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Research at UO advances bomb detection

■ **STUDY:** Two physicists are using neutrons to get a better picture of the contents of passenger luggage

By April Carmichael
Freelance Reporter

Down in the basement of the Volcanology Building on Campus, amongst auditory chaos, a group of researchers work on techniques that may eventually save thousands of lives.

In the wake of the TWA Flight 800 crash, concerns have been raised about terrorism and aircraft safety. Answers to such questions may be discovered by Jack Overley and Harlan Lefevre, two physicists who, for the past four and a half years, have been diligently pursuing a workable bomb detection system.

Funded by the Federal Aviation Administration, the researchers have been experimenting with neutrons to locate bombs in airplane luggage. They shine a stream of neutrons through a suitcase, and the detectors in place behind the suitcase then register if the neutrons reach the detectors and how quickly that happens.

"The detectors, by using the neutrons, get a chemical analysis of the inside of the suitcase. It is not, however, sensitive to compounds, just elements," said Overley.

The detectors' data is then fed into a computer, which presents a visual image of the contents of the suitcase, utilizing shading to indicate the likelihood of explosive materials. The researchers then have to make sense of the information.



Research associate Robert Schofield (left) and Alex Brown prepare the bomb detection device for a test.

"It is like candling an egg, only we use neutrons instead of light," Lefevre says. "Explosives show up different from other items in a suitcase."

The basic principle of the application of nuclear physics to research such as this began 10 to 12 years ago, according to Overley.

Approximately six years ago, Lefevre and Overley wrote to the FAA to apply for funding to employ the technique in the identification of explosives. They received financing two years later.

Overley has been working in the field of nuclear physics for over 40 years and has been with this program since day one. "Theoretically, this technique shows as much promise as any other technique out there."

The procedure is still far from

perfect, though. "At present, it is slow," admitted Overley. "It takes twenty to thirty minutes to examine each suitcase. If it is ever going to be practical, we need to get it several hundred times faster."

The delay is due to the fact that only one strip of suitcase can be examined at a time. Each strip is 1 1/4 inches wide and needs to be scanned for one and a half minutes.

However, despite the time problems, the system has had very positive results so far. "Last summer we ran a series of tests using approximately 10 different explosives and 50 suitcases," Overley said.

"90% of the explosive situations were detected. The false alarm rate was only 2%. And we've improved on the technique since last summer," he explained.

"How well we identify explosives really depends on how big the bomb is, and what shape it is. The less there is, the harder it is to find."

The recent surge of interest in the bomb detection system is due mainly to the crash of the July 17 TWA flight that killed 230 people, according to Overley, but he maintains that the program could survive without such publicity.

"The FAA has been directed to pursue anything that would increase airport security."

At the same time, however, the TWA crash did provide motivation for their work. On the same day of the TWA explosion, Overley's wife flew to Paris.

"That was just too close to home," he said. "I came to work the next day with a remarkable sense of purpose."

Drivers' personal data now on information super-highway

■ **INTERNET:** A computer consultant has posted information on all drivers whose vehicles have been licensed in Oregon

The Associated Press

If you own a vehicle licensed in Oregon, your name and address have been listed on the Internet; a move one state official called a nationwide first.

But the state didn't do it.

It's the work of Aaron Nabil-Eastlund, a 30-year-old computer consultant from Aloha who goes by the professional name Nabil.

Nabil said he spent \$222 for the vehicle license information and put it on the Internet on Friday. Since then, there have been at least 21,000 queries to that World Wide Web page, he said.

"The reason I did it is that I wanted to remove some of the cloak of anonymity that drivers have," Nabil said. "People drive

under the cloak of anonymity, and that makes them drive like maniacs."

He said he hopes bad drivers will improve their ways because they know that anyone can find out who they are and where they live.

"I understand that people don't want this information available. But by being a driver, they participate in a community," he said.

Actually, the information already is public record. But until Nabil's move, it required individual requests through the division or through contracts routinely made by, among others, law firms, insurance companies and marketers.

The cost is \$4 for each request by citizens, who must personally visit an office of the Driver and Motor Vehicles Service Division.

The division also has accounts with about 4,000 businesses and agencies that can obtain information by phone for \$2.50 a request.

State officials said they started

getting complaints almost the instant Nabil made the records available on the Internet. However, they say Oregon's public records laws permit Nabil to post the information.

"We're having a hard time staying in the middle," said Bill Seely, DMV's information services manager. "It doesn't feel good trying to explain to our customers why it is the way it is without sounding like we're in support of it."

Seely said Oregonians who want to restrict vehicle information should contact legislators about changing the laws.

Nabil's information is organized so a person can type in a vehicle license number and find the home address of the owners and the name of the financial institution that provided a loan for the vehicle.

Nabil said he could have provided more information. Hypothetically, he could have listed the names of all young women who own a BMW and live in northwest Portland. But he said such infor-

mation could be a threat to someone's safety.

Seely said he knows of no other state in which motor vehicle information has been placed on the Internet. Some states, including Washington and California, have more restrictive laws than Oregon about the release of such information.

California tightened its laws in response to the highly publicized 1989 murder of actress Rebecca Schaeffer, formerly of Portland. She was killed by a deranged fan who got the address for her Los Angeles apartment from motor vehicle records.

Schaeffer's father, Benson Schaeffer of Portland, said Tuesday night that the appearance of such records on the Internet is "horrendous."

"The use of this information by people who are dangerous could lead to unfortunate outcomes," he said. "Unfortunately, I know that from personal experience."

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