Whirling Dervish Drivers

by Maureen Dowd

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One night several years ago, my mom slipped and broke a bone in her neck. I stayed late at the hospital with her. Driving home on a mostly deserted road, I checked my cellphone messages.

I didn’t notice either the red light coming up or the car stopped at the light. I banged into the back of it, and even though the damage was minor, it was a scary moment.

I admitted that I was upset and distracted, took the blame and swore to myself I’d never use a cellphone in a car again. But, of course, I did. D.C. police will pull you over if they see you using a cellphone that you’re holding up to your ear, but not if you’re hands-free.

Ominously, research by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration — suppressed for years and released on Tuesday after petitions were filed by advocacy groups — shows that there are “negligible differences” in accident risk whether you’re holding the phone or not. Hands-free devices may even enhance the danger by lulling you into complacency.

It is the conversation that pulls focus. My greatest fear is that I’m going to be in a taxi when the driver gets a call from his wife to tell him that she’s run off with his sexy cousin.

In a March New Yorker profile, Tony Gilroy, the screenwriter of “Michael Clayton” and “Duplicity,” told the nightmare tale of being in a New York taxi when the cell-chatting driver ran a red light and hit another car.

“So they’re lifting the other guy out of the car, and I’m thinking, I’m lucky,” he said, adding: “Then I see them come at my cab with those things, the Jaws of Life.” He’d fractured his rib and hip.

Studies show that drivers who talk on cellphones are four times more likely to be in a crash and drive just as erratically as people with an 0.08 percent blood-alcohol level.

In one study cited by the highway safety agency, “drivers found it easier to drive drunk than to drive while using a phone, even when it was hands-free.”

The agency buried its head in the sand, keeping the research to itself for years and ignoring the fact that soon nearly all Americans would own cellphones and that the phones are always getting smarter and more demanding, putting a multimedia empire at your fingertips while you’re piloting a potentially lethal piece of artillery.

Americans are so addicted to techno-surfing that they’ve gotten hubristic about how many machines they can juggle simultaneously. One reporter I know recently filed a story from his laptop while driving on the Pacific Coast Highway.

As John Ratey, the Harvard professor of psychiatry who specializes in the science of attention, told The Times’s Matt Richtel for his [chilling series, “Driven to Distraction,”](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/technology/series/driven_to_distraction/index.html)using digital devices gives you “a dopamine squirt.”

That explains the Pavlovian impulse of people who are out with friends or dates to ignore them and check their BlackBerrys and cellphones, even if 99 out of 100 messages are uninteresting. They’re truffle-hunting for that scintillating one.

Americans woke up one day to find that they were don’t-miss-a-moment addicts who feel compelled to respond to all messages immediately.

The tech industry is our drug dealer, feeding the intense social and economic pressure to stay constantly in touch with employers, colleagues, friends and family.

It also explains why Christopher Hill, a 21-year-old from Oklahoma who killed a woman last September when he ran a red light while on his cellphone and rammed into her S.U.V., tried to keep dialing and driving with a headset his mother gave him two months after the accident.

He “found his mind wandering into his phone call so much that ‘I nearly missed a light,’ ” he told Richtel. Now he says he rarely uses the phone.

Hollywood offered a cautionary story with the depressing “Seven Pounds,” which begins with Will Smith spoiling his perfect life when he BlackBerrys while driving in his fancy car with his gorgeous new fiancée. He crashes into another car, killing six strangers and his girlfriend. The movie ends with a poisonous jellyfish in an icy bathtub. Don’t ask.

Left, literally, to our own devices, we spiral out of control. States should outlaw drivers from talking on phones — except in an emergency — and using digital devices that cause you to drift and swerve; or at least mandate a $10,000 fine for getting in an accident while phoning or Twittering.

Auto companies are busy creating new crack hits for our self-destructive cravings. Ford is developing a system that would let drivers use phones and music players and surf the Internet with voice commands and audible responses.

Sounds like a computerized death machine. But, as our dealers know, we’ll never disconnect.