Reframing Crash Reporting in News Media: A How-to Guide for Road Safety Professionals

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Research to Practice Bytes
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Background and introduction

- 40,000+ people die annually in traffic crashes in the US and are a leading cause of death for young people.

- Road trauma has not been prioritized by the public or by policymakers as a serious public health problem.

- News coverage can help address this lack of urgency and increase interest in finding effective solutions

Source: USDOT

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The role of framing

- **Framing** - focusing attention on certain events over others, thus placing stories within a field of meaning.
- Media frames guide the audience in discerning which story details are most pertinent, such as who is involved, how they were involved, and who may be responsible for a traffic crash (*Ralph, Goddard, Thigpen, and Iacobucci, 2019*) .
- "Episodic" vs. "thematic" frames

Source: cjr.org/analysis/when-covering-car-crashes-be-careful-not-to-blame-the-victim.php

Phase I: Analyze media framing of road injuries and develop guidance for professionals

Purpose

Explore road injury narratives through an analysis of popular televised news and develop a Framing Guide for road safety and public health professionals.

Methods

Analysed 1,156 Facebook posts from the top two most viewed TV broadcast news stations across 18 population size- and geographic region-matched core-based statistical areas (CBSAs) and Vision Zero vs. non-Vision Zero (by 2019).

Phase I Results

- 33% of posts focused attention on travel delay.

- 12% of posts featured a victim narrative.

- 8% had a thematic frame.

- <1% attributed the cause of the crash to lighting or roadway design.

- Vision Zero communities: less likely to focus on people walking, bicycling, or on a motorcycle; 2.5x more likely to quote an elected official.

Source: pedbikeimages.org, Dan Burden

Phase II: Update the Guide with stakeholder feedback

Purpose

Update and supplement the content of the Media Framing Guide for road safety and public health professionals with input from stakeholder groups.

Methods

Conduct two focus groups: one focus group with media professionals reporting on traffic crashes and one focus group with transportation and public health professionals working in the field of road safety.

Phase II Results

- There are several practical barriers to direct communication between the two sectors including:
  - Time constraints
  - Lack of knowledge for who to contact
  - High turnover among beat reporters that frequently report crashes
  - Designated communications spokespeople at municipal offices (e.g., PIO)
  - Past negative experiences
- Language in the Guide was complex
- Road safety/public health professionals could benefit from "boiler plate" language examples in the Guide

Study implications

1. Reporting commonly uses traffic delay framing and lacks contextual information.

2. Transportation and public health professionals need to get involved in reshaping crash narratives.

3. Transportation and public health professionals need a straightforward framework and guidance for effective communication with journalists.
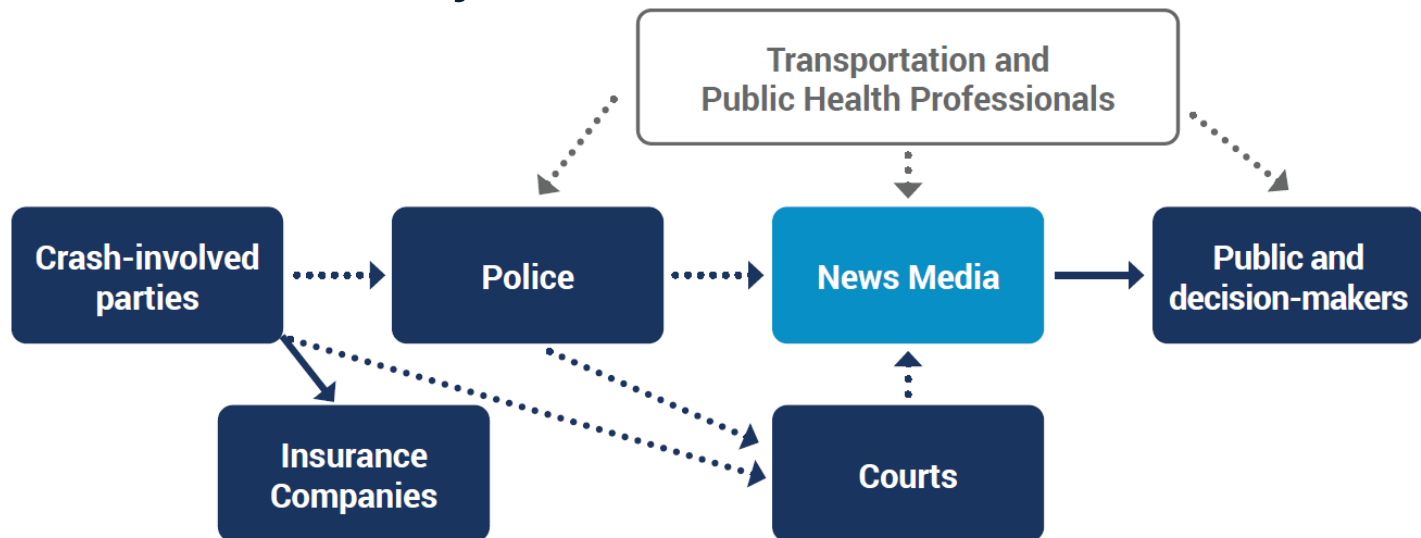
Deliverable: Media framing guidance

Available at: https://www.roadsafety.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/CSCRS_FGuide_v2.pdf

Reframing crash reporting in news media

1. Choose your target message that reinforces the Safe System approach (e.g., risk of speed, separating users in space and time, vehicle design).

Examples of messages aligned with a Safe Systems approach

- Crashes are preventable
- Speed (not just speeding) is an important factor in the risk of injury/fatality in a crash
- Humans make mistakes and the consequence of those mistakes should not be death
- Protecting human life is the top priority
- Humans are vulnerable to the energy transmitted in crashes

- Separating vulnerable road users from fast, large vehicles in space (e.g., protected bike lanes) and time (e.g., leading pedestrian intervals) saves lives
- Providing safer, more sustainable options for modes of transportation is key
- Vehicles can be designed in ways that make them safer (e.g., size, weight, visibility, braking systems) for everyone

Reframing crash reporting in news media

2. Appeal to people's concern for others by highlighting the human toll of such tragic events. Acknowledge the harms caused to loved ones and the larger community.

LOCAL NEWS

Family remembers 19-year-old bus crash victim as 'kind to everybody'

by: Caitrin Assaf
Posted: Jun 8, 2022 / 07:08 PM CDT
Updated: Jun 9, 2022 / 07:30 AM CDT

Reframing crash reporting in news media

3. Provide context to frame traffic injury as a broader pattern of harm. Speak to the extent of the problem and risk factors that go beyond individual responsibility.

Neighbors say road where teens killed in crash is dangerous, known for speeders

by Alexa Helwig, WKRC | Thursday, October 28th 2021

Reframing crash reporting in news media

4. Inspire "can-doism" by emphasizing that the problem is something that can be addressed, is preventable, and would benefit everyone. Highlight any local efforts to prevent serious crashes.

Traffic

Officials call to make NYC streets safer following rise in accidents

By Naveen Dhaliwal via
Friday, May 6, 2022

Example language for reframing the message

Target/ key message reinforcing Safe Systems approach	Appeal to people's concern for others	Provide context	Inspire "can-doism"
(What are contextual contributors to serious injury crashes the public should know about? What are some current projects underway?)	*(Who was involved? Who else will be affected and how?)*	*(What are the roadway characteristics that could have contributed to this crash? What trends are there in this area/ similar areas?)*	*(What plans/initiatives/projects are underway to address road safety? Who has the authority to make the necessary changes and what can the public do to support change?)*
Risk of speed	I can't imagine what their family is going through. This loss is a tragedy that impacts the family and friends tremendously, but it also affects our entire community.	Even if a driver is not exceeding the speed limit, vehicle speed is almost always a factor determining whether victims of a crash survive. The speed limit on that roadway is 45mph, which may be too fast, given all the people moving around that area who live there, shop there, etc.	We have been working with the [state/county] to lower speeds on that road and other similar roadways across the town. Residents concerned about the speed of that road can and should voice their concerns.
Injuries from crashes are preventable	I and my department were saddened to learn of the crash that occurred at [date] and [location]. Our thoughts go out to the family and friends of the [name of person(s)] who was/were killed/ harmed in the crash.	We wish this were an isolated incident, but the truth is, this crash is one among many that devastates the lives of thousands of people in the U.S. each year. It is clear from this crash and many others, that our country, state, and city need to do more to prevent serious crashes like these.	Know that in [municipality], we are working with [partnering agencies] to re-design our roads and introduce better policies to make our streets safer for everyone. [Provide project/program/policy examples, if available]. Please feel welcome to get in touch with me and our elected officials to discuss your concerns about safety on our roads."
Separating/ protecting vulnerable road users	I was so saddened to hear about the tragic loss of a member or our community. My family loves to ride bikes in that area of town and it's scary to think that this could happen to anyone.	People often focus on whether people on bikes involved in crashes were wearing helmets. However, depending on the type of crash, helmets may or may not protect riders when they are hit by a vehicle. The best protection for people walking or rolling, where feasible, is to keep them physically separated from vehicles with protected bike lanes and sidewalks.	This is why we have proposed to include [insert project] as a part of our [insert plan]. These are preventable deaths and we need to protect everyone in the community no matter how they get around.

Example language for reframing the message

Target/ key message reinforcing Safe Systems approach	Appeal to people's concern for others	Provide context	Inspire "can-doism"
(What are contextual contributors to serious injury crashes the public should know about? What are some current projects underway?)	(Who was involved? Who else will be affected and how?)	(What are the roadway characteristics that could have contributed to this crash? What trends are there in this area/ similar areas?)	(What plans/initiatives/projects are underway to address road safety? Who has the authority to make the necessary changes and what can the public do to support change?)
Risk of speed	I can't imagine what their family is going through. This loss is a tragedy that impacts the family and friends tremendously, but it also affects our entire community.	Even if a driver is not exceeding the speed limit, vehicle speed is almost always a factor determining whether victims of a crash survive. The speed limit on that roadway is 45mph, which may be too fast, given all the people moving around that area who live there, shop there, etc.	We have been working with the [state/county] to lower speeds on that road and other similar roadways across the town. Residents concerned about the speed of that road can and should voice their concerns.

Be proactive

1. **Be a resource.** Work with your public information officer, communications team, or journalists directly to let them know about your willingness to speak on the issue of traffic injury.

2. **Create your own content.** Anticipate events (e.g., the World Day of Remembrance for Road Traffic Victims), large infrastructure projects, holiday travel, etc. to share information with the public. Pitch stories to local news outlets, write press releases, use social media, or even record a video statement.* See **Sidebar 3** for examples of opportunities to engage with media.

3. **Develop a plan.** Add a communications agenda item to your regularly scheduled meetings. Identify any relevant messages your team would like to communicate to the public and decide what to do and who is responsible. Have a set procedure, so the right person knows who to contact and what to say right after an event.

Tip: Some local departments (police departments, e.g.) have active Twitter accounts. Consider retweeting stories with added context using the 4-frame approach.

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Communication tips

- **Keep it simple.** Decide what your central message should be that you want the public to understand and care about. Ideally, this message will align with one of the principles of the Safe Systems approach (See page 9 for examples of Safe Systems messages).

- **Acknowledge that you may not be able to speak to the specifics of a particular crash.** Your perceptive is on the "big picture." You are probably most familiar with what the local problem areas are, factors that make crashes more likely to happen or more severe, strategies to prevent serious crashes, etc. Speak to these broader patterns of traffic injury in your community.

- **Confront bias, when possible.** Previously, this Guide noted subtle ways that journalists, law enforcement, and others sometimes blame crash victims—even without meaning to. Address this directly by noting factors that are more important than individual choices or attributes of the victim (e.g., lighting and crosswalks instead of a pedestrian's dark clothing).

    Try: The lighting at that crosswalk may need attention. Regardless of what someone is wearing, we have to make sure that drivers can see people walking who need to cross the street.

- **Check yourself to avoid being defensive.** Traffic injury is a complex problem and it will take everyone working together to create meaningful change. First, practice active listening—acknowledge the concerns residents raise and assume best intentions. Then, you can point to the need and current efforts for a coordinated "all hands" approach.

    Instead of: Well, it would be great if we could put a crosswalk there, but...

    Try: I understand that the community is concerned about the safety of that intersection, and wants to feel safe walking/biking there. One thing we are working on is...We need the community to...

Reframing crash reporting in news media

Transportation and public health professionals have an important role to play in building public support for addressing road injuries and deaths as a preventable public health crisis. Use the following strategies to change the narrative:

How to reframe the message

1. Choose your target message that reinforces the Safe Systems approach (e.g., risk of speed, separating users in space and time, vehicle design).

2. Appeal to people's concern for others by highlighting the human toll of such tragic events. Acknowledge the harms caused to loved ones and the larger community.

3. Provide context to frame traffic injury as a broader pattern of harm. Speak to the extent of the problem and risk factors that go beyond individual responsibility.

4. Inspire "can-doism" by emphasizing that the problem is something that can be addressed, is preventable, and would benefit everyone. Highlight any local efforts to prevent serious crashes.

How to engage with news media and the public

Be a resource. Notify your communications team or local journalists that you're willing to speak on traffic injury.

Create your own content. Anticipate events, large projects, holiday travel, etc. to share info with the public. Pitch stories, write press releases, and use social media to build support for addressing the problem.

Make a plan. Add a communications agenda item to regular meetings. Identify relevant messages and have a procedure for what will be done and who will be responsible.

Summary

- Though the tools exist to realize a future with significantly fewer deaths and injuries on our roads (*Vision Zero Network, 2021*) without a sizable proportion (~25%) of the public seeing road trauma as a pressing public health problem, the U.S. is unlikely to witness significant and lasting reductions in traffic injury.

- **What our culture needs is a new story,** one told by people reflective of the U.S. population about those involved in serious crashes, how such crashes occur in some places more often than in others, and how we can improve road user safety, which benefits everyone.

Thank you
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Collaborative Sciences Center for ROAD SAFETY

Peer Influence and the Perceptions of Safety

Presented by Aqshems Nichols
Graduate Student Researcher at the UC-Berkeley Safe
Transportation Research and Education Center

February 22, 2023

Next webinar

February 22

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Presented by Aqshems Nichols, Graduate Student Researcher at the UC-Berkeley Safe Transportation Research and Education Center

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