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Passport security hacking stuns conference

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HI-TECH biometric passports, touted as the latest advance in national security, can be hacked into and their data copied on to fakes.

Hackers have shown a security conference in Las Vegas how it is possible to clone passports that contain information such as fingerprints, facial scans and iris patterns.

Radio frequency identification technology, referred to as RFID, used in cash cards and passports could be copied, blocked or imitated, said Melanie Rieback, a privacy researcher at Vrije University in the Netherlands.

Data can be transferred on to blank chips, which can then be implanted into fake passports.

Ms Rieback demonstrated a device she and university colleagues built to hijack the RFID signals manufacturers have touted as unreadable by anything other than proprietary scanners.

Since March, anyone applying for a British passport has been issued with a biometric version, which contains physical identification information. Smart chips have been also crafted into German passports and are being put into US passports.

"I spend most of my time making the RFID industry's life miserable," said Ms Rieback, a doctorate student.

"I am not anti-RFID. It has the potential to make people's lives easier, but it needs to be used responsibly."

Also speaking at the Defcon security conference in Las Vegas, Lukas Grunwald, a consultant with a German security company, said he had discovered a method for cloning the information stored in the new passports.

"The whole passport design is totally brain damaged," Mr Grunwald said. "From my point of view, all of these (biometric) passports are a huge waste of money -- they're not increasing security at all."

Mr Grunwald said his discovery was made within two weeks of first attempting to copy the data, and the equipment used cost \$US200. It is believed the hacking principle could be applied to any new passport issued in Britain, the US and other countries.

Britain's Home Office said yesterday that the British biometric passport was one of the most secure in the world, and while it might be possible to copy the chip data it was not possible to modify or manipulate any of the data.

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