

Making a point

US activists stopping robo-taxis in their tracks ... with cones

Kari Paul
San Francisco

It's a typical Wednesday night in San Francisco, a wet fog coating the street-lit pavements of the Lower Haight neighbourhood. In the shadows of Duboce Park, eight activists have gathered. Their mission: to disable as many self-driving cars on the streets of the city as possible. Their weapon of choice? A simple traffic cone, taken from roads and construction sites.

The meet-up has been coordinated by the anti-car group Safe Street Rebel, which in recent months has waged a war on the robo-taxis that have dotted San Francisco's streets since last year. The group's actions have been the subject of news reports, and videos of their efforts have gone viral.

The origins of the group's tactics are murky, but at some point it was discovered that placing a cone on the bonnet of a self-driving car puts it into panic mode, shutting down the \$50,000 (£38,000) vehicle until a human employee can come in person to get it unstuck.

Safe Street Rebel's complaints about self-driving cars are numerous. The group has long campaigned for San Francisco to be less dominated by cars, promoting public transport. It argues state funding should be focused on public transport, rather than on encouraging the use of personal vehicles, even self-driving ones. And it says that their widespread use poses a significant surveillance risk, as companies have already been hit with a number of law enforcement requests for footage collected by the cars' cameras.

The group has intensified its efforts in the run-up to vote on 10 August by the California public utilities commission on whether to allow driverless car companies such as Cruise and Waymo to expand their limited operations.

"We represent an extreme pole of the conversation that is strongly anti-car," said one activist. "I am not delusional, I know the city is not likely to ban robot cars. But what we are trying to do is move the needle in opposition to these vehicles. And it's working."

The city says it is seeking to address some of the growing concern about the autonomous vehicle firms before the vote.

Opponents say the companies have shown a lack of transparency, releasing sparing safety reports but



▲ The Safe Street Rebel group want the city authorities to focus on public transport PHOTOGRAPH: JOSH EDELSON/AFP/GETTY

no comprehensive data. "If this is a service for the public, the public should have data and be able to audit it," said one activist.

Coning is a lot like fishing, it turns out. The activists wait around, chatting, watching cars drive around the park, scanning for one with the giveaway 360-degree sensor on its roof. Finally, a whirring Cruise car turns the corner. There is nobody inside. "Go, go go!" someone yells. An activist leaps in front of the vehicle, which automatically slams on its brakes to avoid impact. A cone is gently placed, and the car is now disabled, flashers on, inert on the street.

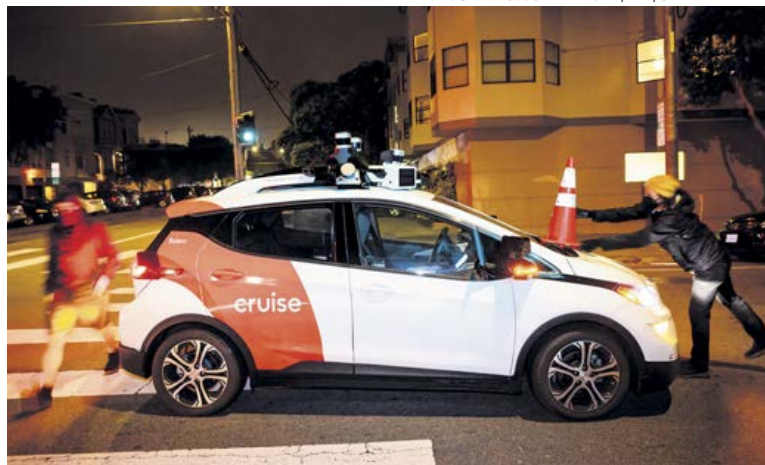
A human-driven car stops behind it and honks, the driver trying to get the vehicle to move out of his way. "Keep honking, it's empty!" one activist laughs.

The companies behind autonomous vehicles are not so amused. Google-owned Waymo has threatened to call the police on "anyone caught interfering with their fleet", saying coning is "vandalism and encourages unsafe and disrespectful behaviour", according to a previous statement. The company did not respond to additional requests for comment.

Cruise, controlled by General Motors, has also condemned the activists. Drew Pusateri, a spokesperson, said: "Cruise's fleet

▼ The protesters in action: they have discovered that placing a cone on a driverless car disables it

PHOTOGRAPH: JOSH EDELSON/AFP/GETTY



In brief

Greece

Boat sinking: inquiry held into border agency

The EU watchdog has launched an investigation into the role of the European border and coastguard agency in Mediterranean search and rescue operations after at least 500 people drowned off the coast of Greece last month when their boat capsized.

Emily O'Reilly, the European ombudsman, has opened the inquiry on her own initiative amid continuing conflicting reports about what some have described as a preventable tragedy.

O'Reilly has asked to inspect a wide range of Frontex documents, including the serious incident report relating to 14 June, when the *Adriana* sank off the coast of Messenia. **Lisa O'Carroll** Brussels

United States

Drug dealer jailed over actor's overdose death

A 72-year-old man linked to a group of drug dealers blamed in the heroin-related death of the Hollywood actor Michael K Williams (below) has been sentenced to 30 months in prison. Carlos Macchi had pleaded guilty to conspiring to possess and distribute narcotics.

Williams - who was known for his role in *The Wire* and also starred in films and other TV series including *Boardwalk Empire* - overdosed on heroin laced with fentanyl in his Brooklyn apartment in September 2021. He was 54. **Guardian staff and agencies**



Israel

Ancient artefacts finally to be returned by Trump

The former US president Donald Trump is to return a collection of Israel's ancient artefacts sent to the US for a Hanukkah event at the White House in 2019 but held at his Mar-a-Lago estate since December 2021, says the *New York Times*.

The artefacts, which include ancient coins and ceramic oil lamps, arrived at Mar-a-Lago after a Republican donor, Saul Fox, gave them to Trump at the Hanukkah party in 2021. The items had been entrusted to Fox after the Covid pandemic delayed Israel's retrieval of the items. **Michael Sainato**

'We represent an extreme pole of the conversation that is strongly anti-car'

Activist
Safe Street Rebel



Using the cones does not damage the vehicles, the campaigners say

provides free rides to late-night service workers without more reliable transportation options, has delivered over 2m meals to food-insecure San Franciscans and recovers food waste from local businesses. Intentionally obstructing vehicles gets in the way of those efforts and risks creating traffic congestion for local residents."

The activists dispute these characterisations of their actions, noting that under California law vandalism requires "damaging, destroying or defacing someone else's property". The cars are not damaged by the cones, only inconvenienced, they say.

The group says it operates with a loose set of principles: they don't target cars with passengers inside. They do not disable cars on intersections or high-speed thoroughfares where a stopped vehicle could be dangerous. Emphatically supportive of public transport, the group takes special care not to block bus stops.

It admits its tactics may need to evolve. While Cruise has said the protest "has not had a meaningful impact", the group says it has noticed cars taking different routes to avoid them. But that does not worry them. "If they move off one road, we just go to the next," one activist said. "They can't hide."