

Huge Tesla leak reveals thousands of safety concerns, privacy problems

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reader comments

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The German publication Handelsblatt is in possession of more than 23,000 internal files and documents from Tesla after an employee leaked the data. The files include personal information on more than 100,000 current and former employees, as well as thousands of reports of problems with Tesla's advanced driving assistance systems, Autopilot, and "Full Self-Driving."

The earliest complaints in the data trove date back to 2015, and the most recent to March 2022. Most of the complaints arise from the US, although European and Asian customer problems are also reflected in the data.

More than 2,400 complaints allege sudden unintended acceleration problems. Although Autopilot and FSD have been the focus of headlines for the last few years, during the mid-2010s there were plenty of reports of Teslas taking off on their own accord—at least 232 cases have been reported in the US, although (as often turns out in cases like these) the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration found no evidence for a hardware or software problem, instead blaming driver error.

More than 1,500 complaints allege problems braking, including 139 cases of phantom braking and 383 cases of phantom stops. In February 2022, we learned that the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration had opened a safety investigation into Tesla's phantom braking problem after it received hundreds of complaints after an article in The Washington Post drew attention to the issue. But the problem has persisted, causing an eight-car collision over Thanksgiving after Tesla opened up its FSD Beta program to all owners.

Handelsblatt says there were more than 1,000 crashes linked to brake problems and more than 3,000 entries where customers reported safety concerns with the driver assists.

The German publication even went to the trouble of contacting Tesla owners to confirm the data was correct.

A doctor from California, for example, who wishes to remain anonymous, told the Handelsblatt about an incident from autumn 2021. She was about to turn in a parking lot when her Tesla suddenly accelerated like a racing car. "I tried to steer but crashed into a cement bollard," the customer recalls. "He fell over, but the car didn't stop. I drove into the nearest bollard. The airbag went off and I was stunned."

Between January and October 2021, the Swiss Thomas Karl complained to Tesla about a dozen incorrect braking attempts with his vehicle. Karl was a regular customer, had been for ten years. But his new Model S made him nervous, as email correspondence with Tesla makes clear.

"Hello gentlemen, believe me that I'm starting to lose my nerve?" Karl wrote on July 26, 2021 about another incident. His Tesla had an accident on the Swiss A3 between Flums and Sargans "after being overhauled vehicle made an emergency stop that scared and worried".

According to Manfred Schon, he experienced something similar

on the M14 highway. The former Bosch employee was on his way to a meeting in the US state of Michigan on June 1, 2019 when his Tesla “suddenly slammed on the brakes, as hard as you can imagine,” Schon told the Handelsblatt. “I was pushed into the seat belt and the car almost came to a stop. Then another car hit me from behind.”

The Tesla files contain similar cases in Germany. One customer complained that his Tesla had “driven into a median barrier on the freeway”. The reason was the autopilot’s emergency braking. Another reported to customer service about his Model S: “Drives into oncoming traffic.”

Beyond the customer complaints, the data leak also shows how Tesla responded to these problems—by committing to as little as possible in writing.

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For each incident there are key points for the “technical review”. The employees who enter this review into the system regularly make it clear that the report is intended for “internal use only”. Each entry also contains the note in bold type that information, if at all, may only be passed on “**VERBALLY** to the customer”.

“Do not copy the report below into an email, text message or leave it in a voicemail to the customer,” it continues. Vehicle data should also not be released without permission. If, despite the advice, “a legal involvement cannot be prevented”, this must be recorded.

Customers that Handelsblatt spoke to have the impression that Tesla employees avoid written communication. “They never sent emails, everything was always oral,” says the doctor from California, whose Tesla said it accelerated on its own in the fall of 2021 and crashed into two concrete pillars.

As anyone who covers Tesla would be able to tell you, Handelsblatt got no reply from the company when it queried it on the problems listed above. However, the automaker did demand its data back, according to an accompanying note from Handelsblatt's editor.

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