Trends. Aviation Security: Thinking About CAPPS, CAPPS II, and Beyond

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Abstract: This Trends article discusses computer assisted passenger prescreening systems (CAPPS) and aviation security.

In aviation security, computer assisted passenger prescreening systems (CAPPS) are ultimately intended to predict human behavior—viz., engaging in security violations of serious enough consequence to merit the development of CAPPS. The public discourse on CAPPS largely focuses on privacy concerns. While a crucial issue within a representative democracy or other political entity that values what traditionally has been conceived as the classical philosophy of liberalism, privacy should not crowd out the public discourse market to the disadvantage of CAPPS accuracy.

However, CAPPS accuracy is already at a disadvantage because too specific a discourse can compromise CAPPS accuracy. For example, publicly addressing the contents and merits of putative CAPPS criteria, such as how a ticket is purchased; whether countries with active terrorism activities and support have been visited; and whether community rootedness can be demonstrated through database searches activated by a passenger’s name, address, date of birth, and phone number allow operators from sophisticated terrorist networks and criminal organizations to plan to look like they do not present a significant security risk. Yet, a strong case can be made that free and open discussion and refereed analysis often yield superior applied scientific products than the close-holdness of the classified world.