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## Self-driving cars need independent checks

Sir, Carmakers may disagree over the future of driverless technologies, but recent collisions raise serious and urgent questions for regulators and the public at large (“Driverless tech arrives at fork in the road”, August 19). In the case of the fatal Florida crash involving Tesla’s Autopilot system, we know the car was exceeding the speed limit. It’s not clear why. An important principle must be that driver assistance systems do not assist in breaking the law.

Tesla tells drivers its software is in “beta”. But letting the public take a chance on a potentially lethal technology is not the way we regulate medicines; the same must be true for cars, which can also kill other people. The vehicle was also driving on a road where vehicles cross the highway. An automated car should know what type of road it is on and what features lie ahead. If it doesn’t, control should be given back to the driver.

Independent checks, or “driving tests” for automated systems and self-driving vehicles must be a pre-requisite for their use. Technologies should be approved for use on a step-by-step basis, starting with the safest environments such as motorways. If that means a strictly limited set of scenarios for now, so be it.

Current regulatory systems were set up to check that occupant protection, headlights and brakes meet the minimum standard, not to verify whether millions of lines of computer code will effectively protect road users from automated cars. There is too much reliance on the manufacturers’ own test data. The Volkswagen emissions scandal has highlighted the need for independent EU oversight – automated cars make this ever more urgent.

“Bugs” that can cause a serious crash will have to be fixed urgently. But with millions of combinations of vehicles, components and software versions, the job of ensuring cars remain safe will be complex. Safety recalls in Europe are mostly voluntary, ie owners are encouraged, not obliged, to get them fixed. Do we want unpatched self-driving vehicles on our roads?

With the potential to eradicate speeding, drink-driving, distraction and fatigue, the safety potential of self-driving cars is undeniable. But the Tesla case shows there are also new risks. To rush in risks putting the public off altogether. If a self-driving car killed a large number of people in a single collision, it could destroy public acceptance. A precautionary and step-by-step approach is needed.

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