

Automobile computer issues linked to recalls

"We're going north on 125 and our accelerator is stuck... We're going 120 [mph]... There's no brakes... We're approaching the intersection! Hold on! Pray!"

Those were the last words of an off-duty California Highway Patrol officer as he and



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three others in a runaway Lexus crashed into an intersection. The audio came from a frantic 911 call as driver tried everything he could to stop the car speeding uncontrollably at 120 mph.

Though it has not been proven, in my opinion the computer software programmed into the drive-by-wire control firmware may have contributed to the death of these people just like the dozens of others that have died in related crashes reported over the years.

This is serious stuff people. The previous recall to fix the floor mats in the troubled Toyotas was a pathetic effort to get around the real problem which I believe is deep within the drive-by-wire software although Toyota denies this is the case.

Toyota has been the first car maker to go completely with drive-by-wire for the automobile's acceleration capability and now the braking system. That means the old mechanical assemblies which are comprised of a pedal pulling a cable moving a valve on carburetor or fuel injection system has been retired.

The mechanical system has been replaced by an array of electronic sensors, digital circuits

and transistor relays talking to multiple in-car computers that control the engine.

This has and continues to scare the crud out of me. My 30-year experience with computers leaves me with this one thought: No way in hell would I trust a car or truck

that is completely controlled by a computer that thinks it knows what I want it to do!

Some 20 years ago Audi was very proud when it came out with the Audi 5000 bragging about its new drive-by-wire system which was integrated with advanced cruise control. Soon spontaneous acceleration problems were reported and the lawsuits began.

It was later reported that researchers at another high-end auto company in Europe had discovered a problem in Audi's engine-control firmware and reproduced the spontaneous acceleration event. But the litigation two decades ago resulted in a gag order locking up those findings which could have helped those engineers at Toyota today.

Toyota now has recalled hundreds of thousands of its trucks, SUVs and cars to supposedly "fix" the problem with a physical brake part swap out. The problem now is that numerous complaints have been filed with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration by drivers of the "fixed" Toyota automobiles about the same spontaneous acceleration problems still occurring.

On top of that there has been yet another recall of the Toyota Prius due to a problem with the brake-by-wire system not stopping the car properly. So let me get this straight — not only do I have to trust a computer to propel the vehicle but I also have to rely on a computer to stop it too!

Thank God I bought a VW Jetta last year instead of the Prius I was looking at.

Now Honda is having a recall due to an automated braking diagnostic test that runs intermittently but lets in a bit of air into the braking system which over time makes the brakes soft. Great, a computer diag test messes up the braking system.

Recently I heard about a Chrysler vehicle that was having intermittent problems starting. It was one of the new models with an ignition system that did not require the driver to hold the key over until the engine started. The single and quick key turn initiated a series of computer checks and software system verification operations that processed before even turn-

ing over the engine.

The problem turned out to be some sort of an EMI (Electro-Magnetic Interference) issue with that driver's Exxon Easy-Pass device hanging from her keychain that was interfering with the complex computerized ignition system of the vehicle. She took off the Easy-Pass device from the key ring and the ignition problem went away for good.

Talk on the scientific, computer, and automotive blogs are strongly leaning towards either a hard-to-find problem in the Toyota's firmware/software integration or even a similar EMI problem that intermittently has a devastating effect on the vehicles drive-by-wire system. Any EMI related problem or catalyst that triggers the spontaneous acceleration event would be immensely difficult to discover and lock down as "the cause" of the problem.

I've had philosophical problems with carmakers putting too much technology into cars since the anti-locking brakes were first implemented. When I was

driving Nascar stock cars in the Team Texas racing school none of them had computer assisted anti-lock brakes and the Nextel Cup cars still do not.

The automobile industry has tried to make cars smarter than we are since they have designed them around the lowest common denominator. In other words, they think drivers are too stupid to operate automobiles so they have built moving computers that make our operational decisions for us. Wow, how's that working out for us now?

Now all GM vehicles with On-Star can be monitored and even disabled remotely by the U.S. government — they even have commercials running today bragging about it. Master control devices that can be hijacked like in Austin this month, with some teenage slacker remotely disabling over 100 automobiles with a single mouse click.

Automobiles have become more expensive, harder to service and now we cannot understand why people may be dying due to a computer not doing what we tell it to do. I want a simple car

that stops due to my foot hitting a pedal that physically induces pressure on a hydraulic chamber which pushes brake pads onto the wheels brake discs.

I want to press down on an accelerator which pulls a cable that moves a physical device which adds more fuel and air into the engine and when I let up I want that operations to decrease.

When all this is said and done, hopefully the class action lawyers will not gag order the true findings of the drive-by-wire problems like they did two decades ago and the public will know what the real problem was.

Bottom line: Computers and software make our lives easier and more productive until they are completely put in charge of our safety because then we are at a programmer's mercy.

Next week's column: Sidebar gadgets.

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