



BY RICK NELSON, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

## Hang up and drive; hang up and walk

**T**he cell-phone market is potentially huge. Sanjay K Jha, then chief operating officer of Qualcomm and president of Qualcomm CDMA Technology, said in a June 11 Design Automation Conference keynote address that 2 billion people are wireless subscribers today and that, by 2020, 9 billion people will become potential customers. (Motorola has subsequently hired Jha to serve as co-chief executive officer.) Jha cited one downside to this exploding market: Many of these 9 billion potential subscribers won't spend more than \$15 or \$20 for their handsets.

There is another: Many of these 9 billion will be talking while driving or texting while walking, creating mayhem on the roads and sidewalks.

The growing cell-phone-related mayhem has already drawn attention of legislatures in the United States, and, on July 1, laws banning the use of handheld phones while driving went into effect in California and Washington, complementing laws already in effect in Connecticut, the District of Columbia, New Jersey, New York, and Utah.

Don't get me wrong. I think people talking while driving can be a menace. Unfortunately, however, the laws taking effect don't address the real problem.

The online magazine *Salon* ([www.salon.com](http://www.salon.com)) recently covered this phenomenon (Reference 1). "For years, psychologists who study driving and attention have argued that switching to 'hands free' is not a real solution to the hazards caused by yakking on the mobile in the car," the author, Katharine Mieszkowski, states. She quotes David Strayer, professor of psychology at the University of Utah: "The im-

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pairments aren't because your hands aren't on the wheel. It's because your mind isn't on the road"—a contention backed up by magnetic-resonance-imaging experiments that show that conversations distract parts of the brain involved in driving.

Mieszkowski also notes that talking on a cell phone while driving is more dangerous than talking with in-car passengers. Passengers, she writes, modulate their conversation in accordance to road conditions, having their own safety in mind. In addition, she quotes Paul Atchley, professor of psychology at the University of Kansas: "Cell-phone conversations are more intense than in-car conversation."

Cell-phone conversations have more words per minute, and a driver who stops conversing to deal with traffic will be accosted at exactly the wrong time with "Hey, are you still there?"

I would assume that laws mandating hands-free cell-phone operation would inherently outlaw texting while driving, and that's a good thing. It turns out, however, that many texting-related accidents don't involve texting while driving. In another recent article (Reference 2), author Dionne Searcey writes: "A growing group of multitaskers are texting on the go ... while ambulatory. They obviously ram into walls and doorways or fall down stairs. Out on the streets, they bump into lampposts, parked cars, garbage cans, and other stationary objects."

So what's the solution? Searcey reports that a company has been outfitting lampposts in London's East End with padded bumpers to reduce injuries to ambulatory texters. Well, that's one approach, and it's likely to be more effective than US hands-free-cell-phone laws targeting drivers. For both mobile texters and mobile talkers, however, education, not legislation, would seem to be the more promising road to take. **EDN**

#### REFERENCES

- 1 Mieszkowski, Katharine, "Hang up and drive," *Salon*, July 25, 2008, [www.salon.com/news/feature/2008/07/25/cell\\_phone\\_driving/index.html](http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2008/07/25/cell_phone_driving/index.html).
- 2 Searcey, Dionne, "Generation Text: Emailing on the Go Sends Some Users Into Harm's Way," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 25, 2008, [www.wsj.com](http://www.wsj.com).

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