Title

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Author

Polovin, Marta

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Marta Polovin

This research highlight focuses on how media and popular discourse factor into traffic safety perspectives and outcomes.

Pedestrian & bicyclist-involved crashes have been increasing throughout the United States. Previous research has shown that media and popular discourse disproportionately blames pedestrians and cyclists for their own injuries and/or deaths, while obscuring the role of motorists in these crashes and ignoring the broader road safety context (like infrastructure and speed limits). Recent research highlights how media framing of these crashes can affect perceptions of cause, influencing public opinion about responsibility and consequences, and demonstrates the need for comprehensive and objective coverage of pedestrian and bicyclist crashes.

Overview of the Issue

Traffic crashes are one of the leading causes of preventable death and injury in the United States and California. In recent years, pedestrian and bicyclist-involved collisions have risen at alarming rates (NHTSA, 2019). Pedestrians and bicyclists are widely recognized to be disproportionately vulnerable to serious injury and death, while also susceptible to victim-blaming and out-sized responsibility for crashes in mainstream media (Magusin, 2017). Given this critical context, researchers have focused greater attention on the role of media framing and language in reporting pedestrian and bicyclist-involved collisions. Goddard et al. write that, "Imbalanced editorial and linguistic patterns," can contribute to "victim-blaming and distracting from systemic issues and solutions"(Goddard et al., 2019). The language we use to describe crashes can have a serious impact on our collective responsibility to enact safe systems, where all road users are protected.

A Historical Example of Media Influence On Traffic Safety

In the beginning of the twentieth century, with the rapid and widespread introduction and growth of the automobile industry, there were deep concerns about the safety impacts of cars, particularly from pedestrians (Norton, 2007). Streets were equally shared by people walking and taking carriages when automobiles first entered the picture. The term "jaywalking" was consequently introduced by automobile lobbyists in the early 1910s to counter efforts aimed at removing or slowing cars on the street. A "jaywalker" was someone who did not know how to properly walk in the city, who essentially was "in the way" of automobile traffic (Norton, 2007). As a result of media campaigning, the term became so widespread that it eventually was adopted into mainstream media, laws and customs. This historical anecdote highlights how terminology can tangibly shift public opinion and response. Today, vehicles are the primary mode of transportation in the United States and "jaywalking" is used to broadly describe crossing or walking on the street or road unlawfully, often blurring underlying infrastructural issues such as access to street crossings and poor sidewalk conditions.

Editorial Patterns & Framing

Media research studies have shown that the way events are covered and how language is used may have a profound impact on public perception (Goddard et al., 2019). One prominent example is the use of the word "accident" instead of "crash" or "collision." There is widespread agreement, from governmental agencies to advocates, that the use of "accident" downplays the preventable nature of these incidents and implies that traffic collisions are inevitable occurrences, just a given cost of modern transportation. Ralph et al. 2019 found that the use of "accident" still remains widespread, with nearly fifty

percent of news articles utilizing the term to describe pedestrian and bicyclist-involved crashes. In addition to word choice, there are other tactics that can exacerbate differences in reporting for pedestrian and bicyclist-involved crashes. Goddard et al. identified four key categories of editorial framing:

Non-Agentive v. Agentive
- When certain subjects are the main "focus point," usually victims
- Example: "A bicyclist was hit and injured" versus "A driver entered a bike lane and injured a bicyclist"

Object-based v. Person-Based
- Assigns agency to inanimate objects, rather than the person controlling the object
- Example: "A car got on the curb" versus "A driver drove over the curb"

Counterfactual Statements
- Provides additional details that can focus attention solely on the role/decision-making of the victim
- Example: "The pedestrian was wearing dark clothing"
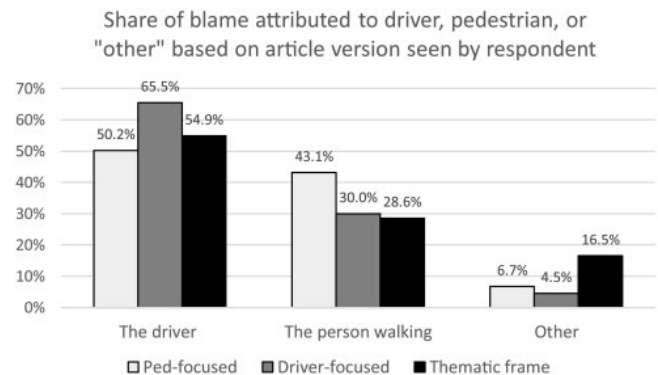
Episodic v. Thematic
- When a crash is treated like an isolated incident versus the symptom of a larger problem
- Example of thematic reporting: "This is the tenth fatal collision this year to happen at this intersection"

These categories highlight how editorial patterns can be overly focused on the actions of individuals, particularly on pedestrians and bicyclists, rather than the infrastructure and/or policies that could address safety from a safe systems perspective (Magusin, 2017; Goddard et al., 2019).

How Framing Affects Opinions
Current research has shown the disparities that exist between how pedestrians and bicyclists are portrayed in the media. The Goddard et al. study demonstrated that there is a clear connection between perceived blame and reporting style. In an experiment where subjects read media reports regarding a hypothetical pedestrian-involved crash, people who read an article that acknowledged the role of infrastructure and

policy in preventing crashes were significantly more likely to support broader changes that promote the safety of all road users (Goddard et al., 2019).

Share of blame attributed to driver, pedestrian, or "other" based on article version seen by respondent

Note: Thematic-frame means article discussed broader infrastructural and policy solutions.

Conclusion
Works cited in this brief highlight efforts to address the disparities in media coverage of pedestrian and bicyclist-involved collisions. The way language is used to frame pedestrian and bicyclist-involved crashes is related to how we determine the appropriate interventions. Safe systems, through innovative infrastructure design and equitable policy implementation, can prevent the vast majority of serious injuries and deaths. By using appropriate and more exact language and framing, we can better acknowledge and act on our collective responsibility to enact safe systems to prevent all serious injuries and deaths.

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