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Whose data is it, anyway?

An old saying goes: you may not be interested in politics, but politics is interested in you. The same sentiments apply, I think, to data. Our friends at Cambridge Analytica, the notorious Facebook marketing firm, understand that today, data is power.

Love them or loathe them, connected devices that talk to each other are fast reaching the world of commercial vehicles. From walk-around checks to predictive maintenance, to DVSA's Earned Recognition to the new Smart Tachograph regulations coming in next year, vehicles of all types are being fitted with hundreds of sensors that gather and share large amounts of operational data. The existence of these new data streams has implications for everyone involved, from OEMs to users and third party garages to regulators.

So, do CV operators own the data that is produced by their vehicles? If so, surely they have the right to access it, like money in the bank? And surely, then, they understand how that data is being used by their contractors? The answer is not always yes: access to some parameters is restricted for perfectly valid safety or regulatory concerns. OEMs don't want users to be able to modify braking parameters, for example, or disable their vehicle's SCR.

In the simplest possible case – a full-service maintenance contract at a main dealer owned by the OEM – the issue of data ownership is irrelevant, as the entities providing the vehicle, reading the data and carrying out maintenance are the same. But what if they weren't? Who manages the data interfaces for operators of mixed fleets working with independents?

In terms of CV data useful for maintenance, the main European OEMs have signed up to separate FMS (fleet management systems interface) standards for truck and bus and coach. These ensure there is some data compatibility for key parameters. Operators of mixed fleets can take some comfort in that. The trouble is, the scope of data covered is relatively small compared to the vast amount monitored overall. What about marrying up all of the other signals: whose responsibility is that?

Looking beyond the needs of the owner, which other authorities, such as law enforcement, have a right to access such data streams?

The brave new world of data poses a number of difficult and complex issues that need careful consideration to maintain control. Whether we do or not, one thing is for sure: the march of data won't stop.

Will Dalrymple
Editor