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Who's Watching?

By ERIC PETERS



Big Brother will be watching you for sure by 2008 -- the year a proposed requirement that Event Data Recorders (EDRs) become mandatory standard equipment in all new cars and trucks will become law unless public outrage puts the kibosh on it somehow.

EDRs are "black boxes" -- just like airplanes have. They can record a wide variety of things -- including how fast you drive and whether you "buckle-up for safety." The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) wants EDRs to be installed in every new vehicle beginning with model year 2008 -- on the theory that the information will help crash investigators more accurately determine the hows and whys of accidents.

But EDRs could -- and likely will be -- used for other purposes as well.

Tied into GPS navigation computers, EDRs could give interested parties the ability to take automated ticketing to the next level. Since the data recorders can continuously monitor most of the operating parameters of a vehicle as it travels -- and the GPS unit can precisely locate the vehicle in "real time," wherever it happens to be at any given moment -- any and all incidents of "speeding" could be immediately detected and a piece of paying paper issued to the offender faster than he could tap the brake. That's even if he knew he was in the crosshairs, which of course he

wouldn't. Probably they'll just erect an electronic debiting system of some sort that ties directly into your checking account -- since the paperwork could not keep up with the massive uptick in fines that would be generated.

What Do You Think?



Are you for or against a bla

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If you think this is just a dark-minded paranoiac vision, think again. Rental car companies have already deployed a very similar system of onboard electronic monitoring to identify customers who dare to drive faster than the posted limit -- and automatically tap them with a "surcharge" for their scofflaw ways. While this inventive form of "revenue enhancement" was challenged and subsequently batted down by the courts, the technology continues to be honed -- and quietly put into service.

Already, 15-20 percent of all the cars and trucks in service have EDRs; most of these are General Motors vehicles. GM has been installing "black boxes" in its new cars and trucks since about 1996 as part of the Supplemental Restraint (air bag) system. Within a few years, as many as 90 percent of all new motor vehicles will be equipped with EDRs, according to government estimates -- whether the requirement NHTSA is pushing actually becomes law or not.

The automakers are just as eager to keep tabs on us as the government -- in part to keep the shyster lawyers who have been so successfully digging into their deep pockets at bay. EDRs would provide irrefutable evidence of high-speed driving, for example -- or make it impossible for a person injured in a crash to deny he wasn't wearing a seat belt.

Insurance companies will launch "safety" campaigns urging that "we use available technology" to identify "unsafe" drivers -- and who will be able to argue against that? Everyone knows that speeding is against the law -- and if you aren't breaking the law, what have you got to worry about?

It's all for our own good.

But if you get edgy thinking about the government -- and our friends in corporate America -- being able to monitor where we go and how we go whenever they feel like checking in on us, take the time to write a "Thanks, but no thanks" letter to NHTSA at <http://dms.dot.gov/>

Talk About It

Should we have Event Data Recorders (Black Boxes) in our cars? Tell us what you think.

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