LICENCE PLATE RECOGNITION TECHNOLOGY

WHAT IS IT?

Licence plate recognition (LPR) software is utilised with surveillance cameras for both private and commercial purposes. It is used for billing purposes in parking lots, average speed enforcement, and traffic management. It allows a camera to scan and record all passing vehicles' registration numbers. For law enforcement, a licence plate scanned by an LPR camera can be checked against an existing database of suspicious vehicles. If there is a match, the system alerts police about the vehicle. Licence plate recognition systems can also be used to map vehicle movements on a massive scale. LPR cameras are fixed in a single location, and each time a vehicle registration number is recorded, that image is time-stamped. This means that the time it was photographed is recorded electronically, and this record is unalterable. Specialised software can be used to analyse collections of millions of licence plate number scans taken over prolonged periods. Such software can accurately track the movements of vehicles as long as they remain within the coverage area of the camera network. This can be done in real-time as the vehicle is on the move, or movements can be mapped retrospectively.

GLOBAL USE

LPR is a relatively old technology, and has been in use since the 1970s. Globally, these systems are commonly used for law enforcement purposes on every major continent, particularly in major economies (including China, Japan, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Middle Eastern and European economies).
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The industry is also growing in developing nations in Africa and South America. Estimates of the market size vary. By one estimate it is expected to grow to USD 3.8 billion by 2025. Major drivers for market growth include the increased adoption by governments for law enforcement purposes.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE LAW

Licence plate recognition has evolved into an accurate tracking mechanism. Yet even in countries where the use of LPR by law enforcement is well-established, legislation has lagged behind. In Britain, automatic LPR has been in use since 1997. But blanket LPR tracking was only ruled illegal in 2013. In the United States, only 16 states have laws expressly governing licence plate recognition use by police.

LPR poses a major threat to privacy, even if the cameras record movements in public places. Analytical software gives police and private entities access to other personal information: by tracking people's movements on public roads, it is possible to find out where a person works, lives, socialises, goes to church, and much more.