



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on August 27, 2010

Government's Peep Show Takes to the Road

As bad as the Transportation Security Administration's full-body scanners are, at least they are avoidable simply by not flying. Opting to drive or ride a bus, however, no longer guarantees that one will not be subject to similar scans. That innocent-looking delivery van cruising through the neighborhood may very well be a mobile version of the TSA's x-ray vision.



Andy Greenberg, blogging for *Forbes*, [writes](#): "American Science & Engineering, a company based in Billerica, Massachusetts, has sold U.S. and foreign government agencies more than 500 backscatter x-ray scanners mounted in vans that can be driven past neighboring vehicles to see their contents, Joe Reiss, a vice president of marketing at the company[,] told me in an interview. While the biggest buyer of AS&E's machines over the last seven years has been the Department of Defense operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, Reiss says law enforcement agencies have also deployed the vans to search for vehicle-based bombs in the U.S."

The vans, says Greenberg, "bounce a narrow stream of x-rays off and through nearby objects, and read which ones come back. Absorbed rays indicate dense material such as steel. Scattered rays indicate less-dense objects that can include explosives, drugs, or human bodies. That capability makes them powerful tools for security, law enforcement, and border control."

Truly, what could be more powerful than x-ray vision? It's certainly helped Superman out of many a jam. It also helps get government agents out of that sticky wicket called the Constitution, which requires them to get a warrant before searching people's homes, persons, and effects. With AS&E's [vans](#), drive-by snooping is the order of the day. (For G-men who prefer to spy from the safety of their offices, the vans also operate in stationary mode, scanning vehicles that pass by and sending the images to a remote location.)

While Reiss and the company's website both emphasize the vans' ability to detect bombs (including "dirty bombs and nuclear WMD," says the website), they also point to less benign uses for the scanners. The website notes that the machines can also be used to detect contraband including "illegal drugs" and "trade fraud items, such as alcohol, tobacco, and other legal goods smuggled to evade duties." Thus, in addition to all the destruction of liberty that has already taken place in pursuit of such victimless crimes, we will now have government agents roaming our streets, surreptitiously searching



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our vehicles (and perhaps homes) for evidence. Who knows what other “contraband” they might locate and decide to confiscate? How about a pack of cigarettes in a teenager’s glove compartment — or a box of donuts in an obese person’s front seat?

Then there is the fact that the scanners, while not providing images as detailed as those in airports, nevertheless do reveal what is under a person’s clothing. Reiss is unmoved, telling Greenberg, “From a privacy standpoint, I’m hard-pressed to see what the concern or objection could be.”

Marc Rotenberg of the Electronic Privacy Information Center, which is suing to stop the deployment of the TSA’s scanners, disagrees, saying that “it’s one of the most intrusive technologies conceivable” and potentially violates the Fourth Amendment. Furthermore, writes Greenberg, “Even airport scans are typically used only as a secondary security measure, [Rotenberg] points out. ‘If the scans can only be used in exceptional cases in airports, the idea that they can be used routinely on city streets is a very hard argument to make.’”

Like the TSA’s scanners, the x-ray vans also have the ability to store images, and Reiss (unlike the TSA) does not deny that they do so. In fact, he says that his customers sometimes “need to save images for evidentiary reasons,” so his machines are equipped with that capability.

On top of the privacy and constitutional concerns are the potential health concerns. [Some scientists](#) have expressed the opinion that the amount of radiation emitted by airport scanners could be detrimental to some of those subjected to it, though, again, it is at least possible (for now) to avoid these either by not flying or by requesting a pat-down at an airport. While the level of radiation emitted by the AS&E vans is lower, according to Reiss, it could still be a concern for some people, especially since there is no way to avoid it (unless one is going to wear a lead suit 24 hours a day) or even to know one has been subjected to it.

Of course, neither the safety nor the privacy of ordinary citizens worries the government much. Such things don’t seem to worry AS&E to any great extent either, although the privacy of the snoops who have bought its vans is of paramount importance. “The company won’t reveal just which law enforcement agencies, organizations within the DHS, or foreign governments have purchased the equipment,” says Greenberg, who adds that “Reiss says AS&E has customers on ‘all continents except Antarctica.’” Until the company comes up with a snowmobile version, penguins’ privacy is assured.

Americans, Afghans, Iraqis, and unknown others are not so fortunate. The U.S. government makes a fetish of secrecy, but average people are allowed to have no secrets whatsoever. Although *Nineteen Eighty-Four* may have seemed like an impossibility 62 years ago, these days Big Brother has nothing on Uncle Sam.

Thumbnail photo at top: from video (above) promoting backscatter van



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