Autopilot in Distress

Dear Reader,

The driver of a Tesla Model S was killed recently when his vehicle being on autopilot, broadsided a truck. As tragic as the accident was, you couldn't say that it came as a surprise. Automobile experts had long since pointed out that it had to happen at some point. Nevertheless, the case has rekindled a discussion of the ethical aspects of self-driving vehicles.

The German Transportation Minister, Alexander Dobrindt, has responded to concerns by setting up an ethical review board to develop rules for the algorithms that determine how a vehicle reacts in various risk situations. In doing so, the Minister has affirmed his commitment to the enactment of an innovation-friendly amendment to the German Road Traffic Act before the end of 2016 – an amendment that is expected to make provision for automated driving.

In the German business monthly brand eins, Paul Saffo, a prominent technology forecaster and interpreter of developments in Silicon Valley, describes our enthusiastic embrace of innovations as a kind of insanity. Saffo questions whether the innovations on the digitalisation agenda, which is more or less dictated by the allegedly altruistic leaders of tech industries, are really likely to meet with societal acceptance in the long term. "We're on the threshold of a new and largely uncharted world," says Saffo.

Indeed, it would be difficult to predict the outcome of the debates on the ethical issues involved, which have taken on a more serious tone and have become more differentiated. In any case, the automobile industry should address the criticism that has been voiced, for instance, by Sarah Spiekermann, Professor at the Institute for Management Information Systems at Vienna University of Economics and Business. As she explains in brand eins, she finds it more urgent to teach right and

wrong to programmers than to machines. According to her, developers hard pressed to meet their responsibilities. "IT analysts are currently selling forecasts of the future as it suits them at the moment. If executives are not in a position to draw a distinction between reality and fiction, then they are simply bad executives." She also points out an inherently disrespectful tendency on the part of developers to refer to humans as system errors. "If I find myself sitting in a vehicle controlled by a Google computing center, then I better have informed myself ahead of time about the concept of humanity held by Google engineers."

Pilots who fly by wire and who are required to continuously monitor their flights tend to have a different perspective on the matter. The task of flying has become vastly more complex. It requires an understanding of machines and algorithms. In more complex traffic situations, the comparatively untrained drivers of a Tesla – amateurs, actually – override warnings issued by their vehicles operating in autopilot mode. The fact that they are already able to do so today can make one wonder. Ethically objectionable? What do you think?

Markus Schöttle
Deputy Editor in Chief