Texting on Mobile Phones While Driving: Will Laws and Technology Fix the Problem?

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In October, the US federal Department of Transportation, supported by an executive order from President Obama, announced plans for a nationwide ban on texting while driving.<http://www.streetsblog.org/2009/10/01/obama-bans-texting-while-driving-for-guv-workers—and-there’s-more/>

The Governors Highway Safety Association <http://www.ghsa.org> summarizes current US state laws restricting the use of mobile phones while driving<http://www.ghsa.org/html/stateinfo/laws/cellphone_laws.html>, including information on restrictions on texting. They state that “19 states, the District of Columbia and Guam now ban text messaging for all drivers [and] …. 9 states prohibit text messaging by novice drivers…. 1 state restricts school bus drivers from texting while driving.”

Some scoffers argue that any law about texting while driving must inevitably be pointless. For example, in a *US News & World Report* discussion board posting,<http://www.usnews.com/articles/opinion/2009/10/09/should-there-be-a-law-against-texting-while-driving/comments/> “Henry Brunjes of NY” wrote, “I see it as basically non enforceable. With technology what it is, we can determine if a cell phone was in use at the time of an accident. However, if more than one person is in the car, how to prove the driver was texting or talking, will be almost impossible.” However, there are plenty of people driving around by themselves who might be saved, so that argument doesn’t seem very weighty.

I doubt that laws alone will significantly alter the behavior of drivers, especially young drivers who have fallen into the trap of texting while driving. However, there are technological barriers to mobile-phone use while driving that might work better. For example, Trinity-Noble<http://www.trinitynoble.com/> in Pennsylvania has a range of products that might make a significant difference to highway safety.

- Trinity-Noble’s “Guardian Angel With Celltinel”<http://www.trinitynoble.com/guardian.html> “transmits a frequency that inhibits the use of cellular handheld devices within a focused immediate area: The Driver’s Seat.”
- “SkyBloc”<http://www.trinitynoble.com/skybloc.html> is an application program that “locks the keys of a cell phone while a vehicle is traveling above certain speeds. With the exception of “whitelisted” phone numbers (911, the Office, Home, etc.) the driver cannot engage in texting or talking as long as he/she is driving. While similar software solutions exist, SkyBloc is the ONLY mobile phone application that can tell the difference between the cell phone of a driver and the cell phone of a passenger*, and prevents the driver from overriding the application, ensuring safe driving practices, something other products cannot do.”
- “Autolog with Celltection”<http://www.trinitynoble.com/autolog.html> is a specialized tool for logging unauthorized mobile-phone use in fleet vehicles or other applications where the black-box device can be installed with protection against tampering. Applications discussed include commercial and government fleets, vehicles used by
learners, and field research into the problem of the relationship between mobile-phone usage and accidents.

Another tool is the iZUP<http://www.getizup.com/what_is_izup/overview> application from Illume Software.<http://illumesoftware.com/> Parents in Wellesley, MA were enthusiastic about the new call-blockers, but a published report<http://www.boston.com/yourtown/news/wellesley/2010/01/wellesley_teens_try_new_cell_p.html> did not give the impression of great enthusiasm from youngsters present at the product demonstration.

The wireless communications lobby has dismissed statistical information about the relationship between mobile-phone use and accidents.<http://www.ctia.org/advocacy/index.cfm/AID/10442> The International Association for the Wireless Telecommunications Industry sneers that “Recent research suggests that cell phones are but one of a host of distractions that hector today’s drivers. Other distractions include the radio, players for tapes, CDs and DVDs, as well as breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks. Some men shave while driving to work in the morning, and some women apply make-up using the rear view mirror.” The next paragraph reads,

“I’m not claiming that cell phones are safe, but I think that they have been vilified because they are new and visible,” says James R. Sayer, Ph.D., of the Human Factors Division at the University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute. “No one would legislate that you can’t eat, drink, or talk in the car. But they will legislate that you can’t use a cell phone in the car. But there are lots of other things in the car that have negative consequences in terms of driving.”

I can see the value of a law making it illegal to eat behind the wheel – especially when using both hands, which I am sure readers have seen for themselves on occasion (I know that I have stupidly done that and won’t be doing it any more). But since when does the fact that one law cannot solve all possible problems mean that we shouldn’t pass the law at all?

Doesn’t this kind of argument remind you of the tobacco industry’s lies about the safety of smoking<https://www.who.int/entity/bulletin/archives/78(7)902.pdf> and the Bush Administration’s suppression of data that might inconvenience the oil and coal industries?<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2007/jan/31/usnews.frontpagenumer>

Personally, if there were a way of stopping people automatically from shaving or applying makeup while driving, I’d be all for it. I’m definitely in favor of interfering with all but emergency use of mobile phones while driving.

Finally, on January 12, 2010, the US Department of Transportation and the National Safety Council joined with a new non-profit group called FocusDriven<http://www.focusdriven.org/index.aspx> devoted to teaching people to stop using mobile phones while driving.<http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-cellphone-driving13-2010jan13,0,7221776.story> Many of the founders have lost loved ones to drivers who were looking away from the road when they killed innocent people in a moment of inattention.<http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/focusdriven-group-combating-distracted-driving-launches-today/story?id=9543077>

I hope readers will get involved in stopping the carnage.

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