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Steered Wrong: Drivers Trust GPS Even to a Fault

Blind Faith in Devices Trumps Common Sense; A Road to Nowhere

By JENNIFER SARANOW
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If your GPS device told you to drive off a cliff would you do it?

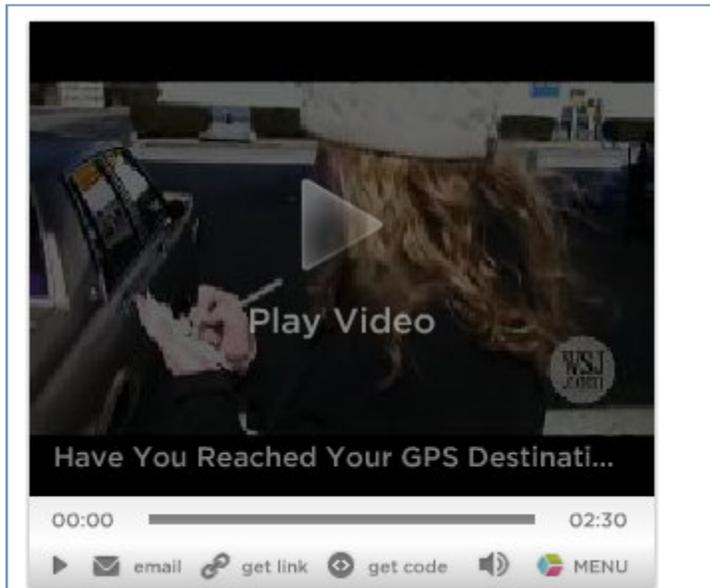
Norman Sussman nearly did. Mr. Sussman recently queried his GPS for an alternate route home after hitting traffic outside Santa Fe, N.M. Following the machine's directions, he veered up a winding mountain road, expecting to rejoin the interstate.

After a half-hour of hairpin turns, Mr. Sussman stepped on the brakes: The road ended at a guardrail and a 200-foot cliff. "It looked like a small version of the Grand Canyon," he says.

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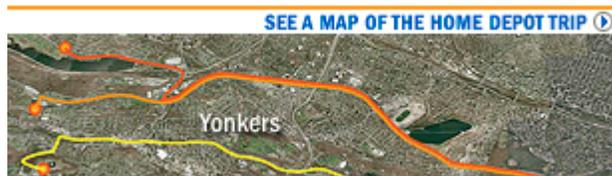


GPS devices are catching on as must-have car accessories, but some drivers are learning that you can't always trust their instructions. WSJ's Jennifer Saranow tests out a GPS device on a recent road trip.

As GPS devices spread, drivers are finding that satellite navigation may replace paper maps but not common sense. By blindly following the gadgets' not-always-reliable directions, they're getting lost, hitting dead ends, and even swerving into oncoming traffic.

Driving the problem are plummeting prices for GPS devices, which have taken the technology more into the mainstream. The average price of a car navigation device over the 2007 holiday season was \$225, nearly half what it was the previous year, according to market researcher NPD Group. An estimated 49 million navigation devices, including in-car systems, portable and handheld units and smart phones, will be in use in the U.S. this year, says Telematics Research Group in Minnetonka, Minn.

During a vacation in Northern Wisconsin, Hill Wright turned to "Jack" for directions. "Jack" is the name given to a GPS device that got lost off the road and hit boulders.



Mr. Wright, 48 years old, says he dutifully followed the directions, which turned into a three-hour detour. "When people buy these things," he says of his Global Positioning System device, "they think they are all-knowing boxes."

Transportation officials in some cities say wayward GPS users are starting to pose safety problems. Truck drivers erroneously sent to residential streets have crashed into fences and damaged walls and trees on narrow roads.

Last May, the North Yorkshire County Council in England put up signs at the entrance to a gravel track declaring it "unsuitable for motor vehicles" after navigation systems had sent drivers on it as a shortcut between two valleys. The rough road quickly turns stony with steep drops in some places, and locals have had to help cars turn around.

In Dyke, Va., Stone Mountain Vineyards says it has had so many complaints from visitors who have been led astray by high-tech directions that it recently added a note to its Web site: "Warning: Please follow the driving directions on the webpage. If you use GPS, or services such as MapQuest or Google maps, they WILL send you the wrong way!"

Steve Melus, MapQuest's customer support and services manager, says the company has received no complaints from the vineyard itself. Google says such errors would come from the map data providers.

GPS mishaps have seeped into popular culture. A TV commercial for Nationwide Insurance shows a man crashing his car into a restaurant at the direction of his device. Steven Schreiber, the firm's vice president of advertising, says the idea came from his own GPS experience.



Hill Wright

On a recent episode of the TV series "The Office," the character Michael drives into a lake because of faulty GPS directions. A needy GPS device recently figured in an episode of "A Prairie Home Companion": In one skit, the device says to the driver, "Did you ever think maybe there are places I'd like to go?"

GPS technology was first designed by the Department of Defense in the early 1970s to improve precision weapon delivery. Today's commercial devices receive information transmitted from a network of government satellites orbiting the Earth and can pinpoint a user's location.

Employees in the Field

Where problems sometimes arise is in the information the devices use to put together a route and come up with directions. Map data companies like Tele Atlas and Navteq have employees in the field recording everything from street names to lane counts and speed limits. To build their map databases, which they supply to GPS makers, they also rely on sources including transportation departments, building associations and public records.

But this information can become outdated quickly as businesses move or close shop, new roads are built, and old ones are closed for repairs. Sometimes, addresses are just wrong. In Worcester, Mass., GPS users with a craving for cannolis have pulled up at the home of Thomas and Elizabeth Scano, instead of Scano's Bakery about two miles away.

Map data companies say ensuring that information is accurate and up-to-date is a constant battle. "I always call it the holy grail of digital mapping that the moment something changes in reality, the map would immediately have it in the database," says Tele Atlas CEO and cofounder Alain De Taeye. "Nobody has achieved that and so far that is pure science fiction."

Manufacturers and map data firms say they are working to fix mistakes faster by getting the customer's help.

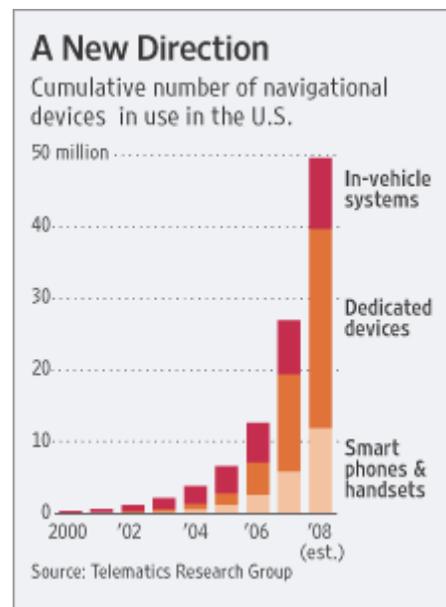
TomTom, a manufacturer of portable GPS devices, launched a program last year allowing drivers to report errors and share corrections with other users. Tele Atlas and Navteq both have areas on their Web sites where users can register possible mapping errors.

Tele Atlas says it has about 5.5 million U.S. streets in its database. About 3 million changes are made to the maps each month, from new construction to two-way streets that have become one-ways to new toll roads. "Change detection is a big part of our business," says Patrick McDevitt, vice president of global engineering for Tele Atlas.

Last April, Raymond and Marie Hulsey filed a lawsuit in the Superior Court of Gwinnett County, Ga., alleging that MapQuest labeled their driveway incorrectly in its mapping software. The couple says that for years, cars and trucks have pulled up in their driveway at all hours, mistaking their home for the county court.

The problem, they say, is that map-data companies, which provide information to GPS devices as well as online map services such as MapQuest, have labeled their driveway "Government Plaza." This is actually the name of a road seven miles away in downtown Rome, Ga., where the county court and civic center are located. MapQuest says it doesn't comment on pending litigation, but says the error in its database has been fixed.

The GPS hiccups are the latest twist on a human idiosyncrasy dating to the Industrial Revolution: a surprising willingness to rely on machines over experience. "Rather than trust our judgment of nature, we let technology tell us what's going on," says Clifford Nass, a communication professor at Stanford University. He says people in the 1960s similarly began trusting computers blindly.



Following 'Jill'

Nick Champion admits he is sometimes to blame for navigational screw-ups. Last April, he was following directions from "Jill," the voice of his car's GPS device, to a seminar in Long Beach, Calif., when he wound up on a park road that was blocked off by a gate. He backed up and made a U-turn, and then Jill said she was "recalculating" and directed him back to the park road. He finally shut off the device and went to a nearby gas station to ask directions. Reading the manual later, he realized he could have clicked on the "detour" button to get another route. "It was my mistake, not actually Jill's," he says.

Harvey Gerst, a 70-year-old recording engineer from Sanger, Texas, says it's taken him some time to get used to his device. After it directed him into oncoming traffic last December, he started calling it Christine, for the malevolent Plymouth in a Stephen King horror novel. "She's trying to kill me," he says. But the more he uses it, the better sense he has for when to listen to her instructions. "Basically, she's quirky and we understand that."

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