

Government Snooping Run Amok - Now Your License Plate Is Being Used to Track You

July 18, 2013 - If you think that it's only the NSA trying to gather information about your daily activities, think again. Yes, the NSA is gathering information on every cell phone call you make or receive. But on top of that, there is now a network of cameras nationwide that is being used to log license plates. Once photographed, the information is being stored in databases and there are virtually no rules about who the information can be shared with. This information was revealed in a new report from the ACLU titled, *You Are Being Tracked*. And as if this type of database isn't a big enough privacy intrusion, there is a move afoot in the California state legislature to introduce digital license plates. These would presumably have tracking capabilities built into them.

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This isn't the first time we've written about camera networks. Last year, we told readers about a program called TrapWire which is being run by a company named Stratfor. TrapWire collects pictures of people taken by security cameras and then uses facial recognition software to map the images. Once that process has been completed, the company can find you whenever you appear in another picture that they take. All of the pictures and the information associated with them are apparently being stored in a centralized database. Current privacy laws allow that information to be shared with just about anyone who wants access to it.

The ACLU report that just came out details a similar tracking effort; this time for license plates. Again, this information is being stored in various databases, with few restrictions on whom it can be shared with or sold to.

How long do you think it will take for someone to start trying to merge the license plate data with a facial recognition

database - whether it belongs to Stratfor or some other entity?

Police agencies around the country love these kinds of databases. After all, they can be used to solve crimes and track criminals. But police agencies do have legal limitations on the surveillance that they can conduct (apparently the NSA is an exception to that rule). The same can't be said for private companies. If you are out in public, it is perfectly ok for someone to take your picture, or a picture of your license plate. And since any company doing this is not acting with any policing authority, it is perfectly legal for them to sell this information to the police.

But it isn't just the police that have an interest in this type of data. Attorneys for divorcing couples or employers who want to monitor employees that work outside the office may also want access to it. And you don't need much imagination to come up with several scenarios that would allow criminals to use this information. Since large online databases are involved, hacking those databases is almost inevitable. The privacy implications are staggering.

The use of the license plate databases doesn't appear to be a liberal or conservative issue either. The ACLU now has an interactive map with details about how this data is being used in various jurisdictions. That map shows that this is going on around the country and isn't confined by political boundaries.

As disturbing as the camera networks appear to be, they are not the end of the story. The California State Legislature is considering legislation that would make California the very first state to have digital license plates. These plates would look similar to an iPad and would also be able to function with the state's Easy Pass system for tolls.

According to the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), the plates could be used to track the movements of people. Their concern is that even though the Supreme Court has ruled that police need a warrant to place a GPS device on a car, if the state starts using GPS in its license plates the Supreme Court ruling will be meaningless. Since the GPS device would already be on the car, police could use a simple subpoena to access data. No warrant required.

ACCESS is urging congress and the states to regulate this type of data collection. And we oppose any attempt to implement state sanctioned digital tracking technology that would be forced on the general public.

by Jim Malmberg

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