Are We Safer Yet?

SCOTT ORLOSKY

By SCOTT ORLOSKY

Safety has been in the news a lot lately. Remember the Upper Big Branch coal mine explosion in April and the HUGE ongoing Gulf of Mexico oil debacle? As always, there is enough finger-pointing going on to implicate a whole host of manufacturers and operators.

If we set aside all of this media attention for a moment, however, and get down to the nuts and bolts of safety, there are really three main players: original equipment manufacturers (OEMs), operators and regulatory agencies.

As a manufacturer of sensors, we supply to the OEMs, and they rely on us to provide enough technical information and support to safely build our products into their equipment. Operators (and some times the OEMs are the operators, too) rely on the OEMs to give them enough information to safely operate and maintain the equipment. Meanwhile, the regulatory agencies let everyone in the chain know what are the safe limits for design and operation of equipment intended to be used in q particular environment.

Given the nature of operating in dangerous environments — even with all the players doing their job well — accidents are inevitable. There is no doubt that the

loss of life is tragic and devastating. Coupled with all of the peripheral losses (environmental, loss of income, hours taken in cleanup, etc.), the cost is largely incalculable.

But where do we draw the line between reasonable expectation of the inevitable and cautiousness to the point of disabling whole industries?

Furthermore, does more regulation even create safer conditions with the complexities of modern-day operations? Given that most accidents eventually come down to operator error, should regulations be directed toward manufacturers or operators?

Here's a case in point. Today's technology could be used to create a virtually accident-proof car. Front and rear radar could ensure safe separation of cars in traffic, governor control could prevent speeding (and even slow things down in poor conditions), traction systems could prevent skids, alcohol breath analyzers could lock out drunk drivers and so on. This would be an expensive car, but it would save approximately 40,000 lives per year in the U.S. alone.

It also takes a lot of the responsibility for safe operation of the vehicle off of the vehicle operator and puts it squarely on the manufacturer. Would people even want to buy a "safe" car or would it infringe on their personal freedom of driving expression? Would manufacturers even be willing to take on the liability for such a car?

The bottom line — can we ever be truly safe? And at what point does the economic hardship of "perfect" safety outweigh the risks of inherently risky operations?

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