Editorial Patterns in Bicyclist and Pedestrian Crash Reporting

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Motivation

Around one fifth of the 37,000 annual traffic deaths in the United States are bicyclists or pedestrians. Despite this figure, there is little public outcry about these vulnerable road user (VRU) deaths.

Media coverage has been shown to shape public perceptions in other fields, primarily by signaling which topics merit attention (agenda-setting) and by influencing how those issues are interpreted (framing).

This study examines how local news outlets report car crashes involving pedestrians and bicyclists.

Methods

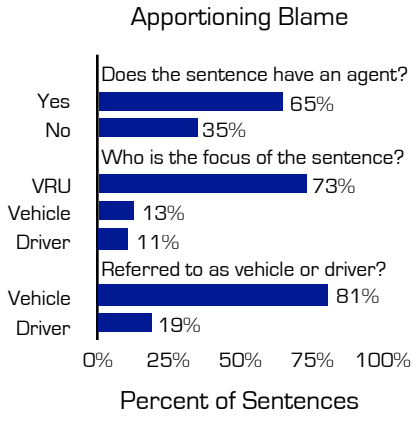
We used a web scraping tool to source 200 news articles from a news aggregator over a two month period in early 2018: 100 articles involving bicyclists and 100 involving pedestrians.

We then used content and linguistic analysis to examine how the information included in the articles as well as linguistic choices:

a) assign blame between drivers and VRUs, and
b) frame these injuries and deaths as a public health issue.

How do Articles Apportion Blame?

The first measure of blame we investigated was agency, which asks whether a sentence describing a crash includes a responsible party. Only 65% of sentences identified the agent who hit the VRU. 35% of the time, the crash "just happened". When an agent was identified, it was almost always the car, not the driver (81% v. 19%).



Next, we investigated focus, which tracks which party is emphasized in sentences that describe a crash. The focus of the sentence typically receives the most blame. 73% of the sentences focused on the VRU. Far fewer focused on the driver (11%) or the vehicle (13%).

Finally, we looked for the presence of counterfactuals. These statements imply that the VRU would not have been hit if they had acted differently, for example stating that the victim was wearing dark clothing or crossing outside a crosswalk. 48% of articles contained at least one counterfactual, the presence of which has been shown to shift blame toward the victim.

Language and Perception

Agency

Inclusion or exclusion of an agent affects perception of blame. Sentences with agents make the actions of the perpetrator clear and reduce victim blaming.

Witnesses tell police the victim was struck.
vs.
Witnesses tell police the victim was struck by a driver.

Reference

Referring to a vehicle instead of a driver neutralizes blame.

A bicyclist suffered major injuries when she was hit by a driver.
vs.
A bicyclist suffered major injuries when she was hit by a car.

Focus

Focus asks who (or what) is the center of attention. The focus of the sentence tends to be seen as more blameworthy.

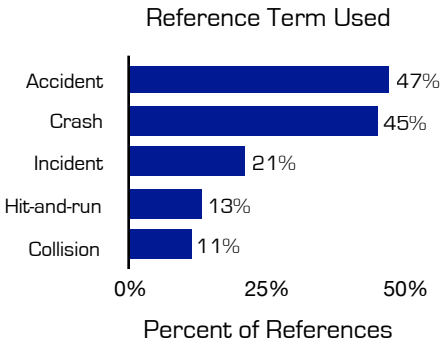
One of the riders was hit by a vehicle that was turning left.
vs.
A vehicle that was turning left hit one of the riders.

Do Articles Use Public Health Framing?

Using public health framing helps construe VRU crashes as a systematic and solvable problem. We first looked at how articles were framed overall: *Factual* framing treats crashes as isolated incidents, whereas *thematic* framing connects the dots between crashes. Readers who encounter thematic framing are more likely to call for action to address an issue. Just 6% of articles used a predominantly thematic frame. Some articles included thematic elements: 8% reported the number of crashes in the area and 7% described road design.

None of the 200 articles included comments from planners, engineers, or road safety experts.

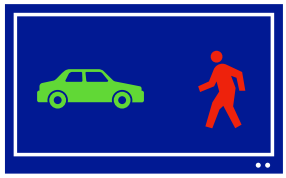
We also recorded the terms used to describe crashes. Referring to a crash as an "accident" obscures the preventable nature of collisions and is no longer recommended. Nevertheless, 47% of the articles referred to crashes as accidents.



Key Takeaways

Through grammatical choices and by selectively including some bits of information but not others, local news coverage subtly, but consistently, blames vulnerable road users for crashes. For example, stating that a victim was outside a crosswalk but omitting that the nearest crosswalk was over half a mile away paints the victim as negligent.

Further, news coverage misconstrues the nature of the problem. Rather than addressing commonalities between crashes, coverage almost always treats crashes as isolated incidents, obscuring systematic solutions.



Local news coverage subtly, but consistently blames vulnerable road users for crashes.

Media treat crashes as isolated incidents, and not as a systemic issue.

These issues obscure potential solutions to curb VRU deaths.

These patterns are not deliberately intended to blame VRUs, but have the effect of distorting the nature of the problem. Individualistic portrayal makes helpful solutions like road design changes less apparent as viable options.

Guidance for Journalists

To address these issues, we first suggest journalists be aware of the relationship between grammatical choices and perceived blame. As a test, try replacing the word “car” with the word “hammer” when describing a crash. “A person was hit by a hammer” sounds strange, as someone must have been holding it. “Hit by a car” similarly obscures agency.

Next, journalists should use public health framing when describing crashes. Linking each instance to the epidemic of VRU deaths will help bring about meaningful solutions. Finally, we advise journalists to include elements that humanize VRU crash victims when possible.

Guidance for Planners

Planners and other professionals should not assume that journalists have resources to seek their expertise. Instead, they should proactively make themselves available. To that end, planners should consider preparing a statement in advance for the eventuality that a VRU crash takes place in which they contextualize the event in the broader epidemic of VRU crashes. We encourage planners to consider the following example, and welcome them to copy it verbatim if they desire:

While I am unfamiliar with the details of this specific crash, I can say that this is not an isolated incident. Today’s crash is just the most recent in an epidemic of crashes that claim the lives of thousands of Americans each year. To meaningfully reduce traffic fatalities, we need to address the common denominator: road design. The U.S. road network tends to prioritize vehicle speed and flow at the expense of all other road users. We can save lives, like the life of [victim’s name], by making common-sense changes to our road network.

Finally, in the longer term, we encourage planners to continue to advocate for road design changes that reduce auto speeds in the presence of VRUs, provide physical protection for VRUs, and encourage safe travel behavior. These might include reduced speed limits, traffic calming measures, raised crosswalks, and protected bicycle lanes, to name just a few. Better coverage, more professional voices, and the resulting improvement in public perception of VRU crashes can work to bring about these changes and make VRUs less vulnerable.

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