The nanny state should loosen its grip on cell phones

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We've written [1] a lot [2] on ECN [3] about automotive safety and its intersection with cutting-edge technology. Texting, Facebooking, and web surfing pose a serious concern for distracted drivers (not to mention pilots [4], train conductors [5], and boat captains [6]), but the nanny state has really overreached on this one [7]: A California court recently found a motorist guilty of distracted driving for checking a map on his iPhone.

The incident highlights just how frightened many of us are by modern technology.

Ideally, we'd never perform activities that divert our attention from the road. We'd never look at a map, put on makeup, have a snack, or text a friend. We'd always use Bluetooth handheld devices and GPS to ensure that we don't become distracted drivers.

But not everyone owns a Bluetooth handset and GPS. And of all those potential distractions, legislators and pundits single out cell phones. Why? Because they're new and scary.

To be sure, mobile phones — and their usage behind the wheel — put as all in danger. The numbers are frightening: A 2010 National Highway Traffic Safety Administration report [8] noted that, of those people killed the previous year in distracted-driving-related crashes, 995 involved reports of a cell phone as a distraction (approximately 18 percent of fatalities).

The National Safety Council claims [9] that cell-phone use causes 1.6 million accidents a year (one in four US car crashes). David Strayer, who runs the applied cognition lab at the University of Utah, found that one's accident risk rises fourfold for those talking on the phone, and texters are eight-times more likely to crash.

I'm certainly not advocating cell-phone use while driving — especially amongst

young people, the demographic most likely to cause accidents. But why — of all the potential distractions — do cell phones deserve unique scrutiny? Why do we pass laws requiring hands-free devices for motorists (or ban cell-phone usage behind the wheel altogether)?

Why is it OK to peruse a paper map but not to look at a map program on your mobile device? Unruly children, swapping CDs, applying makeup, having a nosh ... these are all potential distractions for drivers. One report claims [10] that daydreaming — not mobile-phone usage — causes 62% of all accidents.

We create advocacy groups and pass legislation specifically to target cell phones. But how exactly do draconian anti-texting laws save lives? And how are mobile devices more acutely dangerous than all the other potential distractions on the road (or in the car)?

Would stricter anti-texting laws benefit the victims of this helicopter crash [4] or this train accident [5]? Better yet: Would we create a national dialogue if the drivers/conductors/pilots in these fatal accidents fell victim to garden-variety distractions like daydreaming?

How do you feel about laws that limit — or prohibit — cell-phone usage in vehicles? Do they provide a false sense of security? Do they unfairly single out mobile devices, which represent a minority of motor-vehicle distractions? Or is such legislation sorely needed to prevent future tragedies? Leave a comment below!

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