
Out of Control

Author: Peter Dearlove

A sideways glance at the looming loss of a hands-on controlling interest in our means of conveyance, from cars to light aeroplanes, balloons and vacuum loops. Where are we going without a driver, and why?

Despite a dozen or so missed deadlines and sometimes violent opposition, the era of driverless motoring is upon us, and further delays notwithstanding, it is now as sure to come to pass as sunrise next Sunday. Big-name motor giants and social media moguls are among the multitudes helping to bring it on, and what was once derided as a ridiculous pipe dream has become one of the darlings of the cognoscenti.

The motivation is not difficult to understand, and it is neither a simple fad nor an inexplicable example of the human urge to climb high mountains. It is all about saving lives and money.

The death toll from driver-driven vehicle accidents has reached a truly incredible number - a number that 40 full Jumbo jets crashing every week would not equal. At close to 1.5 million fatalities on the road every year, someone is killed in a crash every 2 seconds. Even more are injured, many damaged for life, and the responsibility for this astonishing transport carnage is overwhelmingly the human factor; drivers fail far more often than their machines. And since it seems we all always have to go somewhere, and get there fast, cars and roads will be with us for a long time to come. The only hope then is for something, or someone, less fallible to be at the wheel.

It is an attractive idea that has been around for nearly a hundred years. In its first brief public appearance, a radio-controlled car motored driverless up and down New York Broadway in 1925, although that was more in the class of a stunt than a protest against death on the roads. Since then people have been tinkering around with the notion until relatively recently. Now it is moving forward at, if you will forgive the expression, breakneck speed.

There are many opponents, mostly latter-day Luddites, who see in it a threat to jobs and an assault on freedom. Thus far they have been making their point with screwdrivers and rocks and their own motor cars, puncturing tyres and deliberately denting anything driver-less they come upon, but authorities in the US are expecting a more radical response if and when driving jobs are actually lost. Indeed it is estimated that most of the accidents so far involving driverless cars, and there have been a dozen or more, haven't been accidents at all – they have been 'incidents', mostly in the form of intentional bumping from behind.

Such opposition is puny compared to the powerhouse supporting the driverless cause. Facebook, Google, Twitter, Mercedes Benz and Ford have all committed their muscle to it. So too has Germany; Andreas Scheuer, during his tenure as the Transport Minister, gave a public assurance that his country would be the first to take autonomous vehicles out of the labs and onto the streets. If his confident forecast proves right, the journey ahead will be incredibly complicated and very, very long; some say at least 30 years, others a more cautious 50. In that time anything could happen to make the journey irrelevant. Think of the Hyperloop, think of drones, think of airships - all of which are also now upon us and all of them, to some extent, concerned with moving people and products from town to town in a seamless, safe and speedy way. The Hyperloop is a serious contender. Currently being tested in real time and with real people, the loop manufacturers say the technology has actually been proved and the project is at the starting gates – presumably waiting only for official sanction and the capital to build something that makes the railways look little and cheap.

They call the loop 'the fifth mode' [of transport, after cars, boats, planes and trains]. In a 500m test tunnel in Nevada, a carrier prototype was sucked along in its tube at nearly 350km per hour. The target is to travel at over 1000 km/h, carrying thousands of people all over the place every day. It certainly has the drama and star appeal to take some of the spotlight off the driverless main event.

And then there is the big balloon story which, remembering the fate of the last great dirigible, the Hindenburg, may have seemed a rather fanciful mistake at first but has subsequently proved to be much more than pie in the sky. The British helium-filled airship Airlander has flown dozens of test flights and is also now ready to go. Mooted as a safe and reliable carrier of passengers and products there could soon be a passenger service between Liverpool and Bristol. It will be much quicker than the railway journey and cost little more. Best of all for green people, the Airlander has a low carbon footprint, being driven by hydrogen-cell-generated electricity.

The drone saga is another one competing for the safer transport spotlight. It seemed to spring upon us quite suddenly, but then the military men got hold of it and put it to immediate and lethal use, guaranteeing publicity without warming hearts. Where exactly it is now, no one can tell because, probably, it is classified as top secret.

Some say that the last great hurdle facing the driverless juggernaut is the all-or-nothing principle. As the argument goes, it will only be when there are no real, live drivers on the roads that the mission can be said to have been accomplished. Back in the 19th Century, when motorised vehicles first began to appear in Britain, the House of Commons passed a road traffic act which came to be known affectionately as the Red Flag Act. That was the one that required all motor cars driving on a public highway to have a man walking ahead waving a red flag - a laughable proposition now, but widely seen as a reasonable precaution at the time.

Familiarity, positive experience, proof of utility and user-friendliness were what eventually combined to get rid of red flagging. Those selfsame ingredients could easily be used now to bring all on board in a massive campaign of coordinated communication. And when you think of the millions going into the science and engineering of the project, surely there must be enough left over to create a welcoming and happy worldwide environment for driverless driving to grow up in.