

Listening to the radio could impair drivers' concentration

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Listening to traffic reports on the radio could be bad for your driving - you could even miss an elephant standing by the side of the road.

That is the conclusion of research being presented to the British Psychological Society's Annual Conference this week by PhD student Gillian Murphy of University College Cork and Dr Ciara Greene of University College Dublin.

Gillian Murphy's research takes a prominent theory of attention (Perceptual Load Theory) and applies it to [driving](#) - a task where attention is crucial. Perceptual Load Theory states that we have a finite amount of attention and that once that capacity is maxed out, we cannot process anything else.

To test whether paying attention to radio traffic reports can be bad for our driving, Gillian Murphy asked 36 people to drive a route in a full-sized driving simulator while listening to a traffic update on the radio.

While driving, 18 participants were asked to complete a simple task and 18 to complete a complex task. The simple task was to listen for when the voice giving the update changed gender. The complex task was to listen for news of a particular road.

She found that only 23 per cent of the drivers undertaking the complex task noticed a large, unexpected visual stimulus - an elephant or gorilla by the side of the road. By contrast, 71 per cent of the drivers

undertaking the simpler task noticed it.

Drivers undertaking the complex task were also worse at obeying road signs, remembering which vehicle had just passed them and even at driving itself. Their speed, lane position and reaction times to hazards were all affected.

Gillian Murphy said: "Road safety campaigns are so focused on telling us to keep our eyes on the road, and this is certainly important, but this research tells us that it's simply not enough. We should focus on keeping our brains on the road.

"Anything that draws our attention away from driving can be problematic, even if it's auditory like listening to the radio or having a hands-free phone conversation. That doesn't mean that we should ban radios in cars, but that we should all be aware of the limits of our [attention](#).

"The fact that we found this using a simple, naturally occurring task like listening out for a traffic update on the radio suggests that the load on our hearing may be an important and overlooked contributor to driver distraction and inattention."

More information: Paper title: 'Cross-Modal Effects of Perceptual Load on Driver Attention'

Provided by British Psychological Society

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