

Since when did driving become a state secret?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

It's not so much the Idaho Transportation Department - and every transportation outfit in the other 49 states - is selling off information it gleans from driver's licenses and vehicle registrations.

It's not even that ITD makes about \$5.4 million - most of which is net profit - although there is something unseemly about the government using public data as a business model.

What ought to have you steamed is this notion that erstwhile public documents - a driver's license and automobile registration - are off-limits to ordinary citizens and even most businesses.

For that, you can thank Congress. Almost 20 years ago, it declared that only a handful of privileged groups could obtain driver's licenses and vehicle registrations.

If you're a data collection outfit that helps automobile manufacturers locate owners of cars during a product recall, fine.

If you're an insurance company looking to verify that a policy holder owns the car in question and is licensed to drive, go ahead.

Same goes if you're engaged in labor market research and you want to compare the relative youth of a region's work force.

But if you are trying to sell parts to everyone who drives a Corvette or accessories to Jeep owners, forget it.

If you are simply curious about who was driving a car in your neighborhood last week, you're also out of luck.

It's been decades since Idaho naively listed anyone's Social Security number on a driver's license. So what's the big deal? Is the listing of your address, your age, a physical description or the kind of car you drive any more sensitive than:

- The number of times you've been married and divorced - and to whom?
- The house you own, where it's located, what it's worth and how much you pay in property taxes?
- The last time you skipped an election?
- Whether you're registered as a Republican or a Democrat? (That's on file because Idaho's lawmakers closed the state primary election to non-registered voters at the GOP's insistence.)

- Which candidates for political office you've helped with a check?
- Anytime you signed a petition to recall an elected official, repeal a law or pass a new one?
- Whether you have a lead foot?

That's not government invading your privacy. That's the individual entering the public arena - a wedding, the filing of a deed, participating in the political process or getting a speeding ticket - and creating a public document in the process.

To say nothing of the information you give away to for-profit businesses. Your magazine subscriptions. Where you shop and what you buy. Much of that information ends up on a list.

Truly private stuff remains private. Your income tax return is confidential. So is your banking information. As well as any health history.

But in this Internet age, a few keystrokes will kick loose a passel of facts on people - to say nothing of the information they volunteer on Facebook.

Getting a driver's license is a public act. We live in an open society where what the government does is subject to public inspection - whether it's a company looking to make a profit or an individual who wants to satisfy his curiosity.

Whatever the fallout - and it's usually nothing more serious than getting more junk in the mail - it certainly beats the alternative where every public document is treated as a state secret. - M.T.