Acronym grammar

I was driving along the highway and I passed a sign that said “Be Alert for D.U.I. Drivers.” I thought it was peculiar that “DUI” (with or without periods between the letters) means “driving under the influence,” but that it was also being used as an adjective to describe what type of driver I should be alert for on the road... So really the sign was warning me, literally, about “driving under the influence drivers.” What a horrible combination of words.

Really, though, there isn’t a way to rephrase it that works much better. I think that in our culture we learn certain acronyms as actual words, like DUI. Once these acronyms are used as other parts of speech—other parts of speech that do not necessarily comprise the acronym, that is—they don’t belong to the words that compose them anymore.

Acronyms become words that they are not. If an acronym is created out of need for convenience, the creative uses that follow must also be born out of need (for maintaining simplicity, perhaps). So if I say, “Bob got a DUI” and am literally saying, “Bob got a driving under the influence,” I don’t mean it that way. I mean what DUI represents as an acronym, not the words that comprise it—in this case, I mean that Bob was charged with driving under the influence. There are implicit facts involved in this usage that further complicate things. Bob was most likely charged by the police, but even though the law is never mentioned it is understood merely by the use of “DUI.”

The strange uses of acronyms as words pervades even further, though.
How about when someone says “DUIing”? (Literally: “driving under the influence-ing.”) Or “DUled”? (“Driving under the influenced.”) While these uses depend on the context of their use to make sense, the listener still most likely knows what is being said. (And it has to be a listener because goodness knows that seeing this written out is just strange...) It’s puzzling how we process these linguistic monstrosities. For “DUIing,” the “ing” doesn’t actually need to be there because “driving” already covers the need for the gerund or participial phrase in whatever context it’s used. For “DUled,” I’m astonished—with the irregular verbs in English, “driving” should become “drove,” if we’re speaking in past tense. But for the acronym, “ed” works fine for the verbal because we’re not worried about the words that make up “DUI,” we’re worried about the act of previously committing a DUI, as in “She DUled.”

What I find truly amazing about this phenomenon is that some people today seem to think that this is an invention by the younger generations. There’s a lot of talk about how students’ writing is influenced by their “internet speak” and how it’s killing grammar, etc. But the LOLs and OMGs of today are the DUs, ATMs, RBIs, FMs, AMs, GUIs, CGIs, DNAs, and TVs of yesterday...