Driven to Distraction By Patricia Smith | March 13, 2017

Drivers are getting increasingly distracted by technology behind the wheel—with tragic consequences. Could a new roadside enforcement tool for police make a difference?

In November, 20-year-old Onasi Olio-Rojas was live-streaming on Facebook while weaving in and out of traffic and speeding at more than 100 miles per hour on a crowded Rhode Island roadway. He lost control of his Honda Civic, smashing into a garbage truck and a concrete barrier. Pulled from the mangled wreckage, he was critically injured, but managed to survive.

Six days later, 18-year-old Brooke Miranda Hughes wasn’t as lucky. She was also live-streaming on Facebook when a tractor-trailer slammed into the back of her Suzuki Forenza on a Pennsylvania highway. Hughes and her 19-year-old passenger were both killed.

Horrific accidents like these are evidence of what authorities say has become a crisis of distracted driving. Drivers are using apps and social media, texting and talking on their phones, and interacting with increasingly complex multimedia on their car dashboards when they should be keeping their eyes on the road. The result is the largest annual percentage increase in traffic fatalities in 50 years.

“This is a crisis that needs to be addressed now,” says Mark Rosekind, former head of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

When distracted driving entered the national consciousness a decade ago, the problem mainly involved people who made calls or sent texts from their cellphones. Now a host of new technologies are taking drivers’ eyes—or at least their minds—off the traffic around them. Car Wi-Fi is common, as are built-in systems for giving voice commands to phones, and drivers are mounting tablets and smartphones on their dashboards. Snapchat allows drivers to post photos that record the speed of the vehicle. The navigation app Waze rewards drivers with points when they report traffic jams and accidents.

## **Surge in Deaths**

It’s all led to a boom in internet use in vehicles that safety experts say is contributing to a surge in highway deaths.

After steady declines over the past four decades, highway fatalities began to tick up in 2015, the most recent year for which numbers are available. That year, more than 35,000 people died on American roads—a 7 percent increase over the previous year.

The government hasn’t yet determined how many of those traffic deaths were caused by
distraction. But insurance companies, which closely track car accidents, are convinced that the increasing use of electronic devices is the biggest cause, according to Robert Gordon of the Property Casualty Insurers Association of America.

It’s not just drivers who are putting lives at risk. Several deadly train crashes over the past decade have been attributed to train engineers who were distracted by texting. In 2008, 25 people were killed and 102 injured when two trains in California crashed into each other after an engineer who was texting missed a red light.

## **Texting & Selfies**

Lawmakers have tried to stop distracted driving, without much success. Since 2007, 46 states and the District of Columbia have banned texting while driving; 14 states and D.C. have banned the use of handheld devices while driving. Yet the problem seems to be getting worse. Americans confess in surveys that they’re still texting while driving, as well as using Facebook and Snapchat and taking selfies. In a 2015 survey by Erie Insurance, a third of drivers admitted to texting while driving, and three-quarters said they’d seen other drivers do it.

The federal government wants more phones to include a “driver mode” that would block features that create distractions for drivers. Several states have increased the penalties for distracted driving, hoping to deter people from using their phones. But authorities say it’s very hard to enforce distracted-driving laws, mainly because police must prove that someone they pulled over was, in fact, sending a text or using an app.

Now, lawmakers in New York State are proposing a controversial solution: giving police officers a new device called a Textalyzer that’s the digital equivalent of the Breathalyzer, the test that’s long been used by police to test the blood alcohol level of drivers. An officer arriving at the scene of an accident could use the Textalyzer to tap into a phone to check for recent activity. Failure to submit to the test could lead to the suspension of a driver’s license, similar to the consequences for refusing a Breathalyzer.

“We need something on the books where people’s behavior can change,” says New York State Assemblyman Felix Ortiz, who co-sponsored the bill. If police have a Textalyzer, he says, “people are going to be more afraid to put their hands on the cellphone.”

## **The New Drunk Driving?**

Many public safety advocates say the current crisis with distracted driving is similar to the challenge the nation faced tackling drunk driving in the 1980s.

Distracted driving “is not being treated as seriously as drunk driving, and it needs to be,” says Candace Lightner, the founder of Mothers Against Drunk Driving, who helped found a new group last year, Partnership for Distraction-Free Driving.

Distracted driving is “dangerous, devastating, crippling, and it’s a killer,” Lightner says, “and still socially acceptable.”