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WITH VIDEO

## Mobile texting ban nearly here

### Voice-activated systems increase

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FREE PRESS STAFF WRITERS

Melvin Johnson III of Detroit says he can't always stop himself from text messaging behind the wheel.

"When I get a text, for some reason I have to know what's being told to me, and then I feel like I have to answer," the 30-year-old business administration student said.

Starting Thursday, texting will be outlawed, as Michigan joins 28 other states in banning texting while driving.

It's not going to stop the practice – that will come with time, just as drunken driving has decreased and more motorists buckle up, said Anne Readett, spokeswoman for the Michigan Office of Highway Safety Planning. But, she said, "simply changing the law will change a lot of people's behavior."

Texting bans across the country are accelerating the development of, and creating a cottage industry for, in-car voice-activated systems for texts and e-mail. Expect more technology on the in-car texting front from General Motors' OnStar, Ford's Sync and a host of start-up companies.

Michigan's law bans drivers from sending text messages in a moving vehicle. But police trying to figure out how best to enforce the ban have questions: Does it prohibit dialing a phone? And does it apply when stopped at a red light or stop sign?

"It's going to be very difficult for us," Tom Hendrickson, executive director of the Michigan Association of Chiefs of Police, said Tuesday. "It's going to be very subjective to the police officer observing that kind of activity."

## Ban won't spell end of texting from vehicles

Texting on a cell phone may be outlawed in Michigan starting Thursday, but that won't necessarily mean the end of texting in the car.

Voice-activated texting systems increasingly are becoming available in vehicles and through aftermarket add-ons.

But the growth of voice-activated features in vehicles that allow drivers to turn their car into a veritable smartphone raises questions about whether technology aimed at limiting distractions only offers more distractions.

"Some of that technology is coming in to help people drive. We've got to be concerned about, does that distract them or does that help them?" asked Adrian Lund, president of the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

Ford's Sync system reads text messages on a small percentage of phones, and allows readers to use a preset reply when the vehicle has stopped.

More phone and Ford vehicles will have that feature as Ford and wireless networks upgrade their Bluetooth technology.

General Motors' OnStar soon plans to introduce texting technology in new versions of its system.

Aftermarket options that even read e-mails to drivers are selling fast.

## Automakers hold back

But automakers, including GM and Ford, have been hesitant to add e-mail to their systems.

Technically, it's possible, said OnStar President Chris Preuss. "We need to be careful not to think that somehow because it is voice-activated it does not provide a level of cognitive engagement that could be distracting," he said.

Research on driver distraction lags new in-vehicle technology, said Lund, of the IIHS. So far, Lund said, the data are conflicting.

The risk of a crash is four times higher for drivers who are talking on cell phones, handheld or hands-free, Lund said, citing an IIHS study.

However, despite the rapid spread of cell phones, the crash rate in the U.S. has been on a downward trend, he said.

"I think what we're learning here," Lund said, "is we don't understand distracted driving very well."

Ryan Valli listens to e-mail on his half-hour commute from Canton to Farmington Hills.

Valli, 39, uses a system by Wixom company Got2bWireless that allows drivers to send text messages, listen to, delete and send e-mail, and update Twitter and Facebook.

## Lightening the load

"I have a lot less to do by the time I get into the office," said Valli, a commercial printing salesman for Canon who is on the road as much as 15 hours a week.

Got2bWireless Executive Vice President Tim Suri said sales are growing 70% a month.

Customers include drivers as well as municipal and corporate fleets.

"We're limiting the distraction of picking up a cell phone in the car, or texting while driving," Suri said.

Nuance, the company behind the voice in Ford's Sync system, sees the text-voice technology proliferating on mobile phones first and then in vehicles.

Systems like those made by Got2bWireless comply with Michigan's new texting ban, said Anne Readett, spokeswoman for the Michigan Office of Highway Safety Planning.

But the ban, and the voice-controlled technology, may be working around the heart of the problem, said Jim Sayer, associate research scientist at the University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute.

"Our families, our employers ... have an expectation that if you have a cell phone then you are reachable at any point in time," he said. "To address the whole overarching issue of texting ... while they're driving, that culture needs to change."

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