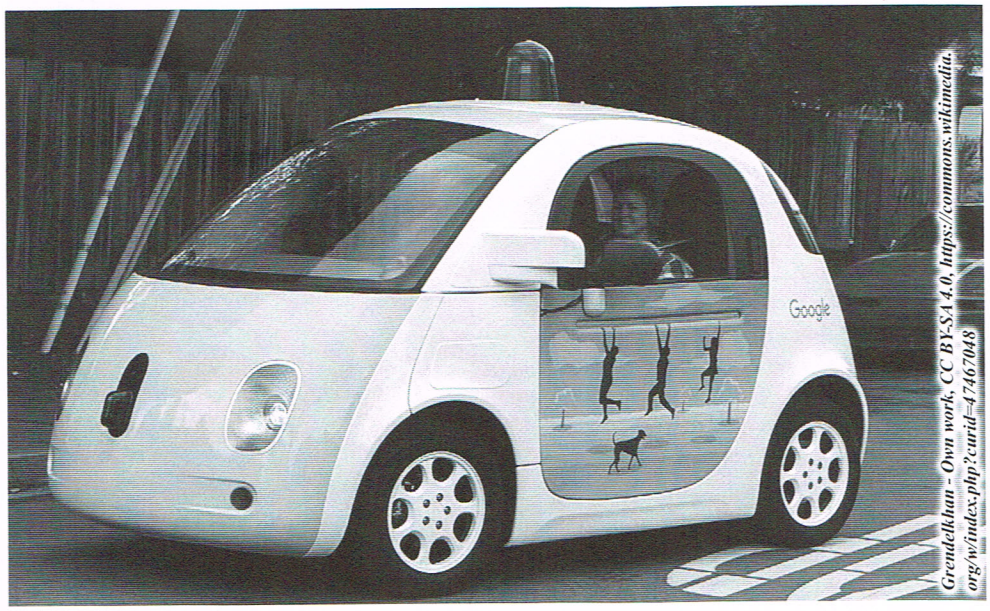
Technology Will Be Your Driver Tomorrow: Yikes!

By Bonnie Eisenfeld

Although I've known for a while that major auto manufacturers and tech companies have been developing self-driving cars, I was unsettled to learn that driving services like Lyft and Uber are now road-testing these cars. Fatal accidents have been reported, worrisome to me as a rider and as a pedestrian; and I have other concerns.

This year I started using a driving service, and have found it very pleasant and convenient. As a city dweller, I have not driven in years and am very happy to let another driver take the wheel. But no driver? I don't think so. Who would help me, a lone rider, with my luggage or packages? What if I want to make an unplanned stop? How will the car find a clean restroom? What if the technology stops working on the road? Is AAA going to send a robot to tow my car?



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A Google self-driving car at an intersection.

I'm thinking there must be other people who worry about these issues too. As it turns out, many people are very worried. Four national consumer surveys, by Pew, AAA, J. D. Power, and MIT, report that most American consumers do not want self-driving cars.

Pew's survey, "Automation in Everyday Life," reports that 54 percent of respondents would not want to ride in a driverless car today. Many do not trust the technology, do not want to give up control, and are concerned about machines making life-or-death decisions. Interest in riding in a driverless car is somewhat higher than average among men, people under age 50, educated people, and urban residents. This survey was conducted in May 2017 using a sample of more than 4,100 adults in the U.S.

AAA's recent survey of U.S. drivers reports that over 60 percent would be afraid to ride in a fully self-driving vehicle. And almost half of drivers would feel less safe sharing the road with driverless cars. However, more than half want semi-autonomous technology in their next vehicle. This survey was conducted in December 2017 with randomly selected landline and cell-phone numbers, using a sample of over 1,000 adults residing in the U.S.

J.D. Power reports that most generational groups are becoming more skeptical of self-driving technology and would not trust fully automated cars. However, car owners were interested in certain automated features—collision protection and driving-assistance technologies such as blind-spot warning, smart headlights, camera rear-view and side-view mirrors, emergency braking and steering systems, lane-change assist, and advanced windshield display. Consumers who have experienced automated driving features are more inclined to have a positive attitude. Power's online survey was conducted in January and February 2017 using a sample of 8,500 consumers in the U.S. who had purchased or leased a new vehicle in the past five years.

MIT AgeLab and New England Motor Press Association report that almost half of vehicle owners would not purchase a fully autonomous car because they don't like to relinquish control, don't trust the technology, and do not feel such cars are safe. Younger people are more comfortable with autonomous vehicles than older people, but they are becoming more cautious about the technology. People's experiences with technology failures affect their views. However, car buyers do want features such as automatic emergency braking, lane-keeping, and auto-park. MIT conducted the survey in 2017 with a sample of almost 3,000 vehicle owners recruited through a variety of websites and online notices.

In spite of the overwhelming evidence that most people do not want driverless cars, I began to think about all the traffic accidents that are caused by human drivers. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reported over 40,000 vehicle deaths in the U.S. in 2017, blamed mostly on people not wearing seat belts, drunken driving, and speeding—belts, booze, and speed. Distracted driving is a growing factor: people talking, texting or using apps on their cell phones, or putting on make-up.

Imagine a perfect world in which all vehicles were self-driving, the technology was flawless, and tech support was easily available. These automated cars would be programmed to follow the rules of the road and detect all obstacles in their paths. There would be no DUIs, no speeding, and no distracted driving. No road rage. Forty thousand lives would be saved each year. Minor accidents and delays would be eliminated—no rear-enders, no illegal turns, no running red lights, no gaper delays.

Promoters of self-driving cars imagine scenarios with energy savings and other cost savings, but these claims are untested. As with many advanced technological inventions, the future may not be what we imagine.