

## Texting Miss Daisy

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### Studies show that cell phone use can be as dangerous as drunk driving.

I need technology like a 4-year-old needs cotton candy. It may just be a really strong want, but it sure feels like a requirement. When Gmail was down last week I could only think of all the things that I couldn't do without it. When I go back to my home county, which has a telephone co-op that blocks out all major carriers, I feel a physical loss with the absence of my signal bars. I need to be able to get in touch with anyone at any time, which is why I think nothing of calling someone while I'm on the road. But that's changing as cell phone laws already present in other states creep into Texas.

Six states already ban handheld cell phones for all drivers and 18 ban text messaging. Texas' first foray into cell phone legislation took effect Sept. 1, and bans the use of cell phones in school zones, as well as for drivers under the age of 18.



The restriction has some caveats that prevent it from being exercised to its full effect, the greatest of which is that, in order to ticket drivers for the offense, signs must be posted outside the school zone. Despite the small scope of the restriction, the law has met a frosty reception. Still, I don't think it's a bad idea.

For one thing, there is that memorable "Mythbusters" episode where they demonstrated that talking on a cell phone was more impairing than driving a little bit drunk. However, despite their precedent for mostly foolproof and highly entertaining tests, that experiment had a lot of flaws. Fortunately, slightly more reliable research has been conducted elsewhere.

In 2001, the University of Utah demonstrated that hands-free cell phones are just as distracting as handheld ones. A study published in 2006 found that people were as impaired while talking on a cell phone as they were driving with a .08 percent blood alcohol count. The drivers on cells were slower to brake than in their control runs, and their following distance varied wildly as their attention on the road and the car in front of them faded in and out. In fact, the only wrecks during the experimental test drives occurred when drivers were on cell phones, not when they had been drinking.

Perhaps the most important results to come out of the Utah studies were published in 2008, with tests that compared conversations with a passenger to the same conversation held on a hands-free cell phone. It's a common misconception that it's the message and not the medium that distracts the driver, an experiment notably not tested by the "Mythbusters." The results are clear, while talking to a passenger had virtually no impact on driving, talking on a cell phone impaired drivers' ability to stay in their own lane and made them four times as likely to miss their destination.

In the end it's really a simple issue. Talking on a cell phone, no matter if it's hands-free or handheld, seriously impairs your ability to drive. We all know that drunk driving is a foolish and reckless act that endangers not only the driver, but everyone else on the road. It's time talking on a cell phone took on that same stigma. I'll be the first to say that I really like my phone and I'm going to be annoyed by not using it, even just in school zones.

But, like that 4-year-old with the cotton candy, I don't actually need technology every minute to survive, and too much can be a very bad thing.

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