

Europe hopes 'antiterrorist' jets can coexist with right to privacy

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PARIS -- Imagine stepping aboard Europe's antiterrorist plane of the future.

At the door, a hand-held electronic nose 30 times more sensitive than a dog's snout sniffs passengers for dangerous chemicals and vapors.

After takeoff, computers monitoring cabin conversations pick up suspicious words in Seat 9B, fingernail-sized video cameras detect nervous facial tics on the passenger in 21F, and a hidden microphone records questionable noises from the passenger in the rear toilet. Buzzers or flashing lights on a computer screen warn the crew and pilot of potential trouble in each spot.

If a hijacker manages to bypass the fingerprint-activated locks on the cockpit door and grabs the controls, an internal computer takes over and diverts the plane from high-rise buildings, a nuclear plant, or any other preprogrammed no-fly zone.

The SAFEE project -- Security of Aircraft in the Future European Environment -- is the first coordinated international effort to create an airplane system capable of thwarting hijackings and terrorist attacks. It is under development in classified laboratories in 11 European countries and Israel. Much of the technology is in advanced stages of development, though systems for accurately analyzing facial expressions remain problematic.

The director of the \$50 million program, Daniel Gaultier, works in a modernist, mirrored building overlooking the Seine River, where entry to his office is controlled by the same kind of fingerprint lock that the plane's cockpit would have. He describes the system -- being developed largely in secret by the European Commission (the European Union's executive arm) and 31 aircraft, avionics, computer and security companies, and university research centers -- as "a last defense against attack" in a post-9/11 world.

The project faces serious opposition. Human rights officials are concerned about passenger privacy, pilot groups are fearful of computers usurping their authority, and airline marketers wonder about the eventual price tag.

"The eavesdropping is incredible," Sophia in't Veld, a Dutch member of the European Parliament, said in a telephone interview from Washington, where she was meeting with members of Congress on antiterrorism and privacy issues. "We have to sacrifice some privacy and some freedom, but people have to have the proper means of redress to defend themselves against unnecessary invasion of privacy or abuses of data by public authorities."

"The trade-off between technology and human rights is a tricky and tough area," Gaultier agreed. "When there's a crisis, everyone will accept it. Six months after the crisis, everyone will forget. You always have to be careful how you deal with passenger rights."

The use of potentially intrusive monitoring systems -- such as those that would record passenger movements and facial expressions and eavesdrop on private conversations and toilet visits -- is a particularly sensitive issue in Europe. Watchdog commissions here have engaged in trans-Atlantic battles over US rules requiring airlines to report personal data about incoming passengers to US authorities.

Testing of most of the technologies in simulators is to begin this fall.

The package of systems found to work is unlikely to be available on commercial aircraft for as long as a decade because most would need to be incorporated into new planes. The cost of retrofitting existing aircraft would be prohibitively high, according to Gaultier. ■