Wot, No Driver? Is this really a good idea? Here’s some food for thought.

Published: January 7, 2016

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Online version: https://www.wheels-alive.co.uk/wot-no-driver-is-this-really-a-good-idea-heres-some-food-for-thought/

Driverless (Autonomous) Cars

A personal view by Dave Randle, who is unconvinced this is the best way forward…



Whatever it says on the packaging, smart televisions and smart phones are anything but.

Any smartness going around remains with the people who made them. All any machine can do is to choose between various pre-programmed options through binaries and Boolean algebra. This is not thinking. The most elaborate computer on the planet has less intelligence than a cockroach.

Yet there is a constant move to turn decision making over to these mechanical idiots – why? To avoid responsibility? To save ourselves the business of knowing, evaluating, developing skills and expertise.

When you phone your bank, you speak to an individual with no training and no choice but to fill in the windows on his screen with mostly useless information. He or she has to ask you for the same information twice or more, because they have moved to a new screen.

Once, if you went to a hospital, you were seen by a specialist, or at least a conscious, living, breathing doctor, who diagnosed you as an individual. Now you are stuffed into a machine that reads your bumps and issues one of a limited number of catch all results.

You can’t argue with the machine, because it is stupid, and the quack can’t be sued because he has the lottery ticket verified by the program.

There are those who wonder why our society is inexorably dumbing down. The answer lies in mistaking machines for something alive or intelligent. A computer can do a lot more things than a scroll saw, but it is still just a tool. Look at all the village jumble sale posters done by machine minders rather than designers; the computer has no taste, no eye, and no cognisance of the purpose of your clickings and rattlings.

Those of us who get to drive the latest in motors look for the freedom and joy of skilful and challenging driving, from understanding and working with the laws of physics and the satisfaction of getting the best out of a car, in terms of performance, smoothness, fuel consumption and handling.

As time goes on, we are treated ever more like Pavlov’s dogs, bleeped at, overruled, skills

and enjoyment edited out by technology designed to be idiot proof but which only works for idiots. After many years, my co-driver and I have decided not to take part in future MPG Marathons, because the last car we drove's over-intrusive electronics left no room for art or technique.

The thought that there will be vehicles on the public highway under the control of insensible machinery fills me with horror. Not just because it will remove the last of the pleasures of driving, but because it will further exacerbate the delusions of invulnerability of those who have been taught on cars that don't permit you to drive them, and, worst, because a machine can never have the number of options available at very short order to the human mind.

People's senses are all around them. They can spot things that are wrong in the environment. If the car responds, rather than making its own pre-programmed inappropriate decisions, they can often get out of trouble, even in new circumstances. No matter how many sensors there are in a motor car, they won't come close to covering all eventualities, and a machine is hopeless at knowing what should be done about them, apart from stop and put on the hazard lights.

On an average of three times a week, a lorry on the inside lane will start to come out, compromising a driver between me and it. The car behind me is usually too close, but I always leave plenty of road to drive on between me and the car in front. The only safe thing to do is to speed up momentarily to provide a space behind me for the other car to move into.

All the time you are driving on the motorway, you are not just keeping a safe distance between you and the car in front, you are reading all vehicles around you and often making decisions based on what you know they're about to do. A good driver drives for everyone and controls the space he's sitting in. No machine could come close. In the scenario above, it not only would not do the right thing, it wouldn't let you do it. At least the person squashed by the lorry would have the reassurance that the stupid self-driven contraption

didn’t exceed the arbitrary speed limit.

What if the signals to the car go wrong and you stray onto a railway line when a freight train is coming at you? The b—– thing won’t have the least idea what’s going on. In a car that allows for the presence of intelligence, you can act quickly, forwards or backwards to get out of trouble. Modern motors need time to consider whether their installed programs agree with you before letting you have your way.

The bizarre thing about all this is that, despite the typical negative concentration on accident figures, by far the majority of ordinary motorists get through their motoring day, and motoring life, safely. For the most part, they are much better at driving than they are with less challenging domestic activities where they knock things over and bash their toes on things.

Depriving them of that satisfaction and one more human skill just because we can, or because the government doesn’t want anyone to have any freedom or pleasure is another plummet toward a time when there is no dumber left and all of our humanity is subordinated to robotics and electronics.

Time will tell what a nuisance they will be to conscious road users. Will you be able to wave them out, or on? Will they know when someone has jumped the traffic lights on the roundabout? Will they know to tuck their rear end in when their lane is jammed? Will they know to think about bikes when there aren’t any? Will they know that holiday makers always drive at 40 mph, whether the limit is 30 or 60? Will they be able to pass a number of parked cars in a single pass when it is clear ahead, or will they pick their way around each of them causing the biggest hold up and accident risk like the 40 mph holidaymakers? Will you be able to set the style of driving – inside lane lorry botherer, middle lane Volvo botherer or outside lane Sprinter botherer? Will there be a setting for the M20 where the car jumps out of the way of ton up Belgians?

In the words of the late great Stanley Unwin, ‘Oh folly.’


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