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O P I N I O N

'I Can't Talk Now. Call Me Back!'

By CLAUDIA GRYVATZ COPQUIN

HAD been receiving an increasing volume of bulletins from Gut Central ever since that hands-free cellphone law went into effect last year. "Warning: Equipment Upgrade Required," "Warning: Purchase Ear Plug, Do Not Delay," "Warning: Cease Sneaking Calls While Driving Or You Will Be Fined, Moron!"

Ever the trendsetters, we New Yorkers are now privy to vital intelligence the rest of the country has yet to wise up to: Just a few years ago, hailed a technological marvel, the hand-held cellphone, when utilized under certain mobile conditions, is now an instrument of mass destruction. Why have there been no recalls?

It's not like I ever really wanted a cellphone in the first place. I was quite happy with the old coin-clanking system, a master at scouring the depths of my pocketbook in the split second required to avoid the dreaded disconnect, then deftly depositing more, and still more, change. The bottom line is, I'm not proficient at working anything more complex than my blow dryer. "On, Off, High Heat, Low Heat." That's about all I can handle. I actually had a computer repairman make an emergency house call last Thanksgiving because I couldn't figure out how to install a new mouse. Is that bad?

My teenagers think so. They mock my phobia and have been mercilessly badgering me to upgrade my phone, not for safety purposes of course, but because they're ashamed of our "antique" unit, as they refer to it when speaking to their friends, most of whom, unlike my own children, already sport their own state-of-the-art contraptions that are not only able to handle phone calls, but

are also capable of transmitting e-mail, making color copies and launching missiles.

Turns out my old cellphone was so retro it didn't even have a jack for an earplug. How quaint. Because I've resisted relinquishing my hand-held (after four years, I've just discovered that pressing the talk key twice redials a busy signal. Amazing!), despite last year's law, my vehicular phone usage has been limited to emergency calls to me from my daughters. A typical call would go like this:

"Ring. Ring."

Like a seasoned spy, I'd swivel my head to and fro, checking for suspicious motorists, generally those of the law-enforcement variety. Once clearance was verified:

The perils of being a law-abiding cellphone user.

"Hello? Hurryup! minthecarandI don'twanttogetaticket!"

"Hi, mom, it's me. Where are you?"

"I'mheadinghome. Whazzup? Hurryup! minthecarandthere'sa redlightcomingup!"

"Um, me and Kelly and Susan and Shannon and um, I think Katie also, and maybe her sister, want to go to the—"

"There'sacoppullingoutof7/Eleventhats'fincallmelater!"

Because of one too many close calls and because on occasion I feel compelled to set a law-abiding example for my children, I drove into the nearest electronics dealer and to my chagrin, came out with a sleek, turbo-charged, palm-size model.

I was apprehensively unpacking the gleaming gadget when one of my daughters grabbed it in glee. Before I could ask, "How do I get a dial tone?" she'd programmed 83 names and telephone numbers into the directory (all her friends, "Just so you can call me wherever I am, mom"); a new voice-mail message ("Hey, my mom finally joined civilization! Leave a message, dude, and we'll speed-dial you back"); and set up a screen saver (doggie prints heading across the screen). "Please," I begged her, "just show me how to check messages!"

I took the virgin device for a test-drive the other day. As we cruised around, my daughters and I sat expectantly in the car, as if our very lives teetered on that first ring. Suddenly, while breezing down the L.I.E., a jarring, high-pitched, sports arena organ riff startled us all. "It's the phone, mom!" my ecstatic daughters exclaimed. "Play ball!"

But I was already fumbling. I didn't know what to do: insert the ear jack first or press the talk button first? How could I locate the Lilliputian talk button without my reading glasses? Which cord belonged to the car battery attachment and which cord belonged to the ear jack? Where was the ear jack, anyway?

Panic-stricken, I struggled to keep my eyes on the road while the persistent ballpark theme shrilled on. My head going up and down hysterically between the road and the tangle of cords surrounding me, I finally pressed the connecting key, but it was all too late — the call was sadly lost. Even sadder, a police car was flagging me to stop. Driven to distraction by the commotion, I had been working the accelerator to previously untested limits.

"You're lucky you didn't kill someone, ma'am," the officer snarled, as I pointed meekly to the cord now dangling pathetically from my left ear.

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Photos for illustrations

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