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The Endgame for Driving While Texting?

By Benjamin F. Carlson on September 30, 2009 9:57am

The New York Times' epic crusade against driving while texting--comprising [seven reports](#) since July 17--may finally pay off in legislation. On Wednesday, transportation secretary Ray LaHood is convening a two-day summit to consider federal bans on the practice. Problem number one? Getting people to believe they're the problem. As [LaHood told NPR](#):

This is not dissimilar to solving the problem of drunk driving...Public awareness is not at the level that it should be.

Despite the lag, public perception seems to be shifting. You may remember the outrage stirred up in July, when it was reported that texting boosted the risk of crashing 23-fold. ([Wire coverage here.](#)) This time around, as the possibility of legislation looms, more opponents--some libertarians, [some truckers](#)--have stepped up to protest. But with even automobile insiders and AT&T telling customers to quit thumbing the keypad behind the wheel, it seems inevitable that [public perception](#) will shift in favor of the ban.

The best reaction:

- **Use Enforcement, Not Technology, To Stop Texting**, writes [Dave McCurdy](#), CEO of the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, which represents BMW, Ford, Toyota and more. "We must address distracted driving, but we must do it without undercutting developing technologies that will help in making driving even safer...Auto makers are working on important safety advancements right now that rely upon wireless communications as the backbone. In the near future, cars will be linked wirelessly to other cars in their vicinity and physical surroundings to, first and foremost, enhance road safety by informing drivers of hazards and situations they can't see."
 - **A Totally Useless Summit**, writes [Bob Barr](#) in the Atlantic Journal Constitution. Barr argues that all kinds of activities cause accidents, because people "apply make-up, they eat, they drink, they talk to passengers, they bounce to music, they talk on the phone, they text, they read newspapers, their eyes wander." Instead of making new laws, he said we should enforce the ones already on the books. "Try this for a solution: if someone is distracted while driving and causes an accident resulting in damage, injury or death, they are liable; and if such actions violate the criminal laws of a state, they should be prosecuted."
 - **Bans Are Crude, Cost Jobs, and Don't Work** argues [Jeffrey A. Miron](#) at the libertarian Cato Institute. He offers a concise list of arguments against a federal ban, starting with the example that "Federal imposition of the 21-year old minimum drinking age [did not save lives](#)." He concludes, "laws that penalize TWD [texting while driving] might make sense. But this is an issue for states, not the federal government."
 - **Cell Phone Companies Know the Tide Is Against Them**, writes [Dan Neil](#) in the Los Angeles Times. "AT&T and other mobile-service providers, and their lobbyists, are going to find themselves in a pitched battle to avoid a flat-out ban on cell use/texting while driving. That would be bad for business. It's smart that AT&T is trying to get ahead of the issue."
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