

Roadside cameras capturing the number plates of speeding cars have become commonplace in France thanks to the introduction of radar speed traps. In the United Kingdom these cameras are now integrated into larger networks with some startling results.

ANPR: We have your number!



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Less than 24 hours after the murder of a woman police officer during a robbery in Bradford, Yorkshire in November 2005 a number of suspects were taken into custody in South East London.¹ The rapidity of the arrests was due, not so much to traditional police work by the West Yorkshire force, but to Advanced Number Plate Recognition. The number plate of a hire car, observed on closed circuit TV cameras on the street where the robbery took place, was entered into Bradford's ANPR network, then 'pinged'; that is to say tracked, from kerbside camera to camera until it was observed parked on a London side street later that night. The police arrested the suspects the following morning.

Of course licence plate recognition is not particularly new technology but today's operations are particularly sophisticated. ANPR systems such as the one provided by Cambridge based Neurodynamics work at vehicle speeds of up to 160 kph, regardless of traffic conditions, available light or poor weather. More importantly they permit real-time database searches which can be integrated with existing CCTV cameras.² The difference today is that such systems are now being joined up and there are even portable cameras that can be deployed at short notice. The robbers in Bradford were 'unlucky' in that they happened to be under the surveillance one of the most up-to-date, integrated ANPR systems running in the UK. Cameras have been placed in a great number of service stations in and around Bradford. Every vehicle that stops in the service area is photographed and its number plate is checked against the police database, as well as the databases of the vehicle licensing office and customs and excise. The reasons behind Bradford's scheme was to catch 'drive offs'; people who leave without paying for petrol, to prevent the fraudulent use of credit cards as payment, as well as to monitor for stolen cars and number plate clones.³ After leaving Bradford the robber's vehicle was next flagged when it entered London, where, as part of their 'ring of steel' anti-terrorist measures, the Metropolitan Police have installed an ANPR network on all the major access roads into, and out of, the capital as well as at the main sea ports. The combination of ANPR and CCTV proved to be the robbers undoing.

¹ The six suspects were eventually released. One was eliminated from the enquiry thanks to CCTV but the information provided from arrests resulted in the identification and later capture of the murder suspects.

² For more details see www.neurodynamics.com

³ The system will flag any licence plate that is already in the data base but attributed to another vehicle.

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Developed partly as a toll access devices, these roadside spies are designed to monitor congestion charges and, when triggered by radar speed traps, to improve road safety. But it is their potential as a crime reduction tool has led to ANPR being described as the most significant advance for police work since the introduction of DNA testing. There is however some cause for concern in that the pooling of, what is sometimes out-of-date, incomplete and erroneous database information, will result in a growing number of unnecessary police acts and even wrongful arrests by officers of the law who employ it indiscriminately.

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