

Consumption

The path towards the autonomous car

Expansión (Spain)

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"In Manhattan, an empty car was parked at the curb at Broadway. A man stepped onto the running board but didn't touch any instruments. Pedestrians watched open-mouthed when they heard the driverless car start its engine, change gear and move away from the pavement to join the heavy traffic." This was the start of an article about the "first driverless car", a 1926 Chandler, manufactured in... 1925!

Although interest in autonomous vehicles has always accompanied the development of the motor car, their deployment has never been so near. First and foremost because the technology is already available, as demonstrated by a number of manufacturers and technology companies in their pilot tests. Secondly, because the potential benefits of the establishment of autonomous mobility pool the interests of manufacturers, consumers and the public sector alike. It is forecast that the spread of autonomous vehicles will reduce transport costs, both due to the improvement in journey efficiency and to the fall in fuel expenditure; the accident rate will fall; the market size will increase as they will give those unable to drive up to now the chance to use a motor vehicle; they encourage new mobility services; they will affect urban planning by reducing parking space; and contribute to the decarbonisation of the economy by incentivising the electrification of car fleets.

A prerequisite for accelerating the adoption of the autonomous vehicle is increasing its attractiveness to society, just as with any other technological innovation. In this respect, surveys analysing consumers' perception of autonomous mobility are not giving conclusive results. Depending on the country, the time the study was conducted and the characteristics of the interviewees, the results vary between the 53% of European drivers who are considering acquiring an autonomous vehicle in the future and the 73% of US citizens who declare they are frightened about the prospect of using one.

The figures for Spain are less encouraging. Although 54% of drivers declare an interest in autonomous vehicles, only 13% plan to buy one. If given the choice between traditional and autonomous driving, eight out of ten would choose the former.

Although opinion surveys do provide a one-off vision of the feelings a population has about autonomous mobility, their usefulness as reliable monitoring tools is limited by the narrowness of the sample and their lack of repetition. To overcome these problems, a recent study by BBVA Research uses the global database of events, language and tone (GDELT), which compiles information from the media in real time on millions of issues and enables sentiment or attractiveness indicators to be built.

The results suggest that Spanish consumers' reticence about autonomous mobility are based on the perception that it is not safe. Although there is broad consensus about the beneficial effects on the accident rate of the introduction of the motor vehicle, safety faults and traffic accidents, like the one that occurred last March in Arizona, degrade its attractiveness. Although a growing interest and a favourable current of opinion is detected, the social perception of autonomous mobility suffers every time its safety is brought into question, above all where human lives are involved. Unlike the Dieselgate scandal in September 2015, which had negative and permanent repercussions for the attractiveness of diesel vehicles, the impact on public opinion of autonomous vehicle mishaps has thus far been transitory.

These results suggest that consumers assimilated the safety faults of autonomous vehicles in the phase prior to their introduction. But in view of the consequences of the loss of trust in diesel vehicles, the population's yielding attitude may disappear if the mishaps become widespread as autonomous mobility progresses. So, the automobile industry and the authorities cannot drop their guard if they want autonomous driving to become a reality a hundred years after the first test.

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