

# Drivers, Cellphones, and Smart Cars



About a decade ago, Robert W. Hahn of the American Enterprise Institute made waves when he touted the advantages of talking while driving (TWD)—that's right, advantages. Banning cellphone use while driving, he said, would cost \$25 billion annually while affording considerably less in savings through the avoidance of death and destruction. That contention earned him the ire of Click and Clack of the radio show *Car Talk*.

It turns out the argument may be moot. As reported in *Science* (Aug. 22, 2012), a new study concluded that "...people who talk on their phones while driving may already be unsafe drivers who are nearly as prone to crash with or without the device."

Study leader Bryan Reimer, associate director of MIT's New England University Transportation Center, told the *Boston Globe* (Aug. 27, 2012), "The people who are more willing to frequently engage in cellphone use are higher-risk drivers, independent of the phone. It's not just a subtle difference with those willing to pick up the phone. This is a big difference."

The study involved 108 people who took a 40-minute cellphone-free test drive up I-93 north of Boston. In a questionnaire administered before the test, those who indicated frequent cellphone use while driving on average drove 4.4 kilometers per hour faster than and changed lanes twice as often as drivers who reported infrequent TWD.

The study's findings back up the experience of the insurance industry. The *Globe* reported that Adrian Lund, president of the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, said his organization has seen little reduction in crashes from restrictions on cellphone use.

When the controversy hit in 2002, I suggested that whatever damage TWD may cause could be self-limiting—people who talk while driving are likely early adopters who would take advantage of collision avoidance and other electronic safety features appearing on cars.

We may never know how dangerous TWD is, but we may be on the verge of learning how safe smart cars can be. The University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute just launched a year-long test project designed to improve the safety of American motorists. Called *Safety Pilot Model Deployment*, the project represents a \$22 million partnership between UMTRI and the U.S. Department of Transportation (US DOT).

As part of the project, UMTRI will install wireless devices on nearly 3,000 passenger cars, commercial trucks, and transit buses. The vehicles will be able to communicate with each other as well as with traffic-signal infrastructure located throughout a test-pilot area in Ann Arbor. Visual or audible warnings will alert drivers to dangerous situations.

Program Manager Jim Sayer, an associate research scientist at UMTRI, said in a press release that the project will address safety and convenience as well as mobility and sustainability. "This is a tremendous opportunity, and we are very excited to be able to support the US DOT's demonstration of cutting-edge transportation technologies in our community."

After the testing phase, US DOT will use the data generated to inform future regulatory decisions, and the transportation industry can use it to develop additional approaches to vehicle safety and environmental sustainability. The testing phase will last one year, but the overall program will operate for 30 months, UMTRI reported.

Sayer noted, "This is a game-changer for transportation." Let's hope so. If it's impossible to improve driver attention, it will be helpful to improve vehicle intelligence.



*Rick Nelson*

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