

Lyft Granted Patent for “Talking Cars”

On December 11, 2018, Lyft was granted a patent by the United States Patent and Trademark Offices for an Autonomous Vehicle Notification System ([Patent No. US 10,152,892 B2](#)). The System is designed with several functions, one of which produces a “talking car.” Talking in the sense of the ability to flash notifications to people outside the vehicle with information such as “safe to cross” (for individuals on foot) or “safe to pass” (for cyclists). The system can also designate other messages, such as “yielding” and “warning turning left/right”.

It seems that concerns about the safety of autonomous vehicles is on the rise; just last week vigilantes actually attacked an autonomous vehicle while traveling through Phoenix. So, the use of direct communications between the autonomous vehicles and individuals could go a long way to gaining the trust of the public. However, this system seems to raise a new issue: what if the autonomous vehicle notifies the individual of safe passage, but another vehicle (autonomous or not) fails to stop for the individual? Further, how will the technology determine when it’s safe to pass or cross, especially during the transition period where autonomous vehicles will be sharing the road with human drivers?

In the context of product liability litigation, the question becomes who then would be responsible if the individual is injured by the second vehicle? Would this be similar to situations where a human driver “waves” another person through what turns out to be an unsafe intersection? Depending on jurisdiction, the driver indicating safe passage may be held liable for any subsequent injuries/damages, regardless of the negligence of those around them. Where there is no driver, will the assignment of liability become more complicated? Will juries now need to understand the technology and algorithms used to determine “safe to pass/safe to cross” notifications in order to determine if the system failed the individual?

While the notification system patented by Lyft definitely has the potential for creating a sense of security when autonomous vehicles interact with people outside the vehicle, it also raises new questions without answers. The ever-changing landscape of autonomous vehicles today attempts to respond to issues as they arise, but in return they create new ones without answers. This cycle will continue to perpetuate itself for some time into the near future as our roads transition to autonomous vehicles.