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PERSPECTIVE

Texting and driving crisis as phones abound

By Jonathan Michaels

When Steve Jobs stood on the stage Jan. 9, 2007, at the Macworld Conference and Expo to introduce the iPhone, he could have hardly known that he was about to change the way the world thinks, works and communicates. Mobile phones had been around for years, but the iPhone challenged society to think in abstract dimensions. In an instant, flip phones were replaced with an endless world of apps; every consumer became an expert photographer; and all the wonders of the Internet were obtainable in an instant.

To be sure, the iPhone has changed all those who subscribe to modern advancement. If you don't own one, you likely have a replica made by one of the many competitors who scrambled to catch up. And this is to say nothing of the myriad of iPads and tablets that have blurred the line between personal computing and personal lifestyle.

Jobs could also never have known the devastation the iPhone would unleash on the world with texting and driving. For those who truly don't care, it takes place at speed — driving on the freeway with preoccupied intentions. For the rest, the start of it is innocent enough. At just about any red light, drivers can be seen texting — or worse, scrolling through Facebook — while waiting for the light. Then the light changes, but the conversation has started, and now another motorist is added to the statistical count of being a distracted driver.

The problem is significant enough to label it a full-blown crisis. Just how serious is it? According to studies conducted by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), 17 percent of all traffic accidents involve texting and driving. Put in terms a little more relevant, by the end of the day another 16 Americans will have lost their lives to it.

The physics of it are disturbing. NHTSA reports that sending or receiving a text takes a driver's eyes from the road for an average of 4.6 seconds, the equivalent — when traveling at 80 mph — of driving 539 feet, or almost two football fields,

blindfolded. The federal agency has determined that texting and driving is *six times* more dangerous than drinking and driving.

Society has thrown its full force at stomping out drinking and driving. In California, offenders are penalized with suspended drivers licenses, fines of up to \$3,600, alcohol school, skyrocketing insurance, and up to six months' imprisonment. Yet texting and driving in California will get you a fine of just \$20.

And that's the good news. Some states don't see it as a problem at all. Mississippi, Oklahoma, Missouri and Texas only ban texting and driving under limited situations, such as in school crossing zones, and two states — Montana and Arizona — have no law against it whatsoever.

The only state that has appropriately addressed the situation is Alaska, who imposes a fine of \$10,000. After that it is a steep falloff, with nearly every state ignoring the seriousness of the issue. Kentucky's fine is \$25, Florida's is \$30, and Colorado's is \$50.

And the problem is getting substantially worse. Smartphone use has proliferated in the most viral fashion. In 2008, there were 238 million smartphones worldwide; today there are 1.9 billion, an *800 percent increase* — meaning that a quarter of the world's population has them. Given the number of people that live in undeveloped or underdeveloped countries, the statistic is astounding.

But what is most surprising — and troubling — is that little is done to curb the problem smartphones bring with them. NHTSA establishes the Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards, which regulate every aspect of vehicle safety, from bumper height to side view mirrors. Many of the safety standards address true items of driver safety, like the requirement for seatbelts and airbags. Yet the safety standards are silent on the biggest killer of all, texting.

One might expect that the lack of regulation may be because little can be done to prevent it. But that is not the case. A host of companies have emerged that prevent drivers from texting and driving, such as the Louisiana company CellControl. CellControl has developed, and is currently selling, a solar-powered device that is placed on a vehicle's windshield, and which creates a "driver-zone" where texting, emailing, browsing and apps are disabled, but which leave the remaining passengers in the car free to use the full function of their phones.

And CellControl is not alone. Apple has filed a



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patent application for a device called "lock-out," which also promises to prevent drivers from using similar functions on their smartphones. The company is looking to incorporate the technology into its soon-to-be-released infotainment system, CarPlay.

While texting drivers are 23 times more likely to get into an accident than non-texting drivers, another NHTSA statistic, it is hard to understand why regulators have not rushed to address the issue. Lawmakers could easily match the penalty to the gravity of the problem, as Alaska has done, or better — enact a Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standard that requires disabling technology for all new vehicles. NHTSA requires rear view cameras, child lock doors, and a host of other safety features — all in the name of making driving safer — but ignores what has become public enemy number one.

If text-blocking laws are enacted a year from now, it will be a year too late. In that time period, 5,800 more citizens will be dead, and another 330,000 will be injured. Let that number sink in for a moment. In the September 11 terrorist attack — the tragedy of all tragedies — we lost 3,000 American lives. Here we are losing people double that rate every year, and we are responding with a \$20 citation.

For the first 50 years of automobile transportation, drinking and driving was similarly treated as an academic problem, not worthy of significant attention. It wasn't until 1969, when Teddy Kennedy drove his car off Dike Bridge, killing his passenger, that public outrage set in. We need to recognize that we are on the cusp of another — larger — societal harm, and address it before it becomes an inferno. As George Santayana famously said, "Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it."



Jonathan Michaels is the founding member of MLG Automotive Law, APLC, which specializes in representing clients in the automotive industry. You can reach him at (949) 581-6900 or jmichaels@mlgautomotivelaw.com