

# It's a match

by Richard Bray

## Passports to use facial recognition software

IT IS ALMOST A rule that when you want a piece of information to receive as little notice as possible, release it on a Friday – preferably in the summer. Coincidence or not, when the federal government entered the biometric business this year it happened very quietly on Friday, July 14. The Ottawa temperature reached a warm 32 degrees that day, so people could be excused if they missed a notice that appeared on MERX calling for a facial recognition solution (FRS) to be used by Passport Canada.

The FRS is a big project by any standard. Passport Canada wants high volume, high-resolution facial recognition including scanning, storage and retrieval for verified, processed digital images of passport pictures. The passport office is looking at about one million initially, with possibly four million final passport images each year, for five years.

The system could have literally hundreds of users, scattered around the world and across the country. Besides about 100 primary users inside Passport Canada, other offices receive passport applications as well: select locations of Canada Post Corporation, Service Canada and Foreign Affairs Canada consular staff at over 100 missions. In fact,

members of Parliament can receive applications at their constituency offices and for many MPs, helping with passport applications is a common practice. This year, however, as office staff examined each one against tough new standards, many people were disappointed that their passport photographs were rejected for low quality. The proposed facial recognition solution probably requires that level of quality control. To achieve good scans of the photos and for future matching with new photos, photos would need to be of high quality and standard format.

Government biometric projects can be a target for criticism from several directions. Do biometrics actually work in large-scale applications? Will people's privacy be respected? On each of these points, Passport Canada may well avoid the "Great Biometric Controversy" of 2003, when Immigration Minister Denis Coderre called for a debate about a national ID card. He got one. At a Commons committee hearing, acting Privacy Commissioner Robert Marleau said the cost of equipment alone for a national ID card program would be somewhere between \$3 and \$5 billion, and the governments track record of cost overruns and delays with such programs as the firearms registry and other computer systems "should serve as an additional warning of the potentially exorbitant cost of issuing a national ID card to every Canadian."

Passport Canada's biometric project is smaller and more manageable than a national ID program, and much less controversial because the system probably means no additional security risk for passport holders. The FRS will simply match an applicant's new photograph against the previous photograph in its database to make sure it is a picture of the same person. The new image would then replace the previous image.

The 'recognition' part of FRS involves a software scan of the image for 'points.' As Passport Canada media spokesperson Francine Charbonneau said, "The system analyzes your facial features. It measures the number of points between your eye and your cheek, for example."

The passport office is convinced the underlying technology of the FRS is sound.

Charbonneau said, "It is a precise, precise science."

At this time, the FRS initiative is simply an additional way to ensure the identity of a passport applicant, and the technology is not about to show up at Canadian border points. "No other government department would have access to the system," Charbonneau said. "It's not something we're focusing on right now."

The push is on around the world to put some sort of biometric on travel documents, whether it is iris scanning, finger or handprints, or facial recognition. The United States has announced stiff new requirements for passports and other identification at its border points, and even though it will be a struggle to meet the deadlines, the trend is clear – the documents that prove your identity must be more reliable and secure. Biometrics are a way to achieve that.

There are several very real dangers associated with biometric identification systems. They can be adjusted to deliver higher or lower accuracy, and there is always a temptation to loosen the rules to avoid misidentification and keep the line moving.

Ironically, the better a biometric identity system is, the worse the consequences might be. Once we trust them, criminals and terrorists will exploit that trust. US security expert Bruce Schneier never tires of repeating, "The moral is that biometrics work great only if the verifier can verify two things: one, that the biometric came from the person at the time of verification, and two, that the biometric matches the master biometric on file. If the system can't do that, it can't work."

Stockwell Day, the current minister of Public Safety, recently revived the idea of a national ID card. A successful biometric project at Passport Canada could mean a solid foundation for a more ambitious and possibly less controversial national identity system. *MB*

---

*Richard Bray is an Ottawa-based freelance writer and editor specializing in the IT sector. He has been published in magazines and newspapers in Australia, the US and Canada. Before freelancing, he worked as a producer, reporter and senior writer for CBC in Toronto.*

