

Teenagers and Cell Phones are not a Good Combination

by Benjamin Artz

Lately we have been hearing a bunch of negative publicity involving cell phone usage. For example, cell phone usage while driving supposedly increases the risk of car crashes, while cell phone usage in a Milwaukee Public School implies there is a fight going on and the students are calling for backup from their friends. So it is obvious cell phones have gotten a bad rap lately, but should we worry about the technology itself or rather the people who are misusing it?

Ever since the invention of the car, we have worried about the use of it as a weapon. Thousands of people die and millions get injured in car accidents every year, so lawmakers have slaved over creating rules for people to abide by in order to curb these crashes. The latest attempt is to attack the cell phone and to discourage its use while driving an automobile. Many cities, including New York and Wisconsin's very own Glendale have passed laws that punish drivers who "cause" accidents while operating their cell phones. The cause of the accident itself is not the cell phone but the inattentive driving, and there is already a law prohibiting and punishing this.

Cell phone legislation should not get special treatment over other notorious causes of inattentive driving such as eating fast food, auditioning for American Idol or conversing with a passenger. Just as well, should we prohibit elderly drivers from our country's highways? Mile for mile, they commit the most accidents of anyone. So we must be careful about our laws and how restrictive they can be of our freedoms. It is perfectly acceptable and expected to have laws punishing inattentive driving as a whole, but the government should not presume to tell us exactly what makes everyone inattentive drivers and specifically ban that activity. However, it is right to regulate those of us who systematically make the wrong decisions and have not learned from our mistakes as of yet; namely teenagers.

Wisconsin's legislature is considering the prohibition of cell phone usage among young drivers. Although this would ultimately be tough to enforce, it is an important step in providing a controlled learning environment for avid cell phone users to concentrate on building good driving skills. Ideally, adults know the dangers and consequences as well as benefits of operating cell phones while driving, but teenagers, on average, do not. Therefore it may be a good idea to prohibit cell phone usage by teenagers while driving. How to enforce it best is a whole different matter.

Lack of sound judgment by Milwaukee Public School teenagers has further blackened the resumé of the cell phone. When fights break out in a school, cell phones are often used to call upon help; not to break up the fight, but to fuel it. This misuse can cause simple disagreements to turn into violent and dangerous

brawls. Once again, some teenagers failed to make good choices with the right they were given, and MPS officials appropriately took away that right.

When making decisions for the state, lawmakers must soundly compare the costs and benefits of their rules. When it comes to teenagers and the problems that cell phones can bring them, the benefits to their own well-being as well as society's may indeed outweigh the costs. Since teenagers themselves cannot, as of yet, comprehend this, it is right for adults to step in and regulate their behavior. Then maybe some day the cell phone will earn its way back into the driver's seat alongside Big Macs, scores of compact discs and the occasional makeup kit.