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# Robot cars: safety and liability

By Adam Blank

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The robots are coming — robotic cars, that is. Are they safe? Will they be an economic boon or bust?

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, in 2015, the last year for which it had final statistics, car accidents were the leading cause of death in the U.S. for 16- to 23-year-olds. That year, 2.44 million people were injured in car crashes. In nearly one-third of all motor vehicle fatal accidents, alcohol played a role. Automated driving vehicles are being pitched to the public, legislators and regulators by industry groups on the premise, but not yet on the promise, that if we take away the drunk, drowsy and distracted human element and shift to automated driving, crashes will be eliminated.

Vehicles equipped with automated driving systems will come in many varieties. Some will need a human driver, either to get to where the automation can take over, or as a fallback in case the automated system fails. Others are being designed never to allow human intervention by

physically removing the steering wheel and pedals. However, all of these vehicles will share one defining characteristic — when the automated driving system is engaged, any human being in the vehicle is no longer in control.

Removing humans from the wheel does not necessarily guarantee safety. Today, we already see stories about the trouble automated vehicles have with bridges, turning left, bicycles, or animals in the road. Their vision systems easily can be tricked or hacked.

Virtually every automaker has embarked on some sort of autonomous driving program, scrambling to resolve technological issues to get to market. To date little has been done on the regulatory side to ensure that these vehicles will not crash when, say, a sensor fails, or a dense fog rolls in. Some players in the car industry have lobbied intensely to avoid responsibility for their vehicles on the road, seemingly hiding defects in their system by failing to comply with reporting requirements and fighting efforts that would allow consumers to hold them accountable for collisions they cause.

Legislation must be crafted to allow these manufacturers to bring automated cars to the masses while ensuring that manufacturers are responsible when their vehicles fail. Safety depends on accountability. If manufacturers are allowed to evade accountability, they have incentive to create a potentially dangerous vehicle. This is a fraught time for the auto industry — fortunes will be made and lost in automated driving, and without proper rules the public may be the greatest victim. But, if we can get the rules right, this technology has the potential to save millions of lives.

Even if robotic cars can be made safe, the question of their economic impact still looms. Business and government must consider the impact these cars likely will have on them, their employees and their constituents. If, as anticipated, this technology can avoid all car crashes, it likely will alter insurance — potentially changing the profit structure of insurance companies and putting a dent into the business of auto body shops, insurance adjusters, medical professionals and attorneys.

Theoretically these vehicles will not violate traffic safety laws so the $3 billion to $6 billion of revenue governments receive annually from traffic tickets will evaporate and the police officers who write tickets will no longer be necessary. Three hundred thousand taxi drivers and upwards of two million truck drivers could be made jobless. Driverless cars coupled with ride-sharing like Uber and Lyft may mean fewer privately owned vehicles and more fleets, hurting local car dealers and lessening demand for urban parking — a substantial revenue stream for municipalities and private businesses who have invested in costly parking structures.

Automated driving vehicles also should have many positive economic benefits. Traffic congestion should lessen substantially; this, coupled with a decline in travel costs, should make it easier for employers to hire employees from a wider geographic area. Shipping costs should decrease with the elimination of human drivers and the ability of robotic trucks to communicate with each other and travel in a “train” formation. An entirely new market will emerge for technology, entertainment and data companies as they compete to improve the car-riding

experience by harvesting data on occupants and advertising to them, providing an “office” or “living room” on the road.

The robots are coming. Whether they are safe or not, and how we maximize their economic potential, remains to be seen.

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