

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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13 February 1970

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Professor Joshua Lederberg
Department of Genetics
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Dear Professor Lederberg:

It was most kind of you to send to me a copy of your column about the ground fault interrupter. I liked your comment about the lonely place occupied by Professor Dalziel. In fact, since he is emeritus, one could argue that the place is no longer occupied at all. I suspect that if he were starting out now in his same career, he would enjoy more approbation from his colleagues than has been his lot in his actual working life.

Your juxtaposition of electric safety and automobile safety interested me. I think it is no profound comment, but one that I do not remember having seen, except insofar as you allude to it, that electric safety has been (to a high degree) obtained almost solely through a means that in principle has been available in the automobile field, but that has not been exploited. Electric safety is a consequence of the interest taken in it by the insurance companies. As you point out, they have been able to make safety economically attractive. There has been no parallel development in the field of automobile safety. I do not know why, but in the state I live in I believe it is illegal for an insurance company to give different rates for different kinds of cars because of judgments about their relative safety. Therefore the buyer has no economic pressure exerted on him by the insurance companies to buy a safe car, and therefore no pressure has been exerted from that direction on the automobile manufacturers.

I think it is true that if one automobile company ten years ago had gone strongly for safety and the others had gone along as they actually have, going down the line for style, with such monstrosities as bumpers that not only do not protect the car they are on but punch holes in the car that they collide with, the company that was manufacturing the "safe" car would have gone bankrupt. I therefore regard legislation about automobile safety -- legislation exerting direct pressure on the manufacturers all at the same time -- to be a highly constructive step.

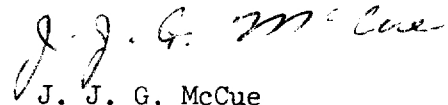
(continued)

Professor Joshua Lederberg

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Nevertheless, I think it's greatly to be regretted that state government regulation of automobile insurance companies has -- as far as I can see without any direct investigation on my part -- prevented them from exerting the economical pressures that have worked so well in the promotion of electric safety. Your column is the only place where I have seen even a hint that such a mechanism could be brought into play.

Yours sincerely,



J. J. G. McCue
Editor
IEEE SPECTRUM

JJGM:mw