Google Wants Driverless Cars, but Do We?

By JAMIE LINCOLN KITMAN.
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Automobile, telecom, tech and e-commerce industries, and their marketers, have spent the last decade enabling the public’s addiction to wired living, working feverishly to bring the phone and the internet into the driving environment. And yet this trend has never been voted on or discussed seriously by our politicians. The assumption is: game on.

In the glorious future, we are assured that driverless cars will save lives, reduce accidents, ease congestion, curb energy consumption and lower harmful emissions. These purported benefits contain elements of truth. But the data is nowhere near complete. Even stipulating that all the claimed benefits will one day materialize, the near- and midterm picture from a public-interest perspective is not the same favorable one that industry sees. Legitimate areas of question and concern remain.

Take, for instance, the “safety” benefits of self-driving cars that include avoiding tens of thousands of highway deaths each year. The truth is, no one knows for sure how many lives could be saved by driverless cars, because data on the role of human error in crashes is incomplete and misleading, relying heavily on self-reporting. The types of accidents we’ll face in this automated future, in which these cars are meant to run together in proximity at high speed, may be fewer, but they’ll be new, different, unpredictable and, on occasion, larger and more grisly than the ones we know today.

Yes, jobs will be created by these new cars, but many will be lost. Millions of truck and taxi drivers will be out of work, and owing to the rise of car-sharing and app-based car services, people may buy fewer vehicles, meaning automakers and their suppliers could be forced to shed jobs.

Then there’s infrastructure. Huge investments in new infrastructure are a given, but huge investments in old infrastructure will also still be needed. Many of these new-generation cars require smooth roads, with clearly painted lines, to safely position themselves. Potholes, worn paint and other irregularities — standard fare on too many of today’s roads — will potentially become even greater safety hazards than they are now. Where will the resources to maintain and repair roads and bridges, an effort already underfunded by more than a trillion dollars, come from?

And have we thought about security? Today’s cars can be hacked easily. New protocols must be agreed on, and even then, nefarious actors will learn how to remotely start and stop cars, steer them, steal them, crash them or even take them hostage. Some attempted address security issues at the hearings last spring — proposing rules governing consumer privacy and antihacking requirements — but the invited companies balked at regulation. For those of a dystopian bent, imagine the day when the local constable locks your doors and instructs your car to drive you to the station for questioning.

And what about the interim period when conventional vehicles share the road with automated ones? One of the claims made for autonomous cars is that they can be lighter, shedding heavy metal crash cells and expensive safety gear, like airbags, saving fuel. That’s great
until the old-school pickup with the old-fashioned drunken driver T-bones your Google car.

What’s more, are we ready to give up on mass transit? In a world where our elected officials can’t see fit to fund and fairly price much-needed public transportation, it’s hard to imagine these new automated-car expenses will free up money for trains and trams. And yet many cities are so crowded they don’t have room for more cars — even automated, electric cars congest.

When it comes to the practical direction of technology, the government too often defers to industry. Shouldn’t society have a say in what amounts to a public works project larger than the Interstate System of highways — run by and for private industry, but underwritten by taxpayers? We need to answer this burning question: Are driverless cars really what we need?

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Online comment on the New York Times website by Sandra Dulap, Toorak, Melbourne Dec 20, 2016

I can’t see what all the fuss and frenzy is about. Throughout history people have been wary of technological advancements only to eventually end up championing such innovations and wondering how they would cope if such technology was taken away. It is part of the human condition to be curious and seek innovation! Driverless cars are just the next step towards a better future. Imagine being able to sip on an organic chai latte and chat with your friends while a google car drives youth Gold Class cinemas. You could even have that extra champagne with your canapés because you knew your driverless car was waiting to take you home. That’s a future I’d like to see!

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Cartoon by Stephen Rodgers published in the Herald Sun December 20th, 2016