Marks & Harrison 2018 Scholarship Competition

A quick glance downwards, one hand on the wheel, the soft tapping of fingertips on a small glass screen, the high screech of rubber tires, a tangled mass of crushed metal, a life forever gone, lives forever changed. From the twenty first century has surged forth an overwhelming amount of technological innovations targeted to such specific problems that their diversity rivals that of the candies in Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory. And keeping up with the incredible speed of this technology is a generation incredibly adept at interacting with it, incredibly attached to the electronics they have known since birth. While the growth of technology has largely positive impacts, there are nevertheless disadvantages of its integration in society—particularly the danger it presents to drivers. Although it is undoubtable modern technology has augmented distracted drivers, there are also countless ways to combat the danger associated with it—many of which have already been implemented.

The main cause of distracted driving is that people are aware that they are being contacted, and decide to respond when they believe they have a few free seconds. But due to motion technology, cell phones are able to detect when you are in a moving vehicle and currently have the capacity to implement "driving modes" to limit distracted driving. For example, current iPhones have a mode which automatically places your phone under Do Not Disturb when it recognizes that you are moving at high speeds. Though simple, this is a cell phone program which can address the issue of distracted driving at its root in a convenient manner for the driver. It could be even be improved by allowing only emergency calls to pass through the Do Not Disturb mode, given the driver has a hands-free speaker device through which they can communicate. This ensures that the driver is mostly but not completely cut off from communications while they drive, and permits family or friends to contact them in emergency situations. Other communications apps such as Snapchat or Facebook Messenger should also develop programs which detect motion and act accordingly to restrict their function while driving. One example could be a "red mode," which colors the cell phone screen with a red tint and warns the driver to stop using the app. By limiting the function of communication apps while the user is driving, these apps can effectively limit the number of distracted drivers.

Improved information circulation can also help to diminish the number of distracted drivers. By learning from survivors or friends or family members of people who have been in distracted driving accidents, drivers will likely correct their behavior themselves and think twice before picking up their cell phones. Statistics and firsthand accounts should be present in driver's education textbooks, high school health classes, television and radio commercials, and billboards to correct behavior at younger ages. Increased knowledge about the dangers of distracted driving will help to ensure that drivers restrain themselves, placing less of the responsibility upon technology companies. Pop culture is another large potential contributing factor—circulating information about the fatality of distracted driving can strengthen the social stigma against it. This not only encourages individuals to resist the temptation of using their phones, but also encourages them to discourage friends or family who do.

The accelerated growth of technology is inevitable, as is its integration in people's lives. However, the very technology that poses a risk to distracted drivers can also serve to limit car accidents and protect their lives. Using technology and societal awareness to limit distracted driving will help to ensure that lives remain unchanged when it is most important.