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## Book Review: Wrong Way

Charles F. Angell

*Bridgewater State College*, [cangell@bridgew.edu](mailto:cangell@bridgew.edu)

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# Wrong Way

Tom Vanderbilt, *Traffic: Why We Drive the Way We Do*. Knopf, ©2008

Charles Angell

A good friend who worked for the transportation department of McDonnell-Douglas in Los Angeles once told me about a meeting called by her corporate vice president who wanted to know what civic project each division was working on to improve conditions on the Los Angeles freeways. She was seated next to a gentleman neatly dressed wearing a bow tie and shirt with a pocket full of pens. One manager explained that his division had decided to locate tow trucks at key highway points in order to respond quickly to whatever traffic emergencies and accidents might occur during the morning and afternoon rush hours. “What did he say?” the gentleman asked my friend. She repeated in his ear what the manager had said. “Why are they doing that?” he asked. Thinking her colleague was hard of hearing, she explained the rapid response rationale for the tow trucks. “Well,” he said, “why didn’t they come to us first for an algorithm that would tell them where the accidents were going to happen?” Said my friend: “he was a rocket scientist.”

I recalled this story as I read Tom Vanderbilt’s *Traffic*. Vanderbilt examines traffic engineers’ efforts to discover an algorithm (though he doesn’t call it that) or at the least some concept that will explain traffic movement and patterns. A number of conceptual ideas offer themselves. Highway traffic resembles water flowing in a river and, as water responds to obstacles interrupting the flow, so traffic responds to roadwork or accidents. Or, traffic mimics social insect—ants, locusts—behavior where “large patterns contain all kinds of hidden interactions.” Then again, traffic operates as a network where, like a spider’s web disturbance (think gridlock) in one part of the network affects the other parts. Traffic, however, doesn’t fit neatly into any conceptual



framework. Where the road tells drivers they’re part of a traffic system, the drivers act as part of a social system. One traffic engineer notes that when he leaves home for work, he drives slowly through his neighborhood, his social world, but as he travels farther from home and enters the anonymity of the traffic world he speeds up, slowing down only when he reenters the social world defined by his destination. The two worlds defy traffic engineers’ efforts to mesh them.

Much of what we experience in the traffic world is counterintuitive. We’ve all, I suspect, had the experience of the sign warning us of a lane closure ahead. In preparation we dutifully move into the open lane only to have more impatient drivers pass us in the soon to be

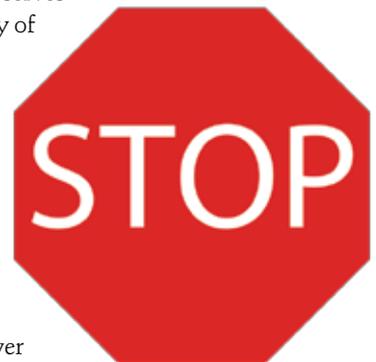
## WRONG WAY

closed lane. We fume, mutter imprecations and vow not to let them merge when we reach the lane closure.

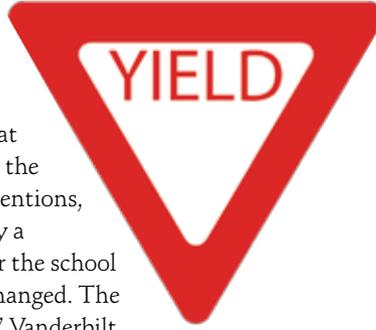
However, traffic engineers point out that it's an inefficient use of highway space to leave one lane unoccupied and that at the merge point drivers in a quite orderly way will alternate to let cars in the closed lane into the traffic flow. Another instance, which is safer in a densely populated area—a wide berm that separates pedestrians from the traffic? Or a narrower berm that keeps pedestrians and drivers more proximate? It turns out the keeping the social world of the sidewalk in some proximity to the traffic world of the street forces drivers and pedestrians to maintain eye contact and thus retain awareness of each other's presence. Drivers slow down; pedestrians watch for cars. Which is safer? More signs? Fewer signs? Too many signs either overload the driver with information (where the hell does Interstate 93 go?) or promulgate useless information (sorry Bambi, I was looking at the 'deer crossing sign'). Which is more efficient? 'Cycling' the lot looking for the best—i.e. nearest the entrance—parking space at the mall? Or pick a row and take the first available space and walk directly to the door? "Research," Vanderbilt notes, "has shown that people tend to underestimate the time it will take to get somewhere in a car and overestimate the time it will take to walk somewhere." Research also supports what every suburban husband intuitively knows: women 'cycle'; men pick a row. Which is more efficient and safer? The intersection? The traffic circle/roundabout? "Intersections are crash magnets—in the United States 50 percent of all road crashes occur at intersections." (The intersection in my neighborhood which includes state routes 18 and 106 and a local street has made me a star on 911.) Four way intersections are the most dangerous of all. (Bring back the Sagamore rotary?) Does a new vehicle with advanced safety features make us safer on the road? Not necessarily. Many drivers of these vehicles, considering themselves safer, will start taking greater risks.

This brings us to accidents. Vanderbilt points out that if you're driving down a country road and a tree limb falls on the car, that's an accident. Accidents, he correctly notes, are "unintended or unforeseen events." Drunk driving and hitting someone or something, talking on the cell phone and hitting someone or something, not wearing a seat belt and being ejected from the vehicle in a crash; these are not accidents. These are the consequences of risky and preventable behavior. Regardless, drivers continue to engage and indulge in these behaviors, in part because they've gotten away with them in the past and expect to get away with them in the future. "The word accident, however, has been sent skittering down a slippery slope, to the point where it seems to provide protective cover for the worst and most negligent driving behaviors." Vanderbilt observes that news reports, when they say of a fatal crash that no drugs or alcohol were involved, "subtly [absolve] the driver from full responsibility—even if the driver was flagrantly exceeding the speed limit." He also notes that TV commercials for SUVs and pick-up trucks display these vehicles being driven in conditions that no suburban driver is ever likely to encounter and in a manner that no driver in any conditions ought to emulate. We incubate the context for our own risky and irresponsible driving.

Vanderbilt reports that since the State Department began keeping records in the 1960s of people in the United States killed by terrorists, the deaths total less than 5000—"roughly the same number...as those who have been struck by lightning." (Three thousand of that total died on a single day—9/11.) Yet, each year 40,000 people, give or take, die in automobile crashes. In response to 9/11 "many citizens thought it was acceptable to curtail civil liberties...to help preserve our 'way of life'" against terrorist threats. Those same citizens when polled, Vanderbilt writes, "have routinely resisted traffic measures designed to reduce the annual death toll." Since 9/11 nearly 200,000 people have died on the nation's roads.



Studies have shown that drivers, “when...asked to compare themselves to the ‘average driver,’ a majority respond[ed] that they were ‘better.’” We all self-enhance, Vanderbilt says, and “inflate our own driving abilities simply because we are not actually capable of rendering an accurate judgment.” We do not realize that tailgating is dangerous, that failure to use directional signals leaves the driver behind us clueless about our intentions, that running the red light is ultimately a zero-sum game, that failure to stop for the school bus ought to get the offending driver hanged. The result? Road rage. “In an 1982 survey,” Vanderbilt says, “a majority of [American] drivers found that the majority of other people were ‘courteous’ on the road. When the same survey was repeated in 1998, the rude drivers outnumbered the courteous.” Add into the mix all the distractions that auto makers have introduced as features for their products and one has to conclude that traffic engineers, in their quest to make our roads as safe as possible, confront a daunting task.



Living in a state where the basic traffic rule often seems to be “I’m-insured-you’re insured; back-up-until-you-hear-the-glass-shatter,” I did approach Tom Vanderbilt’s *Traffic* with something of a chip on my shoulder. With 50 years experience driving on the Commonwealth’s highways, roads, and Boston city streets, what could his study possibly tell me that would alter, amend, or improve my driving? “I would study not only the traffic signals we obey,” Vanderbilt promises, “but also the traffic signals we send.” It’s these latter, the signals we send, that concern me. The *Boston Globe* will occasionally run a letter from an out-of-town visitor complaining about Massachusetts drivers, their rudeness and disregard for the rules of the road, or excoriating the confusing signage and unfilled potholes. “Wimp,” I’d think; “you got on the southeast expressway with pros and couldn’t hack it.” I’m more patient behind the wheel than I used to be, never talk on the phone when driving and, since I assume all the other drivers are packing, have eliminated hand signals from my repertoire. Still, when I come across the Zakim bridge in my F-150 and drop into the tunnel, finding myself behind some confused out-of-towner clogging the left hand lane, I cannot resist the temptation to show ‘em how it’s done. In the words of the immortal Chuck Berry,

*As I was motivatin over the hill  
I saw Mabelene in a Coup de Ville  
A Cadillac arollin’ on the open road  
Nothin’ will outrun my V8 Ford  
The Cadillac doin’ about ninetyfive  
She’s bumper to bumper, rollin’ side by side*

Yeah!

—Charles Angell is Professor of English and  
Book Review Editor of the Bridgewater Review.