Automated License Plate Reader Technology

What is the technology?

Automated License Plate Reader (ALPR) technology uses fixed and mobile platform (vehicle mounted) high speed cameras to take digital photographs of vehicle license plates. The system is automatic and has the ability to recognize and capture thousands of vehicle license plates a day. The captured license plates are downloaded automatically to a secure database for further processing/enforcement on a routine basis. Current uses include law enforcement, other governmental use, and private use.

Law enforcement use typically entails comparing captured license plate information against a database of prior captures on a "hot list" with some connection to a prior crime or criminal investigation. For example, if a vehicle was connected to a robbery scene, the ALPR database could flag the license plate number for placement on the hot list. If an ALPR camera picks up the license plate number for the vehicle, an alert goes out allowing officers to contact the vehicle for further follow up. Law enforcement agencies that employ ALPR systems almost universally report a significant increase in crime interdiction and reduction as a direct result of the technology.

Other governmental use includes compliance with toll road payments/transponder rules and traffic management. Toll scofflaws have their license plates read by the ALPR system which, in turn, enables the local transportation agency to compare the license plate against a database of registered users or obtain an address where a notice of violation can be sent. Further, the technology allows for the measurement of transportation infrastructure use in order to calculate out maintenance and expansion expenses and timelines.

Private use includes repossession services and private parking compliance. Increasingly, private repossession services are using ALPR technology to scan license plates to confirm payment status for possible repossession, enabling the service to repossess a delinquent vehicle with minimal disruption. Parking compliance compares parked cars against a permitted/reserved database to spot violators.

How does the technology affect local government?

ALPR technology can act as a significant resource multiplier, both in the law enforcement and non-law enforcement aspects by automating the collection and comparison process for license plates against the designated database. The technology allows for the collection of thousands of license plates every day with effectively unlimited storage and almost instantaneous identification (if desired). This has led to increased law enforcement success, higher toll collection rates, and increased accuracy in estimating transportation infrastructure loads for maintenance and expansion purposes.

The technology has drawn criticism from privacy advocates concerned with the location of ALPR cameras, whether deployment is targeted in minority communities, whether the technology allows for active surveillance of the public, and the length of time that captured information is stored, among other concerns. Local government should take into consideration the policy aspects of deploying an ALPR system as they relate to these criticisms.

What are local governments doing about it?

Increasingly local governments are adopting their own ALPR systems or they are taking part in database sharing with public and private ALPR databases, or both. Some recent examples include:

- Maryland State Police using ALPR data to assist in the location and apprehension of four individuals involved in drug trafficking
- A California City recovering stolen vehicles by working with repossession companies that utilize ALPR technology.
- Washington, D.C. alerting law enforcement when a parked vehicle is linked to criminal activity.
- The City of Galveston, Texas using ALPR technology to enforce parking along the Galveston Seawall, a popular tourist destination.

Additionally, the federal government recently released an RFP for a national ALPR "fusion" database system, ostensibly to allow for information sharing and hot list development on a national scale.

Legal Issues To Watch Out For:

There are myriad legal issues involving the use of ALPR technology. The arguments are interesting, tough at times, and evolving continuously. They include:

- The Freedom of Information Act or state law equivalents may be used to gain access to information treated as law enforcement investigation, intelligence, or security information for a variety of reasons that concern public safety. The information could be used to locate individuals based upon parking location data. The information could be used to commit crimes by allowing estranged spouses to obtain LPR data, and then use that information to track down the other spouse and cause harm. Further, LPR data could be used to establish patrol routes and the locations of fixed point cameras, endangering law enforcement equipment and personnel. More troubling, release of the information could provide criminals the information they need to continue to operate undetected. Strong local policies will provide the best balance for all interests.
- Privacy concerns have already arisen, and will continue to rise, based upon questions of whose data is being collected, how is the information stored, how long is the information held, whether there is disproportionate monitoring of certain racial or ethnic groups leading to disproportionate enforcement, and more. While leading law enforcement groups like the International Association of Chiefs of Police have released a paper detailing why personal privacy is not implicated by the technology—because license plates identify vehicles, and not people and the license plate information is captured in and from public places—the ACLU and Electronic Frontier Foundation have released their own reports on why the technology is part of a trend of large scale surveillance of the public. Again, how the different interests and perspectives can be reconciled most effectively likely rests on local policy development.

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