

# Where distraction was the attraction and inattention drew attention

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The last days of September 2009 saw the First International Conference on Driver Distraction and Inattention take place at Chalmers University in Gothenburg, Sweden. Attendees from over 20 different countries were hosted by the SAFER Program (Vehicle and Traffic Safety Center at Chalmers), and the French National Institute for Transport and Safety Research (INRETS), at a most convivial site on the Chalmers University Campus. Organised primarily by Michael Regan and Trent Victor and ably supported by Anna Nilsson-Ehle, Lisa Knutsson and Corinne Brusque, the timely meeting brought into full focus the critical and growing concern over driver distraction. Ranging in scope from the most recent innovations in digital bill-boards to traditional considerations for fatigue, boredom and episodes of micro-sleep, the two day event coursed widely over the landscape of current and emerging concerns.

I had the honour to open the Conference and spoke primarily on the differing roles and intentions adopted by modern drivers as well as the traps of hindsight bias in a general consideration of the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of the distraction issue. Mike Regan's insightful paper, following the initial plenary, examined the central question of definition and proposed a potential consensus with: "driver distraction is a diversion of attention away from activities critical for safe driving toward a competing activity," which, as one would suspect, generated much lively discussion. Mike was followed by John Senders who, now over 40 years ago, conducted what may be regarded as one of the seminal works on driver visual sampling strategy. John elaborated on this conception through reference to more modern queuing theory and showed how these conceptual formulations were directly relevant to the utilisation of modern in-vehicle devices. The presentation was classic Senders; theoretically-grounded, practically anchored and closely argued. At 90 years of age, his intellectual spark remains undimmed, a fact much appreciated by his audience.

For me, a highlight was Richard Hanowski's presentation of commercial truck drivers and their incidents of distraction. In an analogue of the now emergingly famous 100-car study, Hanowski mesmerised and frightened his audience with video clips of truck drivers engaged in many in-cab actions which one hopes are not highly ubiquitous but sadly one suspects actually are. It changed my driving behaviour instantly and I shall avoid close proximity to trucks for some time. Tragically, that will bring me closer to many more texting and tweeting car drivers!

The second day began with Mike Perel's insightful plenary speech. Redolent with his years of experience, Perel gave

his perspective on several decades of research and cited many modern examples ranging from President Obama's NASA mobile phone call to epidemiological distributions of differential laws concerning in-vehicle devices across the US. I personally very much enjoyed Jerry Wachtel's talk on Digital Bill-Boards (DBBs), an innovation and penetration of which I was aware but whose nuances and ramifications I had no idea until Wachtel's eloquent articulation of the issues. For HF/E professionals this is certainly an area to watch most carefully. Many other insightful contributions followed from scientists from around the globe. The horrendous problems facing South Africa were stridently voiced as were threats closer to home in the State of Michigan. Sound experimentation by Birrell and Young was ably presented and showed how first class science crosses all international barriers. The paper by Terry Lansdown was, in my view, simply outstanding.

The Conference Dinner took us to an aquarium housed in Gothenburg's 'Universeum.' It was a welcome innovation but having one's meal surrounded by large sharks rather inhibited me from choosing the fish as I didn't want to cause our watery friends any offence. The final plenary of the Conference was given by Claes Tingvall. He addressed the very laudable concept of 'Vision Zero', a Swedish National Policy initiative which seeks to attain the goal of zero fatalities and zero major injuries from traffic accidents in that nation. Whatever attitude one takes to such an aspiration, Tingvall's presentation of the morally crucial notion was persuasive and inspiring. Talking on the issue of distraction, he provided a fluent defence of the idea that road traffic accidents are a crucial public health threat. Hopefully, this ethos can penetrate further into the worldwide community and that this conference was one step along this important path.

The only sad aspect of this meeting was fact that the hastily-called LaHood distraction event by the US Department of Transportation (DOT) resulted in a direct timing conflict. Although a number of HF/E luminaries such as John Lee, Tom Dingus, and Key Dismukes were able to attend and represent our science, it would have been most helpful to have had the decades of expertise as represented by the likes of Perel, Senders, and Wachtel to inform this crucial US initiative. Hopefully, the US DOT focus will be an on-going effort to which many others can contribute. Interested individuals who would like to explore this issue in more detail at the present time are directed to the text on driver distraction by Regan, Lee, and Young. A text from the conference is planned and a follow-on meeting is anticipated.

### Further reading

Hancock, P A, Mouloua, M, & Senders, J W (2008). On the philosophical foundations of driving distraction and the distracted driver. In Regan, M A, Lee, J D, and Young, K L (Eds). *Driver Distraction: Theory, Effects and Mitigation*. (pp 11-30), CRC Press. Boca Raton, FL.

Senders, J W, Kristofferson, A B, Levison, W H, Dietrich, C W, & Ward, J L (1966). The attentional demand of automobile driving. *Highway Research Record*, 195, 15-33.