

## The Mind BlackBerry Problem

by William Saletan

Last month, 25 people died and 130 were injured in a [train crash](#) near Los Angeles. The cause, apparently, was a cell phone. In three hours of work before the crash, one of the engineers received 28 text messages and sent 29 more. He sent his last message [22 seconds](#) before impact, just after passing a [signal](#) that would have alerted him to the disaster ahead.

Scientists call this phenomenon "[cognitive capture](#)" or "[inattention blindness](#)." The mind, captured by the world inside the phone, becomes blind to the world outside it. Millions of people move among us in this half-absent state. Mentally, they're living in another world. It's like the [Rapture](#), except that they've left their bodies behind.

You see them everywhere. The woman alone in the grocery store, a bud in her ear, having an animated conversation with a wall of canned soup. The driver who drifts into your lane while counseling an invisible client. The jogger crossing four lanes of traffic, lost in her iPod. The dad who ignores his kids, living in his BlackBerry the way an alcoholic lives in a bottle.

In many ways, mobile phones are wonderful. Children can reach parents far away. Dissidents in dictatorships can get news and [organize](#). Farmers in undeveloped countries can [transact business](#). Through the phone, you can escape the confines of your environment.

The problem is that physically, you're still living in that environment. Like other creatures, you've evolved to function in the natural world, one setting at a time. Nature has never tested a species's ability to function in two worlds at once.

Now that test is underway. [Half the world's people](#) have mobile phones. [Eighty-four percent](#) of Americans have them. In this country, more than [2 billion](#) text messages are exchanged per day. Wireless and entertainment companies are bringing [television](#) to handheld screens. Already, 40 million Americans use phones or other handheld devices to access the [Internet](#), 27 million use them to watch [video](#), and 19 million use them to download [games](#). The world inside the phone becomes more vivid and engaging every day. It wants your ears, eyes, thumbs—all of you.

That might be OK if you were standing still. But mobile devices have a habit of moving. In a survey this year by Nationwide Mutual Insurance, [81 percent](#) of Americans admitted to talking on a cell phone while driving. Since 2001, in New York alone, more than [1 million](#) tickets have been issued for holding phones at the wheel. In California, the rate is about [7,000 tickets per month](#). And that's just the people who get caught.

So how is this multitasking experiment going? Not so well. In the Nationwide survey, [45 percent](#) of Americans said they've been hit or nearly hit by a driver on a cell phone. Studies show that the more tasks you dump on drivers—listening, evaluating, answering questions—[the worse they perform](#). They [drift off course, miss cues, overlook hazards, and react slowly](#). In brain scans, you can see the [shift of blood flow](#) from spatial-management to language-processing areas. It's the picture of a mind being sucked from one world into another.

Our performance on the two-worlds test, like all evolutionary experiments, can be measured in death. The Federal Railroad Administration reports seven cell-phone-related railway accidents in the last three years, [five of them fatal](#). In [California](#), [Michigan](#), and [Texas](#), police reports document annual cell-phone-related road accidents exceeding 1,000 per state. Six years ago, when only half of all Americans had cell phones, the [Harvard Center for Risk Analysis](#) linked them to [2,600 driving fatalities](#) and 330,000 injuries per year. And that was before the texting boom.

Today, we're so enslaved to mobile devices that we rely on them even to translate the physical world. Misled by with Global Positioning System devices, people are driving cars into [rivers, trees](#), and [sand piles](#). Twice this year in Bedford Hills, N.Y., drivers have caused train crashes by steering onto the track because their GPS [mistook it](#) for a road. [Warning signs, pavement markings, and reflective train-signal masts](#) failed to stop them. They trusted the dashboard, not the windshield.

If we don't want this two-worlds experiment to be regulated nature's way—by killing people—then we'd better regulate it ourselves. Here are a few proposed rules of the road. Multitasking is a glorious gift. We can't ban it, nor should we. Want to phone your spouse or your office while walking? Fine. The only life at stake is yours. Want to turn on your car radio or music player? Fine. Listening is [easier than talking](#), and you can mentally or physically shut it off when necessary. Want to chat with your passenger? Fine again. Studies indicate that passenger conversations are less distracting than phone calls, apparently because you're sharing and often referring to [the same environment](#).

The real danger comes from being mentally sucked out of your world while operating thousands of pounds of metal at high speed. Only [five states](#) prohibit driving while holding a phone, and if you're an adult with a hands-free phone, no legislator is even [proposing](#) to mess with you. That has to change, because research shows that even with a hands-free device, talking on a phone can impair driving skills [more than intoxication does](#). If you need to talk to your spouse or boss, go right ahead—but first, pull over. You're free to visit the other world. Just don't leave your car moving in this one.

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