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Driving With GPS Can Be Difficult to Navigate

This is the VOA Special English Technology Report.

Global Positioning Systems are now a part of everyday driving in many countries. These satellite-based systems provide turn-by-turn directions to help people get to where they want to go. But, they can also cause a lot of problems, send you to the wrong place or leave you completely lost. Many times, the driver is to blame. Sometimes a GPS error is responsible. Most often, says Barry Brown, it is a combination of the two.

Barry Brown is with the Mobile Life Centre in Stockholm, Sweden. The center studies human-computer interaction, or HCI, especially communications involving wireless devices.

We spoke to Mr. Brown by Skype. He told us about an incident involving a friend who had flown to an airport in the eastern United States. There he borrowed a GPS-equipped car to use during his stay.

BARRY BROWN: "And they just plugged in an address and then set off to their destination. And, then it wasn't until they were driving for thirty minutes until they realized they actually put in a destination back on the West Coast where they lived. They actually put their home address in. So again, the GPS is kind of 'garbage in garbage out'."

Mister Brown says this is a common human error. But, he says, what makes the problem worse has to do with some of the shortcomings, or failures, of GPS equipment.

BARRY BROWN: "One problem with a lot of the GPS units is they have a very small screen and they just tell you the next turn. Because they just give you the next turn, sometimes that means that it is not really giving you the overview that you would need to know that it's going to the wrong place."

Barry Brown formerly served as a professor with the University of California, San Diego. While there, he worked on a project with Eric Laurier from the University of Edinburgh. The two men studied the effects of GPS devices on driving by placing cameras in people's cars. They wrote a paper based on their research. It is called "The Normal, Natural Troubles of Driving with GPS."

BARRY BROWN: "One of the things that struck us, perhaps the most important thing was that you have to know what you're doing when you use a GPS. There are these new skills that people have developed. There are these new competencies that you need to have to be able to use a GPS because they sometimes go wrong."

Barry Brown says this goes against a common belief that GPS systems are for passive drivers who lack navigational skills.

"The Normal, Natural Troubles of Driving With GPS" lists several areas where GPS systems can cause confusion for drivers. These include maps that are outdated, incorrect or difficult to understand. They also include timing issues related to when GPS commands are given.

Barry Brown says to make GPS systems better we need a better understanding of how drivers, passengers and GPS systems work together.

And that's the VOA Special English Technology Report, written by June Simms. I'm Steve Ember.