

18131 Lessons From the Uber Crash

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The story from Tempe, Ariz., is terrible. A woman crossing a street outside the boundaries of a crosswalk was hit by a driverless Uber car and killed. The car's computer may have lacked the ability to recognize a person where a person wasn't technically supposed to be, and Uber's emergency driver in the car evidently failed to override the computer.

For the victim's friends and family, there is only tragedy. For the rest of us, however, the larger lessons are vital. We need to figure out how to avoid future tragedies, given the increasing use of driverless cars.

To me, there are two main lessons:

First, driverless-car companies should redouble their efforts on safety. Uber did the right thing by suspending driverless tests in Arizona and elsewhere until it understands what went wrong. It shouldn't focus only on the specific issues in the Tempe crash. The company should also ask what other lurking problems may exist.

Second, everyone — policymakers, the media, the public — should recognize how the Tempe crash may feed a dangerous pattern of irrationality: Human beings are quick to rationalize their own errors and quick to obsess over a machine's errors. As it was said yesterday, "People punish the machine more harshly for mistakes than they do humans."

When a machine makes an error, human beings are reluctant to use it again, as research has shown. When people make a mistake, they often persuade themselves that they know how to avoid repeating it — even when there is abundant evidence that they don't, and they will go on repeating it. Sometimes, machines are more reliable than people, but people still insist on being in control.

Human-driven cars kill more than 100 Americans on average each day. This country now has the most dangerous roads, per mile driven, of any affluent country. And less than 30 years ago, our roads were no more dangerous than those in any average affluent country.

Uber and the other driverless-car companies have a moral responsibility to make their products safer than they evidently are. The rest of us have a responsibility to realize that the status quo — human-driven cars killing 100 Americans each day — isn't acceptable, either. Vehicle safety was a crisis long before driverless cars came along. I'm still hopeful that driverless cars are a big part of the solution. If they're not, or they're going to take a long time to go mainstream, we should take other steps to save lives.