ANNALS OF INQUIRY

SURVEILLANCE AND THE LONELINESS OF THE LONG-DISTANCE TRUCKER

A new book shows how electronic tracking systems have failed to make trucking safer. But they have helped companies spy on their workers.

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus

January 31, 2023



Illustration by Nicholas Konrad / The New Yorker; Source photographs from Getty

Save this story

In 2011, Karen Levy, a doctoral candidate in Princeton's sociology department, spent the summer as a research intern at Intel's offices near Portland, Oregon. Her official remit was fuzzy and open-ended, but the company had at one point

emphasized its resolve to find use cases for its chips in vehicles. Levy hadn't thought much about vehicles per se, but her mixed academic background—she was also trained as a lawyer—predisposed her to reflect on situations that dramatized the peculiar relationship between formal codes (the realm of the law) and practical expediency (the realm of the ethnographer). The road, it occurred to her, was the site of our most common and thoroughgoing encounter with rules; it was also the scene of our most routine and matter-of-fact disregard for them. Take, as an example, jaywalking. It remains technically criminal in many places, but the enforcement of the prohibition is typically neither expected nor desired. Levy's work is often about the wiggle room that makes social life possible. As she put it to me recently, "What do we really mean when we say a rule is a rule? When do we not mean it?"

While in Oregon, Levy happened to hear an NPR segment about new restrictions on the wiggle room afforded to long-haul truckers. Since the nineteen-thirties, truckers had been reasonably encumbered by restrictions on the number of hours they were allowed to work. These regulations relied upon self-reports manually inscribed in paper logbooks, which truckers were obligated to provide upon inspection. These logbooks, however, were easily falsified; at the end of the day, or at the end of a trip, the trucker retrofitted his journey to accommodate the law. This was an open secret: truckers called them coloring books, or even swindle sheets. Road safety, however, was a real issue. For decades, regulators had debated the introduction of electronic logs—tamper-proof devices, hardwired to trucks' engines, that could digitally track the time truckers spent behind the wheel. Truckers were, to put it gently, resistant to the idea. Long-haul trucking is not a good job (it's poorly paid, lonely, bad for your health, and dangerous), but at the very least it was compensated by access to mythological status: truckers, as captains of their own ships, enjoyed the freedom and romance of the open road. Trucking was a vocation for the stubborn. By 2012, a federal mandate was a fait accompli, and, even if the trappings of autonomy had always been more symbolic than material, the deployment of digital trackers was received as a status insult.

What We're Reading

Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.



Later that week, Levy took public transit to Jubitz, a "nice, big truck stop" near the Washington border, to see what it felt like to strike up unsolicited conversations with truckers and get a lay of the land. Levy, whose prose and conversation is starry with exclamatory asides, told me, "I went up to people at the bar, and it was really fun! Truckers turned out to be really forthcoming—they have lots of stories nobody asks them to tell. These days, we talk about 'essential workers' all the time, but nobody likes them or thinks positively of them—despite the fact that, as they like to say, 'if you bought it, we brought it.' " When she returned to Princeton that fall, she told her adviser, Paul DiMaggio, that she'd become enmeshed in the tribulations of truckers. DiMaggio is extremely well regarded as a sociologist—his landmark 1983 article "The Iron Cage Revisited," on the bureaucratization of the professions, is one of the field's all-time most cited papers—but, in a previous life, he had been an aspiring songwriter on the Nashville scene, and frequented honky-tonks in the nineteen-seventies. He not only supported the project but promptly set her up with a trucker playlist—including Dick Curless's "A Tombstone Every Mile" and Dave Dudley's "Six Days on the Road." (Many classics of the genre have an air of dark prophecy; among Levy's favorites is Ronnie Milsap's "Prisoner of the Highway.")

Levy went on to visit truckers in eleven states: "The nice thing about truckers is you can find them anywhere, and if one place isn't great you can go down the road to the next truck stop and see who's there." Levy grew up not far from Indianapolis, and at first she looked for men in Colts jerseys; as an invitation to expound on their expertise, she sometimes asked them how they'd get from, say, Portland to West Lafayette, Indiana, which they could invariably answer off the

top of their heads. Her initial encounters did not go all that well. She told me, "I was an idiot. I literally didn't understand what people were saying—what words were coming out of their mouths. There's all of this lingo—'reefer,' 'chicken coop,' 'reset your seventy.' I went home and bought a CB slang dictionary on eBay, and learned that a 'reefer' is a refrigerated truck, a 'chicken coop' is an inspection station, and 'resetting your seventy' means restarting your weekly time clock with a thirty-four-hour break." She continued, "My conversations were not that useful at first except that it was all interesting, and then, of course, you pick it up—subscribing to all these newsletters, reading the trade press, and now, more than eleven years later, I still read that stuff. I listen to 'Road Dog Trucking,' a satellite-radio channel that hosts call-in shows for trucking professionals." In the past few months, those shows have invited her to appear as a guest.

Levy's splendid new book, "Data Driven: Truckers, Technology, and the New Workplace Surveillance," is a rigorous and surprisingly entertaining ethnographic portrait of a profession in transition. Although truckers have always been technologically savvy subjects—they were early adopters of such novelties as CB radio—they now had to grow accustomed to life as technology's object. When she began her field work, electronic logging devices—E.L.D.s—were a looming threat on the horizon. In 2017, they became a legal requirement, but their industrial applications have gone well beyond the basic federal mandate. Trucking companies realized that they could enhance these devices to do things such as track fuel efficiency in real time. In one sense, this was an old story: strict managerial oversight in the service of productive rationalization was a hallmark of the Industrial Revolution. In another, however, the extension of such scrutiny to the fundamentally antinomian culture of trucking was a relevant novelty. With the pandemic, remote workplace surveillance of the otherwise aloof has become an increasingly common intrusion. Truckers, as she said in an interview with the trucker show "Land Line Now," were "the canaries in the coal mine."

The process of picking up on a community's linguistic practices inevitably entails coming to understand how that community regulates itself—the norms, customs, and other structures that make up a given social order. The sociologist Harvey Molotch has drawn a contrast between the "actual order" of practitioners and an "apparent order" legible to outsiders. The former tends to allow room for fluidity and discretion not officially recognized by the latter. Levy, who is now on the faculty of the information-science department at Cornell, likes to teach Alvin W. Gouldner's "Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy," a mid-century ethnography carried out at a gypsum mine. She told me, "Gouldner writes about 'mock bureaucracy,' this idea that there are all these rules in place that nobody really follows, or follows only in certain situations. There was a rule that you couldn't smoke in the mines—which sounds fine to me now, but back then that was a big deal—but managers would enforce it only when the insurance inspectors were around." This deviation from the apparent order wasn't merely a resigned concession to ungovernability. She went on, "The lack of enforcement got them in good with the workers, and helped the management-worker relationship."

The use of electronic logging devices in trucks, Levy argues, represents an example of how "we impose apparent order to the detriment of actual order." From the perspective of apparent order, the problem of trucking safety—the job ranks eighth on the list of occupational fatality rates—is driver fatigue. Truckers are tired because they drive too many hours. They drive too many hours because they were not only permitted but effectively encouraged to falsify their logbooks. If the problem is compliance, the solution is to take accountability out of the discretionary sphere of human activity and rely instead on mechanism. You use technology to force truckers to tell the truth.

Looking for new books, TV, and music? Get the Goings On newsletter for picks from our writers and critics.

gideonlk@gmail.com

SIGN UP

By signing up, you agree to our user agreement (including class action waiver and arbitration provisions), and acknowledge our privacy policy.

Levy takes pains to point out that there was nothing great about the historical "actual order" of long-haul trucking—it's inequitable, unjust, exploitative, and unsafe. As one trucker told her, "There are a lot of men out there who—there wouldn't be food on the table, frankly, and the lights wouldn't be on at home if they weren't breaking the law and if they weren't using drugs. And it's not about having a party, because it's not a fucking party. It's very much not a fucking party." But the older regime did represent, for better or for worse, a stable if makeshift equilibrium: truckers retained their sense of rough-and-ready dignity in command. They decided how best to get from point A to point B; they relied on expert interoception to know when they were fatigued, and stopped when they felt they needed to stop; and they evaluated the weather and determined the proper maneuvers. This is no longer the case. Levy quotes one exchange between a trucker and his dispatcher, conducted over the two-way messaging service often installed along with the E.L.D., to capture the sense of constant oversight:

12:57 pm Firm: Are you headed to delivery?

1:02 pm Firm: Please call.

2:33 pm Firm: What is your ETA to delivery?

2:34 pm Firm: Need you to start rolling.

2:35 pm Firm: Why have you not called me back?

3:25 pm *Driver: I can't talk and sleep at the same time*.

3:37 pm Firm: Why aren't you rolling? **You have hours** and are going to service fail this load.

3:44 pm Firm: **You have hours** now and the ability to roll—that is a failure when you are sitting and refusing to roll to the customer.

3:51 pm Firm: Please go in and deliver. We need to service our customers. Please start rolling. They will receive you up to 11:30. Please do not be late.

4:14 pm *Driver: Bad storm. Can't roll now.*

4:34 pm Firm: Weather Channel is showing small rain shower **in your area**, 1-2 inches of rain and 10 mph winds ???

The obvious objection is that these dignitary concerns, important as they are, seem irrelevant when weighed against the reality of highway fatalities; we might, as a society, consider this a reasonable trade-off, even if the truckers themselves bristle at the oversight. But, as so often happens, the attempt to impose an "apparent order" from above has seemingly backfired: the data from the first few years under the E.L.D. mandate have shown that the devices may lead to an *increase* in trucking accidents. The bulk of Levy's book is devoted to explaining why the curtailment of personal judgment has had such poor results. For one thing, she says, imagine that your grandmother expects a visit to discuss your inheritance, and she knows it's going to take you eleven hours to get to her home. Most of us would understand that to mean "about eleven hours," and if taking a break for a coffee (or a 5-Hour Energy, or even one of the more advanced stimulants apparently on offer under the counter at some truck stops), or slowing down over a snowy pass, meant a half hour of delay, presumably Grandma wouldn't mind. But if Grandma said that you had *exactly* eleven hours or she'd write you out of the will, Levy says, you'd drive "like a bat out of hell" to get there.

The E.L.D. mandate has also had unfortunate second-order effects. There's already considerable turnover in the trucking industry, but frustration with the mandate has sent a disproportionate number of veteran drivers into early

retirement. Truckers with thirty or forty years of experience have been replaced by eighteen-year-old "baby drivers" with fresh commercial driver's licenses, and these drivers are, unsurprisingly, less safe. The mandate has also inadvertently altered the compliance landscape. The devices provide (theoretically) tamper-proof logs, but actual enforcement remains a matter for the police. Cops, as Levy found while embedded with the state police, have not taken easily to the new regime; they often can't understand how the boxes are supposed to be read, which undermines their authority at weigh stations. (Levy points out nicely that a shared bewilderment or resentment about E.L.D.s can at times engender the rare moment of trucker-cop solidarity.) In part because police officers find these interactions stressful or unpleasant, the phase-in period of the mandate saw them waving through trucks with E.L.D. decals, on the assumption that the truckers were in conformity with regulations. Truckers, who aren't stupid, immediately pursued a strategy of "decoy compliance," purchasing decals on the black market even when their trucks weren't in fact equipped with electronic monitoring. The data showed that regulatory compliance increased dramatically since the advent of the mandate, but it remains unclear if what was being tracked, at least initially, was actual compliance or merely its guise. (Also, some truckers just smashed their E.L.D.s with a hammer. Levy devotes a fascinating chapter to such strategies for mutiny, yet she's careful not to narc on her informants.)

All of this, Levy maintains, was predictable insofar as the mandate was designed to solve the apparent problem rather than the actual one. The problem was not that truckers lied. The problem is the industry's economic structure. Truckers are paid on a per-mile basis—"If the wheel ain't turnin', you ain't earnin' "—which means that all of the time they spend resting, or refuelling, or looking for scarce parking, or being detained by slow shippers at their destination is uncompensated. Truckers are exempt from the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, so they're not paid overtime. Beginning in the late nineteen-seventies, the trucking industry underwent rapid deregulation. Shipping costs fell dramatically, but so did wages.

In 1980, the median income for a trucker was a hundred and ten thousand dollars in today's dollars; today, the average trucker brings home less than half of that. Solidarity has proved elusive. The Teamsters were once powerful, but the percentage of truckers with union membership has declined to the low single digits.

As Levy puts it, "By using digital surveillance to enforce rules, we focus our attention on an apparent order that allows us to ignore the real problems in the industry, as well as their deeper economic, social, and political causes. Under the apparent order envisioned by the ELD, the fundamental problem in trucking is that truckers cannot be trusted to reliably report how much they work, and the solution to that problem is to make it more difficult for them to fudge the numbers. But under the actual order, the problem in trucking is that drivers are incentivized to work themselves well beyond healthy limits—sometimes to death. The ELD doesn't solve this problem, or even attempt to do so."

Yet the story in trucking, as in so many other domains, continues to be one in which technological patches are sent in search of ostensible bugs. One of the advantages of Levy's longitudinal commitment is that she's witnessed wave after wave of prediction that self-driving trucks are just around the corner—that two million long-haul truckers will be put out of work at one fell swoop. That has not come to pass, and Levy believes that it's unlikely to happen anytime soon. Artificial intelligence might not drive the truck, but it has nevertheless been awarded a role to play. It powers, for example, an array of prototypes that will likely define the future of automated oversight: biometric cameras that can monitor truckers' eyelids for fatigue, or biometric vests that can detect a heart attack. It seems plausible that blanket hours-of-service regulations could be abandoned altogether in favor of thoroughly personalized restriction; the machines will decide when and for how long rest is warranted. Even if dreams of driver replacement as such are in retreat, Levy writes, these surveillance technologies "represent a distinct and simultaneous threat: a threat of *compelled hybridization*, an intimate invasion into their work and bodies. AI in trucking

today doesn't kick you out of the cab, it texts your boss and wife, flashes lights in your eyes, and gooses your backside. Though truckers are, so far, still in the cab, intelligent systems are beginning to occupy these spaces as well—in the process, turning worker and machine into an uneasy, confrontational whole."

This sounds grim, but Levy emphasizes that she has nothing against technology per se, and she notes that there are certainly ways in which E.L.D. systems might serve driver interests: if they gave greater visibility to long, uncompensated detention times at ports, that would be an important step toward making one of the industry's neglected problems more tractable. This might seem like a standard-issue "to be sure" concession, but arguments such as these—and their deployment in a book with the wry, elegant, engraved-wood tone of mid-century sociology—serve to differentiate Levy's account from the current state of technology criticism. Her work recalls the variety of pre-techlash misgiving exemplified by such critics as Evgeny Morozov, who coined the term "solutionism" to describe Silicon Valley's intuition that all problematic symptoms could be alleviated with technological palliatives. In the eleven years since Levy began her study, criticism of technology seems half-hearted or incomplete if it makes no reference to eugenics.

This has been, in some ways, a counterproductive turn. Such inflammatory rhetoric drives away the sorts of engineers who might otherwise be open to learning about the difference between apparent and actual orders. In an interview she gave last year, Levy said, "There's kind of a stereotype that computer science is a really asociological discipline, and that people in tech view the world through an engineering lens without any regard for social life—but my own experience doesn't bear this out at all. The students I meet are so eager to reflect deeply about the normative stakes of what they're doing and to integrate social-scientific knowledge into their world views." (They still frown, she told me, when they're assigned titles such as "Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy.") Over the past decade, Silicon Valley rationalists have given mimetic energy to concepts like "Chesterton's fence," the

idea that no reform measures should be undertaken until one understands why and how a given system was set up in the first place. They might not have had to resurrect such a principle from obscurity if they'd been exposed to a century of social-scientific reasoning. No engineers are likely to seek out such exposure if they suspect that faculty members in science, technology, and society departments regard them as eugenicists.

The subtleties of Levy's account can easily get a little lost between the increasingly divergent extremes of technology discourse. She told me, "There's one thing that's hard to get across in talking about the book, which is that the goal was never to say, 'Hey, we should go back to the way things were.' The not-as-good tech criticism tends to valorize work or the old way of doing things, the craft of labor, and I've been trying really hard to not say, 'I think everyone should go back to breaking the law flagrantly and being exploited for their labor.' The point is that the technology provides a hint that there's some other change that's needed. The future is not to leave tech out of it and go back to how things were ten years ago, even if that's what a lot of truckers want. It's easy for people to be, like, 'Yeah, smash the fucking thing'—well, maybe, or maybe not." ♦

More Science and Technology

- How an ultra-rare disease accelerates aging.
- Why don't we take nuclear weapons seriously?
- The long quest for artificial blood.
- All the carcinogens we cannot see.

- The rebranding of MDMA.
- The elephantine memories of food-caching birds.
- The climate solutions we can't live without.

Support *The New Yorker's* award-winning journalism. Subscribe today.



Gideon Lewis-Kraus is a staff writer at The New Yorker covering technology, academia, and books, among other topics. He is the author of the memoir "A Sense of Direction."

More: Book Review Truck Drivers Technology Surveillance Tracking

The Goings On Newsletter

What we're watching, listening to, and doing this week in N.Y.C, and beyond

SIGN UP

By signing up, you agree to our user agreement (including class action waiver and arbitration provisions), and acknowledge our privacy policy.

READ MORE

THE LEDE

The Humanism Driving the Anti-A.I. Movement

At the Pro-Human Assembly in Washington, D.C., attendees talked less about jobs and policy, and more about their philosophy of life.

By Becca Rothfeld

THE LEDE

There Is No A.I. "Race"

We're constantly told that Chinese advances would have catastrophic consequences. But the first to innovate is rarely the one who wins.

By Chang Che

INFINITE SCROLL

Caleb Hammer's Humiliation Economy

The host of "Financial Audit," a popular YouTube series, claims that his goal is to make his viewers more financially literate, with his down-and-out interviewees serving as extreme test cases for what not to do.

By Brady Brickner-Wood

THE WEEKEND ESSAY

A Night Living in Penn Station

For the outreach workers trying to place homeless New Yorkers in shelters, each evening presents familiar faces and fresh challenges.

By Anand Giridharadas

PAGE-TURNER

MacKenzie Scott's Substack Novel Can't Escape the Amazon Juggernaut

Scott's decision to self-publish could be seen as a protest against her ex-husband's company—or as a sign of how profoundly it's altered the publishing landscape.

By Rhoda Feng

LETTER FROM PATAGONIA

The First Social Network

In rural Argentina, isolated residents exchange messages over AM radio.

By Jordan Salama

THE LEDE

Let Cathy Ames Be a Monster

In the captivating new "East of Eden," only one note rings false: the softening of John Steinbeck's most evil character.

By Alexandra Schwartz

ANNALS OF MONEY

The Battle to Pass a Billionaire Tax

Most Democratic voters say that they favor a wealth tax, but a California ballot initiative has plenty of liberal opponents.

By Nicholas Lemann

OPEN QUESTIONS

Will A.I. Still Take Our Jobs?

The jobs apocalypse hasn't arrived. Something else is happening instead.

By Joshua Rothman

BOOKS

How Test Engineers Decide What Counts as Good Enough

Test engineers stage reality, sometimes by extreme means, to make sure airplanes don't fall apart, children can't open pill bottles, and bears won't break into coolers.

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus

THE FRONT ROW

"The Social Reckoning" Leaves Out the Human Element

In Aaron Sorkin's overwritten sequel to "The Social Network," inspired performances by Mikey Madison and Jeremy Allen White can't bring the main characters to life.

By Richard Brody

ANNALS OF LAW

Should I Stay or Should I Go?

The quandary faced by government lawyers who think that the Trump Administration is subverting justice.

By Eyal Press

Privacy Information