

# *I Used Apple AirTags, Tiles and a GPS Tracker to Watch My Husband's Every Move*

A vast location-tracking network is being built around us so we don't lose our keys: One couple's adventures in the consumer tech surveillance state.

By Kashmir Hill and Photographs By Todd Heisler

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In mid-January, my husband and I were having an argument. Our 1-year-old had just tested positive for Covid-19 and was occasionally grunting between breaths. I called urgent care and was told we should take her to the emergency room. But, because I had been up all night with her, I was too exhausted to drive.

"I'm worried," I told my husband. "I want you to take her to the hospital."

"Doctors always tell us to take the baby to the E.R. whenever we call about anything," he replied, exasperated. (This was true.) "She is fine. She is eating and playing and happy. This is not an emergency."

He eventually caved and set out for the hospital a half-hour away. Knowing he was already annoyed by me, I did not want to pepper him with questions about how it was going.

Instead, I turned to the location-monitoring devices that I had secretly stashed in our car a week earlier.

I put a quarter-sized Apple AirTag in a seat pocket; a flat, credit card-shaped Bluetooth tracker made by Tile in a dashboard pocket; and a hockey-puck-like GPS tracker from a company called LandAirSea in the glove compartment.

I realize I sound like the worst wife ever, so let me explain. It was for journalism.

Apple released chic, sleek AirTags early last year as a way to keep track of keys and purses. Given the company's history of introducing products — such as the original iPhone — that lead to mass adoption, AirTags could well lead consumers to location track *everything* all the time, so that nothing is ever lost again, ushering in a surveillance state with the cleanest of aesthetics.

But every new convenience comes with a price: In recent months, people have freaked out after finding AirTags hidden in their bags and on their cars. They were scared about being stalked or followed by someone wanting to steal their vehicles. A *Sports Illustrated* model, Brooks Nader, said she found one in her coat pocket after visiting a Manhattan bar. All these people received warnings on their iPhones, a feature Apple had built into the AirTag system to help prevent unwanted tracking.



I shared the feed from the LandAirSea GPS tracker with the photographer Todd Heisler so he could follow my husband around New York City.

When my colleague and I reported on this, experts we spoke with were of two minds about Apple's attempts to prevent nefarious use, with some saying the alerts were inadequate and others praising the company for unearthing a larger problem: widespread surreptitious tracking, usually done with devices that don't notify a person of their presence.

I decided to examine both claims by planting three AirTags, three Tiles, and a GPS tracker on my husband and his belongings to see how precisely they revealed his movements and which ones he discovered.

Some states, including New York, where we live, have laws criminalizing this sort of thing. Not wanting to break the law, or my husband's trust, I had asked him for permission.

It was not the first time I had subjected him to my brand of experimental reporting. I've been covering privacy for more than a decade, and have found that the best way to concretely explain the dystopian implications of new technologies is to immerse myself in them, guinea pig-style.

My husband has lived on Bitcoin with me, been spied on by our "smart home," and watched me give up the tech giants. (He would not give them up himself, saying, "I have a job," but he agreed to unplug our Amazon Echo.) He also happens to be a professional press freedom advocate, so I was fairly certain he'd be game.

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"You can do it," he said. "But it'll be boring. We're in a pandemic. I never go anywhere."

Our lives are certainly less exciting these days. We see practically no one but each other or my in-laws. On top of a pandemic, it's winter here in the Northeast, so we're home most of the time. But my husband does occasionally leave the house, and I wanted to track him when he did.

When an editor proposed sending a photographer to surreptitiously follow him in person one day — to show visually the movements I was tracking digitally — a small part of me worried I might discover something I didn't want to know. A little privacy is good for any marriage.

### **'Is it in my shoe?'**

Thirty minutes after my husband and youngest departed for the hospital, I opened an app linked to the most precise tracker in my arsenal, the \$30 LandAirSea device. To activate it costs extra, because it needs a cellular plan to relay where global positioning satellites have placed it. I chose the cheapest plan, \$19.95 monthly, to get location updates every three minutes; the most expensive plan, for updates every three seconds, was \$49.95.

The app has an "InstaFence" feature that can alert me when the car moves, and a "Playback" option to show where the car has been, so I could see the exact route on windy roads my husband had taken. I saw that he parked at 4:55 p.m., so I wasn't surprised when I got a text from him 12 minutes later reporting that they were in the waiting room.

The other trackers in the car — the \$34.99 Tile and \$29 AirTag — didn't work as well in real time out in the sparsely populated area where we live. The AirTag, designed to find keys left behind "at the beach," took an hour or so to reveal that the car was in the hospital parking lot. The Tile, intended to "find misplaced things nearby and far away," never realized it had moved from our garage. That's because these devices rely on Bluetooth technology.

Rather than communing with satellites circling the planet, they ping devices within 30 or so feet of them, such as the smartphone held by another person standing in line at the pharmacy. To help track down AirTags, Apple enlisted, per its own description, "hundreds of millions of iPhones, iPads and Mac devices all over the world." That meant the AirTag's effectiveness skyrocketed the day my husband traveled to New York City, because he was surrounded by people carrying iPhones.



My husband did not realize he had three location trackers in his backpack and a photographer trailing him.

Yes, the internet of things — *our* things — is coming alive around us, digitally frisking us as we walk by to see if we're carrying anything of interest.

The day before his trip, when I knew he was far from the house, thanks to the car trackers, I sneaked into his office and hid an AirTag, a Tile and the GPS tracker in various pockets of his backpack. This felt incredibly invasive, and was the moment I felt most conflicted about the experiment.

It was a good thing I did, though, because he wound up switching coats that day, and not wearing the one I had originally loaded up with devices. When he got into Manhattan, the AirTag became my most powerful tracker, outperforming the GPS device, and allowing me to tell a photographer exactly where he was at all times.

The Tile tracker was not quite as well-informed. Its system is similar to Apple's but far fewer people have the Tile app on their phones than own Apple devices. Forty million Tiles have been sold, the company said last year.

Another key difference between Tile and AirTag is that if an iPhone detects an unknown AirTag continuously moving with it, the iPhone owner gets a notification, along with a map showing where the tracking started. (Android owners, meanwhile, have to download a special app to look for AirTags. Tile said it planned to release a similar app for people worried about unwanted tracking.)

Within two hours of my putting all the trackers in our car, my husband, who has an iPhone, got an alert about the AirTag, after running an errand.

The problem was that he couldn't find it. The alert said he could make the AirTag play a sound, but when he attempted to do so, his phone wouldn't connect to the device. This happened multiple times, and he started to get frustrated. "Is it in my shoe?" he asked me at one point, taking his blue Nike off and peering at it. "You have to tell me. I don't want to destroy my shoe looking for it."

The one time his iPhone connected to the AirTag in the car, so he could play the noise, it was so hard to tell where it was coming from that he gave up looking for it after five minutes.

The critics were right: Apple's safeguards against nefarious use weren't foolproof.

Apple itself has realized the inadequacy of its safeguards and announced improvements this week, including making the devices louder and telling AirTag users that tracking someone without consent is a crime.

My husband, of course, had agreed to this in principle, but didn't realize just how many devices I had planted on him. Of the seven trackers, he found only two: a Tile he felt in the breast pocket of his coat and an AirTag in his backpack when he was looking for something else. "It is impossible to find a device that makes no noise and gives no warning," he said, when I showed him the ones he missed.

## **Flying under the radar**

My husband had lunch in Brooklyn, and the GPS tracker showed me where. It did lose its signal underground, which meant the photographer briefly lost track of his subject. But the AirTag kept up.

Alyson Messenger, a lawyer in Los Angeles who works with survivors of domestic violence, said she knew of two women stalked by former partners with AirTags. She thinks other cases are “flying under the radar.”

An abuser could also put spyware on a person's phone to track them, but that requires time, access and knowing their passcode. With these location-tracking devices, a person “just needs to get close enough to a victim or their property to place them,” Ms. Messenger said. “It's insidious because the devices are so discreet and unnoticeable. We suspect it is happening and victims don't know.”

The AirTag and Tile are marketed to find lost things, but LandAirSea describes the purpose of its GPS tracker somewhat differently. “The ultimate in discreet tracking,” its Amazon page brags, where it is ranked as the best selling GPS tracker. “Keep track of movement in real-time with your very own private eye.”

The first time I ordered a LandAirSea tracker on Amazon, the device for finding things, incredibly, got lost in the mail. I got a refund and reordered. When it did arrive, I opened its plain white box to find instructions for setting it up, but no information on the legal implications of using the device.

On the inside bottom of the box, there was a message designed to look handwritten: “We are a small family business so your review would mean the world to us!” Many of those online reviews explicitly discuss users' secretly tracking loved ones.

“If you're using this to find out if your spouse is cheating on you. Please have a mental health plan for the aftermath,” someone named Jason wrote in a five-star Amazon review posted on New Year's Eve. “I bought this with the intent to find out where my wife was going after work every night and random ‘me’ days she was having. Turns out it was another guy.”

A one-star review posted on the company's site a few months ago, by someone claiming to be 16, declared a GPS tracker secretly placed on his car by his father “too easy to find.” “Your parents didn't track you, don't track us,” the teen admonished.

## **‘Too ripe for abuse?’**

I could see where my husband was, even when he went underground to take the subway to Brooklyn, because the AirTag's location was reported by the many iPhones carried by New Yorkers.

With my LandAirSea tracker updating me on my husband's every trip to the grocery store and detour to Dunkin' Donuts for a coffee, I wanted to talk to someone at the company about the product. Jared Zientz, the director of analytics there since 2020, told me that the Illinois-based LandAirSea was founded 26 years ago, originally to track airplanes.

I asked Mr. Zientz about how LandAirSea dealt with people using its devices for unwanted spying.

"It's certainly something that comes up," Mr. Zientz said. "People call in, and they're like, 'I found this on my car. What are you going to do about it?'"

The company, which sells about 15,000 devices per month, according to Mr. Zientz, tells these callers they should go to the police, because they will need a subpoena to determine who owns the device they discovered. He estimated that the company received approximately 30 subpoenas per year.

Mr. Zientz said many people arrive at these products after searching online for "spouse tracker," but that the company was trying to discourage this by marketing the device for "asset protection" and "fleet management." I asked Mr. Zientz why the company didn't have any messaging about the legality of its devices on its website or in its packaging.

After my husband got home at 7 p.m., having been tracked over 150 miles and around Manhattan and Brooklyn all day, his iPhone finally alerted him: "AirTag Detected Near You"

"It's in our terms somewhere," he said. (He was referring to boilerplate language on the LandAirSea website forbidding using it for "any unlawful purpose.") "Each state has different laws so we can't even broadly say, 'this is illegal,' or whatever," he added.

Mr. Zientz said he had tried out Apple's AirTags, in part to see whether they might encroach on LandAirSea's business. "Me and my girlfriend both had them in our luggage," he said. Because they worked only with iPhones, he didn't see them as a threat. Since AirTags have come out, LandAirSea has actually sold more trackers, according to Mr. Zientz, a bump he attributed to an uptick in car theft.

Asked for comment about my experiment, a Tile spokesman, Scott Coriell said, "Tile is designed to help people find their things, not for tracking people." He said using a Tile like this violates the terms of use and "can result in a permanent ban from Tile."

The day after I asked Apple for comment, the company released "an update on AirTag and unwanted tracking." "Unwanted tracking has long been a societal problem, and we took this concern seriously in the design of AirTag," Apple said in the statement.

There are certainly plenty of legitimate uses for this technology. Having a tracker in a teen's car, *with* their knowledge and consent, can provide peace of mind to a parent. Bluetooth trackers helped a family keep a moving company honest and located a stolen car. But Albert Fox Cahn, the executive director of the Surveillance Technology Oversight Project, thinks the devices are "too ripe for abuse" to exist.

"No one should be able to buy a tool to track their loved ones this easily and this cheaply," Mr. Cahn said. There are already state laws against this, but Mr. Cahn said that prohibitions won't stop bad actors.

"Any time you build a product and use threat of prosecution to prevent misuse, that's a fig leaf, not a real deterrent," he said. Mr. Cahn thinks the devices shouldn't be available at all.

## **My husband was right**

Within an hour of our daughter getting to the hospital, a nurse had checked her oxygen levels and declared them "really good."

The reason I was allowed to share this tale of marital strife is that my husband was correct: We did not need to take our toddler to the hospital. The doctor even said so after reviewing an X-ray of her lungs and declaring her fine. At 7:17 p.m., my husband texted that they were heading home. I watched their progress on my app.

He was also right about the tracking overall being pretty boring. There were no surprises about where he went. The biggest surprise to me was how nerve-racking it felt to surveil him, and how guilty I felt about what he didn't know, such as the photographer tailing him. It was a relief when it was over, and I let my husband read a draft of this article.

At the end of the day, my husband got an alert on his phone. He was unable to get the AirTag to play a sound.



“For all the bad press the AirTags have gotten, and as flaky as the detection mechanisms were, at least I was consistently getting notifications they were following me,” he said. “The privacy dangers of the other trackers were way worse.”

Now that the article is done, I will stop paying \$20 a month for the LandAirSea tracker to report the car's minute-by-minute movements, but I think I'll leave the AirTag in it. It will make it easier to find the car in a vast parking lot.

“What!?” my husband said, reading this. “We are NOT keeping an AirTag in the car.”

Audio produced by Kate Winslett.