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## R U ambu-textrous?

By Louis R. Carlozo

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Time was tight, and Kelly Scheiner of Streeterville had many errands to run before her vacation to New Smyrna Beach, Fla. And so, a silver Nordstrom bag draped over her left forearm, she marched north on Michigan Avenue, crossing Illinois Street at a crisp clip, thumbs firing on her BlackBerry.

"It's multitasking," said Scheiner, 32, an executive recruiter for a private equities firm. "I have to return these things at Nordstrom, and it's a way to get more things done: checking e-mails, sending messages."

Scheiner has no idea when she became a text-walker, though she knows some state officials, including Illinois Secretary of State Jesse White, have spoken out in support of a new bill that would ban using a wireless device while crossing streets.

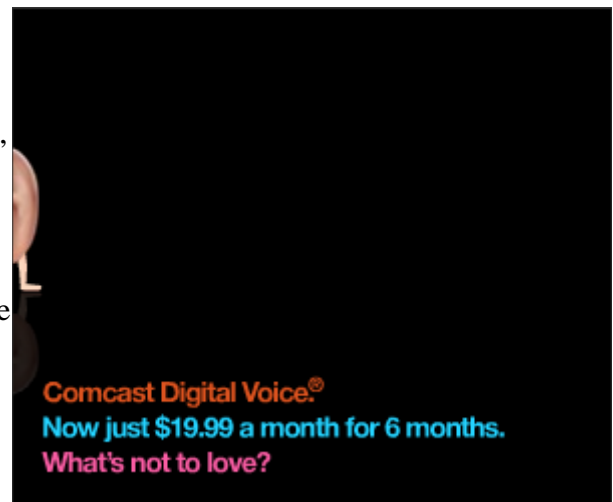
"I think that's probably smart," said Scheiner as she walked across to the west side of Michigan Avenue, steps from the Shops at North Bridge entrance. "If someone's [crossing the street] and not looking, it's safer for the pedestrian" to avoid texting. Still Scheiner admitted: "Of course I do it. I'm pretty careful. I try to be. But I'm sure I've hit someone or something once or twice."

The Illinois General Assembly bill, also known as HB 4520, was introduced in January by Rep. Ken Dunkin (D- Chicago), who then insisted: "This legislation is not laughable. On the surface it's like, 'Oh wow, what is this?' But it's becoming more and more of a common problem with people haplessly crossing an intersection and almost killing themselves."

Under the proposed law, Illinois residents would get slapped with a misdemeanor and a \$25 fine if caught using a cell phone or other wireless device while traversing streets.

"The secretary headed a task force on driver safety, and this issue came up, and he was intrigued by the idea," said David Drucker, a spokesman for Secretary of State White's office. "He's seen a couple of instances of [walking and texting] himself. Right now, though, he feels that it needs more study."

Even as lawmakers take a closer look at the issue, texters might want to scrutinize their own abilities to divide their attention in so many directions.



The brain's ability to take on several activities at once makes text-walking possible, researchers say, but it's a delicate balancing act. All it takes is one unexpected disruption to turn a text-walk into a garble-stumble.

Not that many people seem aware of this. Stroll the Loop or Magnificent Mile on any lunch hour, and you'll see an omnipresent parade of text-walkers, with handhelds clutched, eyes cast down as they type, send and delete.

They're in the suburbs too (visit any strip mall parking lot or retail center) and criss-crossing college campuses across the country.

At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, new-student orientations now include cautionary words from campus police about the perils of ped-texting, said University of Illinois Interim Police Chief Jeff Christensen.

The message? "Walk defensively," Christensen said. "The U. of I. campus is a vibrant, bustling community that has a highly condensed population sharing a very small and busy area."

Last August, a train struck and injured a teenager in Elmwood Place, Ohio, as he sent a text message from his cell phone. Oblivious to the train's horns, he walked around crossing gates. The town's dumbfounded mayor said that "the kid was apparently just daydreaming."

In Springfield, Dunkin pressed for his bill by citing the deaths of two New York City pedestrians who were apparently walking and texting. And at other universities where walker free-for-alls in the streets were common long before cell phones, authorities now take care to make sure students and parents know text safety.

Students and young adults, so adept at texting, make up a large subset of the injured seen at Northwestern Memorial Hospital this summer, said James Adams, chief of emergency medicine. "We always see someone [who was] texting or calling, who would not have been in that accident had it not been for the phone," Adams said.

As for where the accidents occur, "The Lake Shore path is ground zero, and so is Michigan Avenue," Adams says. "We see people tripping off curbs, off sidewalks, into planting grates. People are moving, it's crowded and accidents happen."

What's worse, those accidents become complicated when it's on the path, where pedestrians pose as much of a threat as they themselves might be threatened. Adams describes a typical scenario: "Someone is texting and walking a dog, the dog goes farther out on the leash and doesn't get yanked back because the person is distracted. Then the dog goes into the path of a moving bike."

When that happens, "Summers are ruined," Adams says. "It's an emerging trend and one that has not anywhere near peaked."

The text-walking trend highlights our obsession with making the most of every minute. "There's this sense of compressed time—an expectation that we should be able to multitask and disengage from the larger world," said Mark Reinecke, chief of psychology at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine. "We should be in connection with others at all times, and respond to them immediately."

## **Rules are evolving**

Is this bad? Not necessarily, Reinecke thinks—though he adds we're in a period of etiquette-wrestling similar to when cell phones first appeared on trains and buses: "Most people would not text in church, for example. The rules for how we should do this are still evolving."

So, too, is the understanding of how people do both things at once without sending a garbled e-mail or tripping over a fire hydrant.

Text-walking involves mastering two independent skills. With the walking part, balance and posture, as involuntary actions, are controlled by the cerebellum. But years of stepping through high-traffic environments can yield hoofers wired to do many things at once, said Ofer M. Wellisch, who has conducted neuroscience research with the National Institutes of Health and is a consultant for the holistic health Web site Mamaherb.com.

"The brain gets input from many areas: sight, listening, touch," Wellisch said. "Your feet are sensing whether you are going up a or down a hill. As you go from a child to an adult, you integrate more functions into it."

Then comes the typing part. Those who remember typing classes know you can memorize a keyboard to the point of not looking down. "It's learned movements," Wellisch said.

To stroll and string keystrokes, the brain creates feedback between the dorsolateral frontal cortex (concerned with planning, strategizing and sequencing) and the parietal lobe (which integrates sensory information). The two brain areas harmonize to allow for multitasking, said Marsel Mesulam, a Northwestern University neurologist and psychiatry professor.

## **A juggling act**

If walking/texting looks like a juggling act, Mesulam says, that's a good analogy: "The answer is in the circus, you know? The guy juggles while he or she is on a horse, singing and doing other things. You can teach yourself lots of tricks."

Within reason, that is: "If you're crossing a busy street and get a message that is pretty jolting, your ability to distribute your attention is compromised. You're putting yourself at risk."

Wellisch, who acknowledges text-walking, added: "It's not something I could've done 10 years ago. It's a matter of practice. Now it comes automatically."

"But would I recommend someone texting while driving? Absolutely not."

And even those with every reason in the world to walk and text sometimes choose not to. Standing in line at the Michigan Avenue Apple Store for the new iPhone, Sean Mansfield of the Loop paused to send messages from his texting device. By day, he works in financial services—but that fast-paced world has not drawn him into compulsive text-walking, he insists.

"I want to pay attention to what I'm doing, stay focused," said Mansfield, 25. "It's somewhat dangerous to do in an urban environment."

Mansfield then pointed to a man in a black T-shirt, crossing the street hunched in that familiar text-as-you-go posture: "See? There's a guy doing it now. I don't want to be that guy."

[lcarlozo@tribune.com](mailto:lcarlozo@tribune.com)

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