

Big Brother's Watching

By Reg P. Wydeven
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Technology is a wonderful thing. Advances in medical treatment and care have given us longer, healthier lives. Innovations in automobile safety have lowered the number of accidents and reduced the severity of injuries and fatalities from accidents.

Global positioning systems have even helped people with horrible senses of direction, like me find where they need to go. While they help people do the finding, they also help people be found.

Take, for example, the two young men who were arrested recently for burglarizing several homes in the Fox Valley. The pair allegedly broke into numerous homes and stole televisions, iPods, cash, alcohol and other valuables.

As a result of their investigation, the Calumet County Sheriff's Department was able to place a GPS device on one of the suspect's vehicles while it was parked on public property. The Sheriff's Department used this legal tactic to follow the vehicle to the location of a home they were currently burglarizing.

Caught red-handed, the suspects confessed to the prior break-ins and the authorities even recovered some of the stolen items in one of their homes. Because of the confessions, Outagamie County also plans on charging the suspects.

Tracking burglars isn't the only way the government is using GPS devices. In Indiana, six employees of the Fort Wayne-Allen County Health Department were fired after GPS devices revealed they were running personal errands while on the job.

Likewise, the town of Islip, New York, had more than 600 GPS tracking units installed on government cars to ensure their employees aren't running to the store, the gym or home while they're on the clock. Officials say the GPS devices have saved 14,000 gallons of gas in the first three months of being installed.

More and more state, county and municipal offices are looking to GPS devices to save resources and funds as operating budgets are being cut. The City of Denver implemented GPS devices and as a result, 5,000 fewer miles were driven than the unequipped fleet had during the same period the year before.

In response, employees and labor unions are complaining the tracking equipment is too intrusive and violates their right to privacy. In fact, the Teamsters are attempting to negotiate more contracts that protect their members from being spied on or punished as a result of the devices.

Some clever employees have addressed the issue on their own. One industrial snowplow driver in Boston hid his GPS device in a snow bank while he used the city's truck to do some private plowing.

City officials in Hoboken, New Jersey didn't need GPS devices to track the whereabouts of its SWAT team. Bill Bergin, the newly appointed Public Safety Director, disbanded the team after pictures surfaced of waitresses at an Alabama Hooters posing with guns, sprawled on top of police vehicles and embracing officers.

The pictures were taken in 2005 as the officers were returning from a relief mission for victims of Hurricane Katrina. Members of the SWAT team remain on the force and will continue with normal police work, however, the SWAT commander, Lt. Angelo Andriani, was ordered to take desk duty.

A desk job is the least of Adriani's worries. He is also being sued by several Latino officers for discrimination, as they accuse him of being a white supremacist.

It may be troubling that the government is spying, but at least it's mostly spying on itself.

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