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## Guest editorial: Security vs. privacy is a false choice

*By Torin Monahan*

### Other Views

Since the recent failed terrorist attack on a flight to Detroit, there has been renewed interest in an X-ray screening device that can peer underneath clothing.

The "backscatter" system uses low levels of radiation to scan travelers and give security agents a graphic representation of passengers' bodies. Although Nashville International Airport does not currently use these systems, it may plan to purchase them now, as may most airports throughout the country.

The stated goal of the backscatter system is to detect concealed weapons or objects without subjecting travelers to pat-down searches by security screeners. Of course, many are appalled at the prospect of strangers scrutinizing their naked, if software-"blurred," bodies and feel this constitutes an invasion of privacy far greater than that of a routine search.

Unfortunately, public debate has focused on a false trade-off between security and privacy — to the neglect of important

questions about the increasing role of surveillance in our lives. One should ask whether the systems work as promised, who has access to the data and for how long, the systems' cost, and whether there are better alternatives that don't force a sacrifice of travelers' rights.

While surveillance may increase security or infringe upon privacy, it also commits government agencies to costly financial obligations and subjects people to intensified control. Each of these machines costs about \$190,000, a major investment considering there are roughly 500 commercial airports in the U.S. One could say that no price is too high for security, but this ignores the fact that the would-be attacker, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, did pass through Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport, which is one of the few airports screening passengers with backscatter machines.

## **Rights are overlooked**

We can also learn from the history of flawed security systems paid for by taxpayers. Indeed, the last celebrated passenger screening system — which used "puffer machines" to detect traces of explosives — was suspended a few years back because of frequent mechanical failures, but not until after nearly 100 of the machines were installed at 34 airports.

What each round of airport surveillance has in common is the generous funneling of public funds to private companies, regardless of the technologies' efficacy.

Meanwhile, some Transportation Security Administration screeners receive as little as \$9.32 an hour for a part-time job of 16 hours per week.

Security systems also control people in troubling ways. Airports are now notorious for their surveillance rituals. People line up, remove clothing and shoes, and submit to electronic and physical frisking — all without knowing their rights or the limits of TSA authority.

All of this is part of a larger program to keep people compliant, uneasy and uncertain, ostensibly so that potential terrorists won't be able to discern and exploit points of weakness. Nonetheless, there's something inherently undemocratic about an illegible social space, wherein citizens are kept in the dark about their rights and forced to submit to ever-increasing surveillance.

Ironically, as people become more naked in the name of greater security, their rights become more opaque, hidden behind the veil of flashy new technologies.

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