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Researchers urge learning to drive safely with cellphone

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By Mac Daniel, Globe Staff | May 27, 2007

Driving while distracted is hardly new.

When radios were introduced in Model T Fords in the 1920s, there was a hue and cry that they would lull drivers to sleep. Now, drivers have long fiddled with the radio dial or even changed CDs, but the big new worry is talking on cellphones.

Studies indicate that the phone is not the problem, but the conversation may be, says Bryan Reimer, a scientist who has looked at driver distraction for the past five years at MIT's AgeLab, which develops innovations for an aging populace.

What researchers call "unpaced conversations" are conducted in the vehicle around what the driver is doing. When a traffic light turns red, for example, talking passengers pause so the driver can concentrate on braking.

But "paced conversations," such as talking on a cellphone while driving, heighten the chance of distraction, because the person on the other end of the line can't see what the driver is doing.

Drivers can also get more distracted depending on the nature of a conversation, Reimer said. An unemotional chat about being late for dinner is probably not a problem. Making a big-money deal or arguing with a friend "has different influences and changes the demands involved," he said.

The research suggests that efforts to pass laws that focus on technology and not drivers won't work, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. After more than 15 years in American pocketbooks and cars, the technology won't easily be taken away or regulated.

"We need to learn to live [with] or adapt to these type of distractions in the car," Reimer said. "Education seems to be the key." ■

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