

With Irma goodwill gesture, Tesla's remote control raises eyebrows

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Electric car maker Tesla helped its owners fleeing the path of Hurricane Irma, offering a complementary boost to the car battery's range to allow them to travel further before needing to recharge.

The goodwill gesture was a publicity boost for the Silicon Valley firm, but the ability to remotely access to its customers' cars also drew some attention.

As millions of Floridians were ordered to evacuate, Tesla offered free software upgrades increasing battery capacity on the Model X, Model S and SUV to 75 kWh from 60 kWh. That extended the driving range by 30 miles (48 kilometers) to 230 miles (370 kilometers).

A company spokesperson on Monday confirmed the news, which was first reported by the specialized blog Electrek. Tesla made the decision to offer the range boost after one Florida owner asked for the upgrade during the evacuation.

The upgrade, which normally costs \$4,500 to \$9,000 depending on the model, is only temporary for Irma evacuees and will expire on September 16.

Investors hailed the decision, and the company's share price closed up nearly six percent on Monday in New York.

But it also highlighted how drivers remain in [automakers'](#) hands, long

after they have driven off the sales lot.

Auto blog Jalopnik said Tesla's move was "praiseworthy and appropriate" but also illustrated "a terrifying prospect of our automotive future."

A dystopian automotive future?

Jalopnik reporter Justin Westbrook speculated about a possible "worst-case scenario where a company or corporation becomes a critical decision maker in disaster scenarios," such as favoring richer car owners in a future evacuation.

Auto analysts contacted by AFP recognized automakers' growing power over drivers, but did not share the more extreme fears.

While Tesla may be more advanced in its remote abilities, most automakers have some degree of control over their increasingly electronic and connected cars.

"Many consumers don't know that GM can remotely shut a car down," said Karl Brauer, executive publisher at Cox Automotive.

"If police officers come to GM and say, 'Shut the car down,' they could," said Brauer. "I don't think they want everyone to know that they have been doing it over a decade."

Ed Hellwig, senior editor at Edmunds.com, said other automakers eventually will catch up to Tesla's level of control.

"Going forward though, they will probably have the same level of abilities to update a car and control it to some degree," he said.

But Hellwig doubted ordinary consumers should be concerned their cars could be hacked by hostile actors.

"If there is enough motivation, it's possible," he said. "But we don't have to worry about it on an everyday basis because the systems are very sophisticated."

In 2015, US researchers succeeded in remotely controlling a Jeep Cherokee, turning on its windshield wipers, turning on its radio and even releasing the brakes.

Tesla itself received a warning in 2016 from a Chinese security firm which revealed remote access vulnerabilities in the Model S.

The Palo Alto, California company remedied the flaws with a software update. Like all Tesla updates, it was distributed remotely.

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