.

The report commended Customs and Border Protection for the "considerable progress" made, but said results from the 2017 pilot "calls into question" the CBP's ability to further scale the program to full capacity by 2021.

On its website, CBP states that it's "fully committed to meeting existing privacy laws and regulations." Images captured of passengers are only accessible by the CBP and are routinely discarded—12 hours after verification in the case of U.S. citizens and 14 days for noncitizens.

While airlines, airports, federal agencies and consumer advocates continue to sort out these issues, the deployment of biometric technologies continues to pick up pace and is beginning to show the myriad ways it can be used.

In August, facial recognition technology flagged a traveler arriving in Washington, D.C., from Brazil who presented a French passport that wasn't his. The system used software developed by Japanese-company NEC Corp., which has its North American headquarters in Irving and is positioning itself to be a major player in the biometric age.

"It's about helping airports and airlines become more efficient while giving the best travel experience," NEC Corp. of America spokesman John Wise said.