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HEMMINGSEN: A small part of big problem

Some readers disagreed with The Gazette's editorial last week that said state legislators shouldn't ban cell phone use while driving.

But I'm siding with the newspaper on this one because cell phones are only a small part of a much bigger problem: drivers don't pay attention.

That's not saying people should gab while they drive. Cell phones are a dangerous distraction that some researchers estimate contribute to accidents accounting for about 2,600 fatalities and 330,000 injuries each year.

That's important. But to put it in context, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, or NHTSA, reported 41,059 traffic fatalities and nearly 2.5 million injuries in this country in 2007.

Driver inattention was related to nearly 80 percent of crashes and 65 percent of near-crashes in a controlled experiment published a few years ago by the NHTSA and the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute. Talking on a hand-held cell phone increased the risk of crash by 1.3 times. Dialing a phone was more distracting, increasing the risk by almost three times. But other behaviors carried greater risk: driving while drowsy, applying makeup, reading or looking at an object outside the car, for example. Reaching for a moving object inside the car made a driver nine times more likely to crash or nearly crash.

Research is ongoing, but last April, the NHTSA published a review of driver distraction research so far. They think drivers are multi-tasking about 30 percent of the time while they're behind the wheel. About half of that time, they're talking to a passenger. The rest of the time they're eating, smoking, monkeying with the controls, reaching around for something and — lastly by frequency — talking on the cell phone.

Cell phone use has gotten a lot of attention, but it represents a small part of the problem. If we wanted to make the highways safer, we might do better to ban passengers or car radios. But the answer isn't in banning anything at all, it's in encouraging drivers to pay attention. The NHTSA authors came to a similar conclusion: "Standard behavioral countermeasures, including laws, enforcement, and sanctions, are considered unlikely to be effective because distraction is a broad societal problem associated with lifestyle patterns and choices," they wrote.

In a one-pager on distraction and technology, John D. Lee, director of Human Factors Research at the National Advanced Driving Simulator here in Iowa City, put it this way: "people cannot look at or think about two things at once without consequences, particularly novice drivers."

But we think we can, and that's the real problem.

By definition, distracted drivers don't notice dangerous things they do — weaving in and out of lanes, blowing through stop signs, speeding. Luckily, all those things are illegal. Another law isn't the answer. Rather we must accept and promote the fact that driving is a full-time deal.

One last statistic: in surveys, as many as 80 percent of people say they're better-than-average drivers.

My guess is that's because they're just not paying attention.

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