

Race to robot cars continues after fatal crash

SAN FRANCISCO, US - The race to perfect robot cars continues despite fears kindled by the death of a woman hit by a self-driving Uber vehicle while pushing a bicycle across an Arizona street.



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Uber put a temporary halt to its self-driving car programme in the US after the fatal accident near Phoenix, where several other companies including Google-owned Waymo are testing such technology.

While the [Uber](#) accident may be used to advance arguments of those fearful of driverless cars, it does not change the fact that "transformative technology is coming whether we like it or not," according to Adie Tomer, a fellow at the Brookings Institution think tank in Washington.

"There certainly will be calls to stop all autonomous vehicle testing, not just Uber's programme," Tomer said in a post on the institution's website.

"But, technological progress is hard to stop, and I don't expect it to happen in this case."

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Furor caused by the Uber accident could keep some cities or states from allowing testing of autonomous cars, or prompt tighter national rules, but there is too much private investment taking place to stop it, according to Tomer.

Self-driving cars hold the promise of being more attentive and quicker to react than humans at the wheels, and would free people to use travel time more productively or pleasantly.

The governor of Arizona on Monday put the brakes on Uber's self-driving car programme in that state, citing "disturbing and alarming" dashcam footage from the fatal crash.

San Francisco-based Uber told AFP that it decided not to re-apply for a permit needed to operate autonomous vehicles on California roads.

Arizona and California have been particularly welcoming to self-driving car testing, hoping companies developing autonomous technology in those states will create local jobs and facilities devoted to a promising new industry.

Technology giants, automakers, and vehicle parts companies, sometimes in alliance, are racing toward a future where cars driving themselves whisk people wherever they wish.

The competition is fierce and costly, with billions of dollars being spent on research.

Waymo and Jaguar Land Rover on Tuesday announced they [have joined forces](#) to develop a "premium self-driving electric vehicle" based on a new I-PACE model.

Testing of an I-Pace equipped with Waymo self-driving technology will begin later this year, and the goal is to make it part of a Waymo driverless transportation service, according to Jaguar.



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"This is just the beginning," the Waymo team said in an online post.

"The ultimate goal: with Waymo as the driver, products tailored for every purpose and every trip."

For example, self-driving vehicles could be designed for various needs such as working while commuting, celebratory nights out, or napping, according to Waymo.

Waymo chief executive John Krafcik over the weekend contended that the recent Uber accident would not have occurred with his company's technology.

"At Waymo, we have a lot of confidence that our technology would be able to handle a situation like that," Krafcik told a car dealership conference in Las Vegas.

Krafcik said Waymo's vehicles had clocked more than eight million kilometres (4.9 million miles) on routes frequented by pedestrians since 2009 without being involved in a fatal accident.

Waymo early this year announced it was ordering "thousands" of minivans from Fiat Chrysler to expand its self-driving taxi programme, which is launching this year in Phoenix, Arizona.

The nonprofit group Consumer Watchdog has argued that autonomous vehicles are not ready for roads and the public should not be put at risk to test such technology.

Democratic Senator Richard Blumenthal released a statement maintaining that the Uber accident "makes it clear that autonomous vehicle technology has a long way to go before it is truly safe for the passengers, pedestrians, and drivers."

Self-driving technology in the Uber car included some from California chip maker NVIDIA, which told AFP that it parked its test vehicles pending results of the accident investigation.

"Although we developed our self-driving technology independently, as good engineering practice, we will wait to learn from Uber's incident," an NVIDIA spokesman said.

NVIDIA shares suffered on the news, closing the formal trading day down 7.7% to \$225.52 on Tuesday last week.

Japanese auto giant Toyota also tapped the brakes on its autonomous car testing after the Uber accident, while German titan BMW maintained pace.

US federal authorities have opened an investigation into a fatal accident in California involving a Tesla electric car, with one of the goals being to determine whether its autopilot system was engaged at the time.

The US Transportation Department last year closed an investigation into a fatal 2016 crash in Florida of a Tesla on autopilot, finding that no "safety-related defect" had caused that accident.

Source: AFP

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