

May 9, 2001
TechKnowledge no. 8

Beware of the Cellular Keystone Cops

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Published on May 9, 2001

STATE HIGHWAYS AND TRANSPORTATION	
EXHIBIT NO.	6
DATE:	2-3-2011
BILL NO.	TECH KNOWLEDGE

One day soon, you may be pulled over and ticketed for using a cell phone in your car. Hundreds of bills have been introduced in state and municipal legislatures across America in recent years proposing to make talking on a cellular device while driving a crime, although few have passed thus far. And even the feds are taking an interest with the House Transportation Subcommittee on Highways and Transit holding a hearing this week on the issue.

With cell phone use exploding in recent years (there are over 115 million wireless subscribers today) and quickly coming to be considered an essential component of everyday life, it is not surprising that these little devices would eventually start to cause some problems. But just how big of a problem does cell phone use in cars really pose? The results may surprise you.

The AAA Foundation of Traffic Safety has released the results of a new study by the University of North Carolina Highway Safety Research Center that analyzed over 32,000 traffic accidents caused by distracted drivers to determine what factors contributed to those accidents. Among the top causes were: outside objects, persons, or events (29.4% of accidents surveyed); adjusting the radio, cassette, or CD player (11.4%); and distractions caused by other occupants in the vehicle (10.9%). The less significant causes listed by the survey were: moving objects in the vehicle (4.3%); other objects or devices in vehicle (2.9%); adjusting vehicle / climate controls (2.8%); eating and drinking in the car (1.7%); using or dialing on a cell phone (1.5%); and smoking-related distractions (0.9%).

These findings reveal that public policy in this case is being driven by perceptions, not facts. Because many of us are annoyed by people who use cell phones while they drive, or fear they may place us at greater risk than they actually do, policy makers are proposing bans on cell phone use in cars. This is not to say, however, that using a cell phone while driving does not pose some degree of risk. And this threat, critics argue, is only likely to grow as cell

phone use grows. But, thankfully, while new technologies often introduce new problems into society, still newer technologies typically come along to solve those problems.

For example, "hands-free" cellular devices, which employ an ear piece and a clip-on microphone, are already on the market and being widely used by motorists. One-button speed-dialing, an option on almost all phones today, enables drivers to place calls without having to dial a series of numbers. Better yet, voice-activated calling is right around the corner. This will allow drivers to simply say "call home" and let the phone do the rest. And auto manufacturers are currently integrating "on-board" communications services into many of their new vehicles. These new technologies will enable everyone to abide by the sensible old "10 & 2" rule that our high school driving instructors taught us, allowing us to keep both hands on the wheel and our eyes on the road at all times.

Imposing burdensome restrictions on cell phone use in cars, therefore, is unnecessary and may actually cost lives by having the unintended consequence of discouraging drivers from carrying a cell phone in their car. With an estimated 118,000 emergency calls placed by cell phone users every day, the life-saving applications of cell phones are well established. If a ban was to discourage drivers from carrying phones in their cars, the costs would likely far outweigh the benefits.

On a more practical note, it is difficult to understand how such a ban would be enforced. Where will policymakers draw the line? Since snacking behind the wheel and playing with your car stereo are more distracting and dangerous than cell phone use, should legislators ban those activities first? What about arguing with your spouse or kids in the car? Should that be policed? And what about the CB radios truckers still use?

There's a far simpler way to approach this problem from a public policy perspective: Don't try to ban technologies (cell phones, radios, CBs, etc.) or specific activities (conversations, singing, smoking, etc.) inside the cabin of an automobile. Instead, simply enforce those laws already on the books dealing with reckless or negligent driving. If a driver is weaving in and out of traffic lanes, or posing a serious threat to others on the road for any reason, they should be pulled over and probably ticketed if the infraction is serious enough.

In conclusion, a degree of patience and humility is necessary by policymakers. It is impossible to legislate a 100% risk-free society into existence. Technology is quickly solving a problem it created. Turning our nation's law enforcement officers into a cellular SWAT team in the meantime will only deter them from policing more dangerous activities while threatening to further erode our personal liberties with little benefit to show for it.

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