

# GPS Tracking

Discovering, Dismantling, and Fighting Back

From the desk of THE LUDD-KACZYNSKI INSTITUTE OF ANTI-TECHNOLOGY



*Smash that cellphone! All the kids are doing it!*

The war on “eco-terrorism” is still trudging along and, whether we like it or not, those of us that are passionate about defending the environment are on the frontlines. One of the most quintessential tools that law enforcement have against us is the virtually unlimited capabilities of Global Positioning System (GPS) tracking. Tracking devices are easy to use, relatively easy to install, and the information collected is often admissible in court. Anyone can buy a GPS tracking device, without any credentials.

Legally speaking, the use of GPS tracking devices as evidence is in a bit of a gray area. The supreme court, at the urging of past and present US presidential administrations, are debating the use of warrantless GPS tracking as admissible evidence. President Obama is currently pushing for the use of warrantless GPS tracking, even though lower courts have ruled such measures unconstitutional.

Under current laws, a warrant is obtained to plant a GPS device. Still, tracking devices have many uses outside of courtroom scrutiny. Using a GPS device to track someone’s movements without the intention of using it as evidence, but rather to keep the person under surveillance, is highly plausible since GPS devices are readily available on the consumer market.

GPS tracking devices can be best summed up by two different categories: Passive and Active tracking

## Passive Trackers

The easiest trackers to discover and identify are passive trackers, which gather data, such as mileage, locations visited, speed, and time. They store the data internally and typically require a battery pack. These trackers are easy to install and reliable for the information they present. However, real-time tracking is virtually impossible, as the information is stored, typically requiring the device to be plugged into a computer to retrieve the information. The passive tracker will be most effective when attached to the outside of a car, for instance on the undercarriage or behind a bumper, because of the relative ease of retrieval.

## Active Trackers

Active GPS trackers are the “dystopian futurist” surveillance technology which most of us have been dreading. Not only do active trackers gather location, mileage, speed, and time, but they broadcast this information via cellphone towers. This means that someone can be tracking your movements in real-time, from any computer. Active trackers typically require more than a battery pack to ensure their long-term reliability. One option for powering the device is splicing the wires into the car’s electrical system. Although the installation of these more advanced trackers is made easier by having access to the inside of a vehicle, it does not rule out placement outside of the car. Finding electrical wires to splice a device onto without gaining access to the interior of a car can be done with relative ease, especially around the undersides of the trunk and engine, and anywhere near the battery.

## Cellphones

Cellphones have had GPS tracking in them from the very beginning. They are considered active trackers. As you move between cellphone towers, your phone registers itself at those towers and your movement can be tracked by just that alone. With more cellphones on the market having built-in GPS mapping, tracking someone’s movements has never been easier. Although there is a lot more red tape for law enforcement to break through before they can track us by our cellphones alone, never underestimate the concessions being made to catch “eco-terrorists.”

## Steps you can take to find and disable GPS tracking

First and foremost: take the fucking battery out of your cellphone! If you are going somewhere and you don't want a potential someone finding out about it, take the battery out. If you don't want a conversation to be monitored, take the battery out. It's the first line of defense that you have. Always be mindful of that damned cellphone. For GPS devices on cars, the process is a little more involved. Start on the outside of the car, examining every crack and corner. Try to get your car on a lift to really get a good look at the undercarriage. If a lift is not available, you can use a regular car jack, flashlights, and mirrors. A GPS device is generally going to be a mounted box, often plastic, and sometimes small. Anything that matches this description is suspect, and removing it yourself is a must. Having a friend help you out with the discovery and removal of a GPS device is a big help, but make sure this person is someone you have a close affinity with. There is always a chance that, if you discover a GPS device, there is a warrant backing that device up, and, if so, its removal can be a crime.

On the inside of the car, check everywhere! Lift up the floor carpeting, remove the glove box and inspect behind the dash, thoroughly inspect the trunk and spare tire compartment, pop the hood and get in really close to the engine (preferably when the car is not in use and has cooled off). If you can, try to get a hold of a Radio Frequency (RF) scanner. This device will, under most circumstances, detect any broadcasts by active GPS trackers coming from your car.

Make sure your car is in a remote enough area away from cellphones, cellphone towers, and other cars. Some active trackers will only send out information intermittently, so a good way to test for this is to take a drive out to the country (if there is any left near where you live), preferably with a friend you can trust, so a full scan of the car can be preformed.

## Fighting Back!

Destroying the device is a possibility with little immediate repercussions. Run it over or do something equally inconspicuous, *as if it fell off on its own accord*. Again, taking the device off, if backed by a warrant, can result in criminal charges and possibly more intimidation and threats from the FBI. It's not a good idea to take any pictures of the device if removed. It's especially not a good idea to post the pictures on the Internet, unless you are prepared for the FBI or local authorities to pay you a visit. If the device is there, chances are whoever is tracking you knows quite a bit about your personal life. The best possible solution is to get in contact with a lawyer.

Two cases of the removal and handling of GPS devices

come to mind: Kathy Thomas and Yasir Afifi. In 2005, an active member of a Food Not Bombs chapter (who has gone by the pseudonym Kathy Thomas in the media) discovered a GPS device placed on her car and handed it over to *Wired Magazine*, who sent it to an Internet-based company called IIFIXIT.COM for inspecting. The website IIFIXIT.COM posted their findings of the device. The FBI reacted and began putting pressure on her. Kathy obtained her FBI file by request and it made clear the surveillance was part of a nationwide investigation of activists connected with Earth First!, the Earth Liberation Front, Animal Liberation Front, and groups that the FBI considered "left-wing anarchists." In the end, no charges were brought against her. Moreover, there had recently been a federal case against the FBI brought on by a student named Yasir Afifi for the placing of a GPS device on his car, which he and a friend discovered while at an auto shop getting an oil change. A friend posted pictures of it on news website REDDIT.COM and soon after the FBI showed up at Afifi's home, demanding the return of the device. Afifi sought legal council and built a case against the FBI, citing he had no ties to radical, environmental, or political groups, it was just his race, as an Arab-American, which had been the reason the FBI was targeting him. The FBI continued their harassment of Afifi throughout the investigation, and eventually Afifi dropped the suit and handed over the GPS device to the FBI. Entering the realm of the FBI often has very unfortunate circumstances surrounding it. While fighting them in court seems like it could incur more harassment and scrutiny by the feds and local law enforcement, there are a few Green Scare cases that have been dropped (AETA 4, 2010) and outright won (Connor Cash, 2004). There are also those folks continuing to resist the FBI and the grand juries who are paying dearly for their continuing resistance. They deserve our support. No compromise!

In short, the best ways to prevent being tracked by a GPS device is by taking the battery out of the cellphone (or by ditching that cellphone), and by ditching that car! Ride a bike, take a bus, use a wheelchair, or walk.

