Speedometer Top Speed Often Exceeds Reality

Tom Krisher, AP Auto Writer

DETROIT (AP) — The speedometer on the Toyota Yaris says the tiny car can go 140 miles per hour.

In reality, the bulbous subcompact's 106-horsepower engine and automatic transmission can't push it any faster than 109.

So why do the Yaris — and most other cars sold in the U.S. — have speedometers that show top speeds they can't possibly reach?

The answer has deep roots in an American culture that loves the rush of driving fast. The automakers' marketing departments are happy to give people the illusion that their family car can travel at speeds rivaling a NASCAR racer. And companies often use one speedometer type in various models across the world, saving them money.

But critics say the ever-higher numbers are misleading. Some warn they create a safety concern, daring drivers to push past freeway speed limits that are 65 to 75 mph in most states.

"You reach a point where it becomes ridiculous," says Larry Dominique, a former Nissan product chief who now is executive vice president of the TrueCar.com auto pricing website. "Eighty percent plus of the cars on the road are not designed for and will not go over 110 mph."

Last year, speedometer top speeds for new versions of the mainstream Ford Fusion and Chevrolet Malibu were increased from 120 or 140 mph to 160, which approaches speeds on some NASCAR tracks. The speedometer on the Honda Accord already topped out at 160. All are midsize family haulers, the most popular segment of the U.S. auto market, and like most new cars, have top speeds that seldom exceed 120 mph.

The Yaris got its 140 mph speedometer in a redesign for the 2012 model year, giving it the same top reading as the original 1953 Chevrolet Corvette sports car. Even the new Nissan Sentra compact has a 160 mph speedometer.

There are several explanations for the speedometers.

When people are comparison shopping, cars with higher speedometer readings appear to be sportier, and buyers favor them even though they have no intention of driving over 100. "People really want to see higher numbers," said Fawaz Baltaji, a business development manager for Yazaki North America, a large supplier of speedometers for auto companies. "It is indicative of a more powerful engine. There's a marketing pitch to it."

Although cars with high-horsepower engines can come close to the top speedometer speeds, most are limited by engine control computers. That's because the tires can overheat and fail at higher speeds. Tires now common on mainstream cars often can't go above 130 mph or they could fail. Many tires, especially on older models, have speed limits as low as 112. But that's still faster than most people will ever drive.

Automakers, in a push to cut costs, now sell the same cars worldwide and use the same speedometers in different cars all over the world. In China and Europe, governments require that the top number on speedometers be higher than a car's top speed. Cars sold in Europe, for instance, have faster top speeds than those sold elsewhere because they can be driven over 150 mph on sections of Germany's Autobahn. So to sell the same car or speedometer globally, the numbers have to be higher, said Kurt Tesnow, who's in charge of speedometer and instrument clusters for General Motors.

Also, some mainstream cars have some souped-up cousins that go faster and need higher speedometer numbers. A Chevy Malibu with a 2-liter turbocharged engine, for instance, can go 155 mph, far higher than the mainstream version. The little Toyota Yaris gets its speedometer from another Toyota model that's sold in other countries. "It's not that each speedometer is designed for that specific vehicle," said Greg Thome, a company spokesman.

Lastly, research has found that most people like the needle to hit highway speeds at the top of the speedometer's circle, said Yazaki's Baltaji. So the common freeway cruising speed of 70 to 80 mph is right in the middle on a 160 mph speedometer, he said.

The rising speedometer numbers aren't surprising to Joan Claybrook, the top federal auto safety regulator under President Jimmy Carter. She's been fighting the escalation for years and says it encourages drivers — especially younger ones — to drive too fast. During her tenure, she briefly got speedometer numbers lowered.

"They think that speed sells," she said of automakers. "People buy these cars because they want to go fast."

Some drivers at dealerships Tuesday conceded that marketing the higher speeds could have worked on them — at least when they were younger.

Paul Lampinen, 36, Ann Arbor, Mich., said he bought a Ram Pickup with a V-8 engine because he likes a powerful truck. The higher speedometer numbers could have influenced him when he was in his 20s, but they wouldn't work now, he said. "I don't want to pay any tickets," he said while getting his truck serviced at a Chrysler dealer in nearby Saline, Mich.

For years, most speedometers topped out at 120 — even though that was 50 mph over the limit in most states. Then, in 1980, Claybrook, who ran the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, limited speedometers to 85 mph, even

though cars could go much faster.

The move, designed to end the temptation to push cars to their limits, drew outrage from gearheads nationwide. Some automakers got around the rule by ending the numbers at 85 but leaving lines beyond that to show higher speeds. The government also forced automakers to highlight 55 mph, which at the time was the fuel-saving national speed limit.

The limit was short-lived, overturned two years later by President Ronald Reagan, who campaigned on a pledge to end onerous government regulations. Cars with 85 mph speedometers lingered for several years until they were redesigned and the maximum speeds for most returned to 120.

By the 2000s, however, the speedometer speeds crept higher. Even compact cars showed 130 or 140 mph. The 2014 Chevrolet Corvette speedometer and some Jaguar models now peak at 200.

Claybrook concedes there's no data to show the 85 mph limit saved lives, but she believes it did. She called the ever-higher speedometer numbers immoral.

At present, the government has no plans to reinstate speedometer limits or regulate top speeds, saying there's no evidence to show it would prevent crashes. "Ultimately, drivers are subject to speed limits mandated by the states regardless of the top speed listed on a vehicle speedometer," NHTSA spokeswoman Lynda Tran said.

But Claybrook isn't satisfied. "To have a car register any more than the maximum speed limit is really a statement by the company: Drive faster. It's OK," she said. "It's encouraging people to violate the law."

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