

Chapter 10

Global Tracking Systems in the Australian Interstate Trucking Industry

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ABSTRACT

Technology, trucking, and the surveillance of workers in the workplace: helpful or a hindrance? Technological advances are produced by the creative ideas individuals: these ideas then become selling items in their own right. Do tracking devices effectively regulate traffic breaches and criminality within the trucking industry? The data collection was conducted in the field while the authors rode as a passenger with truck drivers on long-haul trips. The complexities of tracking systems became more apparent as the authors listened to the men and placed their narratives in a broader context for a broader audience. The results of the work indicated that the Global Positioning System (GPS) has a role in the management of the industry as a logistics tool, but that there are limitations to the technology. The drivers use the devices and also feel the oppressive oversight when managers use the data as a disciplinary tool.

INTRODUCTION

Rounded out, it resembled a tiny earth, because its hinged wires traced the same pattern of intersecting circles that I had seen on the globe in my schoolroom—the thin black lines of latitude and longitude (Sobel, 1996, p.1).

GPS is technology that provides accurate satellite navigation and thus, accurate time sheets. This “accuracy” may be affected by weather, distance, buildings and satellite failure. The aim is to reduce operational and compliance costs and improve business profitability. The emphasis is on “real time” recording of distance, time and

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-4582-0.ch010

costs. Driving behavior is recorded – stop, start, braking, speed – engine speed versus tachometer records versus road conditions. In other words road and traffic conditions are not recorded. The fieldwork was conducted in a male environment and the company owners and boards were, in the majority, male. Men are doing the driving and men are doing the watching – different types of work. One reason for men doing the work is explained:

That's why we use men exclusively for long distance telegraphy ... because they naturally press down hard. They have a strong touch. Women wouldn't naturally press down hard and are therefore not adaptable to long distance work (Wile, cited in Winston, 1998, p. 56).

The companies selling the tracking devices are men, so the quote above seemed to support a theme that men are controlling this industry and perhaps believe that “heavy handed” control is necessary. Drivers in Australia seem helpless in the face of increasing use of technology as the interface between employer and employee.

Managers and employees are faced with the reality of electronic monitoring of communications and collection and use of information about employees (Mello, cited in Tabak and Smith 2005, p.173).

There has been little or no research by public institutions into drivers' use of this technology, the design of which emphasizes “real time” surveillance. Business organisations have their own “othered” populations to control, namely their employees. Snider wrote:

Since the earliest days of capitalism businesses have been obsessed with finding ever more sophisticated (and intrusive) mechanisms to manage, discipline and ultimately eliminate human employees from the production process. Business has thus been a major player in the development

of surveillance technologies, constantly commissioning studies to tell those at the top better ways to control their workforce (Snider, 2011, p. 5).

The trucking industry (also referred to as the transportation or logistics industry) involves the transport and distribution of commercial and industrial goods. Trucks fitted with GPS are commercial vehicles – trucks, semi-trailers, dump trucks – and are used in industries such as mining. The Australian trucking industry provides an essential service; drivers transport large quantities of raw materials and import and export products. The usual destinations include docks and distribution centres and, in the case of building materials, construction areas. Trucks are important to the construction industry where large amounts of rocks, dirt, concrete, and other building materials are used. There are extensive economic infrastructures, investments and costs from capital, wages and government taxes.

The use of satellite communication is now being introduced as emission standards are being taxed. The Federal government will be able to access which companies are contributing to pollution, based on the use of diesel calculated by distance travelled.

The technology we are discussing is run through the satellite tracking of a device that is located on the truck. This tracking device is placed on the prime mover, the trailer and if there is more than one trailer then each trailer will have a device. One driver could have three or more separate tracking devices on the truck he is driving. The media is now talking about technology providing driverless trucks. The trucks use GPS technology to navigate autonomously around a pre-defined course from loading units to dump locations, including waste dumps, stockpiles and crushers (Asia in Focus in Asia Pulse, Sydney, accessed 2 Nov 2011).

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