

FLEETING THOUGHTS

Rise of the machines

Internet-connected cars will have broad and deep consequences for how we use our vehicles

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BARELY 15 YEARS since the internet became a mainstream source of information exchange, we're finding more and more objects wired up: logging data, exchanging data and learning from data. The Internet of Things is upon us, and with 4G cars on the way, making your motor an individual Wi-Fi hotspot, it's only a matter of time before the automotive industry joins the party.

With more data comes more possibilities. If cars can process data from the cars around them, they can drive themselves, dodge traffic and avert accidents. If you're hungry, your car can tell you where to find the best restaurants. Stuck for a parking space? Your car can scan local multi-storeys. Need petrol? Your car can help. Car service due? Be guided to the best place by location, rating and availability.

For several years now I've been having conversations with the press cars I drive – and not simply because I'm an automotive geek who talks to cars like eccentrics

croon to their flowers. Many higher-spec cars have voice-activated interfaces that can call up the office or re-route you if you hit heavy traffic. Now they can talk back – and soon they'll be able to take over the wheel if you're tired, bored or simply have something else to do. Knight Rider, basically, but in rather more everyday cars.

Alongside Mercedes, Volvo and a handful of other manufacturers, telecommunications companies and the likes of Apple and Google are pouring cash into connected-car technology. And if you think about it, the reason is obvious. Picture how much data your car could log about you: your location and activities; how much petrol you buy and where you buy it; where you do your shopping, work and leisure breaks; where you get your car serviced. That data is invaluable – and it's the reason why your car is going to be networked, whether you like it or not. Your smartphone is a Trojan horse that gives people access to your data, and your car is up next.

In the same way that we make a deal with Google or Facebook to provide us with useful services in exchange for our valuable data, we'll gladly swap that information in return for access to Shiny Things. And cars are, perhaps, the ultimate Shiny Things most of us access on a regular basis.

Apple is already well along this road, and if you have its hands-free voice interface, Siri, you can use the voice command on your phone to control your car's functions. Maps, calls, music, tweets and messages can all be dictated and relayed while driving, while apps such as Spotify can be streamed and displayed on the dash.

Leaving the house for the car has, regardless of your motor, usually meant a step back in time. We may not get a signal, the phone's battery may run out, we have to suction-cup our tiny navigation device to the window, we're cut off from the social world and don't have access to the gadgets – internet, television, Spotify, Google, Facebook and more – that we take for granted. No longer.

Within five years we can expect a quarter of cars to be connected to the internet – and we'll simply update their operating systems over 4G, as we do with laptops or tablets. The ramifications are mind-blowing. We're transitioning to a world where a car is capable of driving itself and providing us with the tools to work, relax or entertain at the wheel. The car won't be a mode of transport, merely an extension of our house or office. It requires a rethink at every level of how we view and use our vehicles.

Top toys KEEP YOUR EYES PEELED FOR THESE NEW GADGETS

Gesture control

These touchless controls might allow you to 'swipe' a window open or control temperature with a mere gesture. It's already been used in concepts from Volkswagen, so expect to see it soon.

Haptics

Haptic controls offer tactile feedback to give the sensation that your inputs have been accepted. They can be used to accentuate music or give feedback when used in seats

and steering wheels, as is seen on some existing models.

Wi-Fi

Some cars can support up to eight devices. That means no more costly tethering, no more temperamental dongles and no more hunting for an out-of-town internet-equipped McDonald's while searching around in your glovebox for spare change.

Live television

Digital broadcasting and connected cars mean there's

no reason why you shouldn't be able to access all the TV and radio stations you can at home – plus on-demand, podcasting and live music streaming.

Pre-installed dash cams

Dash cams that record what goes on when you're at the wheel are increasingly popular for entertainment and insurance purposes. It can only be a matter of time before the facility to record your journeys hits the market.

→ Have you driven any of Robin's recommendations? Tell him what you think [@RobinBrown78](#)