

PRO/CON: Cars that drive themselves could soon become the norm

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A self-driving Ford Fusion hybrid car is test driven in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on August 18, 2016. AP Photo/Jared Wickerham

PRO: Driverless cars could allow people to stay in the suburbs, and save them money

More than at any time in world history, technological advances are having a major effect on the way people live their lives.

Just 30 years ago, few would have imagined it would be possible for every person to own their very own pocket-sized supercomputer that would allow them to do virtually anything, from finding a date to buying a house. Yet today's smartphone is a marvel.

Now, the driverless car is another society-shifting invention that has the potential to become an everyday reality in the not-so-distant future.

Driverless Cars Could Be Here By 2019

In April, Volkswagen's Johann Jungwirth predicted the first self-driving cars could appear on the market as early 2019. In May, General Motors' Richard Holman said driverless cars could become a reality in 2020.

State governments have already started preparing for the new technology's arrival.

California, Florida, Michigan and Nevada have recently passed laws governing their use. More than a dozen other states are currently considering similar legislation.

Private Car Ownership Will Decline

Traditionally, new technological developments put more products in the hands of consumers. However, many industry experts predict driverless cars will actually limit private car ownership.

The tech-savvy consumer of the future will no longer spend thousands of dollars on a new car. Instead, they will open an app on a computer or smartphone and call for their very own driverless chauffeur.

Driverless cars have the potential to radically change the way people spend time with their families and commute to and from work. Most likely they will also alter where and how people live.

Suburbs Versus Cities

Recent data show that more and more people are moving to big cities. However, surveys suggest that people of all ages still prefer to live in affordable, convenient and spacious suburbs.

One 2015 poll showed that as many as two-thirds of young people would choose suburban living over life in the city.

If Americans still prefer the suburbs over city centers, why are so many choosing to live in cities?

A number of factors are responsible for the shift from suburbs to cities that has occurred over the past two decades. One of the most important is the increasingly globalized economy, which is drawing people looking for work to major centers of technology and commerce.

International centers of tech-commerce have developed in regions such as California's Silicon Valley, the Research Triangle in North Carolina and in major cities such as Chicago and New York.

Professionals who want to work in these growing tech fields or in related industries often need to be close to the action.

Suburbs Offer A Better Quality Of Life

This does not mean, however, that cities typically offer a better quality of life — indeed, in most cases, they do not.

Sales taxes and income taxes are highest in some of the country's major cities, such as Chicago, New York, San Francisco and Seattle.

Crime and pollution remain significantly worse in cities as well. In addition, regulations that limit businesses, especially small businesses, are worse in states with large cities, including California, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Illinois, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania.

Driverless cars have the potential to completely change the way Americans think about where they live. The commute from suburb to city center will become much less strenuous, so people will feel less need to live in the city itself. People will no longer need to pay the high rents, taxes and fees common in big cities in order to work comfortably in those places.

With driverless cars, driving to work will feel more like sitting at home on the couch watching a favorite television show.

If that is what the future looks like, most of us will not mind the extra commuting time.

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CON: Driverless cars pose major safety issues, and relying on them is unrealistic

A nationwide network of millions of self-driving cars whisking suburban commuters to work is a pleasant utopian vision. However, getting to that point would be far from simple.

Self-driving cars have been in development for years, and their backers claim the vehicles will be ready to dominate the car market in the near future.

Having a nation of commuters use these vehicles, they claim, will reduce traffic congestion and improve highway safety. They say they will make even the far suburbs more convenient places to live.

Fully automated cars could make up 10 percent of global vehicle sales a year by 2035, some have predicted.

However, before those suburban dwellers can order such cars, some gargantuan problems must be overcome.

Safety Issues Abound

First, the technology used in those cars creates serious safety problems, and huge improvements must be made before they can safely handle streets.

Developing fail-safe software for completely driverless cars would require rethinking how software is designed. The software in phones, laptops and other devices is not designed to operate for extended periods without crashing or freezing — and those errors would be deadly in a car.

Also, driverless cars rely primarily on pre-programmed route data, so they do not obey things such as temporary traffic lights. They also have problems figuring out when objects such as bits of paper garbage are harmless, so they may swerve for no reason.

Computers Cannot Replace Humans

The vehicles simply cannot deal with the unexpected adventures that fill everyday life. Until the cars can self-drive at all times, humans are going to have to be ready to resume control.

Meanwhile, Google's self-driving car has already run into another perplexing safety problem — human drivers.

Recently, one of Google's self-driving cars came to a crosswalk and did what it was supposed to do — it slowed down to allow a pedestrian to cross. However, despite the slowing down, the human "safety driver" hit the brakes. The pedestrian emerged unhurt, but Google's car was hit from behind.

Maps For Millions Of Miles

For driverless cars to work properly, detailed maps of streets and highways need to be loaded into the computers that guide them. Currently the maps for Google's self-driving cars have only been designed to handle a few thousand miles of road. Developing a nationwide self-driving car system would require countless amounts of effort and money. To make a national system work, a company would have to maintain and update data on millions of miles of roads.

The development of these vehicles would also inevitably mean more state and federal regulation covering how, when and where driverless cars can be used.

Regulators are notoriously cautious and whatever regulation they come up with is likely to hamper the rapid spread of driverless cars.

Legal And Privacy Issues

The use of driverless cars would also raise issues of legal responsibility, such as who should be held responsible in the event of a crash — the passenger, the carmaker or the designer of the computer system. Such complicated legal issues could take years and many lawyers to sort out.

There is also a potential privacy problem: Each car's computer would store massive amounts of highly personal data that federal intelligence agencies, with their fondness for spying on us, might well grab to use against drivers.

No Love For Driverless Cars

Totally self-driving cars will likely not be cheap, either. One report says the ability to drive anywhere with no human input would add some \$10,000 to a car's sticker price, at least during the first decade the technology is on the market.

There is also the problem of getting people to accept them. Cars are not just transportation — they reflect our personalities and tastes. Imagine someone who loves zooming down the highway behind the wheel of a sleek and speedy sports car. It will be hard to get them to accept riding as a passenger in a not-very-exciting computer-controlled vehicle.

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