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## How Many More Have to Die?

By Jonathan Michaels

It's interesting how our mindset on vehicle safety has shifted so dramatically over the last several decades. Many of us grew up in an era where seatbelts were seldom thought of, and even more rarely used; and other safety measures, such as mandatory child-seats, were not even a consideration. And, while it is hard to imagine it today, it was not that long ago that some states had no laws against drinking and driving; and for those that did, the blood alcohol limit was often set at 0.15 — or about twice today's legal limit.

But as technology advanced, and awareness improved, we began not only to accept the importance of these measures, but embrace them. Seatbelts are a part of our daily routine; children are secured in their four-point harness car seats; and those convicted of drinking and driving face serious penalties. And for this, countless lives have been spared.

Now, welcome to the new millennium, and the newest public enemy number one: cell phone texting. We all have done it at some point or another. Glancing at our phone while driving down the freeway to see who is texting us; and at times, sending a quick response. We are not acting irresponsibly when doing this, or so we think, for it only takes a moment of our attention. And, therein lies the problem.

While there is something sinister about knowingly getting behind the wheel while intoxicated that justifiably invokes scorn from society, reading a quick text while



Maddison Medeiros, 17, of Yuba City, places a call on her cellular phone. AP PHOTO

driving seems innocent enough, and certainly not on the same level as drinking and driving. And, it is because of this that the problem is compounded. While most of us recognize the danger of drinking and driving, and go to lengths to avoid doing

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In 2009, *Car and Driver* magazine conducted an experiment on the impact of texting while driving, as compared to drinking and driving, with staggering results. The magazine took its editors to a deserted air strip and compared reaction times while sober, with a blood content of 0.08 (the legal limit), and while texting. To establish a baseline, the magazine determined that while driving 70 miles per hour, it took editor Eddie Alterman 0.54

seconds to respond to a car suddenly braking in front of him. A car traveling 70 miles per hour covers 103 feet per second, meaning that Alterman traveled 56 feet before reacting. When Alterman had a blood alcohol content of 0.08, this added four feet to his reaction time, for a total of 60 feet. What was shocking, however, was the distance added when texting. When Alterman was reading a text, his reaction time was increased by 36 feet, for a total of 92 feet; and when responding to a text, his reaction time was increased by 70 feet, for a total of 126 feet traveled before reacting — or two and one-half times over his baseline, and more than double his reaction time when legally drunk.

This test is not an anomaly. In 2009, the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute released the results of an 18-month study that involved placing cameras inside the cabs of more than 100 long-haul trucks. The cameras recorded the drivers over a combined driving distance of three million miles, and concluded that when the drivers were texting, their risk of crashing was 23 times greater than when not texting. The study also found that drivers typically take their eyes off the forward road for an aver-



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age of 4.6 seconds when sending and receiving texts — or for a vehicle driving 70 miles per hour, about 475 feet.

To put the magnitude of the problem into perspective, in 2009 there were 33,808 fatal vehicle accidents in the United States, 10,839 of which were alcohol-related. The National Highway Safety Traffic Administration (NHTSA) estimates that of the total fatalities, 5,500 were caused by “distracted drivers,” but it readily admits that it does not know for certain how many deaths are actually caused by texting because, unlike alcohol-related accidents (where alcohol content can be measured and confirmed), there is really no way to confirm whether a death was caused by cell phone use. As Department of Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood recently commented, “We believe that this data represents only the tip of the iceberg because police reports in many places do not routinely document whether distraction was a factor in vehicle crashes.”

If it seems that the problem is bad now,

it appears to be getting worse, particularly among younger drivers. In a recent study conducted by Nielson, the company found that the average teenager sends 3,339 texts per month — or more than 100 per day, and up 8 percent from a year ago. And, as you may expect, many of these teenagers are texting while driving. In an investigation undertaken by Nationwide Insurance, the company found that 37 percent of people between the ages of 18 to 27 readily admit to texting while driving. In fact, the problem has become such an epidemic that it has engendered its own acronym — DWT, or “driving while texting.”

Yet, in the face of this, many legislatures have been slow to respond to the growing problem. So far, only 30 states have banned texting while driving (California being one of them). But, even with legislation, the problem will likely persist, as it often seems innocent enough to read a quick text, and the problem is extremely difficult to police.

And, unlike being arrested for drinking and driving, which carries with it severe

consequences, the penalty for texting and driving in California is a \$20 ticket for first time offenders, and a \$50 ticket for repeat offenders.

There is a solution to all of this. Although not widely known, several companies are introducing devices that can be installed in cars that will block text messaging while the car is in use. Currently, the devices are primarily being marketed as a way for parents to ensure that their teenage sons and daughters are not texting while driving, but the potential for widespread use is evident.

Should these devices be required for all new car sales? Perhaps. It all depends on your stance on the liberty given to personal freedoms; and the point at which the convenience afforded by cell phone usage is outweighed by the loss of life. Is cell phone use while driving an important liberty? Undoubtedly. But, how many more people have to die before we truly recognize the seriousness of the problem, and take action that is designed to actually mitigate against it?