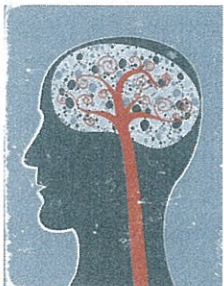


# My car, my saviour

*We examine EU policies in the making, strip them of officialese and offer readers a closer insight into what goes on in the public arena. This week, Nina Lamparski looks at an EU directive which places its faith in smart vehicles rather than smart drivers*



SHUTTERSTOCK

Not long ago this writer totalled her Citroën. Luckily she was not behind the wheel. Nor was anyone else for that matter. The C1 stood parked on a quiet street when a female driver in her 60s crashed into the car on a Sunday morning. The police report revealed that there were no drugs or alcohol involved: the woman had merely been “distracted” as she came around the corner at reasonable speed, suddenly swayed and lost control.

*“Even worse, many member states have experienced considerable escalation of fatalities”*

The accident could possibly have been avoided, had the lady’s car been equipped with an intelligence system called Electronic Stability Control (ESC). The smart technology, first introduced in 1995, identifies

potential crash situations and stabilises the vehicle by braking individual wheels. This in turn reduces the risk of skidding during sudden manoeuvres. So instead of being a passive safety system (i.e. the seat belt), ESC focuses on accident prevention. A study by the Institute for Transport Economics in Cologne revealed that 4,000 lives could be saved on European roads and 100,000 injuries avoided if all vehicles possessed ESC. This also means multi-billion euro savings in health care and insurance costs.

As a result of ESC’s proven efficiency, the technology will become mandatory in Europe for all new passenger cars and commercial vehicles as of November 2014. The EU thus joins America, Canada and Australia where similar regulations are being put into place.

The European Commission hopes that ESC will help the Road Safety Action Programme 2003-2010 achieve its goal of halving the number of people killed on European roads. The only thing ‘safe’ about the programme at this stage is the assumption that the target will not meet its 2010 deadline: preliminary data, presented by the Commissioner for Information Society and Media Viviane Reding, revealed that so far the decrease achieved hovers around two percent. Even worse, many member states have actually experienced considerable escalation of fatalities. Indeed, Commissioner, “we are not doing very well”.

But for once politicians cannot be held to blame for the despondent figures. Nor should we point the finger at the automobile industry for building increasingly faster cars (without which, one might argue, none

of these safety technologies would be needed). The responsibility for responsible driving lies primarily with the individual who also has the power to make wise purchasing decisions. And women, it turns out, value safety more than men when they buy a vehicle. However, they are also 30 percent less likely to know about the existence of so-called e-safety technologies, according to a recent European survey released by the e-SafetyAware association in Brussels. Wonder why? Partly it comes down to lingering chauvinism. Enter a car store as a couple in 2009 and you will find that the sales person still tends to speak to the male and ignore the female.

To change this, and in light of the impending ESC policy, e-SafetyAware is campaigning hard in partnership with the Commission to raise public awareness amidst both genders regarding clever warning systems. The organisation is headed by none other than the new president of the Fédération Internationale de l’Automobile (FIA) – former Ferrari boss Jean Todt who evidently manages to pull a lot of star power to support e-SafetyAware initiatives. During a recent two-day media event in Rome, racing drivers including Heikki Kovalainen, Luca Badoer and Susie Stoddart demonstrated the efficiency of ESC and other e-safety systems (blind spot monitoring, speed alert, etc) in a series of test-drives. Even Michael Schumacher made a brief appearance, declaring his strong support for e-Safety technologies (and indirectly for Todt ahead of the FIA elections which had not yet taken place at that point...).

There is no doubt about the life-saving potential of these systems. But some pertinent questions were raised at the Rome conference which had attracted senior representatives of car brands and numerous independent associations from around Europe. E-technologies currently represent an expensive extra for car manufacturers who have to buy the systems from specialised companies. Hence not many brands in the ailing car industry can afford to install them, especially when many drivers remain unaware of the systems or see them as unnecessary gimmicks. It is therefore understandable that smaller companies are reluctant to add more costs to their production. So those creating e-technologies need to lower their sales rate or else we as consumers will pay dearly to save our lives under the new ESC policy. Finally, while eSafetyAware’s agenda is laudable, having F1 heavy-weight Todt now also at the head of the FIA sends a rather unethical message to every-day motorists: the future belongs to faster cars, not smarter drivers.