



American survey approves fingerprinting as an identification measure

Contrary to common belief, the use of fingerprints for personal identification is not regarded as improper. This is, at least, how the American public perceive the application of this biometric technique. A survey conducted by Professor Alan Westin on public attitudes towards uses of finger imaging technology reveals that most Americans would be comfortable with the process.

The requirement for more secure personal identification technologies has led to the development of biometric techniques (PL&B Sep. '96 p.29 and Oct. '97 pp.23-27). Biometric identifiers include, among others, retinal scans and finger imaging. The modern process of taking fingerprints could not be further away from ink and paper. After the photographic scanning of the fingertip, a digitised image is recorded in a computer database. A positive match between the fingerprint of the person who is being identified, and the previously recorded image in the authentication database, confirms the identification.

The method enhances security, but is it morally acceptable in terms of individual liberty and privacy? This question was asked by the US-based National Registry Inc.(NRI), which provides finger image technology for public and private sector organisations.

The company commissioned Professor Alan Westin to study public attitudes in the US towards uses of finger imaging technology for different identification and authentication processes. The survey, conducted in July 1996, is based on 1,011 respondents, a representative sample of US adults.

Previous experiences positive

More than half of the respondents had been fingerprinted at some time in the past, and had a positive conception of the method. The respondents had had their fingerprints taken for various identification purposes: military service, applying for a job, government licence etc. Most respondents thought that fingerprinting had been appropriate.

High level of support for finger scans

The survey described the new fingerprinting method and possible uses, such as verification of identity to qualify for a government benefit. Seventy-five per cent of respondents thought that they would be comfortable with the system. When asked for their opinion on possible use of fingerprinting to verify the identity of persons using credit cards for major purchases, cashing large personal cheques or entering high-security areas, two thirds of the respondents felt that finger imaging was justified in these situations.

The same attitude applied to checks on job applicants in the police force or banking. Ninety-three per cent of respondents supported the use of finger imaging to check the identity of potential new police officers.

No association with criminal behaviour

Fingerprinting is sometimes regarded as a controversial process because its image is connected with criminal investigations. Most of the interviewees saw finger imaging as a practical and easy-to-use process which helps to fight fraud.

It may have been assumed that minority racial or ethnic groups would have more concern over the use of fingerprinting. This was, however, not the case. Support was found to be at the same level as for the majority of respondents.

The public supports privacy principles

The interviewees were asked how important it would be for them that fair information practices be followed. The basic fair information practices described were regarded as important by more than 90% of the respondents.

Until now, there has been very little information on how Americans regard fingerprinting and its uses. Based on this survey, the opinion of the general public is very positive. Even if the margin of error of plus or minus 3% is taken into account, the results are encouraging for advocates of finger imaging identification methods.

Professor Alan Westin is one of the world's leading experts on privacy and publisher of *Privacy & American Business*. This survey was the subject of a presentation at its conference in October, 1997, in Washington DC. The survey is available on the Internet at www.nrid.com