

Cars Could Be the Newest Spies

July 5, 2022 - For several years now, automobiles have been creating privacy issues for drivers. They are now loaded with computer chips and they monitor everything from speed to braking habits. With the advent of GPS, they know where you are going and where you have been. And with built-in Bluetooth, a lot of them have records of the phone calls you make and complete copies of your contacts. Anyone who searches your car is probably going to be able to reconstruct a large portion of your life. For those of us who are privacy conscious, all of the info that cars collect is problematic. But it isn't just drivers who are at risk, and governments have begun to take notice.

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Cars have become a lot more sophisticated recently. Teslas are a very good example of this. They are packed with things like proximity sensors and cameras. That hasn't escaped notice in China.

In fact, the Chinese government has apparently come to the conclusion that Teslas pose a national security issue. They are now banned from the streets of Beidaihe, a Chinese resort town, for the next two months because of a meeting of Communist Party officials taking place there. China is concerned that Tesla could cooperate with the US Government and provide access to camera and other data that the cars could be collecting.

Tesla certainly isn't the only company with these capabilities but in China, it is currently considered to be the highest risk. That's largely because of Elon Musk's involvement in the firm.

When Russia invaded the Ukraine earlier this year, they tried to knock out the country's communications network. Specifically, they wanted to shut down the internet. Musk thwarted that plan. He began to supply the Ukrainian government with Starlink access points. For those of you who are unfamiliar with Starlink, it is a satellite communications network that works around the globe, and it is one of Musk's other ventures. As a result of Musk's efforts, the internet continues to function throughout Ukraine. All one needs is a Starlink access point.

The Chinese government has been so concerned about Starlink it recently called for the country to come up with a plan to destroy it. They view it as a national security threat that could easily be used by the United States to deliver weapons if China ever had the inclination to destroy our GPS satellites. Now, they apparently view Teslas in the same light. And they may not be incorrect.

This brings up a real question. If Teslas are a national security threat to China, are Chinese products a national security threat to the United States and other Western governments? The obvious answer is, "Yes." Dealing with that issue though is a little more complex. Just ask Elon Musk.

Tesla has a large factory in China that is turning out its cars. The same can be said of Apple and many other well-known companies. In order to decouple our economies, Western countries need to make clear that they no longer find Chinese products acceptable. There are a number of ways to go about this. They include things like incentives to move facilities. But a less costly approach would be to set a time line for closing their markets to Chinese made goods. And at the same time, they should make it illegal for companies headquartered in the west to transfer technology to China.

There really is no long-term benefit to the United States or other Western democracies in doing business with China. Yes, you may be able to purchase a cheap television tomorrow, but how does that really benefit the US when all of the jobs making that TV are in China? And the TV may actually be spying on you to boot.

It isn't just a privacy matter. It's now a matter of national security too. And I suppose we should thank the Chinese Communist Party for pointing that out.

by Jim Malmberg

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