

No elegant technical fixes for distracted driving

PETER SVENSSON - AP Technology Writer - Associated Press

When does a smartphone make you dumb?

When you're driving.

Dialing or texting on a phone is a proven distraction when you're behind the wheel. And as "smart" as today's phones are, they can't compensate for human folly. Phone makers and software developers are making a valiant effort to create elegant technical solutions, but, try as they might, they've yet to solve the problem of distracted driving.

A new survey, released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention last week, exposes just how severe the problem is —especially among young drivers. In the survey, about 58 percent of high school seniors said they had texted or emailed while driving during the previous month. About 43 percent of high school juniors acknowledged they did the same thing.

Thirty-nine states ban texting behind the wheel for all age groups, and an additional five states outlaw it for novice teen drivers. Even so, Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood said distracted driving is "a national epidemic".

The industry doesn't have a surefire cure. There's a bevy of phone applications (or apps) that silence a phone when they detect that the device is moving at car speed. Although they carry names like "SecuraFone" these solutions all have limitations that prevent them from being widely adopted.

One big shortcoming is that they can't tell drivers from passengers. Most of the apps assume any phone that's travelling at more than 10 miles per hour belongs to a driver. Of course, that phone might belong to someone in the back seat, or on a bus or train. That means these apps come with easy override buttons —which could also be used by a driver. The app isn't "smart" enough to know the difference.

On the plus side, these apps are "generally reliable," said Russ Rader, spokesman for the Insurance Institute of Highway Safety.

They're also a lot cheaper than they were when they debuted two or three years ago. At the time, app developers figuring that safety was priceless, charged around \$40 for their products, plus recurring fees of around \$4 per month. Now, Sprint Nextel Corp. gives away its Drive First app and charges \$2 per month for the service.

ZoomSafer and CellControl are two companies that offer slightly more sophisticated solutions: apps that make sure you're in your car before putting the phone in "driver mode." The phone listens for a wireless signal, either from the car's built-in

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Published on Electronic Component News (<http://www.ecnmag.com>)

electronic system or from a proprietary device that plugs into the engine-diagnostics port. The phone is wirelessly linked to the car, so people who don't usually drive the vehicle can ride as passengers without having their phones go silent. Using these apps, a driver who leaves his car behind and rides the bus won't have his phone silenced.

These apps are more difficult to set up, and more expensive. Cellcontrol charges \$130 for the device that emits the wireless signal. Rader sees these as possible solutions for employers who manage fleets of vehicles and need to make sure drivers comply with the law. They may also offer some relief for parents of teenagers.

But these apps share a shortcoming with the simpler, motion-sensing ones: none of them work with Apple Inc.'s iPhone, the single most popular phone in the country.

The iPhone doesn't let apps run "in the background" —that is, while the user does other things. That means the safe-driving apps are usually limited to BlackBerrys or those running Google Inc.'s Android software.

One startup company has devised a novel way of encouraging safe driving, even on iPhones. Its idea is to use an economic incentive: it records users' behavior and pays them when they leave the phone alone until the end of the trip.

The app appears to have become a victim of its own success. SafeCellApp started out in 2010 by paying \$1 per 100 miles, with a maximum payout of \$250 per person per year. But last year, it changed that to \$1 per 1000 miles, paying at most \$20 per year. The app costs \$12, plus a subscription fee of \$12 per year. Most reviewers in Apple's App Store, however, rate it a one-star rating out of five.

The National Transportation Safety Board hasn't weighed in on any apps. Its recommendation is a human solution: Just don't use your phone at all while driving, even if you're using a hands-free device.

The Transportation Department is also betting on human, rather than technological solutions. It's awarding \$2.4 million to Delaware and California for pilot projects to combine more police enforcement with publicity campaigns against distracted driving. Similar pilot projects in Syracuse, N.Y., and Hartford, Conn., are successfully reducing distracted driving, Transportation Secretary LaHood said last week.

Technology may yet bail us out of the problem of distracted driving — not by making us less distracted, but by taking care of the driving.

This summer, the government is launching a yearlong test involving nearly 3,000 specially-equipped cars, trucks and buses in Ann Arbor, Mich. These vehicles sense each other wirelessly, and warn drivers about impending collisions, often before the other vehicle is in sight.

In an even more extreme example, cars may someday soon drive themselves. As part of a pilot project, Google Inc. has equipped cars with sophisticated 360-degree

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sensors and computers that never get distracted or tired. Its cars have logged more than 140,000 miles on public streets with only occasional human intervention through the brake or wheel. Driverless cars are now legal in Nevada, though the law still requires a person in the driver's seat.

"If you are really going to look to the future, you are going to have to ask yourself is Google right? Should we have driverless cars?" said Clarence Ditlow, executive director of the Center for Automotive Safety, a consumer group. "The computer driven car with a GPS system is going to make less mistakes than a human being. The question is, is society ready for it?"

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Associated Press writer Joan Lowy in Washington contributed to this report.

Source URL (retrieved on 10/23/2014 - 12:47am):

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