

A It took me over an hour to drive to the office this morning. I sometimes think it would be quicker to walk.

B Why don't you use public transport?

A Because it's no quicker, and who wants to spend ten minutes waiting for a bus on a cold, dark, rainy morning?

B Well, your problem might be solved if driverless cars become the norm. Uber have successfully tested robo-taxis, and big companies like Google and Apple are also experimenting with self-driving vehicles.

A Yes, I've heard about that. I can't say that I'm convinced though.

B Why not? In some ways self-driving cars are already here. Some of the most recent safety improvements in cars come very close to self-driving. New technology can control a car's speed, keep it in its lane, and help with parking. These put us on a clear path toward self-driving cars.

A Yes, but all that technology comes at a cost. You can be sure that anything manufactured by Apple will be horribly expensive, just like their phones.

B Actually, self-driving cars might well cost you less because you'll be less likely to have an accident, so insurance premiums will be lower - and they'll use fuel more efficiently.

A Needless to say, I'm not convinced. Will it really be cheaper to own a self-driving car? I accept that insurance premiums might fall, but what about the depreciation costs? With all that state-of-the-art technology, it will be a bit like driving around in a giant iPhone and, as we know, there isn't much of a market for second-hand iPhones. In fact, out-of-date driverless cars might well be banned from the roads since the risk of them being unable to communicate properly with more recent models is potentially catastrophic. Even if manufacturers can solve that problem, driverless cars will still age more quickly than regular ones given the pace of technological change - and hence depreciate faster.

B But you'll save money in the long run because journey times will be shorter, and we all know that time is money. Driverless cars don't need to keep more than a few inches apart, thereby reducing congestion. And they'll be quicker still if the inner-cities are reserved for driverless cars only. No need for traffic lights, roundabouts or three-way junctions, just a seamless flow of traffic.

A I'm sceptical about that, too. If driverless cars really are all they're cracked up to be, we'll see a shift away from public transport towards more car journeys. Elderly people won't stop using cars when their eyes and other senses deteriorate, freight will shift from railways to automated lorries, and workers will be more likely to use cars for the daily commute if they can recline in the back seats with their laptops. It's been estimated that once driverless cars become fully operational, in about twenty years, we'll see a sixty per cent increase in road usage. That will mean longer journey times, not shorter.

B I'm not saying that self-driving cars will create a perfect world. There will still be some accidents, although far fewer. Some people will never want to give up driving their cars and there will be others living in areas which are difficult to serve with self-driving cars. Some people will see self-driving cars as a threat to their business and try to stop them from becoming popular. But they won't succeed because you can't stop progress and self-driving cars offer such a wealth of advantages.

A My main concern about this new technology is that it will aggravate existing inequalities. I'm not just thinking about the tens of millions of people who earn a living as taxi drivers in the developed world, most of whom will lose their livelihoods. Even if cities become driverless car zones, congestion won't fall. After all, if the risk of being hit by a car is significantly reduced, people will be more likely to cycle or walk from A to B. And that in turn will mean more congestion, not less. No doubt some trains will still run, including the London Underground, and that will be one of the quickest ways to get around. But as fewer people will be using trains, they'll become unaffordable to all but the superrich.

Outline

The second speaker believes that self-driving cars will reduce congestion and make the roads a lot safer. They will cost less because insurance premiums will be lower and they will be more fuel-efficient. The other speaker is sceptical as self-driving cars could encourage a shift away from public transport towards more car journeys as people will be more inclined to take the car if they can use their laptops while driving, which will actually increase congestion. She also believes they will depreciate more quickly than regular cars. However, her main concern is that self-driving cars will increase inequality: as fewer people will use trains, they will become too expensive for all but the superrich.

Questions

1. What is your own experience of driving?
2. What can be done to reduce traffic congestion on our roads?
3. Do you think more should be done to encourage people to use public transportation? How?
4. What major changes do you think we will see in the world of transportation in the coming years?