

Bumps in the road

by Malcolm Webb

1 Sir, John Gapper's article "Why would you want to buy a self-driving car?" (December 8) is interesting and thought-provoking. However, his conclusion, that all but the "wealthy and fussy" will eventually buy such vehicles, seems to me to be flawed in at least two respects.

2 First, he ignores what I call "electric window syndrome". I first encountered this phenomenon many years ago, when a salesman, quivering with rage, complained that his colleague had been given a company car with windows that were opened and closed by the touch of a button, whereas his, otherwise identical, model only had rotating handles to wind the windows up and down. The reason was that the carmaker had introduced electric windows as a standard on the model after the complainant had received his car. The explanation of that fact failed to assuage his hurt. Car status is a significant issue. Of course, not all people think or act alike in this regard. A sizeable proportion of the car-buying community (I would venture to suggest the clear majority), however, is motivated to a significant degree by vehicle status, and a grey, driverless, utility van, collecting people for a journey to be shared with others, is not going to fit the bill for them.

3 Second, the driverless vehicle will need to be programmed to avoid collisions. However, what will the programmed response be if the only alternative to knocking over the child, suddenly stepping in front of the vehicle travelling at speed, is an evasive manoeuvre that risks the lives of all the vehicle's passengers? Carry on and risk killing the child, or take late evasive action and risk killing passengers, including any children among them? Presumably the vendors of such cars would have to disclose the programmed response for this and other similar predicaments. The lawyers will have fun with that. In any event, I suspect that this could be another serious marketing problem for these vehicles.

4 Just as with aeroplanes, no matter how smart the driving technology becomes, I suspect the days of journeys completely devoid of 6 are a very long way off.



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