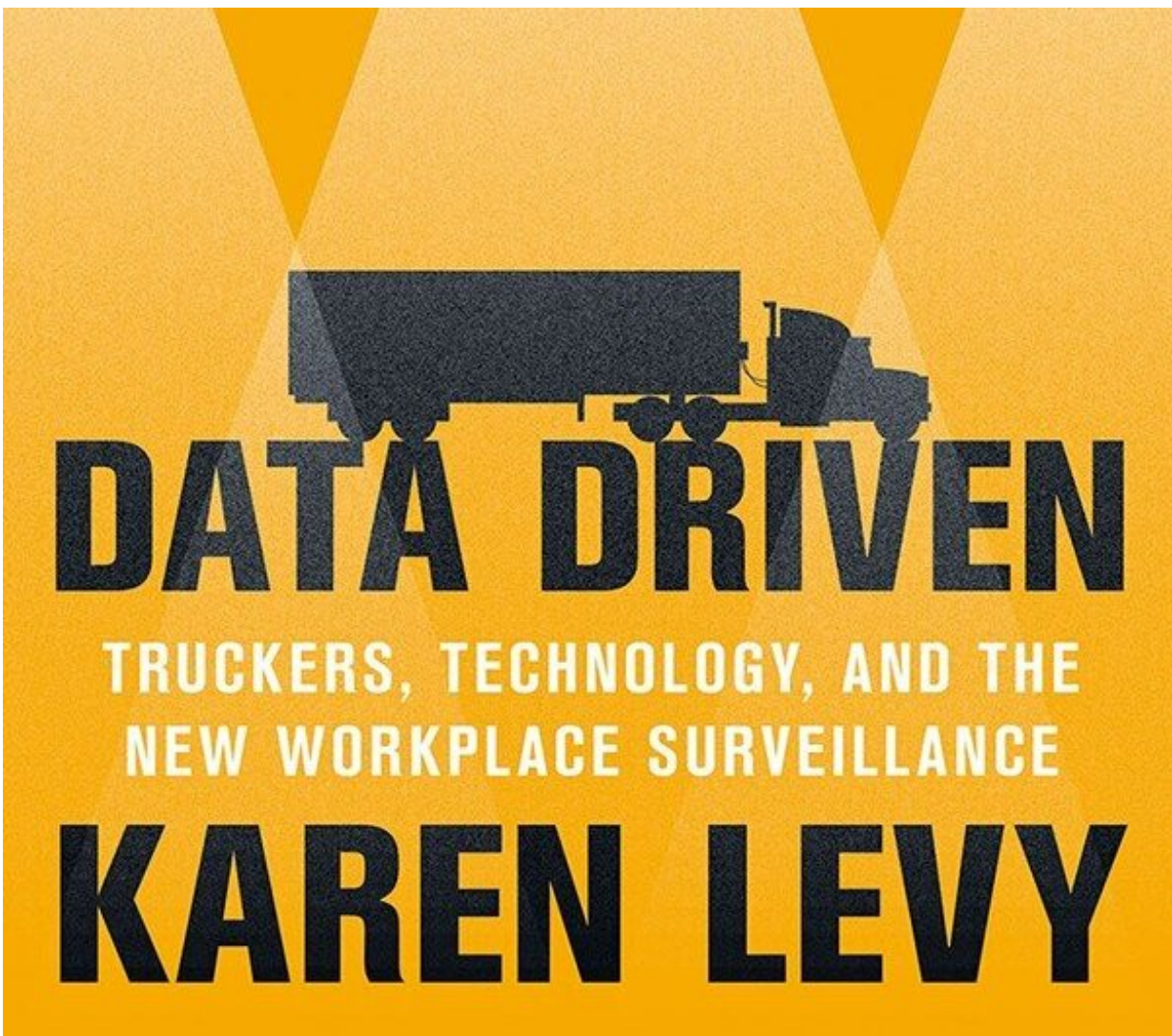


# Monitoring invades truckers' privacy without boosting safety

December 9 2022, by Tom Fleischman

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For many truckers, driving is more than just a job.

"The occupational identity of the trucker is really strong," said Karen Levy, associate professor of information science in the Cornell Ann S. Bowers College of Computing and Information Science.

"They really see themselves as 'truckers,' not just as people who drive trucks," Levy said. "There's a whole culture associated with it, and a lot of pride and professionalism."

Picture a truck driver, and a few images probably pop into your head. First, the trucker is likely male—which isn't surprising, since more than 90% of all U.S. [truck drivers](#) are men. You might envision this driver mustachioed or bearded, wearing a cap adorned with a U.S. flag or some other symbol of American might.

You might even picture Cledus Snow and his dog, Fred, from 1977's "Smokey and the Bandit," or arm-wrestling Lincoln Hawk in 1987's "Over the Top."

Yes, the images are all cliché—but they didn't get to be clichés by being totally untrue.

Much of trucking culture is about the independence associated with it—just the driver and his rig on the open road. But the proliferation of a technology known as the electronic logging device, or ELD, aimed at tracking truckers' every movement, and non-movement, has invaded truckers' inner sanctum.

Levy, who started research on truck drivers as a graduate student, is the author of "Data Driven: Truckers, Technology, and the New Workplace Surveillance," which examines how truckers' work is being affected by a proliferation of technology ostensibly developed to promote driver

safety. Drivers, Levy said, tend to disagree.

Levy spoke with the Chronicle about her new book.

**Question: Where did your fascination for the trucking industry and the work lives of truckers begin?**

Answer: I started researching truck drivers while studying the sociology of law and technology. I was really interested in what it looks like to enforce laws using technology. One day I randomly heard a story on the radio about how truckers were upset about a proposed rule that would require them to install monitoring devices in their cabs in order to keep track of the hours they work. I didn't know anything about truckers, but that day I went to a truck stop just to see what it was like to talk to drivers. And I was hooked right away; truckers had such interesting stories to tell, and were so generous with their time and expertise.

**Q: You spoke to dozens of truckers and others related to the industry. What is the general sense of electronic surveillance and its usefulness in terms of keeping drivers and others on the road safe?**

A: Very consistently, truckers describe electronic monitoring as making them feel like criminals or like children. Digital surveillance flies in the face of truckers' sense of professionalism—it seems premised on the idea that they aren't to be trusted. Some of the technologies are really quite invasive, monitoring things like a driver's eyelids or his brainwaves to see how tired he is. And maybe we could stomach some of this if there was really a demonstrable impact on safety. But we don't even have evidence that safety has increased. In fact, the data we have show that

truck crash rates have gone up since ELDs were made mandatory.

**Q: Did your opinion of ELDs and their utility change over the course of researching this book?**

A: I think one of the things that became really clear for me over time is that if there are negative implications of a new technology, like ELDs, the answer isn't necessarily just to go back to the status quo. That's often where the conversation goes—that the "old way" of doing something was better. But in trucking, the status quo has been pretty terrible economically for workers. So I think the key is not to say, "Let's just undo the technology," and have that be the endpoint of the analysis. I think the key is to say, "Well, the technology is a clue that there's a bigger social or [economic problem](#). What should be done about that?"

**Q: Why is simply throwing technology at a problem that is non-technological (overworked, underpaid truckers) a bad thing?**

A: Often, when we use technology to try to solve a problem, what is actually happening is that we are using technology to avoid solving a different, bigger problem. In trucking, there are huge problems with truckers not being paid for their work. Truckers are exempt from the Fair Labor Standards Act, which guarantees overtime pay to most workers. And they're generally paid by the mile, which means that they make no money at all for all the time they spend waiting to be loaded or unloaded at terminals, or doing inspections, or sitting in traffic. That routinely adds up to several hours a day of unpaid work. So because of this, it's not surprising that truckers are incentivized to drive as much as they can, even when they're tired—it's the only way they can make money! And monitoring them really doesn't change or challenge these root causes of overwork. If we really want to prevent truckers from

driving while tired, what we need is economic reform to address the root causes.

**Q: Do you foresee a time when ELDs will no longer be required? Or are they working from an industry perspective?**

A: That depends what we mean by "working." Are they making the roads safer for the public? The evidence doesn't suggest that they are. Are they giving managers more oversight? Absolutely. Are they generating value for third-party companies that want to sell stuff, like parking spaces, to truckers? Also yes. In the book, I talk about how the biggest impact of the government mandate of ELDs is that it scaffolds a bunch of additional surveillance by private firms—it's all interoperable, because the [technology](#) bundles it all together. So for this reason, I think ELDs are very likely to stick around, whether or not they accomplish their stated goal.

Provided by Cornell University

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