

Coming Soon: “Car-Key Kids”

What autonomous automobiles will mean for adolescence

by MICHAEL J. PETRILLI

Imagine seventh graders arriving at middle school dances in their own rides.

Anyone with even a passing interest in science fiction, or in the latest advances out of Silicon Valley, surely gets a kick thinking about Google’s self-driving cars, now under development and ready for road testing. Imagine: you could spend *even more* of your day staring at a screen or writing with your thumbs if you didn’t have to pay attention to traffic during your commute to work!

But amid all the buzz and brouhaha, an important point has gone unmade: while auto-piloted autos will surely make life more convenient for many adults, they will be nothing short of revolutionary for adolescents (and their parents). They will change the teen (and tween) years as we know them.

Why is that? Here’s a basic fact: most adolescents are ready for independent mobility well before they are qualified to operate a car. Those lucky to live in a city already know this. Many parents let their 12-year-olds ride a train or city bus or a bike to school or a friend’s house; some even let their 10-year-olds do so. But of course these kids can’t drive the family car. But soon they will.

Well, not “drive.” But sit in the back as a robot takes them to school, or soccer practice, or karate class. Think about what this means for the parents. No more schlepping tweens around town, no more spending years with “chauffeur” as your primary job description.

Of course, this raises many questions, all of which deserve answers. How old must children be in order to be driven by a Google-bot? If they are old enough to walk to school (say, eight), is that old enough? Would said children have any control over where the car goes, or would parents set the route in advance? (How might that work for 15-year-olds? What’s to keep the cleverer and more dexterous among them from hacking the instructions?) Can each family make these decisions? Or should states set the rules?

Furthermore, if a robot can drive teens around town more safely than teens themselves, might states push back the “manual-driving” age to 21 or later to wait until young people’s brains are really up to the task? Such a policy is politically infeasible now because of the interest in allowing those 16 and up to get themselves to their jobs. But with a computerized chauffeur, that’s no longer a problem. (Of course,

it will be a while until everyone has an autonomous auto, and until every road is ready for them, too.)

Let’s take this thought experiment even further. If teenagers didn’t need to “drive” their own cars—if they were no longer *allowed* to drive their own cars—

might we be able to eliminate the drinking age? Or move it back down to 18, where it used to be in many places? In the 1980s, Uncle Sam gave states incentives to raise it to 21 because of a concern about drunk driving. (Teenagers have famously bad judgment, weak self-control, and proclivities toward recklessness.) But once Google becomes a designated driver, that rationale goes away.

Already the federal government is funding technology that will passively detect any driver’s blood-alcohol level and render the vehicle inoperable if that level exceeds the legal limit. Autonomous autos could go one step further and give the driver a ride home (and perhaps a stern lecture to boot).

Schools will need to respond to these big changes, too. It’s inevitable that they will eventually purchase “driverless buses.” (I would assume parents will demand an adult onboard, but that could be a teacher’s aide instead of a “driver.” He or she could even provide instruction on the way to school.) Already the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration is preparing to require “connected vehicle” technology on school buses (gadgets that allow vehicles to talk to one another in order to avoid crashes). Eventually, driverless buses will surely be seen as the safer alternative.

But the advent of driverless cars will change school routines as well. Imagine carpool lines without parents. Seventh graders arriving at middle school dances in their own rides. High school seniors spending their weekends at bars. “Car-key kids” instead of “latch-key kids.” (Will schools allow kids’ cars to park themselves nearby, or must they return home until pickup time?)

This might sound fanciful, but it could all be a reality before today’s kindergartners walk across the graduation stage. Strap on your seat belts. It’s going to be a wild ride.

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