

Car manufacturers are tracking and spying on tens of millions of US cars



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Millions of new cars sold in the US and Europe are "connected," having some mechanism for exchanging data with their manufacturers after the cars are sold; these cars stream or batch-upload location data and other telemetry to their manufacturers, who argue that they are allowed to do virtually anything they want with this data, thanks to the "explicit consent" of the car owners -- who signed a lengthy contract at purchase time that contained a vague and misleading clause deep in its fine-print.

Car manufacturers are mostly warehousing this data (leaving it vulnerable to leaks and breaches, search-warrants, government hacking and unethical employee snooping), and can't articulate why they're saving it or how they use it.

Much of this data ends up in "marketplaces" where data-sets from multiple auto-makers are merged, made uniform, and given identifiers that allow them to be cross-referenced with the [massive corporate data-sets that already exist](#), and then offered on the open market to any bidder.

After being asked on multiple occasions what the company does with collected data, Natalie Kumaratne, a Honda spokeswoman, said that the company "cannot provide specifics at this time." Kumaratne instead sent a copy of an owner's manual for a Honda Clarity that notes that the vehicle is equipped with multiple monitoring systems that transmit data at a rate determined by Honda.

[Big Brother on wheels: Why your car company may know more about you than your spouse.](#)

[Peter Holley/Washington Post]

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September when it quietly changed contract terminology and started tracking customers with the intent of selling information about their driving habits. OnStar reversed the policy under pressure from consumers and Congress. Recently, insurance companies Progressive and

State Farm have begun testing tracking systems, which policyholders plug into their OBD-II port. The systems record data on driving habits, and in exchange customers can potentially get lower insurance premiums, but any data collected belongs to the insurer (including any crash data).

What can you do about it? If you're a new-car buyer, not much. But pay close attention to the language of the user agreement for any telematics service if you don't like what you read, opt out of the service. With EDRs, it's enough simply to know your rights. The law is still playing catch-up to the technology, but at this point you do not have to surrender the EDR data to the police without probable cause, a warrant, or a subpoena.

Got a car problem?

Ask Ben about it. Send your questions to pmautoclinic@hearst.com or over Twitter at twitter.com/PopMechAuto. While we cannot answer questions individually, problems of general interest will be discussed in the column.