

Technology and Change: The Automobile

At the turn of the 20th century, the “horseless carriage” was often referred to in rural areas as the “devil wagon.” In the 1890s and early 1900s, some cities and counties had rules forbidding motorized vehicles. In Vermont, a walking escort had to precede the car by an eighth of a mile with a red warning flag, and in Iowa, motorists were required to telephone ahead to a town they planned to drive through to warn the community, lest their horses be alarmed (M. Berger 1979; Clymer 1953; Glasscock 1937; L. Morris 1949). In most rural areas, motorists were expected to pull their cars to a stop or even to shut down the motor when a horse-drawn buggy came near. “Pig and chicken legal clauses” meant the automobile driver was liable for any injury that occurred when passing an animal near the road, even if the injury was due to the animal running away (Scott-Montagu 1904).

Roughly 85,000 motored vehicles were in use in America in 1911. By 1930, the number was nearly 10 million, and in 2011, the estimated number of registered passenger vehicles was 253 million (M. Berger 1979; Statistica 2014). Forms of entertainment began to change when people were able to be more mobile, and entertainment became available virtually any night of the week (M. Berger 1979; McKelvie 1926). Thus, dependence on family was lessened, possibly weakening familial bonds and oversight (M. Berger 1979). Even courting was substantially changed because individuals could go farther afield to find a

possible life partner, couples could go more places on dates, and two people could find more privacy. School attendance rates of rural children also increased substantially with motorized buses (U.S. Department of Interior Office of Education 1930).

As people could live in less congested areas but still get to work in a reasonable amount of time via an automobile, the suburbs began to develop around major cities. A dispersed population needs to use more gasoline, thereby creating pollution. As the wealthy moved to expensive suburbs and paid higher taxes to support outstanding schools, socioeconomic and ethnic stratification between communities increased. These are some of the *unintended consequences* of the spread of the automobile. It sometimes takes decades before we can identify the consequences of the technologies we adopt.

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Engaging With Sociology

1. What might be some long-term social consequences for our individual lives and societies of the widespread use of smartphones, microwave ovens, and computer games?
2. How might the introduction of smart cars that can navigate themselves and warn us of hazards change our lives?