

Aspects of meaning and relevance in news media coverage of motor vehicle accidents

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Overview

Day after day, rush hour after rush hour, stories of injury and death on the roadway pour forth from the local news. A mother of four, a teenage athlete, a father, a wife, an innocent child. The noble cause in which these tragic victims are engaged? A trip to the grocery store, a family vacation, a daily commute.

Reports of terror threats and other crimes generate visceral responses and increase public demand for immediate solutions. Yet, tens of thousands of vehicular tragedies go unreported, and those that are produce little impetus for change.

Why isn't the public more appalled? Why don't daily news reports fuel a national resolve to "bear any burden, pay any price" until we can all but eradicate one of the most insidious threats to personal security in our own communities?

To answer these questions, it would be wise to begin with an examination of how and why traffic safety information is collected and conveyed by professional news gatherers.

Two elements drive news coverage of any topic: the message and the messenger. In the case of traffic accidents, the relative dangers of auto mobility lurk just below the surface of both, but rarely coalesce and rise to improve the context and penetration of news reports.

In a world overwhelmed by information, how can news media messages and their stewards break through that barrier and compel us to sit up and take notice? Much depends upon a story's meaning and relevance to our own lives. Improving these qualities of communication requires a thorough knowledge of a complex arena and some means with which to reach its gatekeepers and, ultimately, penetrate its veils of objectivity.

Where we begin

Most of us get much of our information about threats to our personal security from news reports. This makes reporters and editors our partners in public safety, and vital allies in any effort to

achieve a culture of zero tolerance for traffic fatalities. Yet the role of the media in bringing the risk of death by motor vehicle into sufficient context has been under-explored by scientists and other stakeholders in traffic safety. That the public has not demanded solutions may reflect the facts that the messages we receive do not convey the totality of this reality and that people do not accurately perceive their own level of risk.

Motor-vehicle crashes cause 42,636 deaths and almost 2.8 million injuries each year (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration [NHTSA] 2006). Among people between the ages of 4 and 34, motor-vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death. They rank third in terms of the number of years of life lost (Subramanian 2006). In addition to the people who are killed and injured in these incidents, the economic costs of our failure to manage traffic safety are huge. The annual tally to our economy of vehicle crashes for 2004 was estimated to be over \$230 billion (NHTSA 2006).

The frustrating truth behind these unacceptable numbers is that vehicle accidents are a common occurrence. And, in the news business, decisions are driven by the central question: “What’s new?” How do we transform what has sunk into our consciousness as an acceptable fact of life into a new and compelling force for change? In communications terms, we stimulate a new reaction by infusing raw, unaffiliated information with context and relevance, thereby enhancing our ability to grasp its true meaning.

Imagine that two fully-loaded 747s crashed in every state every year—that’s almost ten airline crashes on U.S. soil every month—the equivalent of 43,000 deaths. How long would the American people stand for such terror and destruction? How many months would pass before politicians reached for the media microphone to announce immediate action and investigative reporters pounced on every overlooked opportunity to save lives?

If we offer a yellow or even red alert for possible terrorist attacks, can we draw similar public attention to the more pervasive threat of vehicular carnage by sharing analogous intelligence—trends, patterns and other cumulative factors—at critical incident windows, such as a typical Memorial Day weekend?

We’ve all heard the infamous statement about what makes an event most newsworthy: “If it bleeds, it leads.” Clearly, however, “size” matters in the ability to move a nation to its feet. We know how big the problem is, in terms of hard numbers. What we have yet to learn is how to deliver that basic information with a velocity that sweeps us toward a zero-tolerance safety culture.

What we do

It has long been debated whether the news media shapes public attitudes or reflects public interest. Which comes first, in terms of news judgment: the raw information or the cultural demand and context? If news editors effectively steward information, does that mean the safety community hasn’t effectively accessed the news media?

In short, we're not sure. Research linking news media and the traffic safety arena is fairly limited. But based on experience in other fields, we know that product recalls, often publicized by the news media, generally produce a desired safety response. Media reports of health findings, drug side effects and the spread of disease are significant drivers of change in individual behavior, sometimes going so far as to make or destroy markets by altering perceptions of brand or product trust and safety. And crime reports impact feelings of safety and can change behavior, even inhibiting tourism, shopping, and enjoyment of other liberties.

In one pointed example of the power of “news” to affect our perception of vulnerability, *The Washington Post* reported in an August 27, 2006 article on parental concerns about child safety that, while a little over a hundred of more than a quarter million kidnappings of children annually involve abductions by someone unknown to the child, “high-profile cases of abduction by a stranger have sowed fear, especially since cable TV and 24-hour news have made the details easier to disseminate.” The article went on to say that one expert “calls such fears an example of ‘moral panic’—a collective fear fueled by the mass media until it becomes self-perpetuating.” The article details extreme measures routinely adopted by today’s parents to monitor their children’s playtime activities and severely restrict their movement in the face of a perceived threat of strangers in their midst.

Clearly, context, relevancy, and meaning are a continuing challenge in the delivery of public safety information. Because the dangers of roadway mobility are far more clear and present than many other types of threats, why haven’t news reports of vehicular death and injury inspired more “collective fear” or, better yet, collective action?

To find out, we must gain a deeper understanding of what drives traffic safety news. We can begin by examining recent research findings that relate to media coverage of vehicle crashes. From there we can start to fill in the information gaps, building an avenue of research through which to more thoroughly quantify and analyze the information news media routinely provide. With that data in hand, we can explore with news professionals the realities behind the reports—the factors that govern the tone, type, and volume of news coverage devoted to traffic safety. Such feedback will not only help the safety community hone its delivery. It should clarify what could be done within the bounds of journalistic integrity to lower the societal “pain threshold” and engender a more realistic response to our level of vulnerability.

The objective of this paper is to describe a process through which we can gain these insights and help fuel a mobile nation’s mindset for safety.

What we know

Much has been said about the role of “the media” in influencing public opinion. If we want to find out how to pierce the veil of resistance to the down-home facts about roadway safety, however, we need to concentrate, not on the media at large, but on that primary group of information “first responders,” the *news* media.

Understanding how the news media report traffic crashes can contribute to a greater understanding the role it plays in reducing risks for drivers. Although research in this area is limited, Connor and Wesolowski (2004) provide an interesting snapshot of newspaper reporting

on fatal motor vehicle crashes in four Midwestern cities. Their findings, described below, shed light on the amount of media coverage of fatal crashes, as well as the way the stories are conveyed to the public as “news.”

During the time period covered by the researchers, 846 crashes were reported in the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration’s Fatality Analysis and Reporting System (FARS). Of these crashes, less than one-third were reported to the public. There were other discrepancies between the data contained in FARS and the actual reporting of crashes. For example, stories on teen drivers and alcohol-related crashes tended to be over-reported by the newspapers, whereas poor road conditions, whether or not occupants were wearing safety belts, and fatal crashes themselves tended to be under-reported.

So, what impact do such reporting practices and biases have on our safety culture? In terms of “consciousness,” the way stories are reported may bias the public toward a view that “*it just won’t happen to me.*” Middle-aged adults who don’t drink and drive may believe that they are insulated or protected against being involved in a fatal crash by their own self-image and by society’s positive reinforcement of responsible driving behavior. Overemphasis on sensational aspects of risky behavior, coupled with a lack of emphasis on road conditions and safety belt use may make people feel that some factors are more important than others, despite evidence to the contrary.

The result of reporting that does not accurately reflect true public risks may be that the average motorist does not receive a clear idea what kind of people are involved in crashes or what factors cause them. In this way, the risk that people see may be disproportionate to actual statistical risk probability. Drivers may see increased risk for some behaviors and less risk for others when just the opposite could be true.

Another interesting finding of the Connor and Wesolowski (2004) study was the way in which newspapers conveyed stories of fatal crashes. A vast majority of the stories assigned blame to one of the drivers, who was portrayed as a villain, someone who had done something wrong with catastrophic consequences. In this way, newspaper reporting may increase the public’s feeling that crashes are largely unavoidable events. If a careless driver is on the road, there is little one can do to protect oneself. In reality, this is not always the case. Road conditions reported in FARS during the study period were labeled poor in more than 20% of the incidents. Road conditions were actually reported in only 6% of the newspaper accounts, however. It’s easy to see that taking additional safety measures under poor road conditions is something the public can do to protect itself, but this simple message may not penetrate current coverage.

Finally, newspaper reports used the terms crash and accident interchangeably, again perhaps contributing to the public’s belief in any number of cases that “accidents happen” and that there is little or nothing that can be done to prevent them.

It appears that what we do and what we know can be better integrated to greatly enhance the penetration of vital roadway safety information. Thus, we have identified an achievable objective. A first step toward that objective is simple: we can adapt what is essentially a common business communications tool and use it to shine light into the mysterious corners of the roadway safety “umbrage gap.”

What we can do

“What we have here is a failure to communicate.” This memorable line from *Cool Hand Luke* sums up a common problem for social causes like “traffic safety.” Managing the relationship with each “public” that can affect a desired outcome is a fundamental principle of modern public relations, and thus, of effective large-scale communication. Understanding how each public receives and responds to various types of information is a fundamental step in that direction.

The process of collecting and analyzing data that sheds light on this public interaction is known as a communications audit—a tool that can be used to great effect in studying the path to creation of a safety culture. An audit focuses attention on one or more audiences that have been identified as stakeholders in a desired outcome and studies what is currently at play in that relationship and what can be done to enhance its mutual benefit. Various communications factors are examined and recommendations to fine tune and improve the quality of communication are developed.

While a full audit should be carefully designed to address specific outputs, it isn’t hard to envision how such an exercise might be conducted within the relationship between traffic safety advocates and the news media.

The logical first step is to search for existing research on how news organizations cover traffic safety topics. This helps define the platform of available resources—allowing us to further evaluate what we know now. A literature or “clippings” search predicated on carefully identified roadway accident reporting language (conducted with the aid of a reputable media monitoring vendor) is another early step that will produce building blocks for story analysis. The literature search can also elicit an index of terms used to convey fatal crash details, and their general frequency, which can then be analyzed for urgency, gravitas, and other attention-getting qualities.

From there, a representative sample of news stories can be selected, at which point it is possible to measure the editorial weight of messages, the message content (the extent to which reports carry “pure facts” or may be impacted by editorial slants), fact content (which facts are used to tell the story), and the tone of what is communicated (whether positive, neutral, or negative), among other factors.

The assessment can also expand to a national level the existing regional research sample that indicates how accident reportage stacks up beside actual crash data. This might be accomplished by focusing special attention on a series of metropolitan area test markets where key communications variables can be formally tested.

Interviews with news professionals then provide vital, real-world context. Structured conversations with editors and reporters—both the news correspondents who generate individual stories and the traffic reporters who provide more logistical information—are an essential audit component that can help to illuminate motives, vision, awareness, and editorial priorities involved in crash reporting. Practitioners might also shed light on standard procedures that prove to be a target for improvements: how often and under what circumstances such events are covered on-site, what information is accessible to crews involved in typical one-off, hastily

assembled incident coverage, what elements prompt expanded coverage, and whether or not current resources can provide sufficient contextual data to meet daily demands and editorial standards.

It may also prove worthwhile to research how many reporters in the nation cover a dedicated transportation “beat.” For the vast majority who cover accidents as part of a bigger territory, it may be useful to know their main area of focus (Metro news? Crime? General assignment?).

Another element of the assessment can be how fatal crashes, in particular, are reported by all primary stakeholders and how jurisdiction operates in this context. Are roadway fatalities assumed to be the bailiwick of law enforcement, transportation agencies, or other entities and how does communication flow among stakeholders? A brief, mini-audit of “internal” stakeholder communications, similar to that performed on the broader level, will shed light on the number of data resources available, their perspectives, and their connectivity.

The communications audit should include some method of quantifying and qualifying the information resources currently being provided to editors, producers, and correspondents by roadway safety groups, including the messages conveyed. The goal here is to assess how the “roadway safety industry”—transportation and highway departments, agencies, and associations—currently advances to these critical messengers both core information (trends, statistics, studies) and broader concepts. A beneficial product of this analysis is a detailed inventory and assessment of the types of messages now being disseminated.

Astute analysis and presentation of these and other auditable components of the daily drumbeat of death by motor vehicle should prove informative, not only to the roadway safety community, but to the news media itself. Public affairs practitioners know well the two-way street of surveys and polling: the opportunity to educate, enlighten, and motivate an audience, while engaging it for the purpose of gathering input.

The good news is that, considering the cost of modern public information campaigns and the breadth of the local and national audiences to which safety organizations can gain daily access via the news media, the time and cost of this process are relatively small. A complete communications audit of a representative sample of news organizations and news markets can be completed in as little as six months at a cost ranging from \$75,000 to \$300,000, depending upon the size of the sample chosen. Studying three markets with a cumulative population of 3,000,000 people, at an estimated cost of \$300,000, produces a \$10 per person investment—and breaks new ground in the delivery of essential, life-saving messages. Leveraging that investment into more effective communication nationwide reduces the cost per impression to a matter of pennies, while chipping away at one of America’s most preventable causes of death and injury, not to mention an economic cost to society now estimated at more than \$200 billion per year.

Summary

Motor vehicle related injury and death are the nation’s leading public health problems. Yet, despite abundant evidence of the risks involved in vehicle operation—and a considerable body of ready remedies—we tolerate an alarming status quo and, daily, slide behind the wheel to play a deadly game of “beat the odds.”

A relatively brief and cost-effective audit of the news media's role in communicating the reality of roadway mobility will shine a spotlight on areas in which our conversation with the motoring public can be advanced while encouraging improvements in the context, relevance, and meaning of news stories on the topic.

A communications audit is a systematic process of evaluating what messages are going out, to what extent they are being received, how they are being received, the lasting impressions they leave with target audiences, and the overall impact they create—whether or not they are delivering the change we seek. Based on gaps identified in this process, stakeholders can formulate strategic communication plans that make existing resources work harder to further their desired outcome.

This process can be put to work for a change in America's roadway safety culture. Before other steps are taken to create change, a comprehensive communications audit can assess how the news media impact America's current safety culture. An audit will offer insights into the ways traffic accidents are reported while stimulating thinking among editors and reporters as to their role, responsibilities, and resources in the public safety equation. The result will be timely information for existing stakeholders in the highway safety community that can significantly improve communications strategy and effectiveness.

The bottom line: If getting into an automobile and driving is, in fact, the most unsafe thing an individual can do in any day, can—and should—media reporting be designed to penetrate resistance to the facts and feature positive reinforcement of a mindset for safety? The highway safety community has within its reach a tool with which to dig for answers to this question, and an opportunity to transform the ore that tool uncovers into an information support structure for a new American culture of roadway safety.

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Biographical statements

John W. Martin is the President & CEO of SIR. Prior to SIR, John led the marketing and marketing research efforts of PBM Products, a consumer products company specializing in nutritional products. While at PBM, John orchestrated new product launches and promotional programs with leading retailers including Wal-Mart, Target, Kroger, Albertson's, CVS, and dozens of other national chains. During John's tenure as PBM's chief marketing officer, the company became one of the fastest growing private companies in America.

John began his career at a mid-Atlantic advertising agency, where as President he led the agency's planning and research work in healthcare, B2B services, and travel marketing. Many of John's initiatives while at the agency received the American Marketing Association's (AMA) Effie Award, for the most effective marketing campaigns in the country.

John received a master's of business administration from Virginia Commonwealth University in 1984 and graduated from Washington & Lee University with a bachelor's degree in economics in 1982. John is often a featured speaker at marketing workshops around the country and most recently addressed the Southern Newspapers Publishers Association annual conference.

Karen Smith, Ph.D., is SIR's Senior Vice President of Research Strategy. With more than twenty years of experience conducting research for some of the nation's (and the world's) leading corporations and organizations, Karen is responsible for all phases of SIR's research—from problem conceptualization and research design to analysis and strategic interpretation of results. Karen works across a variety of industries, including healthcare, transportation, manufacturing, education, associations, consumer products, business-to-business, and finance.

Monica Worth is Principal of Worth Associates, Inc. Now approaching its 20th anniversary, Worth Associates provides communications and marketing support to national and international clients, working within the federal government, Congress, the media, and at the roots of communities to shape public perceptions of significant issues, organizations, and industries.

Worth Associates' work with key transportation stakeholders from the American Traffic Safety Services Association (ATSSA) to the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) to the U.S. Department of Transportation/FHWA, and allied industries such as emergency services, construction, and energy has provided a consistent level of contact with the nation's leading transportation media, including correspondents with the nation's top 25 major daily newspapers, national print, television, and radio press, and the major trade magazines. Currently, Worth Associates provides communications and marketing counsel to several innovative technology programs at FHWA and AASHTO and manages outreach for programs of ATSSA and the National Partnership for Highway Quality. Worth Associates founded and staffs the Ad Hoc Roadway Public Affairs Committee (AHRPAC), a group of communications directors from major transportation associations and Congressional committees that seeks to improve outreach to motorists on roadway transportation issues.

Monica Worth is the recipient of a 2006 Federal Highway Administration "Partnership in Excellence Award" from Acting Administrator, J. Richard Capka.