Investigation and Interpretation of Black Box Data in Automobiles: A Guide to the Concepts and Formats of Computer Data in Vehicle Safety and Control Systems

William Rosenbluth
Monograph 4
Investigation and Interpretation of Black Box Data in Automobiles:

William Rosenbluth

ASTM Monograph Series
ASTM Stock Number: MONO4

ASTM
100 Barr Harbor Drive
PO Box C700
West Conshohocken, PA 19428-2959, USA

Copublished with SAE
SAE Order Number R-313

Society of Automotive Engineers, Inc.
400 Commonwealth Drive
Warrendale, PA 15096-0001, USA
Dedication

This book is dedicated to my wife, Jean Joy Rosenbluth. Her strong belief in me, and her continuous encouragement, patience, and ever present support in the face of manifold adversities and diversions, made possible the development of the data skills and the laboratory where I accomplished much of the work and learning chronicled herein. That foundation ultimately made this book possible.
Foreword

This publication, Investigation and Interpretation of Black Box Data in Automobiles: A Guide to the Concepts and Formats of Computer Data in Vehicle Safety and Control Systems, was sponsored by Committee E30 on Forensic Sciences and the Society of Automotive Engineers, Inc. This is Monograph 4 in ASTM's monograph series.
Acknowledgments

The author wishes to acknowledge and thank the following people whose interest, participation, and contributions unquestionably enhanced the quality and content of this book:

Holly A. Adams, Automotive Systems Analysis, Inc., Reston, VA, for her original analysis and decrypting of complex EEPROM data and formats, for her contributions to the practical illustration of these data, many of which are in this book, and for her meticulous review of the many preliminary drafts.

Mark W. Arndt, Transportation Safety Technologies, Inc., Mesa, AZ, for his contribution to the Vetronix CDR investigation.

Fred H. Chandler, Jr., Chandler & Sons Automotive, Sterling, VA, for his skilled participation in many of the tests discussed in this book, and for the use of his extensive automotive electronics scanner and test tool resources, and for his professional inspection facility, used for many of the tests documented herein.

Dr. Eugen I. Muehldorf, TRW, retired, Potomac, MD, for his contribution and review of the physics and mathematics associated with Newton’s laws of motion and with crash pulse modeling.

Edward M. Ricci, Esq., Ricci, Hubbard, Leopold, Frankel & Farmer, West Palm Beach, FL, for his encouragement and support of detailed analysis methods used to perform multiple comparative EEPROM crash-data analyses.

Gerald Rosenbluth, Automotive Consulting Services, Inc., Tempe, AZ, for the use of his extensive library of specifications and service data, and for his professional inspection facility used to conduct many of the tests documented herein.

Steven Rosenbluth, The Jim Henson Company, Inc., Hollywood, CA, for his pioneering development of electronic data interfaces, interrogation software, and original data interpretation formats, all of which have allowed us to perform multiple comparative EEPROM crash-data analyses, for both simulated and real crash events.
Contents

Preface xiii

Chapter 1—Background and Evolution of On-Board Vehicle Data, Diagnostics, and Communication Capabilities 1
  1.1 Introduction to Vehicle Electronic Feedback Control 1
  1.2 Examples of On-Board Vehicle Systems with Data Memory 1
  1.3 The Architecture of an ECU 3
  1.4 Vehicle Environments with Multiple System ECUs 8
  1.5 On-Board Diagnostics—I (OBD-II) 10
  1.6 Freeze Frame Data that is Useful for Crash Analysis 14

Chapter 2—Geometric Conventions, the Physical Laws of Motion, Acceleration Models, and Numbering Systems 30
  2.1 Geometric Conventions, Vehicle Trajectories, and Principal Direction of Force (PDOF) 30
  2.2 The Physical Laws of Motion 32
  2.3 Acceleration Models 34
  2.4 Evaluating Collision Severity Using Force, Acceleration, Velocity, and Distance Relationships 39
  2.5 Collision Pulse Characteristics, (Barriers, Vehicle-to-Vehicle Longitudinal, Pole Impacts, Side Impacts, Underrides) 42
  2.6 Numbering Systems, Common Units, and Conversion Factors 45

Chapter 3—A Review of Air Bag System Architecture, Components, and Stored Data 49
  3.1 Air Bags as a Safety Device 49
  3.2 Air Bag Supplemental Restraints, Crash Pulse Input Vectors, and Design Axis Sensitivity 49
  3.3 Components of Air Bag (SRS) Systems 50
  3.4 Operation and Timing 60
  3.5 Diagnostics, DTCs and Crash Data 60

Chapter 4—A Review of Antilock Braking and Traction Control Systems 72
  4.1 Foundation Braking Systems 72
  4.2 Antilock Braking Systems 72
  4.3 Traction Control Systems 74
  4.4 Components of ABS/TCS Units 75
  4.5 ABS/TCS Diagnostics and Data Example 77
Chapter 5—Finding Data in Post Crash Vehicles and Deriving Useful Data Parameters

5.1 Getting at the Data via On-Vehicle Diagnostic Ports or Individual ECU Umbilicals
5.2 Getting at the Data In ECUs Affected by Crash and Fire Damage
5.3 Finding Out If An ECU Has Data in EEPROM or Flash Memory
5.4 Identifying ECU EEPROM/Flash Memory Interrogation Codes
5.5 Deriving Restraint System Deployment Timing Response from Crash Parameters

Chapter 6—Using ECU Electronic Data to Derive Case-Specific Analyses

6.1 Case Analysis Objectives and Introduction
6.2 The Anatomy of a Crash Pulse and Associated Freeze Frame Data
6.3 Occupant Dynamics with respect to a Vehicle Impact and Air Bag Deployments
6.4 Hypothetical Case 1, Analysis of a Crash Where Switch-Sensor Time Intervals are Recorded
6.5 Hypothetical Case 2, Analysis of a Crash Where Peak Acceleration and Base Duration are Recorded
6.6 Hypothetical Case 3, Analysis of a Crash Where Time Period Accelerations are Recorded
6.7 Hypothetical Case 4, Analysis of a Simple Crash where Cumulative Velocity Change Over a Fixed Period of Time Samples is Recorded
6.8 Hypothetical Case 5, Analysis of a Complex Crash Where Cumulative Velocity Change Over a Fixed Period of Time Samples is Recorded
6.9 Case 6, Extended Analysis of a 1999 Model Year Vehicle Crash—Documented via CDR Download in Chapter 3
6.10 Case Analysis Summary

Chapter 7—The Future of Vehicle Black Box Data Storage

7.1 Forecasting Advanced Electronics Applications in Vehicles and Complementary Event Data Storage Capabilities
7.2 Government and Industry Activities Concerning Ground Vehicle Event Data Recorders
7.3 Advanced Occupant Sensing, Collision Detection, and Safety Protection Systems
7.4 Wish List Parameters in Future Vehicle Crash Event Data Recorders
Appendix A—Glossary of Terms and Conversion Factors Used in
Vehicle Data System 129
Appendix A.2.1—Conversion Factors by Unit MPH 141
Appendix A.2.2—Conversion Factors by Unit KPH 143

Appendix B—Scan Tools, Scanners, Bus Interfaces, and
Manufacturer Contacts 145

Appendix C—Government Standards and Regulations (CARB,
DOT/NHTSA, EPA) 149

Appendix D—Industry Standards and Specifications (SAE, ASTM,
ISO, etc.) 150

Appendix E.1—Comparison of Recorded Data Parameters, Aircraft
versus Automotive Black Boxes 152

Appendix E.2—Parameters in SRS and ABS ECUs 156

References 157
Bibliography 159
Index 161
CERTAINLY NO ONE WISHES FOR AN AIRCRAFT DISASTER, but when one occurs, everyone wants to know why. In the analysis of aircraft disasters, among the primary investigative tools used by the FAA and NTSB are the continuing data recorders on the aircraft itself. Those data recorders, the cockpit voice recorder (CVR) and the digital flight data recorder (DFDR) shown in Fig. P1, are colloquially known as black boxes and are often the focus of intensive searches at the crash site because of the valuable information they may contain about conditions before and during the last moments of aircraft operation. The CVRs and DFDRs save their data in media that survive most crashes, and their information and operational parameters could help identify human error, equipment malfunction, or unexpected weather anomalies. But, not all situations can be predicted. For example, in the Oct. 25, 1999 Learjet crash that killed golfer Payne Stewart and five others, investigators did not find any CVR voice information because it operated as a 30 minute tape loop. Unfortunately, the likely decompression incident happened in the first 30 minutes of flight, hours before the crash-caused loss of power stopped the tape loop. By that time, all persons were unconscious, the valuable cockpit conversation(s) were overwritten, and the only data on the CVR were cabin pressure and stall warnings as the plane ran out of fuel (Moss 1999; Lunsford 1999; Hembree 1999; NTSB Advisory 1999; NTSB Investigation undated).

Technology advances within the past ten years have allowed increasingly sophisticated nonvolatile electronic data storage capabilities on automobiles and trucks. Among the first were electronic odometers, which saved the vehicle cumulative mileage, even if the battery was disconnected. Application of nonvolatile electronic data storage was then incorporated to assist with the diagnosis and repair of intermittent electronic faults that would otherwise be difficult or impossible to diagnose. Systems having the capability to incorporate nonvolatile electronic data storage include engine fuel management (EFI), antilock braking (ABS), automatic traction control (ATC), cruise control (CC), air bags (SRS), and seat belt tensioners (ETR). Figure P2 shows a simple example of ECU controllers for the ABS and SRS.

One byproduct of the incorporation of nonvolatile electronic data storage for diagnosis and repair is the utility of this electronically saved data to assist land vehicle investigators in determining vehicle conditions before and during an accident in a way unavailable by previous post accident mechanical analysis techniques. However, because the original intent of this electronically saved data capability was to assist repair, and not necessarily to assist accident investigation, these data are often distributed among several different units, which save data in their own formats and for their own diagnostic purposes (EFI, ABS, ATC, CC, SRS, ETR, etc.).

In each system that incorporates computer control, the assembly containing the integrated circuit microprocessor unit (MPU) is called the electronic control unit (ECU). Within the ECU, the desired nonvolatile information is saved in EEPROM. 2 This information usually includes diagnostic trouble codes (DTCs), and optional pa-

---

1 DFDRs on commercial airlines save over 50 mandatory and 30 optional parameters. A reference showing a complete list of DFDR parameters, including a comparison to known automotive parameters, is shown in Appendix E. "A Comparison of Recorded Data Parameters, Aircraft versus Automotive Black Boxes."

2 EEPROM—Electrically Erasable Programmable Read Only Memory. EEPROM is fabricated using a special semiconductor construction that allows it to retain previously stored data even when the battery is disconnected. A similarly functioning technology, Flash Memory, is also used for this purpose.

3 Often called error codes.
metric data. Because EEPROM is nonvolatile, it retains its data even when the battery is disconnected. EEPROM data are downloaded from a vehicle ECU using a scanner or via a microprocessor interface, in much the same way as a credit card terminal is used to query a central data bank to authorize a credit purchase. This concept is shown in Fig. P3. There are two levels of stored data: repair-level DTCs and engineering-level

4 Scanner—Small hand-held microprocessor capable of sending serial data commands to a vehicle ECU and then receiving and selectively recording/interpreting ECU serial response data.
parametric crash data. Generally, repair-level scanners cannot access engineering-level data, whereas engineering-level scanners can access all data.

As we have discussed above, certain crash-related data may be stored in the EE-PROMs of several vehicle ECUs, requiring the use of several scanners, one dedicated to each type of system ECU, to acquire a complete set of crash data. This is shown schematically in Fig. P3. Newer vehicle models\textsuperscript{5} utilize advanced scanners that often incorporate multi-system interrogation functions in a single unit.

Thus, the concept of vehicle black box data is actually an umbrella term, which implies using data components that are obtained by interrogating several different system units that can be assembled to provide a set of electronically saved data useful to the accident investigator.

In addition to scanners, a laboratory computer interface can be used to accomplish the EEPROM download process for both repair and engineering-level data. Sometimes, this method provides more detail than field scanners can provide. An illustration of a laboratory download of air bag ECU EEPROM data is shown in Fig. P4.

Engineering-level data can incorporate additional parameters such as time, ignition cycles, velocity change, pre-event velocity, acceleration profile, seat belt status, and other crash event data.

When a set of data is saved only after a certain condition or event, that data is often called a freeze frame, and the triggering condition is called the event trigger. An air bag ECU data event trigger is a crash deployment command, and the saved freeze frame data can identify crash timing, crash velocity changes, seat belt usage, etc. An ABS ECU event trigger can be any DTC, for example, a front wheel sensor malfunction DTC as caused by a crash. The saved freeze frame data can identify wheel speeds, brake apply status, ignition cycles, etc., at the time the DTC was set.

If a crash event has triggered both of the above freeze frame examples, one can see how the combined set of saved data can present an extended overview of vehicle conditions at a critical moment, such as the instant of the crash.

The balance of this book identifies where and how to find various data parameters, as saved in various freeze frames, which have multiple formats, and shows how to interpret and combine them so their sum can present a vehicle condition overview that can provide significant additional information when compared to traditional post accident mechanical analysis techniques. As we continue this investigation, we will

\textsuperscript{5}Models starting with the 1996 model year are mandated to have OBD-II compliant scanners, many of which incorporate multi-communication protocols and multi-system functions in a single integrated scanner unit.
also cover some mathematical structures, basic Newtonian physics, and basic electronic circuits. These concepts are then integrated into several case studies.

Also included are several appendices with information useful to investigators in this field:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Glossary of Terms and Conversion Factors Used in Vehicle Data Systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Scan Tools, Scanners, Bus Interfaces, and Manufacturer Contacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Government Standards and Regulations (CARB, DOT/NHTSA, EPA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Industry Standards and Specifications (SAE, ASTM, ISO, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Comparison of Recorded Data Parameters, Aircraft versus Automotive Black Boxes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In conclusion, the reader should be aware that, just as with aircraft CVR and DFDR data, the inexorable progress of time and technology will serve to make the set of available crash event data increasingly more complete and more useful. These advances will almost certainly incorporate increasingly more complex data formats and sources, so the methods and formats discussed herein will probably be considered only a primer for future investigators probing electronically saved data.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

WILLIAM ROSENBLUTH is a Fellow of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS), a member of the Society of Automotive Engineers (SAE), the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM), the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers (IEEE), and the IEEE Computer Society.

At IEEE and AAFS, he has presented over 40 papers dealing with automotive engineering investigations, co-instructed a continuing education short course, and organized engineering technical sessions. His engineering achievements were recognized by the AAFS at its February 1999 meeting, where he was presented with the Andrew H. Payne, Jr. Special Achievement Award for Pioneering New Procedures, Outstanding Professional Performance and Outstanding Forensic Engineering Leadership.

He was employed by the IBM corporation for 21 years, and for the past 15 years he has been principal engineer for Automotive Systems Analysis, Inc. (ASA), in Reston, Virginia.

He holds three US Patents, including one for a device to measure air bag static deployment throw and velocity using digital data acquisition.

His publications include a paper summarizing his work on low-speed rear-end impacts and occupant stress parameters published in the Journal of Forensic Sciences, a book chapter covering vehicle air bag systems and internal information and codes published by LEXIS Law Publishing and two articles on high speed sensors and data acquisition for Sensors Magazine.

He lives with his wife Jean in Reston, Virginia.