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PERSPECTIVE

Public enemy No.1: texting and driving

By Jonathan Michaels

It has migrated from a menacing problem to a full-blown epidemic of national importance: Texting and driving is the single most deadly thing one can do behind the wheel of an automobile. For decades, scores of marchers repudiated drinking and driving, with full community support. Virtually every state has stiff intoxication laws designed to stomp out the practice, and jailing the minority who fail to comply. Yet, texting and driving escapes even base scrutiny, being treated as a mere annoyance, not the cold-blooded killer it is.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration classifies texting and driving as *six times* more dangerous than drinking and driving. In a recent study conducted by the NHTSA, it was concluded that drivers take their eyes off the road for an average of 4.6 seconds when sending or receiving a text. At 80 miles per hour that is the equivalent of driving 539 feet — or nearly two football fields — blindfolded.

The danger presented by texting and driving is certainly comprehensible, but the physics alone do not begin to reveal the magnitude of the problem. All but the biggest of sinners make a concerted effort to avoid driving while drunk, resulting in relatively few intoxicated motorists on the roads at any given time. The same cannot be said for texting.

Society's relationship with the smartphone has far exceeded convenient connectivity. Truth be told, users are increasingly developing a genuine compulsion for their smartphones, texting, Facebooking and gaming at every idle opportunity. A visit to any Starbucks illustrates the point, where consumers are unable to last four minutes without reaching for their phone, to be reunited with their cyberspace community.

The problem is that this relationship does not cease when the user gets back in his car. It is far too easy to check a text while driving, or start a conversation via text while at a red light. The triggers are constant, unleashing the compulsion to reconnect, much in the same way the smell of whisky can cause the sober to stray off path.

Not only is the compulsion present, but our rational ability to avoid the danger is biologically impaired. The University of Kansas recently conducted a study on the subject, and found that drivers have great difficulty resisting the cellphone temptation because the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for decision making, is

fully engaged by the task of driving.

Now consider the velocity at which cellphone use is occurring. Unlike drinking and driving, which is a danger to be sure, but infrequent in comparison to the number of drivers on the road, the number of drivers using their smartphones while driving is ghastly high. In a 2011 study, the U.S. Department of Transportation concluded that at any given moment 660,000 people — or nine percent of all motorists — are texting and driving on public roads. The number is far greater today, some five years later. In 2011, 93 million Americans owned smartphones. Today that number has rocketed to 207 million, meaning that nearly every driving citizen owns one.

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Adding to the problem is the seemingly innocent nature of the practice. While few would make the decision to booze it up and then take the keys to the car, quickly checking or responding to a text seems hardly a sin at all. The net result of all this is that texting is not only *six times* more deadly than drinking and driving, but occurring at a significantly greater rate. It should be no surprise then, that by the end of the day another sixteen Americans will die at the hands of texting drivers.

And while the focus so far has been on private motorists, we should expect to see texting to bleed into public transportation, where a careless conductor endangers the lives of hundreds. If there is any question of this, consider the horror that ripped through a Tennessee community when a school bus driver killed three elementary school children, and hospitalized 21 more, with his quick reply to a text.

Given its rank danger, it is downright shocking that legislatures across the country attach little importance to the practice. In California, get caught driving in the carpool lane, disadvantaging compliant motorists, and receive a \$480 fine. Endanger the lives of drivers everywhere by texting down the highway, and pay a mere \$20 fine. In fact, four states — Arizona, Montana, Texas and Missouri — find the practice perfectly acceptable, seeing fit to not outlaw it at all.

In reality, compliance laws will have little effect on driver behavior. It is just too easy to quickly re-

ply to a text, and too difficult to police, for laws to have any significant impact. The only solution is complete abstinence, which will never voluntarily happen in a world of smartphone addiction.

The proper solution is for smartphone companies like Apple, Samsung and Google to program their phones in a manner to prevent the practice from happening in the first place. The technology has been available for a while, begging the question of why the corporate giants haven't exercised a modicum of social responsibility in their quest for greater profit.

The solution is simple: block the cellphone from use (saving, perhaps, phone calls and navigation) when it begins travelling at a slow rate of speed, such as five miles per hour; and then don't let it resume normal use until it has come to rest for a sustained period, such as five minutes. The phones are already outfitted with GPS technology, which tracks rate of travel, and which could easily support the application.

Critics may point out that this unfairly punishes safe phone use in transportation, such as busses or trains. The solution is simple there too: allow users to bypass the lockout by manually typing in a message, such as "I am not driving." While some motorist will undoubtedly abuse the system, the masses, who are innocently sending a quick text, would not.

It is remarkable that phone makers have not already conceived of and implemented this simple fix, and indeed, used it as part of their selling pitch, much in the way breweries run advertisements pleading with party-goers to not drink and drive. Acknowledging the danger, and providing a well-crafted solution, would be a market gainer.

If the profiteers cannot find it within them to change their ways, Congress ought to show them the light by banning the use or distribution of any cellphone that does not contain a lockout system. The continued practice of juggling chainsaws has to stop, now, before more citizens unnecessarily die. The problem has surged; the technology is here; someone needs to take leadership and define the new era of smartphone use.



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