

Self-driving cars in Hong Kong may lose their edge with selfish owners

With its smart city blueprint, it seems the Hong Kong government is finally considering self-driving cars.

However, other international cities are already testing them on the road. Singapore has said it will have a full fleet of self-driving taxis by next year.

Self-driving cars have come a long way since the first DARPA Grand Challenge (driverless car competition) back in 2004. Even firms like Google, Apple and Nvidia have jumped on board.

The benefits of self-driving cars are massive. They increase fuel efficiency with better driving patterns. They reduce traffic congestion by allowing communication with other vehicles and even traffic infrastructures, and they will be much safer than the average driver. Yet, they will not be the miracle solution that we want them to be.

Hong Kong is plagued by traffic jams from having too many vehicles on the road. The number of private cars has grown by 18 per cent over the last five years, accounting for 88 per cent of total vehicle growth. Even though private cars account for only 10 per cent of passenger trips, they occupy 40 to 70 per cent of the road. Further, the average private car spends 95 per cent of its lifetime parked somewhere, taking up valuable space.

I am concerned that private owners will treat their self-driving car just like a conventional vehicle, and so there will be no environmental gains. Also, they may have their cars roaming the street to avoid paying for parking, which will exacerbate congestion. If the mindset of these owners does not change, we will not see smarter travelling.

Paris, like Hong Kong, suffers from serious congestion. The authorities there are developing driverless public transport, including buses and taxis, but not encouraging private self-drive vehicles.

Clearly, the wholesale adoption of self-driving cars is not the answer. It would make more sense to address Hong Kong's traffic issues through better infrastructure, and policies to promote the use of non-motorised transport and public transport. Still, the benefits of self-driving cars cannot be ignored. They are a good replacement for conventional vehicles, for example, with car-pooling, taxis, buses and goods vehicles.

We will eventually see self-driving cars on our roads. Therefore, policymakers have to think seriously about what role they will play in Hong Kong and how the city will adapt.

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