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Big Brother Rides Shotgun

By [Nancy Gohring](#), [Interactive Week](#)

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You think privacy is a big issue online? Just wait until wireless gets more pervasive. The potential for wireless to let Big Brother track your every move may drive some people to run for the woods, leaving technology behind.

I care a lot about companies collecting information about my online browsing habits and selling it to anyone, but at the end of the day, the practice isn't all that harmful. The worst that happens is that I have to deal with more junk mail, e-mail and phone calls.

But some recent reports about how one company has used wireless tracking horrifies me and blows it for those companies trying to use the technology for legitimate, useful purposes. Acme Rent-a-Car in New Haven, Conn., has been using the global positioning system (GPS) to track the speed of drivers and fine them for exceeding limits. One renter came home from a trip to find \$450 had been debited from his bank account. That's \$450 in pure profit - Acme doesn't hand the "fine" over to the police. And the last time I checked, the cops were the only people authorized to enforce laws.

The Connecticut Department of Consumer Protection has filed a complaint, asking Acme to quit the practice and return the money it has taken from drivers. One renter has filed a lawsuit. Acme counters that the rental contract clearly states that drivers may be fined for driving too fast, and has the gall to claim its intent isn't to make money from the GPS technology, but to be able to track stolen vehicles. Right.

It's ridiculous practices like this that ruin the potential for nifty wireless applications based on location. Wouldn't it be nice to get driving directions based on exactly where you are? It would be convenient to use a cell phone to find nearby stores without having to type in a ZIP code. Progressive Casualty Insurance has a service that allows customers to choose to implement a combined GPS and cellular device in their vehicles that can help them get lower insurance rates based on how much they use their

cars. So far, it's an optional service.

It will be challenging for such interesting applications to come to fruition with rules in place designed to protect the rights of people who don't wish to be tracked at every instant - or fined based on their position, or how fast they got there.

Sen. John Edwards, D-N.C., has introduced legislation that will require mobile phone companies to get permission from customers before collecting location information. He's trying to nip the potential for misuse in the bud.

Unfortunately, it's companies such as Acme that make such lawmaking necessary.

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