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 THE BIG CITY

## Big Brother Is Ticking

At last, a scheme to tame New York cabbies.



**H**ARRIS SILVER, A 31-YEAR-OLD advertising copywriter who describes himself as a pedestrian advocate, credits his most inspired idea — a breakthrough that could revolutionize transportation and public safety — to an encounter he had with the front bumper of a taxicab. He was trying to cross 14th Street as a cab was turning east from Sixth Avenue. “The cabbie literally began pushing me out of the crosswalk with his bumper,” Silver recalls. “I tapped on his window and yelled at him. He got out of the cab and looked like he was going to kill me. Fortunately, I had a camera with me. I took a picture of him and his car and said, ‘I’ll see you in taxi court.’”

Armed with the picture, Silver eventually did triumph in a hearing before the Taxi and Limousine Commission. “The driver was fined \$800, but I realized I’d spent a lot of time to accomplish very little,” Silver says. “Now this poor cabbie was just going to have to work twice as hard to pay the fine, so now he’d be twice as dangerous on the road.” Silver began wondering how to create a different kind of incentive, something to stop cabbies *before* they broke the law.

A few months ago, Silver was in pedestrian-friendly Amsterdam, meeting with its director of road safety. (This is how pedestrian advocates spend their vacations.) He asked if Amsterdam had considered programming taxi meters to stop ticking whenever the driver speeds. “I figured it was so obvious that they must have thought of it already,” Silver says. “This official perked up and asked me

where I’d heard of that idea. I said I’d just thought it up. That was when I realized I might be on to something.”

Back in New York, Silver came up with a plan: program the meter to freeze the fare whenever the cab travels more than 30 miles per hour, the speed limit on most city streets. The meter would resume ticking only when the driver slowed down. For highway driving, the cabbie could flick a switch that would allow the meter to tick freely. This override switch would turn on special lights inside the cab as well as on its roof, alerting both the passenger and any police officers nearby if the driver tried to use the switch illegally on city streets.

The taxi industry, of course, would object to the added expense and complication. But a cartel protected by city law is in no position to whine about government overregulation. Silver estimates that installing his system would cost only \$200 per taxi, which could be a public-health bargain if it reduces the number of taxi casualties. More than 12,000 passengers, drivers and pedestrians are injured every year in accidents involving New York City cabs and livery cars.

Until now, the only strategy for insuring a safe ride from a New York cabbie has been to tell him in a woozy voice that you’re feeling sick, and even this threat to the upholstery doesn’t always work. The city’s taxi drivers do not operate according to conventional standards of risk assessment. Not one of them, so far as is known, has ever been observed wearing a seat belt. As veterans of traffic in Karachi and Lagos, they have long been reconciled to

the inevitability of death. The only thing that will slow them down is the prospect of losing money.

What about passengers who *want* to speed? They’d be free to cut their own deals with cabbies by promising to make up any lost fare. (The receipt, besides showing the legal fare, could also show the amount forfeited for speeding.) Some traditionalists might object to the very idea of impeding New Yorkers — isn’t it a civic right to be in a hurry? — but Silver’s plan could actually get people around town faster. It would make cabs perform more efficiently as the pace cars of Manhattan.

“Slowing down cabs could improve traffic flow,” says Samuel I. Schwartz, the former chief engineer of the city’s Department of Transportation, who is known as Gridlock Sam. “The lights on most avenues are timed for 30 miles per hour, and when you end up making a series of quick stops and starts, which really slows down the traffic behind you. But if everyone’s going 30 miles an hour, more cars can move more quickly.” Schwartz, a former cabbie himself, believes drivers need a little leeway — he’d set the meter’s limit at 35 miles per hour — but otherwise he’s sympathetic to Silver’s proposal. “The closest I have come to death was the night a cabbie drove me across the ice-covered grating of the Manhattan Bridge at 70 miles an hour,” he says. “This is a very creative solution to that problem.”

Silver has had no luck so far with officials at the Taxi and Limousine Commission, who say his plan seems impractical. But remember, these are the visionaries who thought it would be a good idea to coax pas-

sengers into wearing seat belts by playing recorded messages from Jackie Mason and Joan Rivers.

When the T.L.C. tires of devising new ways to nag passengers, perhaps it will see the shining potential of Silver’s taxi meter. Besides protecting passengers and pedestrians, it could accomplish even more social good with another innovation: a \$2 deduction from the fare whenever the horn is honked.

In theory, this might unfairly penalize cabbies who reserve the horn for genuine emergencies, but it’s not clear that any such cabbies exist in New York. (If they do, passengers should voluntarily compensate them for the emergency honks.) Honking while the taxi is not moving should carry even stiffer penalties, and if there’s no passenger in the cab, the penalty should apply against the next fare. The stilling of the horns would be the simplest and quickest quality-of-life improvement since the historic rout of the squeegee men.

If it seems too harsh to suddenly impose these financial penalties on cabbies, there could be a transition period during which the meters issue only warnings. The T.L.C. would probably insist on using more celebrities: Paul Simon urging horn-honkers to try the sounds of silence, Robert De Niro snarling, “Are you honking at me?”

If speeding cabbies were forced to endure the continual sounds of Jackie Mason snapping, “Whaddya, whaddya?” or Joan Rivers cooing, “To die for, darling,” the incidence of reckless driving might decline significantly, although there is also a danger of an increase in the suicide rate. In the long run, monetary penalties seem the most humane choice. ■

