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Wireless technology hooks up cars to the info highway

- Lara Sinclair, Las Vegas
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ELECTRONICS and automotive manufacturers in the US are making driving safer using new technology, including connecting vehicles wirelessly to the internet.

But fears that accidents will increase because of drivers using mobile phones and other communications devices have led to the development of systems that will cut off phone and internet access in some situations in a bid to save drivers from themselves.

Inbuilt car communications systems were affecting purchasing decisions, according to Ford president and chief executive Alan Mulally.

He told the International Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas last week that Ford had a million cars on the road using its Sync communications system, developed with Microsoft and launched two years ago.

It enables drivers to use voice commands, as well as touch, to activate Bluetooth-paired mobile phones and media players.

"Thirty-two per cent of our customers indicated the Sync was critical or important to purchase," Mr Mulally said.

The company was using technology to make cars safer in other ways as well, such as when drivers were changing lanes, according to global product development chief Derrick Kuzak.

"We've developed a radar-based Blind Spot Information System for assistance in changing lanes," Mr Kuzak said.

It was matched with cross-traffic alerts that scanned a 220-degree radius at the back of a vehicle, which signalled drivers when traffic was coming as they reversed out of a parking space.

Features recently added to the Sync system include traffic information and voice-activated search and directions, which can be requested using a voice command and sent by the vehicle to the driver's email.

The driver can request a vehicle health report to be sent by the Sync system to the driver's email and Ford is allowing development of applications that could access Sync system information within a certain radius and use it to warn drivers of safety issues.

For example, if all the cars on a certain stretch of road suddenly turned on their windshield wipers or their fog lamps, "we could warn all of the cars a few miles away to expect rain", Mr Kuzak said.

On the communications front, almost two-thirds of Sync customers are using voice commands in cars, while a new version of the system will include a touchscreen that will enable drivers to access applications to update their Twitter and Facebook pages, listen to podcasts and internet radio, and shop from the car through built-in WiFi access.

Kia plans to have the latest version of its communications system, called Uvo, in cars this year.

Got2BWireless, which says its product will be available in Australia within three weeks, produces a communications system

that can be paired via Bluetooth with a mobile phone, enabling the driver to send a text message by voice command, update Facebook and Twitter feeds, and listen to emails that have been converted to voice.

But as in-car communications systems become more capable, debate is raging in the US and elsewhere about how much connectivity is too much.

Ford argues recent research shows "just talking" on a mobile phone is no more dangerous than "just driving".

"That's why our technology solution enables hands-free voice controls," Mr Kusak said. "We even block things like touchscreen destination entries when the vehicle is at speed."

New versions of Sync will allow internet browsing from the vehicle but, not surprisingly, it will only do so when the car is stationary.

There is a growing push to save dangerously distracted drivers -- said to cause 25 to 30 per cent of accidents -- from themselves.

A safe driving forum at the trade show revealed a push to enlist the aid of insurance companies to encourage drivers to stop texting and emailing from their cars.

Products such as ZoomSafer focus on mobile phone use, which is illegal in most US states, as it is in Australia, without a hands-free device. The application can be downloaded to a mobile phone and auto-activates when the user starts driving.

It locks the keypad to prevent texting and emailing.

ZoomSafer's Matt Howard told the forum that research into cognitive distraction -- when a driver's mind is not on the road, even if they are looking at it -- suggested talking on phones was dangerous, meaning voice-activated texting and tweeting would be at least as suspect.

Research on "cognitive distraction suggests hands-free use of a mobile phone isn't really any safer than not hands-free", Mr Howard said.

"It's a \$US40 billion (\$42.9bn) problem _ the cost of accidents and related costs attributable to distracted driving," said Charlie Kelly, president of Tomahawk Systems, whose company is developing a similar service ⁰⁰ints but⁰⁰nte with the aim of securing an insurance discount for drivers who install it.

Multiple systems for blocking illegal mobile phone activity were on display at the trade show.com CES last week.

One company, Drive Safely Corporation has even developed a service that gives the driver a test to see if they really are driving,by flashing letters up on the mobile screen that require the owner to match them before they are able to send a text message.

Users who failed the test would be blocked from sending an SMS for 30 minutes, research and development chief David Mastrella said.

Not all automotive electronics products at the show were aimed at safer driving, however.

Rocky Mountain Radar representative John Gleason said his radar and laser detection product, still legal in 49 US states, would sound an alarm when it detected a police radar device.

It picked up the radar signal up to 5km from the police, so users could speed, Mr Gleason said.

The driver would get a signal _ either a voice alert or an alarm _ to be careful, then they would just slow down.

``It has saved me quite a lot of money from speeding tickets," he said. But ``if they find one in Virginia, they destroy it".

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