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MEDIA RELEASE

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Mass Surveillance of Motor Vehicles

There is enormous risk that Automated Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) will be implemented as a tool of mass surveillance.

The Australian Privacy Foundation (APF) welcomed aspects of the Queensland Parliamentary Report released on 11 September, but expressed serious disappointment that the document's key Recommendation is highly ambiguous.

The Report of the Travelsafe Committee was prepared following exemplary public hearings. It recognises the potential benefits of the technology and the serious impact it could have on privacy, and adopts a balanced and measured approach to its Recommendations.

It is the only serious consideration yet to be given to ANPR by elected representatives.

The Report has two major defects, however.

1. The Report fails to recommend the appropriate form of technology ('blacklist-in-camera').
2. The key Recommendation is ambiguous. It says only that:

"Data relating to vehicles not found to be committing an offence shall be cleansed nightly from devices to minimise the possibility of security breaches"

The Committee Chair has confirmed to the APF in writing that the intention of that Recommendation is that:

"Data relating to vehicles not found to be committing A TRAFFIC offence shall be cleansed nightly from ALL devices OF ANY KIND, INCLUDING ALL DATABASES, to minimise the possibility of security breaches"

APF's Chair, Roger Clarke, said "It is vital that all agencies throughout Australia understand that ANPR as currently practised is simply mass surveillance, and is a completely unacceptable imposition on Australian society".

Queensland Parliamentary Travelsafe Committee Report on ANPR:

<http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/view/committees/documents/TSAFE/reports/TSR51.pdf>

APF Policy re ANPR:

<http://www.privacy.org.au/Papers/ANPR-0803.html>

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Automated Number Plate Recognition (ANPR)

APF BACKGROUNDER

Introduction

Automated Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) uses digital cameras and software similar to Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software to extract the registration data of vehicles.

This can be done by pointing the camera at parked cars, but is most commonly done by deploying the camera adjacent to a road, and monitoring passing traffic.

The technology is related to that used for 'speed cameras' and 'red light cameras', but differs in some ways from it. Variants have been used in Australia since the 1980s, primarily for heavy vehicle traffic.

Appropriate Use of ANPR

ANPR has demonstrable benefits in the enforcement of traffic administration law, particularly the detection of vehicles whose registration is not up to date, but possibly also of stolen vehicles, and vehicles associated with a crime or with an individual for whom a warrant is outstanding.

Achieving actual benefits is heavily dependent on investment in infrastructure, in databases of high quality, and in support resources (particularly enough policemen deployed so as to intercept suspect vehicles). Considerable risks are involved, both to law enforcement officers and the public.

The appropriate form of ANPR technology to support this approach is usefully described as '**blacklist in camera**' design. This involves:

- release from the on-site camera of only those registration numbers that reliably match to an entry in an up-to-date 'blacklist' of registration plates that are being sought
- certified non-accessibility and non-recording of data under any other circumstances
- substantial controls over 'blacklists', data quality, and blacklist transmission security

Mass Surveillance Use of ANPR

Unfortunately, ANPR is commonly applied in a way that is not appropriate. It involves uploading of all data that is gathered by cameras, into a central location. This creates a large set of data containing vehicle identities, times and places. That database can be used to generate all manner of suspicions, some of which may be warranted, but most of which are not.

Mass surveillance of people's movements has never previously been conducted in free nations. The approach championed by technology providers, law enforcement agencies and Crimtrac would have been appropriate in East Germany under the Stasi, but is emphatically not appropriate in Australia.

Conclusions

National security extremism has held sway in Australia since 12 September 2001. But it is gradually losing its power, and pressure is growing for rollback of the many unjustified violations of human rights.

Currently, ANPR is one of the most crucial aspects of the battle to avoid a surveillance society.

Law enforcement agencies are seeking to implement ANPR in such a way that it gathers large amounts of data about vehicle locations, irrespective of whether reasonable grounds for suspicion exist about the activities of their occupants. Crimtrac is actively seeking to play the role of databank operator, to consolidate observations nationally. This nationally-coordinated movement must be defeated.