

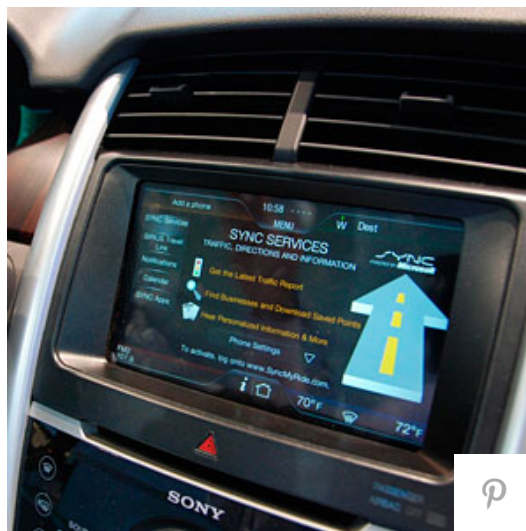
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The Coming Explosion of In-Car Infotainment Apps

Right now, the variety of in-car applications are pretty sparse: Pandora, Twitter, Google Maps. But automakers, sitting on thousands of third-party app submissions, are prepared to explode the infotainment app space.






By Larry Webster Jan 27, 2011

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In-vehicle entertainment and information systems—collectively known as infotainment—are quickly becoming as important to buyers as what's under the hood. Last year, 80 percent of new Fords had some version of Sync, and other automakers are rushing to meet the demand. But there's a

     When it comes to gadgets, we're conditioned to expect hyperevolution, not the years it takes a



Carmakers, however, are reluctant to open the doors to an uncured flood of third-party developers. In addition to the obvious security risk involved with loading a potentially malicious program, car companies are accustomed to controlling user experiences. They'll keep tight control over which apps will work with their cars, to keep out apps that might be distracting or do a poor job of complementing the driving experience. "We want to retain the customer experience we've worked to establish," said Stephan Durach, director of BMW's Palo Alto research lab, where the Mini Connected app platform was developed.

That means the apps, which either live on a smartphone or in the car or the cloud, are typically controlled by the interface already in the car's dash. Or in the case of Ford's Applink, voice commands, which will be a required feature to silence critics who are already opining that the last thing we need is more distraction in our cars. So no Angry Birds—at least for now.

In any case, we're in the incubation stage, and the available apps are already familiar stuff like Pandora and Twitter. That could change quickly. Ford says it has over 1000 third-party submissions that it's currently reviewing. GM recently announced a contest for college students to submit ideas. No one knows where this journey will lead, which is of course half the fun. In the meantime, here's a sampling of what's available now or soon will be

Mini Connected

The Basics: Car-specific apps live on an iPhone but are displayed on the car's screen and controlled by the dash knobs. The currently available apps (Pandora, Twitter, Web radio, a driving-efficiency coach and others) are available for free at Apple's iTunes Store.

Best Feature: The Twitter app reads the car's internal data and offers canned status updates like "Heading to Chicago. It's 72 degrees, the top is down and life is great!"

Availability: Currently on Minis equipped with the navigation system and will soon join BMW's lineup.

Toyota Entune

The Basics: With Entune, your Bluetooth phone is simply the gateway to car-specific apps that live in the cloud. The apps are displayed on the navigation screen and offer some voice-controlled features like





Best Feature: The Pandora mobile app uses the same familiar screen and functions as on your computer.

Availability: Coming this summer in the Prius V (a wagon version of the Prius) and in more cars later this year.

Ford Applink

The Basics: In conjunction with Ford's Sync system, the apps live on a variety of phones and connect to the car with either Bluetooth or a USB cable. Bonus: Applink does not require the car to have a pricey factory navigation system.

Best Feature: For Pandora, say "thumbs up" when you like a song.

Availability: Ford Fiesta with \$395 optional Sync, and Ford Mustang later this year.

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