
— Opinion

Why is Australia stuck in the slow lane on driverless cars?

Australian regulations put a much higher bar on robot drivers than human ones. That makes little sense when it's likely that the tech is already safer.

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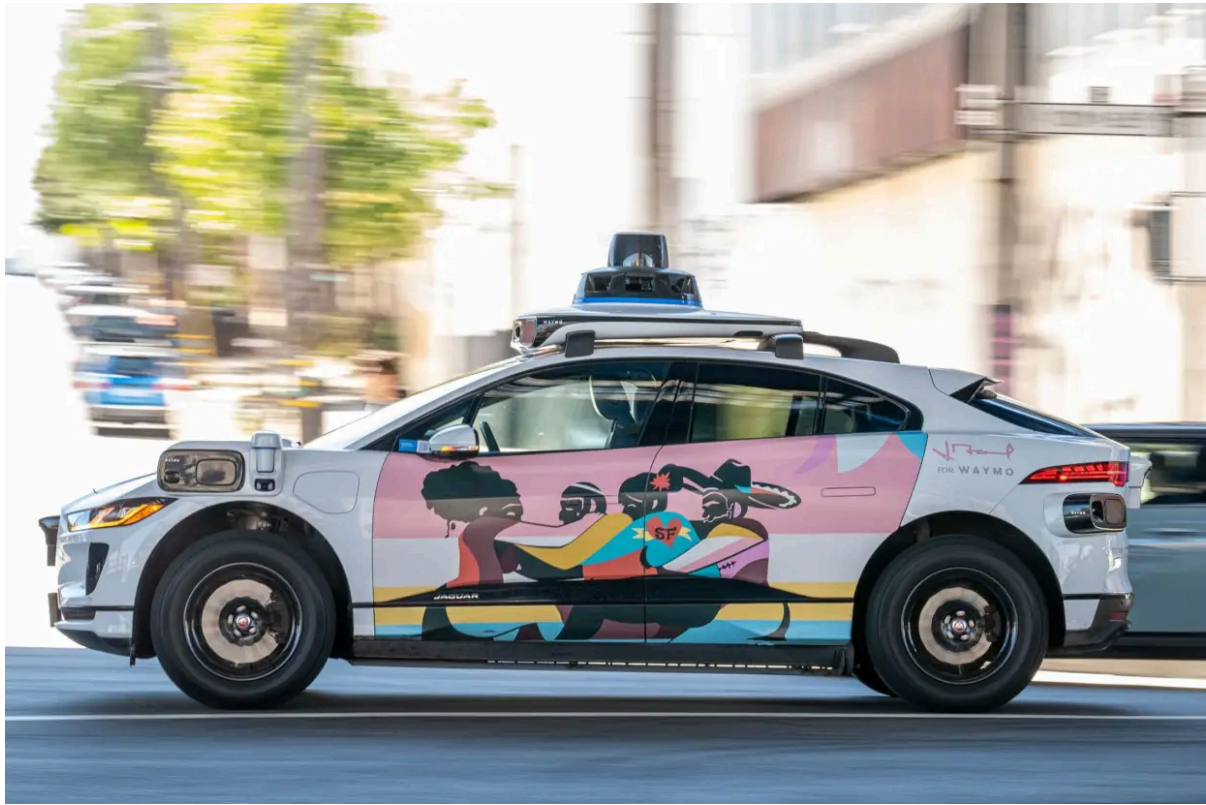


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In August, United States authorities agreed to allow Waymo's robotaxis to expand their existing zones to include urban motorways for the first time – in San Francisco and Phoenix.

Driverless cars are spreading fast in the US and China, but not here: Australian authorities are yet to be convinced these vehicles are completely safe. It's time to catch up – automation doesn't just make transport more efficient, it can also reduce the road toll.



Waymo robotaxis in San Francisco can now travel on the city's freeways. **Bloomberg**

Tech enthusiasts have promised that driverless cars were just around the corner a few too many times over the past decade. So you could be forgiven for not realising that robotaxis are up and running [<https://www.afr.com/link/follow-20180101-p5jsjk>] right now in San Francisco and Phoenix.

Waymo, an Alphabet subsidiary, has been operating on city streets since 2018, and now on the all-important freeways in those cities. Amazon's Zoox has plans for the Bay Area, Las Vegas, Miami, Seattle and Austin, while General Motors' Cruise is planning to launch in Dallas, Houston and Phoenix.

In China, robotaxis are already in 11 cities, and scaling up fast. Baidu's Apollo Go launched in 2022; it has more than 400 cars on the road in Wuhan, and plans for 1000 by the end of this year. Apollo also operates in Chongqing, and AutoX in Shenzhen.

Chinese and American robotaxis generally operate at level-four automation, which means they don't need human intervention for their approved conditions and zones. Approved zones are strictly limited, and fleets can be grounded for wild weather or software problems. Robotaxis are a toe in the water; privately owned automated vehicles will take longer, since owners will expect to drive wherever and whenever they like.

Human drivers are to blame for most serious Waymo collisions, and humans are twice as likely to get into a crash reported to the police.

In Australia, even robotaxis are years away [<https://www.afr.com/link/follow-20180101-p5jlxp>]. Every Australian state has felt the need to run its own bespoke trial of low-speed automated shuttle-buses, as if the lessons from overseas or interstate might not apply locally. Clearing the mountain of regulation that prevents the commercial deployment of automated vehicles is similar: federal and state governments have been inching forward for years on bespoke Australian legislation, and hope to be ready by 2026.

The snail's pace appears due to fears that someone could be injured or killed by an automated vehicle. Errors can happen: last year, Cruise pulled out of California after a pedestrian was dragged six metres by a Cruise robotaxi after she had been hit by another vehicle. Cybersecurity also remains a risk: the US manufactures its own self-driving systems, but it also proposes to ban any software of Chinese or Russian origin in internet-connected cars [<https://www.afr.com/link/follow-20180101-p5kcyk>] from 2027.

While automated vehicles do not have a completely unblemished record, they are on a path to being safer than human-driven cars, and may be safer already.

Human drivers are to blame for most serious Waymo collisions: humans are twice as likely to get into a crash reported to the police, and six times more likely to get into one that triggers an airbag. Humans are also more of a menace to cyclists, and more vulnerable to crashing in routine conditions.

It's too early to be confident about fatalities; a fatal crash occurs about once every 160 million kilometres driven, and so far, Waymo vehicles have driven about 11 million – thankfully, without fatalities.

In Australia, fallible human drivers caused 1300 road deaths over the past year, up from 1200 the year before and 1150 the year before that. If we insist on holding automated vehicles to a substantially higher bar than human-driven vehicles, we will slow the adoption of a technology that is not perfect but quite likely already safer.

Critics may argue that driverless vehicles take jobs from professional drivers. Technological change can be disruptive, but right now, with unemployment at just

4.2 per cent, the problem is more one of businesses finding workers than workers finding jobs.

And history shows, over and over again, how remarkably adaptable people and businesses are. When Ford, Holden and Toyota stopped making cars in Australia, critics predicted 200,000 job losses; in fact, people employed in motor vehicle manufacturing went from 40,500 in 2014-15, to 37,500 three years later, to 40,500 today. People found jobs in auto parts manufacturing, other manufacturing, and other fields altogether.

Australia should not seek to be a world leader in adopting this technology. But we have much to gain from not delaying its adoption once the technology superpowers have gone through a couple of cycles of refining both the technology itself and how best to manage the risks of error and hacking. And it looks as though that time has come. For Australia – enough of the dinky shuttle-bus trials on university campuses – the time to roll out the regulatory red carpet is now.



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