

Driven to distraction by in-car gadgets

LOS ANGELES, USA: - Talking on the phone while driving is illegal in a growing number of countries, but with the explosion of in-car technologies the potential for drivers being distracted is greater than ever.



Connected cars are creating major distractions and dangers for drivers. Image: [IMS](#)

The dangers of gadget distraction were highlighted in Los Angeles, where the LA Auto Show devoted a whole day to the opportunities and risks of the so-called Connected Car.

Technologies which make driving safer - from anti-collision systems to devices which prod you awake if you drift off - have grown to become increasingly standard on new cars.

But at the same time the modern motorist can choose from ever more sophisticated entertainment systems, while social networking and other software and gadgets make talking or texting on the phone seem old hat.

"Driver distraction is number one for us," said Phil Abram, Chief Infotainment Officer for General Motors (GM), in his address on the first preview day of the LA Auto Show.

"It's important to take a smartphone out of the hands of the driver and mount it safely in the centre console," he added.

Smartphone complicate the regulatory issues

Increasingly powerful smartphones can be connected directly to in-car systems, which often have flat panel displays able to stream music, video and more at the touch of a button, or screen.

German car company Audi presented what it called the "connected car of the future" at the LA show, touting the new A3 sedan as the first to provide 4G LTE in the vehicle itself.

But a key problem for car manufacturers stems from the sheer variety of phones, tablets and operating systems, which often fail to work seamlessly with the car itself, according to a study cited at the LA show.

Across platform connection difficulties

Frustrated motorists are left grappling with infotainment systems that freeze, Bluetooth phones or devices which do not talk to each other, or other glitches which require them to stab at buttons.

"The car manufacturers are really struggling with this," Peter Skillman of Nokia's Here mapping unit told the LA Times, which said electronics problems now outweigh mechanical issues as motorists' top complaint in recent studies.

The sheer proliferation of devices also presents a problem for regulators. Whereas it was relatively easy to ban talking and texting while driving, it is difficult to draw the line with so many other technologies.

"We're not close to a standard on this," said Kevin Vincent, chief counsel for America's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), adding that it is a long way from coming up with new laws.

"We're making recommendations, but they're voluntary. There are a lot of questions to be answered. It's a very complex issue," he said.

Gadgets causing deaths, injuries

Mitch Bainwol, head of the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, defended car manufacturers and put the blame squarely on phones themselves and how they are used.

"The factor that's causing death on the highways is the device," he said, while acknowledging the tough task regulators face. "The pace of technology is faster than regulators can cope with," he added.

Ford vice president Jim Farley highlighted the importance of in-car technology in his opening keynote speech to the LA Auto Show.

"We have literally turned the car into a platform for app developers, who work with us to add value through new features delivered at the speed consumers expect," he said.

A new Nielsen study, the key findings of which were presented at the show, showed that people are already shopping from their cars, with Amazon.com the fourth most browsed site.

"It's early days to be sure, but you can see that some consumers are turning the car into a shopping centre on wheels," said an executive from the audience ratings service.

Source: AFP via I-Net Bridge