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Some People Do More Than Text While Driving

By **Matt Richtel** May 19, 2015 5:30 am

Phones are getting smarter, drivers seemingly less so.

A survey released this morning shows that many motorists have expanded their behind-the-wheel activities beyond texting to include using Facebook, Snapchat and Twitter, taking selfies and even shooting videos.

The survey was commissioned by AT&T, itself a phone company, but one that has invested heavily in discouraging distracted driving through its “It Can Wait” public service campaign. The telephone survey was conducted by Braun Research, which polled 2,067 people who own a smartphone and drive at least once a day.

The survey found that 27 percent of drivers age 16 to 65 report using Facebook, and 14 percent report using Twitter. Of those, a startling 30 percent who said they post to Twitter while driving do it “all the time.”

“One in 10 say they do video chat while driving. I don’t even have words for that,” said Lori Lee, AT&T’s senior executive vice president for global marketing.

The survey found, 17 percent take selfies, perhaps a fitting metaphor for ignoring everyone else on the road. The survey also found that texting remains the most prevalent activity, reported by 61 percent of drivers, followed by 33

percent who email and 28 percent who surf the Internet. More than 10 percent use Instagram and Snapchat.

The survey is obviously just one data point. But there is other evidence suggesting that driver behavior is getting more foolish, even in the face of public service efforts and legislation. Oklahoma this month enacted a bill banning texting and driving, joining 45 other states and the District of Columbia with such laws.

Yet the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, which conducts an annual survey about driver behavior, found in its 2014 survey that 36.1 percent of drivers read a text or email in the 30 days before the survey, and 27.1 percent typed one.

Those figures are an increase over two years earlier, when the 2012 index found that 34.7 percent read a text or email and 26.2 typed one.

Also, the National Safety Council, a nonprofit organization, estimated Monday that crashes from texting drivers rose to 6 percent of all crashes, up from an estimated 5 percent last year. (The figures are mere estimates; policing agencies haven't been collecting actual data long, and drivers may not admit that their texting caused a crash, according to safety advocates).

Even if these are modest increases in crashes and behavior, presumably within the margin of error, they still show the challenges facing safety advocates and policy makers. Curiously, more drivers are aware of the risks. In the 2014 AAA survey, 84.4 percent of those surveyed said it was "completely unacceptable" to text and drive.

What might explain the disconnect?

Over the years covering this issue, I've heard a handful of explanations from scientists and policy experts that get at potential reasons.

First, policy and safety efforts to discourage distracted driving are flying

in the face of strong social pressure to stay connected. It's also flying in the face of market forces and new technology that encourage constant connectedness. That's summed up in the auto industry's idea du jour: touch-screen Infotainment.

And our devices can feel irresistible. In the new AT&T survey, 22 percent of the respondents who access social media while driving said that they did so because they felt addicted. A growing body of evidence suggests that heavy use of phones is, if not actually addictive, at least extremely habit-forming.

Drivers also overestimate their abilities to multitask while driving even as they criticize others for doing it. In the AT&T survey, 27 percent of people who shoot a video while driving said they thought they could do it safely. "You're an accident waiting to happen," Ms. Lee said of multitasking motorists. The company, which started the It Can Wait campaign in 2010, plans to expand its message to discourage not only texting but other smartphone activities.

What's to be done to narrow the gap between attitudes and behaviors? Some lessons for curbing the behavior can be drawn from the success in cutting sharply into drunk driving and the effort to increase seat belt use. Both relied on the combination of public education and enforcement of tough laws.

But given the strong social and market forces present with technology that weren't present on those other issues, it is unclear if that pattern will repeat itself.

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