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I know our robot overlords are coming, but they can't have my car keys

There's more to my anxiety about smart cars than just the fear that my parallel parking skills are becoming obsolete.



SHUTTERSTOCK

In America, learning to drive has always been a rite of passage. Why would anyone give that up? Are these the same people who let Spotify choose their music?

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America is experiencing a peculiar cultural moment. We are slowly, willingly relinquishing control to our cars.

I discovered this a few months ago, when my 13-year-old Subaru finally choked and sputtered its way to an unhappy, gasoline-fumed death, and I bought a new car. Rather, my husband bought a new car for me, because I have no interest in learning about new cars or their myriad features and special powers. So my husband sat in bed at night, tapping his laptop, researching cars.

“What kind of car do you want?” he asked.

“One with no TV screen,” I replied.

“They don’t make many cars like that anymore.”



Driverless? Self-driving? No matter what you call them, these cars haven’t passed all the road tests

Driverless vehicles are being tested in Singapore and Silicon Valley. We traveled to both places to find out when your ride will be ready.

There are so many reasons why this is bad. One of the riskiest behaviors for drivers is “distracted driving” — multi-tasking while you’re supposed to be steering. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, approximately 660,000 drivers are using cellphones or “manipulating electronic devices” at any given moment, leading to crashes that killed 3,179 people and injured 431,000 in 2014. While most people blame teenagers and their infernal texting, grown-ups fiddling with giant dashboard screens, trying to Google the nearest Starbucks, are also pretty darn distracted.

Yes, you can switch the screen off, but then the car has no radio. This is a cruel bargain, if you ask me.

So, a few weeks after my Subaru croaked, I was sitting in the driver’s seat of a new Jeep Cherokee, the salesman proudly explaining how to operate the dashboard monitor and the GPS, how to open and close the massive sunroof, how to start the car by pressing a button.

He explained a special feature called LaneSense, which allows the Jeep to detect when the driver unintentionally drifts out of a lane. When this happens, the Jeep automatically applies torque to the steering wheel, prompting the driver to . . .

“I don’t want that!” I snapped, startling the salesman. “Why would anybody want that? Turn it off!”

I’m sure I appeared ungrateful, which I was. Also resentful, somewhat panicked, and old. I am perfectly capable of staying in the lane all by myself, thank you. I can also parallel park, so you can go ahead and shut off the ParkSense feature while you’re at it.

Perhaps I'm just saddened that my navigation and parking skills are becoming obsolete. But I think there's more to my anxiety. Psychologists have found that dependence on computers can cause "automation complacency" — we think the car's paying attention to our surroundings, so we don't bother. For instance, surely the car will tell me when I am about to back over a bicycle, so why should I bother looking out the rear window? Crunch. "I think it's dangerous to give the car so much control," I told the salesman. He looked perplexed.

LaneSense and ParkSense are just two steps down the slippery slope to the terrifying world of fully autonomous robot cars: The research firm IHS Automotive expects 21 million self-driving cars to be sold in 2035. This brings us ever closer to the computer takeover so accurately predicted in the Terminator movies.

OK, well, maybe not, but I am not alone in my mistrust of autonomous vehicles. A May 2016 survey by the University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute found that two-thirds of the respondents — a.k.a. normal people — are moderately or very concerned about riding in a completely self-driving vehicle. Just under 16 percent said they'd prefer a completely self-driving car.

The willingness of those 16 percent to cede control hints at a darker cultural conundrum. In America, learning to drive has always been a rite of passage, a step into independence. Why would anyone gladly give that up? Are these the same people who let Spotify choose all their music?

Driving the new Jeep, I longed for my first car, a 1992 two-door Chevy with crank windows and a tape deck. I drove it solo across the desert and up the California coast, reading a map (on paper!) to find my way. That car was my sidekick, my fellow traveler. There was no question who was driving.

I think the Jeep sensed my distrust, because it somehow connected to my iPhone and they began to talk to each other. They colluded, offering to show me maps and guide me around traffic jams. Sometimes the iPhone played music on the car radio without asking.

“The car and the phone are talking to each other and I don’t like it,” I told my husband.

We fixed the Jeep so that it can’t talk to my phone anymore. Now a plaintive message sometimes pops onto the car’s screen: “No iPhone detected. Would you like to connect one?” No, I would not. I want the Jeep to remember who’s driving the car.

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