



Dongles Watch Your Driving

You've probably seen the insurance commercials. Just plug in a free dongle so the insurance company can track how you drive your car. You might save some money on your insurance bill. Then again, you might not. It depends on how, where, and what you drive.

The dongle plugs into the OBD-II diagnostic socket, which has a power and a controller-area network (CAN) connection to the rest of the car. The socket can be found in every car made after 1996. It provides access to data about the car and its operation. The dongle adds a micro, a GPS receiver, and a cellular interface.

I wasn't too fond of the idea of letting my insurance company track me, but I did think that it might be a good idea if I could get that information myself. As it turns out, we all can, for a price.


Audiovox's Car Connection (CC), which has an OBD-II dongle with GPS and cellular support, is now plugged into my 2010 Toyota Prius (*see the figure*). It tracks my car's every move. I can find my car in a parking lot using the Android app on my smart phone. My wife can see where the car is too. I don't have one on her car yet.

The location information would be handier if my kids weren't off and married. CC lets you set up Safety Zones and texts you if the car goes outside of them. It is handy for tracking older or younger drivers who might have limits set on their driving.

What I have found more useful is the driving information. Of course, it says I should slow down to get better gas mileage. I did chuckle at its hint not to let the car idle, though. The Prius doesn't run when it's sitting still.

The system is supposed to provide diagnostic details if the car alerts you to a problem. I wish the app would provide this info anytime. Engineers and car buffs would love that, but it would probably just confuse the average consumer. The system will track and notify you about regular maintenance, but I had to set up the schedule myself. It would have been nice if the software did this itself, since it knows the make and model of the car.

There ain't no such thing as a free lunch (TANSTAAFL). There is an upfront cost and a reasonable annual subscription for CC. That insurance dongle might appear to be free, but it ain't. Even a lower insurance rate will cover its cost in the long run.

In theory, the tracking and automotive information that CC generates will only be available to me. That may be cold comfort these days with the likes of the National Security Agency looking over everyone's Internet shoulder. In the meantime, I'll keep a closer eye on my Prius using my smart phone. 



(a)



(b)

Audiovox's Car Connection dongle (a) plugs into a socket found under the dash (b).

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