ETHICS IN (ROAD SAFETY) JOURNALISM: HOW CRASH REPORTING CONTROLS THE NARRATIVE

Dr. Tara Goddard
Texas A&M University
Department of Landscape Architecture and Urban Planning
Velo-city 2019
Motivation:
Traffic Crashes -- The US Numbers

In 2017:

• Pedestrians:
  – 5,977 killed (more than 16 per day)
  – 7,950 killed when driveways/parking lots included
  – 65,000 injured* (one injury every 8 minutes)

• Bicyclists:
  – 783 people killed (>2 per day)
  – 53 children under the age of 14 killed while bicycling
  – 50,000 injured* (one injury every 10.5 minutes)

*Known to be underreported in police data


Ralph, Iacobucci, Thigpen, & Goddard 2019
Motivation: Perception of danger

Ralph, Iacobucci, Thigpen, & Goddard 2019
The Role of the Media

Field of media studies suggests that media coverage:
– helps determine which issues merit attention
– shapes how issues get framed

Bicyclist critically injured in crash with open car door in Arlington Heights

Officials ID bicyclist killed in crash

Officials have identified a cyclist killed in a Thursday crash as 69-year-old Filip Sevin of Macomb Township.

Sevin was southbound on M-19 just south of Old Emmett Road in Emmett Township when he was struck by a pickup about 3:40 p.m., according to the St. Clair County Sheriff Department.

The driver of the truck remained on scene and has been identified as a 73-year-old Sandusky man.

Sevin's obituary describes him as an "avid sports fan, a bicycling enthusiast and enjoyed swimming."

No arrests were made at the scene and the crash remains under investigation.

Ralph, Iacobucci, Thigpen, & Goddard 2019
Research Questions

How does the media portray and represent bicyclist and pedestrian crashes?

– What are the implications?
– How can we help reporters do better?

Ralph, Iacobucci, Thigpen, & Goddard 2019
Our Study

We examined local news coverage of vehicle crashes involving someone walking or biking.

Measurable Questions:
1. How do articles apportion blame between Vulnerable Road Users (VRUs) and drivers?
2. How often do articles frame crashes as a public health issue?
3. How often do articles humanize—or dehumanize—victims?
'He died doing what he loved' | Loved ones remember Austin bicyclist/writer killed in crash

Two people were sent to the hospital after a bicycle and vehicle crashed.

Author: Shelby Kimball, Paul Livengood, Pattrik Perez
Published: 6:56 PM CST February 18, 2018
Updated: 7:11 PM CST February 18, 2018

Friends and family are mourning the death of a beloved Austin cyclist and writer.

Andrew Tilin, 52, died Saturday, after a driver hit him while he was changing a flat tire on his bike.

The crash happened about 9:14 a.m. near Marshall Ford Road and North FM 620, according to the Texas Department of Public Safety.
### Methods – Coding for Blame Attribution

#### Sentence Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Agentive</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Obj/Pers: Auto</th>
<th>Obj/Pers: VRU</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Agentive</td>
<td>Auto</td>
<td>Object</td>
<td>Object</td>
<td>A car struck a bike.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Agentive</td>
<td>Auto</td>
<td>Person</td>
<td>Object</td>
<td>A driver struck a bike.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Agentive</td>
<td>Auto</td>
<td>Object</td>
<td>Person</td>
<td>A car struck a bicyclist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Agentive</td>
<td>Auto</td>
<td>Person</td>
<td>Person</td>
<td>A driver struck a bicyclist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Agentive</td>
<td>VRU</td>
<td>Object</td>
<td>Object</td>
<td>A bike was struck by a car.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Agentive</td>
<td>VRU</td>
<td>Person</td>
<td>Object</td>
<td>A bicyclist was struck by a car.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Agentive</td>
<td>VRU</td>
<td>Object</td>
<td>Person</td>
<td>A bike was struck by a driver.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Agentive</td>
<td>VRU</td>
<td>Person</td>
<td>Person</td>
<td>A bicyclist was struck by a driver.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Non</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Object</td>
<td>Object</td>
<td>A bike and a car collided.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Non</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Person</td>
<td>Object</td>
<td>A driver and a bike collided.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Non</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Object</td>
<td>Person</td>
<td>A car and a bicyclist collided.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Non</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Person</td>
<td>Person</td>
<td>A driver and a bicyclist collided.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Non</td>
<td>Auto</td>
<td>Object</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>A car was in a crash.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Non</td>
<td>Auto</td>
<td>Person</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>A driver was in a crash.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Non</td>
<td>VRU</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Object</td>
<td>A bike was in a crash.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Non</td>
<td>VRU</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Person</td>
<td>A bicyclist was in a crash.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Methods – Coding for Blame Attribution

## Sentence Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Agentive</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Obj/Person: Auto</th>
<th>Obj/Person: VRU</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Agentive</td>
<td>Auto</td>
<td>Person</td>
<td>Person</td>
<td>A driver struck a bicyclist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Agentive</td>
<td>VRU</td>
<td>Person</td>
<td>Object</td>
<td>A bicyclist was struck by a car.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Non</td>
<td>VRU</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Person</td>
<td>A bicyclist was in a crash.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“A bicyclist was severely injured after she was struck by a SUV on Saturday evening, sheriff’s officials said.” [Type 6; passive voice]

“Officials say a bicyclist was severely injured on Saturday evening after a SUV driver struck her.” [Type 4; passive voice]
Methods – Coding for Public Health

Framing

• Presence of the following thematic elements:
  – the number of crashes in the area
  – Vision Zero or similar programs
  – road design
  – any methods for reducing crashes

• Overall framing as either thematic or episodic.

• Information from a planner, engineer, or other expert to provide context behind a crash.
Methods – Coding for Humanizing Elements

• Measured three ways:
  – How often articles referred to VRUs as a pedestrian/bicyclist instead of as a person walking or biking.
  – How often articles included details about the victim.
  – How often articles mentioned traffic and road closures.
Results

• 35% of stories had no agent at all
• Only 13% referred to a driver instead of a car
• Over half had a counterfactual about the victim that was not necessarily relevant
Results

• 72% used the terms bicyclist or pedestrian instead of “person on a bike” or “[name] was walking”

• 24% mentioned the road closure
Discussion

• Local news coverage subtly, but consistently, blames vulnerable road users for crashes
• Coverage almost always treated crashes as isolated incidents
• Coverage tends to de-humanize victims by using “othering” language and omitting humanizing details

Ralph, Iacobucci, Thigpen, & Goddard 2019
Discussion

• Coverage often paraphrases or quotes police officers (on scene) or police press releases, so problem may be “upstream” of media

• Coverage may be updated later but damage may be done, message-wise
Suggestions for journalists

• Include humanizing elements whenever possible:
  – Victim as a “person walking/biking”, not a “pedestrian” or “bicyclist”
  – Victim’s name and a few personal details
• Awareness of grammatical choices and impacts
  – Avoid attributing blame to inanimate objects – the hammer analogy!
• Provide a public health frame to crashes
  – Contextualize the crash by providing data on the number of crashes, fatalities, and injuries
Suggestions for planners and engineers

• Expert commentary was nonexistent in our sample of articles.

• Planners and engineers can help by making their expertise readily available to journalists, but . . .
  – Media training needed to understand how reporting works and what format in which to present complex information in “small slices”
Suggestions for advocates

• Be mindful of word choices (e.g. “accident”), active voice, and agency when discussing crashes

• Get comfortable with an “elevator pitch” on why it matters

• Help journalists, planners, engineers, and policy-makers focus on the issues by using specific, accurate language
Next steps

• An experiment to test whether these experimental patterns matter
• How does it effect assignment of blame? Of punishment?
• How does it affect support for road safety programs, and what type?

Ralph, Iacobucci, Thigpen, & Goddard 2019
Thank you! Go raibh maith agaibh!


Tara Goddard
Assistant Professor
Department of Landscape Architecture and Urban Planning
@GoddardTara