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## Count down to greater safety

Launched in June 2004 within the European Commission (EC)'s eSafety programme, the eCall initiative has, as its primary objective, the development of a telematics-based system designed automatically to inform the emergency services of the location and identifying details of a vehicle involved in an accident. Earlier in 2005, a meeting in Brussels agreed a deployment action plan that is expected to result in the production of standards and specifications within 12 months and the beginning of field tests in 2006.

Three years after that, in 2009, the hope is that all new vehicles will be eCall-enabled. But what exactly is this new project is expected to deliver and what are the likely hurdles it needs to overcome?

The benefits of eCall and of other advanced driver assistance systems (ADAS) could be huge, in terms both of commercial profit and of lives saved. If German automotive technology giant Robert **Bosch** is to be believed, its share of the ADAS market is expected to reach e1bn (US\$1.34bn) by the end of the decade; while figures released by safety-oriented bodies around the world point to significant life-saving advantages in reaching victims more quickly than at present.

The EC's Directorate-General for the Information Society (EC DG Infso) has estimated that the full deployment of a single system using E-112 (the European emergency telephone number) throughout the EU could save 2,000 lives a year. French national traffic and transport Authority (DSCR) has stated that 250 deaths a year are due to the failure to alert the emergency services quickly enough.

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EC Information Society Director-General Fabio Colassanti signs the MoU on eCall with (left) ACEA's Ivan Hodac and (right) ERTICO's Olivier Mossé

Supported by European automotive manufacturers' organisation l'Association des Constructeurs Européens d'Automobiles (ACEA), the EU and ERTICO, as well as individual European carmakers, eCall is expected to be able to detect a collision and automatically report it. The message will be sent via a GSM (global system for mobile communications) or GPRS (general packet radio services) wireless link to the local public service answering point (PSAP).

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Details this receives will include the exact location of the vehicle, its make and model, the registration number and the likely extent of any injuries based on the speed at impact. The PSAP will normally call the driver and check the veracity of the message and then pass the details to the emergency services. (Drivers will also have the option of manually instigating the sending of the message).

But there are difficulties. These include the present chaotic state of in-vehicle electronics, the apparent lack of political will at national level to sign the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on eCall, and the seeming reluctance by drivers to part with their cash for a system that they hope they will never have to use.

So far as vehicle electronics are concerned, the automobile industry faces a glum future in the design of new and upcoming models. A poor record of reliability and the consequent warranty claims in an area of vehicle production that now accounts for around 90% of innovations in new vehicles is having its affect on profitability.

Underlining the problems Bernie Robertson, former senior vice-president at **DaimlerChrysler**, said in a speech at the October 2004 Converge 2004 biennial in Detroit, US, that as much as 70% of all quality problems in vehicles are the result of issues with electronics. And, while the issue is now being addressed by the Autosa (automotive open system architecture) international development partnership, there is still some way to go before the problem can be regarded as having been solved.

Meanwhile, at the political level, mixed messages are being sent. While the concept of eCall enjoys the full support of the EC and at least 23 public and private European organisations - all of which have now signed the MoU - the only government to have done so is Finland.

In September 2004, a further ten European states undertook to join up to the MoU - but have yet to do so. Meanwhile Finland expects to have a national service operational by end-2004.

Lastly, there remains the question of whether drivers really want a system for which they will almost certainly have to pay. While PSA Peugeot Citroën are apparently experiencing few problems with their proprietary eCall system, currently in use in 20,000 vehicles in France, and Volvo has its On Call service, GM has been forced to substantially reduce its On Star service in Germany due to lack of interest.

Yet despite these difficulties, there is very little risk that eCall will not survive and eventually flourish. The stakes are too high to contemplate failure, and the rewards too great.

One positive sign is that, following the 2004 **ITS World Congress** in Nagoya, Japan, the concept of eSafety (and, one assumes, of eCall as well) has now been taken up by Japan and the US. These moves lead to the prospect of an eventual global (and, perhaps, interoperable) system.

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