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OP-ED CONTRIBUTORS

## Thumbs on the Wheel

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PRESIDENT Obama has forbidden federal employees from texting while driving. The federal Transportation Department plans to do the same for commercial-truck and Interstate-bus drivers. And support is building in Congress for legislation that would require states to outlaw texting or e-mailing while driving. Such distractions cause tens of thousands of deaths each year.

But the way to stop people from using cellphones while driving is not to make it a crime. Too many drivers value convenience more than safety and would assume they wouldn't get caught. A more effective approach is to get telecommunications companies to tweak technology to make it difficult or impossible to text and drive.

When a cellphone is used in a moving car, its signal must be handed off from one cell tower to the next along the route. This process tells the service provider that the phone is in motion. Cellphone towers could be engineered to not transmit while a phone is traveling. After a phone had stopped moving for a certain amount of time — three minutes, maybe — it would be able to transmit again.

Another solution would be to install hardware in cars and software in cellphones that would disable some phone functions when cars are moving. It would be the electronics equivalent of putting a guard on a knife handle or a grill over the blades of a fan.

This would, of course, affect passengers in moving cars as well as drivers. The inconvenience would arguably be worth it. But it is also easy to imagine technology that would allow only passengers to use their phones — by tethering them to devices, placed on the passenger side of the car, that would override the system.

Just as the text function could be disabled from a moving vehicle, so could the talk function be limited — at least when used without hands-free operating technology like Bluetooth. Given the [evidence](#) suggesting that even hands-free operation is dangerously distracting to drivers, we may need to ask whether all cellphone use should be technologically impeded in moving cars. There is nothing unreasonable in expecting drivers to park before making calls.

While texting behind the wheel is a problem today, innovations may give rise to other risky behaviors within a few years, if not months. The best solutions will come not from lawmakers plugging holes in the dike, but from the engineers finding ways to make products safer.

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