

Pitts: Put brakes on driving while texting

LEONARD PITTS, Miami Herald

Published 5:30 am, Monday, August 10, 2009

The amazing thing about the debate over the need for laws to ban texting while driving is that there is a debate over the need for laws to ban texting while driving.

In the first place, you'd think you wouldn't need a law, that simple common sense would be enough to tell us it's unsafe to divert attention to a tiny keyboard and screen while simultaneously piloting 2 tons of metal, rubber, glass and, let us not forget, flesh, at freeway speeds — or even street speeds. In the second place, if common sense were insufficient, you'd think lawmakers would have rushed to back it up with tough laws.

Think again.

The issue has been moved to the front burner recently by a confluence of events. In late July, a study by the [Virginia Tech Transportation Institute](#) quantified the blatantly obvious: Texting while driving is dangerous. Researchers found that the person who does so is the functional equivalent of a drunken driver, a whopping 23 times more likely to be involved in an accident or near-collision. Actually, according to a study in *Car and Driver* magazine, the texter is a significantly greater threat than a mere drunk.

About the same time the VTTI study was released, four senators introduced legislation that would require states to pass laws banning drivers from texting or risk losing federal highway funds. According to the [Los Angeles Times](#), only 16 states and Washington, D.C., already have such laws on the books.

And last week, Transportation Secretary [Ray LaHood](#) announced a September summit in which lawmakers, law enforcement, academics, safety experts and other stakeholders will study texting and other driving distractions.

You want my response to this flurry of attention and activity? I can give it to you in a syllable:

Duh.

What else is there to study? What more is there to say? The danger is all too self-evident. And if it were not, it has been quite aptly illustrated in episodes like last year's commuter train crash in California in which the operator was texting and 25 people died.

Enough. Ban texting while driving. And cell phone use, too. Because what researchers tell us is that it's not the physical difficulty of juggling the devices that endangers us. It is the distraction: a driver so wrapped up in communicating with a person who isn't there that he is drawn away from his primary duty of keeping the car between the lines. The brain doesn't have sufficient bandwidth for both.

So yeah, there ought to be a law. And it ought to have some teeth in it. On the second offense, maybe a hefty fine, or brief loss of driving privileges. On the third, maybe you earn a free stay of a couple days and nights at the lovely graybar hotel.

If you sense here the zeal of the newly converted, congratulations on your perception. I stopped using my cell behind the wheel (I was never dumb enough to text) two weeks ago. Had myself an epiphany, I did: Was reviewing last night's game with my son really worth dying for? I decided it was not. So I no longer make or take calls while driving. If it's an emergency, I told my family, dial me again and I'll call you back. But the calls are hardly ever urgent, are they? That's not what this epidemic is about. Rather, it's about this idea — new within the last 15 years or so of our hyper-connected, hyper-productive culture — that it's never OK to be out of touch or unreachable.

Whither solitude? Whither the moment just spent communing with your own thoughts? Do you really have that much to say? I'll save you the trouble: You don't.

Phoning while driving, texting while driving ... here's a novel idea. How about driving while driving? And for those truly urgent messages that just can't wait, I propose a simple solution:

Pull over.

Pitts, winner of the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for commentary, is a columnist for the Miami Herald.