

Cultural Daily

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Pedestrians Versus Driverless Cars

Daniel Myrick · Wednesday, June 15th, 2016

Twenty years ago, it would've taken some effort to convince people that driverless cars were on the way. Now, it's a near certainty that most people take for granted.

Smithsonian magazine pointed out how 100 plus years ago, no one was sure how the new automotive invention would take shape and [the results were disastrous initially](#). Imagine the public's fear at a time when pedestrians owned the road, kids used it as a playground, and then suddenly this big metal monster came barreling through at four miles per hour. Two-thirds of urban deaths were due to being hit by cars in what was called a "homicidal orgy of the motor car." Within only a few years, the auto industry and newspapers waged a successful war against the menacing jaywalkers and the roads belonged to cars.

By the 1930s, sidewalks were implemented for pedestrians and a new culture and pace of life grew from that. Safety was championed and the extreme deaths began to decline. Like the growing pains then, will the future changes with cars involve a disastrous learning curve?

As it stands now, the public has uncertainties over what the roads would look like with cars that have no steering wheel, brakes or gas pedals.

Will The New Cars Create A Danger?

In theory, laser scanners should be able to spot ants in the road, much less humans or other cars. Yet, what happens when a car's computer crashes, gets hacked, or is programmed poorly? It could be easily argued that a few deaths here and there while the kinks get worked out would be a small price to pay when considering the upside. After all, drunk driving, texting and other deadly distracted driving practices already kill a lot of people and driverless cars would eliminate that.

Like with a century ago, the new dangers figure to come with dramatic shifts. A write up in the *Atlantic* expects that [safety might actually worsen during the transition period](#), particularly while conventional cars are still driven by humans. However, all signs point to long-term safety. In over a million miles, Google's self-driving cars have been in sixteen accidents, all caused by humans in other cars.

Technology has continually found ways to make people in cars safer. In 1970, there were 60,000 deaths from car crashes in America. After safety features like seatbelts and airbags became commonplace, deaths became less common. By 2013, that number of deaths had been cut in half. As the *Atlantic* article calculates, driverless cars are predicted to save about ten million lives per decade worldwide and save upwards of two hundred billion dollars in medical expenses annually.

How Might Our Daily Culture Change?

Undoubtedly things will change. People will be able to carry on business without thinking about driving. More time to take a nap, or get caught up on work while going to the office. It'll be like riding the bus, without having to pay any attention to the road. And with that, no more road rage.

In fact, once driverless cars take over and hover board technology becomes more and more

common, it shouldn't be long until people live like they did in *The Jetsons*. Our future a hundred years from now will be just as foreign as our past of a hundred years ago.

Just try to imagine what this could possibly look like. Ride sharing could involve playing card games or be a trip to the movies in their own right. There probably won't be much of a need for road signs or stoplights, or eventually there shouldn't be much need for roads at all. Cars won't need to idle at intersections, or even idle at all. They'll just be in forward motion continually until they get where they are going. We will not read about celebrities like James Dean or Princess Diana dying in car crashes, though perhaps we will hear of more conspiracy stories like Michael Hastings or Aubrey McClendon. One thing about it, the future will be pretty incomprehensible from today's viewpoint.

How Will Pedestrians Fare?

Will people actually be able to cross the road at will, perhaps without even looking, knowing that cars will calculate how to go around them? Sounds like fantasy, and also terrifying to imagine cars coming straight at you. However, growing up in the midwest, I quickly learned to remain very alert of oncoming cars even while I was on the sidewalk. I have been hit by a car, as have a good number of people I know. I have also been in countless car accidents as a driver and a passenger. Some were my fault, some were the fault of others. In any scenario, I am way more afraid of a human driven car than a computer driven one.

The city of Chicago is building infrastructure to accommodate more walking and working toward a [goal of zero pedestrian fatalities](#) by 2022. The expectation is that driverless cars will get them to this goal. The impeccable track record of Google cars with only a handful of minor accidents, none of which being the car's fault, included zero accidents with pedestrians. That's well over a million miles and not one pedestrian collision. That's a lot better than the [nearly five thousand pedestrian deaths](#) in 2014. That national rate of 1.04 traffic fatalities per hundred million miles driven is already an all-time low, and it stands to reason that driverless cars might just help Chicago reach the goal by 2022.

Once again, there is a war to be fought between the pedestrian and the automobile. Once again, expect the car to win this battle. Just like in a traffic accident when a pedestrian is hit, the car usually wins. Just like in the business world, the industry with the money beats the lifestyle with no money. It's valiant to live out the old way of life, but it is prudent to expect that the future will take its own road regardless of where more skeptical people dare to tread.

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