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Experts Say E-Passport Data Can Be Stolen



By Jay Wrolstad
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"RFID technology makes it a lot easier to provide personal information to the authorities, but it comes down to convenience versus privacy," Yankee Group analyst Andrew Jaquith said. He also pointed out that intercepting RFID wireless links is still an issue as well.

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>> A [security](#) expert warned that a flaw in next-generation electronic passports provided in the U.S., UK, and elsewhere, could enable sensitive personal information to be copied by criminals or hackers. The German security authority briefed those attending the Defcon computer conference, using his own passport as an example.

The Associated Press and other media outlets report that Lukas Grunwald demonstrated how data stored on RFID chips embedded in the passports be duplicated and transferred to another chip, which could be used on a bogus passport.

Digital Fingerprint

The chip's vulnerability could pose problems for countries seeking to use radio frequency technology to store and transmit personal information. The U.S. Department of State is currently testing a new type of electronic passport that will use an RFID chip to hold a person's name, birthday, gender, place of birth, dates of passport issuance and expiration, passport number, and even a photo image of the bearer.

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Moreover, the same chip is also expected to host a digital signature that will protect the stored passport data from being altered.

Critics claim that the technology could be misused in ways that would violate a person's right to privacy. RFID potentially could allow unscrupulous individuals to wirelessly "read" the contents of a household's medicine chest, for example, or to track an individual's location without first obtaining his or her consent.

RFID Flaws

The latest potential setback for e-passports is not particularly remarkable, Forrester Research analyst Paul Stamp said. "The fact that you can clone an RFID chip is only a problem at an automated border control post, but there are no plans by any country at this time to do so," he said.

Stamp pointed out that the chips are but one piece of the passport security puzzle, including examination of the document itself by customs officials. "Using a copied RFID chip is like trying to use someone else's passport," he added.

Still, the analyst noted that the Grunwald's discovery reinforces the need to be cautious when storing information on such chips without backup controls to limit access to that data.

"RFID technology makes it a lot easier to provide personal information to the authorities, but it comes down to convenience versus privacy," Yankee Group analyst Andrew Jaquith said. He also pointed out that intercepting RFID wireless links is still an issue as well.

"The security community has expressed its reservations about these e-passports, given the high risk information leakage," said Jaquith. "It might be a good idea to shelve this idea until the problems are addressed."

Stamp suggested that getting countries

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worldwide to accept RFID as the standard will take time, as new controls over information access are developed.

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