



Death by iPad: Where will driving distractions end?

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An iPad mount for your steering wheel? It sounds so inevitable that our hogwash detectors didn't even bleep.

It's pretty easy, then, to forgive USA Today for not only repeating the iPad Steering Wheel Mount hoax but for attacking the concept as if it were legitimate. It's not like there aren't already similar, outrage-inspiring products already in use.

For example, the Wheel Mate Steering Wheel Desk Tray (real and "made from a lightweight vinyl-wrapped material for durability without the bulk of oak") has inspired a hilarious contest among product reviewers over on Amazon.com to push the gullibility envelope.

In-dash TV screens? Sure. GPS? Doesn't everyone? Real-time stock quotes? Why not?

The National Highway Transportation Safety Administration reported that in 2009, 20 percent of injury crashes involved reports of distracted driving. In accidents involving fatalities, 995 involved reports of a cell phone as a distraction.

According to the Governors Highway Safety Association (GHSA), no states ban all cell-phone use (handheld and hands-free) for all drivers. Many states prohibit all cell-phone use by certain drivers, though: 28 states and the District of Columbia ban all cell phone use by novice drivers, and eight states prohibit all drivers from using handheld cell phones while driving.

Yet even as state traffic laws begin to address the distractions of cell phones and texting, drivers have moved on to other distractions. And car insurance policies avoid the issues entirely.

Cell phones were just the start

"This is an area where the law is really trailing behind the speed of technology," says Steven M. Gursten, attorney and writer of [Michigan Auto Lawyers Blog](#). "Look how long it took states to slowly, one by one, address texting -- and that is with studies now showing that someone texting is 23 times more likely to be involved in an accident."

Nowadays, cell phones are only one of many potential distractions. Some even come already installed by manufacturers – combinations of Bluetooth, navigation and social networking that allow drivers to find the closest restaurant or the cheapest nearby gas.

Potential laws limiting or prohibiting use of these technological devices while driving have not kept up with the pace of new distractions.

“There are no laws that address GPS navigation systems,” says Jonathan Adkins, GHSA communications director. “However, there are laws that address such things as DVD players, which can’t be within view of the driver.

“It is a patchwork quilt of completely different laws in this area, and the law is clearly trailing behind the speed of technological change.”

That doesn’t mean distracted drivers go scot-free.

“Every state has some kind of a reckless driver law,” says Adkins, “so it’s possible that someone who is not focused on driving can get a ticket.”

At the same time, Adkins says he is not aware of any laws addressing gadgets used by drivers while driving. He stresses that states don’t have regulatory authority over vehicles because that is a federal issue.

Should the feds ban technology?

Is a car microwave oven so much worse than a radio – or a boiling-hot cup of Starbucks?

The real challenge, says attorney Gursten, is how we approach all of the ways that drivers can be dangerously distracted and determine where we as society draw the line.

“Do we allow GPS but don’t allow texting? Do we allow Wi-Fi connections in cars? Sometimes useful is also dangerous,” he adds. “Useful can also cause extended periods of driver inattention and distraction.”

While state legislatures have come down hard on cell phone use and text messaging, the federal government wants to get more involved. With his message, “Put it down!” U.S. Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood has made ending distracted driving a centerpiece of his agenda.

The program has four parts:

- Improve reporting so the extent of the problem is clear. This could be as simple as more detailed police accident-reporting forms, or as elaborate as video observations of driver behaviors.
- Work with car manufacturers to make technologies easier to use.

- Use technology proactively, with systems that warn drivers of dangers ahead or monitor levels of distraction. In fast-moving heavy traffic, for example, cell-phone calls could be diverted to voice mail.
- Begin a national dialogue and offer a model for consistent laws throughout the states, such as the federal ban on all texting for people driving government vehicles.

And while insurers are among those footing the bills for accidents caused by distracted driving, they're not addressing this issue specifically. Although there's been an increase in popularity of navigation systems and computers in automobiles, insurance companies are not updating their policies to reflect this increased liability.

"I am unaware of any surcharges," says Jeanne M. Salvatore, an Insurance Information Institute senior vice president.

Lawyer Gursten isn't ready to let drivers off the hook, though.

"Sadly, none of this would be necessary if we could depend on drivers to exercise good judgment," Gursten says. "But my own experience as an accident lawyer is the vast majority of car accidents are preventable and many if not most are caused by people exercising dangerously bad driving judgment."

