

Self-driving cars offer huge benefits

Policymakers must apply the lessons of the horseless carriage to the driverless car

A NEW kind of vehicle is taking to the roads, and people are not sure what to make of it. Is it safe? How will it get along with other road users? Will it really shake up the way we travel? These questions are being asked today about autonomous vehicles (AVs). Exactly the same questions were posed when the first motor cars rumbled onto the roads. By granting drivers unprecedented freedom, automobiles changed the world. They also led to unforeseen harm, from strip malls and urban sprawl to road rage and climate change. Now AVs are poised to rewrite the rules of transport— and there is a danger that the same mistake will be made all over again.

AVs are on the threshold of being able to drive, without human supervision, within limited and carefully mapped areas. [...]

Clean, dream machines

Assuming the technology can be made to work as AV firms expect, it is not hard to imagine the beginnings of the driverless era. Cost means that self-driving vehicles will at first serve as robotaxis. That way they get used more, offsetting their costs, and provide transport that is cheaper per mile than owning a car, undermining the case for car ownership, at least for townies [...]

AVs would dramatically reduce the number of road deaths and, being electric, cut harmful emissions in places with clean grids. Clever routing, closer spacing between vehicles and dynamic congestion-charging could cut traffic. Like cars before them, AVs will reshape cities (a long commute is easier if you work or sleep en route) and redefine retailing (shops can come to you). Carmakers will face enormous change; instead of selling to individuals, they will supply fleet operators, or reinvent themselves as “mobility service” providers.

Adapted from *The Economist*, March 1st, 2018