

Big Brother makes our rational choices less rational

Chris Warner, Executive Editor



While writing my February 2013 column about EDRs (event data recorders, AKA “black boxes”), I came across an article on the same topic (<http://bit.ly/12YX4Fe> [1]) by one of my colleagues. She commented on the reservations I share with many others about the use of the data derived from the black boxes.

She asks, “What is contemporary privacy”, alluding to social media and the information that our mobile devices collect, particularly when using navigation applications. “Before people want to start questioning whether or not their privacy is being invaded,” she continues, “they need to make sure they are not plastering their private information all over the Internet for everyone else to see.”

The author suggests that since our smart phones and mobile devices are already collecting data about us, particularly data that can track our movements, laws requiring EDR data collection on all automobiles are necessary because the technology may help reduce accidents in the future. If we’re already halfway down the slippery slope of government intrusion, at least we’ll have better physical safety as we drive.

But I’m not here to knock my colleague. She’s doing exactly what I have done in my recent columns, and she’s doing what countless consumers do whenever they decide to buy a personal electronics device or even when they seek medical help. She is making a rational choice -- the type of decision one makes when they must weigh the cost versus the benefit.

Choosing whether to use a device or conduct any business online is really no choice at all. To function in today’s society, computers (even those in our cars), internet use, and social media presence are compulsory (just try to get a job in marketing, for instance, without being immersed in social media). The same goes for our cars. If I don’t want to work within walking distance of my home, the environmental impacts from the internal combustion engine and (now) the potential privacy

Big Brother makes our rational choices less rational

Published on Electronic Component News (<http://www.ecnmag.com>)

intrusions resulting from a black box are minor considerations when I choose to drive a car.

When we need immediate medical help, do we really worry where our medical records will go? Our jobs, our family, and our lives depend on the internet and connected devices, and the rational choice is an easy one: Rely on our computers – whatever form they may be – and go with the flow. All while whistling past the graveyard as our personal information is packaged and sold to the highest bidder, and government agencies such as the NHTSA demand we put more information out there, telling us “it’s for your safety, so you can trust us.”

I cringe when I hear someone with a stake in our personal data insist that people freely put so much information out there because they “crave a better experience.” I crave to get the job done, but I don’t want my experience to include my data being sold, passed around, stolen, or used against me. And I don’t believe that consumers crave first and foremost to hand personal data off to another party and whatever benefit the product or technology offers in return would simply be a bonus. That’s what marketers and government officials want us to believe. Nobody acknowledges that data collection is an unfortunate means to an end – a rational choice we would rather not have to make.

This is also what tech editors face when we write a column or blog about new technology. While new technologies either solve a problem, can be applied toward solving a problem, or simply have a number of exciting possibilities, features, and benefits, the potential for misuse or intrusion of data privacy and government overreach is both a major concern and a regrettable afterthought. It’s our own rational choice – spread the news about some exciting technology, or create a tone of doom and gloom with warnings about Big Brother.

Source URL (retrieved on 12/20/2014 - 11:46am):

<http://www.ecnmag.com/articles/2013/02/big-brother-makes-our-rational-choices-less-rational>

Links:

[1] <http://bit.ly/12YX4Fe>