

# IN-CAR-CONNECTIVITY

—by Cecilia Kang

Even as policy makers and safety advocates worry that the use of gizmos in cars is driving people to distraction, companies including Ford Motor showcased dashboard innovations at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas in early January. The topic was so prominent, in fact, that hundreds of booths dedicated to computers and cars gave the industry event a Detroit Auto Show feeling.

Ford, for example, had a lineup of cars decked out with Internet dashboards which allow people to use Twitter and Facebook and stream Internet radio from behind the wheel. Alan Mulally, Ford's chief executive, described the firm's "in-car connectivity strategy" as core to its corporate turnaround.

Demand for such innovation is growing, according to the Consumer Electronics Association, which reports that "sales of in-vehicle gadgets are expected to top \$9.3 billion for 2009."

But as the use of technology accelerates, policy makers are proceeding with caution. Distracted driving is deadly, they say. In 2008, nearly 6,000 highway deaths were caused by distracted driving— with many of those distractions caused by cellphone use. On any given day, 800,000 drivers use cell phones on the road, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. One of three teens admit to texting while driving.

Trade show vendors showcased safety innovations, too. Among the wares from start-ups were software and gadgets aimed at shutting down cellphone use or making communications

safer on the road. Global Traffic Network sends traffic warnings about accidents by cellphone ring ones. ZoomSafer's software locks down phone calls and texting when a car hits 15 mph.

The Federal Communications Commission and other policy makers at the show stressed the need to address technology issues urgently—in particular, distracted driving. Transportation Secretary Raymond H. LaHood called texting while driving an "epidemic." Some drivers try to avoid the temptation of talking on the cellphone or texting while driving by keeping gadgets in a purse stowed in the trunk. But some officials have acknowledged it might be unrealistic to expect drivers to put their gadgets away.

During a CES panel hearing in January, Peter Appel, the Transportation Department's head of research and technology, said his agency is looking into ways technologies can make driving safer. Location-based applications could make the driver's seat rumble to warn of a possible accident ahead. Software firms such as Safe Driving Systems and Txtblocker showed off technologies that would block text messaging and inbound calls while on the road.

Creating new technologies and making the roads safer "can be very complementary objectives," Appel said. But ultimately, he said, "the responsibility the driver takes for his or her safety is more important than any action by smart technology."

