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The next step in in-vehicle infotainment: Distracting the passenger



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As the private automobile becomes more connected, in-car infotainment providers have started to work in two opposite directions: limiting the ways content distracts the driver and looking to increase the distraction of the passengers. Siegfried Morkowitz reports.

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driving the car – and, therefore, represents a potentially large and, so far, largely untapped, market opportunity.

“Now we are seeing suppliers such as Delphi starting to think about how to distribute content throughout the car,” says Dominique Bonte, vice president and group director, telematics and M2M, ABI Research. “Up to now they were driver-centric. This is changing.”

The main reason for this shift is that passengers potentially constitute a very large market for apps and content – and for car OEMs wishing to enhance their brand by providing state-of-the-art infotainment for the entire car.

But there is another important reason, and that is that the automobile is slowly, but irrevocably, heading towards autonomy, where the function of the person occupying the driver’s seat will be reduced to occasionally checking the instrument cluster and purchasing the petrol, electricity or whatever will be powering cars two decades from now.

“We have to look at passengers now because ultimately everyone in the car will be a passenger,” Bonte says.

Work in progress

To be sure, passenger-centered infotainment is still very much a work in progress, except perhaps for rich – and costly – top-end systems, such as the NGT5 recently delivered by Harman for Mercedes.

(Until these systems are more affordable, smartphone integration will remain the default for passenger entertainment.)


“Infotainment systems will have strict mechanisms to prevent unsuitable apps from being used while the car is in motion,” says Gareth Owen, principal analyst at ABI Research. “Driver distraction is a very big issue right now and rightly so. Obviously, some new systems might have the capability to drive rear-seat entertainment systems, but I think the vast majority will be focused on the driver,

with the most common applications being navigation and music-related services.”

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Harman's NGT5 represents the future of in-vehicle infotainment.

possible in OEM-shipped passenger-centered infotainment services.

“The aim of our NGT5 system is enabling the ride and helping the drive to be as pleasant as possible,” says Sachin Lawande, president of Harman’s infotainment division. “This puts the passengers in a much more cheerful environment, and they can consume more content than simply going along for the drive.”

The system enables each passenger in the car to personalize his or her entertainment, download apps and social networks and interact with the route through individual displays. The system also “allows passengers to access maps front and rear so they can get more information along the route and identify points of interest,” Lawande says. “This makes the ride more interactive and gets passengers more involved along the route.”

And there is even an educational aspect, according to Lawande.

“We had a request from parents who wanted to be able to educate their children about the route,” he says.

To allow the front-seat passenger to receive information and watch videos without distracting the driver, Harman developed a “split screen” that is actually a single screen using layered displays, each of which is angled in such a manner that it can only be viewed by the intended user.

“With the NGT5, the car has four different [infotainment] systems and displays,” Lawande says. “This independence includes the map display, which is usually tied to [only] a single system.”

The next frontier

The next goal for Harman is to give passengers their own sound, without the need for cumbersome headphones.

“The car today is still a single audio zone,” Lawande says. “We are working on trying to change this so that the car will have multiple audio zones – the driver and front-seat passenger in one zone and the backseat passengers in another.”

To that end, Harman is working on and being challenged by active noise cancellation (ANC) technology.

of cars. Then you'll be able to have two offices in the car, for example, front and back."

One problem is cost, which applies not only to ANC but to infotainment systems such as the NGT5. "We now have to make the technology more cost-effective so we can deploy it in greater numbers," he says. "There is a strong demand from all segments of the market."

Beyond the traditional

In early 2012, General Motors decided to push the envelope even further, specifically focusing on using the rear windows of a car as the rough equivalent of tablets with which children could entertain themselves during a journey.

According to news reports, GM asked designers at Future Lab at Jerusalem's Bezalel Academy of Art and Design to develop apps that would transform the windows into interactive screens that reacted to the vehicle's speed and location.

Because GM had no intention of producing the apps in the near future, it told the designers to unleash their imaginations, with no consideration to cost or practicability.


And they did, coming up with four apps.

Otto, an animated character, is projected over passing scenery and reacts to the car's movement, the weather and the scenery itself. Foofu allows passengers to use the window as a kind of canvas for finger-drawing. Spindow enables users to look into the windows of other users of the app around the world. Finally, Pond lets passengers download, stream and share music with other cars.

Siegfried Morkowitz is a regular contributor to TU.

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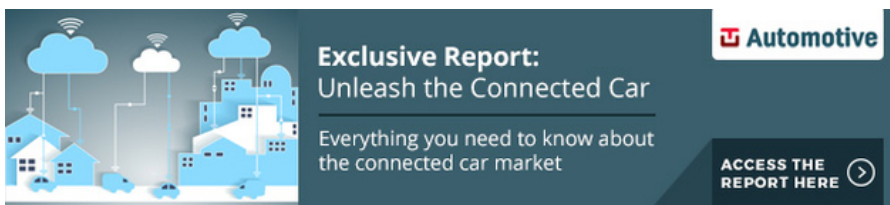
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