

First self-driving car death

Regulators probe role technology may have played in accident



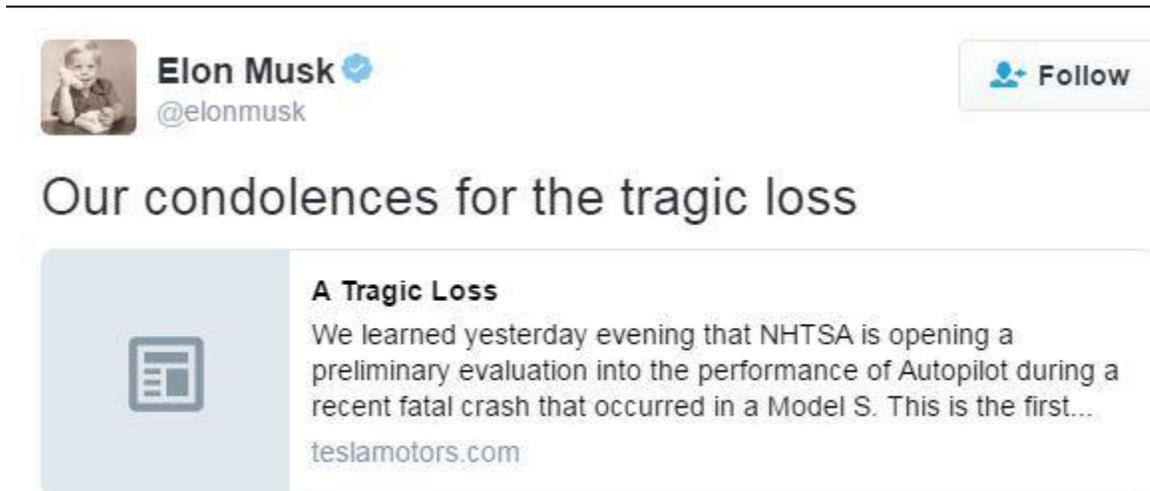
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A tragic loss

 **A Tragic Loss**
We learned yesterday evening that NHTSA is opening a preliminary evaluation into the performance of Autopilot during a recent fatal crash that occurred in a Model S. This is the first...
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by: [Richard Waters](#) in San Francisco

A car that was driving itself has been involved in a fatal crash for the first time, after a person at the wheel of one of Tesla Motors' electric cars that was operating under its own control was killed in the US.



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Our condolences for the tragic loss

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The death was revealed by the company on Thursday, a day after it was notified that federal regulators were investigating the role its technology may have played in the accident.

Tesla sought to deflect blame from its Autopilot feature, which was the most advanced driving-assistance technology on the road when it was launched last

October. The company claimed that both the unnamed driver and its technology had failed to notice the imminent danger just before the accident occurred, though it did not explain how it came to that conclusion or what kind of investigation it had carried out.

However, the first known death involving a car that was under its own control at the time of an accident will shine a new spotlight on tech and automobile companies as they urge regulators to allow fully autonomous vehicles on to the roads. It will also raise questions about the way in which Tesla chose to introduce the technology, particularly given some criticism in the industry that it made excessive claims for the current state of driverless technology.

It describes the technology as being in a “beta phase”, or a late-stage test, a fact that it said drivers have to acknowledge explicitly before they can use it.

With Autopilot engaged, Tesla cars can accelerate, brake and steer themselves. Elon Musk, chief executive, once bragged that a car could almost drive itself from San Francisco to Seattle “without touching the controls at all”.

Tesla said the accident happened on a divided highway when a tractor trailer, or articulated lorry, drove across the highway “perpendicular to” the car. It added: “Neither Autopilot nor the driver noticed the white side of the tractor trailer against a brightly lit sky, so the brake was not applied.” The car then went under the trailer, “with the bottom of the trailer impacting the windshield”.

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Tesla

Since a software update to its Model S cars released last October, drivers have been able to hand over control of their cars while on a highway. When they make the switch they are warned to keep their hands on the steering wheel and “be prepared to take over at any time”. Tesla also said its technology makes “frequent checks” that drivers are still holding the steering wheel and warns them if they are not, though it did not say how often this happens.

The Autopilot feature attracted notoriety after some Model S drivers posted videos on YouTube showing themselves taking their hands off the wheel.

The accident was “inevitable based on the documented abuses of driver-assist technology we’ve been seeing on sites like YouTube”, said Karl Brauer, a senior analyst at Kelley Blue Book, a US automotive research firm. “This will

be a big hit to Tesla's reputation because the automaker has been seen as a leader in both passenger safety and advanced technology."

Tesla said the fatality was the first in the 130m miles that its vehicles have been driven under the power of Autopilot, compared to an average rate of one fatality for every 94m miles driven by conventional cars on US roads.

Its release of the technology by way of a software update to its Model S sedans last year has made it by far the most ambitious use of driverless car technology to date. Some 70,000 of its cars are capable of using the Autopilot technology, though Tesla has not said how many drivers use it. Google's fully autonomous cars, by contrast, have driven 1.6m miles, and have been involved in only minor accidents.

"Autopilot is getting better all the time, but it is not perfect and still requires the driver to remain alert," Tesla said. "Nonetheless, when used in conjunction with driver oversight, the data is unequivocal that Autopilot reduces driver workload and results in a statistically significant improvement in safety when compared to purely manual driving."



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