

From Victim-Blaming to Solutions: Changing the Narrative about Traffic Crashes

How word choice and framing in news coverage of traffic crashes shape public perceptions

Researchers at Texas A&M University and Rutgers University have identified six common editorial patterns in local news stories about traffic crashes involving people walking or biking:

- Use of the word “accident”
- Lack of agency (does not refer to what or who killed the victim)
- Focus on the pedestrian (“A pedestrian was hit by a car” v. “A car hit a pedestrian”)
- Object-based language (refers to the car, not the driver)
- Counterfactual statements (implies that the victim’s actions contributed to the outcome)
- Episodic framing (treats crashes as isolated incidents)

The researchers had 999 subjects read one of three versions of a news story about a hypothetical traffic crash in which a driver hit and killed a pedestrian (see *Status quo versus better practice: 3 news stories about a hypothetical crash*, p. 3). The first version reflected the six common editorial patterns (“status quo coverage”), the second version shifted focus and agency toward the driver, and the third version preserved those changes and also framed the crash as part of a larger theme or pattern.

After reading the news story, subjects were asked to apportion blame, identify an appropriate punishment for the driver, and assess various approaches for improving road safety. In comparing the three groups, even relatively subtle differences in editorial patterns significantly affected readers' interpretation of both what happened and what to do about it on nearly every measure.

The research highlights the importance of word choice and overall framing in news stories about traffic crashes involving people walking or biking:

	Word choice	Overall framing
Status quo coverage	<p>Coverage obscures the role of the driver by omitting an agent altogether (“A pedestrian was hit.”) or by granting agency to a vehicle (“A pedestrian was hit by a car.”).</p> <p>Media studies scholars previously have shown that the focus of a sentence tends to receive more blame for what happened. Coverage almost always focuses on the pedestrian: “A pedestrian was hit by a car” rather than “A car hit a pedestrian.”</p>	<p>Traffic crashes kill more than 40,000 people and injure hundreds of thousands more each year in the U.S. Yet coverage treats crashes as isolated events, not as part of a wider public health crisis.</p> <p>In previous research, media studies scholars have shown that describing events this way leads readers to focus on individual actions rather than commonalities across events. This reduces demand for systemic change and government action.</p>
Simple changes to improve coverage	<p>Write sentences so that it is clear that a driver was involved.</p> <p>When describing the crash, focus on the driver rather than the person who was hit. Humanize the victim elsewhere.</p>	<p>Connect the dots between seemingly isolated crashes. Describe the crash setting, include local and national data on crashes, and mention strategies to improve safety. Contact local experts and advocates to provide context.</p>
Why these changes work	<p>Shifting to a driver-focused text reduced blame for the victim by 30%.</p>	<p>Connecting the dots between crashes helps readers identify other causes of crashes. It increases support for sidewalks, crosswalks and lower speeds.</p>

Status quo		Effect	Better practice		Effect
<i>Common patterns of news stories about traffic collisions involving people walking and biking</i>			<i>Recommended characteristics of news stories to improve clarity, accuracy and completeness</i>		
“Accident”	<i>“Pedestrian killed in <u>accident</u> on Main Street.” (What actually happened?)</i>	Vague and figurative. Obscures the preventable nature of the crash.	“Crash”	<i>“Pedestrian killed in <u>crash</u> on Main Street.”</i>	Implies that the incident was foreseeable and preventable (within the generally understood meaning of “crash”).
Non-agentive	<i>“A pedestrian was hit and killed.” (By what? By who?)</i>	Omits the agent of the pedestrian’s death. Presents an incomplete picture.	Agentive	<i>“A pedestrian was hit and killed <u>by a driver.</u>”</i>	Names the agent of the pedestrian’s death. Presents a more complete picture.
Focus on pedestrian	<i>“A <u>pedestrian</u> was hit and killed by a car.”</i>	Places the focus on the victim, not on the car, and increases blame for the focus of the sentence.	Focus on vehicle	<i>“A <u>car</u> hit and killed a pedestrian.”</i>	Places the focus on the car, not on the victim. Increases blame for the focus of the sentence.
Object-based language	<i>“The <u>car</u> jumped the curb.” (Was someone driving the car?)</i>	Obscures the role of a human actor. Depersonalizes the incident.	Person-based language	<i>“The <u>driver</u> drove over the curb.”</i>	Places the focus on the human behind the action. Personalizes the incident.
Counterfactual statements	<i>“The pedestrian <u>darted into the street.</u>”</i>	Increases perceived blame for the victim. Implies that the victim could have avoided the crash if they had acted differently, thus minimizing the role of the car or driver.	No counterfactual statements	Story sticks to the known facts	Prevents confusion, speculation and unsupported conclusions (especially where an investigation may be ongoing).
Episodic framing	Portrays the crash as an isolated incident (a single “episode”). Fails to provide context for the crash, e.g., details about roadway conditions or a history or pattern of similar crashes.	Prevents readers from connecting the dots between incidents and thus shifts attention toward the individuals involved and away from the system in which the crash occurred.	Thematic framing	<i>“This is the tenth fatal collision this year.”</i>	Portrays the crash as part of a history or pattern (“theme”). Lets readers see the actions of the individuals involved within the context of the environment or system in which the crash occurred.

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Status quo versus better practice: 3 news stories about a hypothetical crash

Words or phrases that differ between article types are denoted in **bold** for demonstration purposes. Thematic elements added in article #3 are denoted with underline. In the actual experiment, all three articles had plain text.

Pedestrian-focused	EFFECT: Increases perceived blame for the pedestrian
Pedestrian struck and killed on east side	← Non-agentive, focus on pedestrian, episodic framing
Police are investigating a fatal accident on the east side Saturday evening. Shortly before 7 p.m., police were called to the 2500 block of North Main Street on a report of a pedestrian struck by a car . Police say a 46-year-old man wearing dark clothing was attempting to cross Main Street when he was struck . The injured pedestrian was unresponsive at the scene and reportedly died on the way to the hospital. Police say the driver was not impaired and remained at the scene.	← "Accident" ← Object-based language, counterfactual statement ← Non-agentive
Driver-focused	EFFECT: Increases perceived blame for the driver
Driver hits, kills pedestrian on east side	← Person-based language, focus on driver, episodic framing
Police are investigating a fatal crash on the east side Saturday evening. Shortly before 7 p.m., police were called to the 2500 block of North Main Street on a report of a driver striking a pedestrian . Police say a 46-year-old man was attempting to cross Main Street when the driver struck him with his car . The injured pedestrian was unresponsive at the scene and reportedly died on the way to the hospital. Police say the driver was not impaired and remained at the scene.	← "Crash" ← Person-based language ← Agentive
Thematically framed	EFFECT: Shifts focus from the individuals to the environment or system
Driver hits, kills pedestrian on east side <u>as pedestrian deaths continue to increase citywide</u>	← Person-based language, focus on driver, thematic framing
Police are investigating a fatal crash on the east side Saturday evening. Shortly before 7 p.m., police were called to the 2500 block of North Main Street on a report of driver striking a pedestrian . Police say a 46-year-old man was attempting to cross Main Street between a bus stop and the Walgreens when the driver struck him with his car . The injured pedestrian was unresponsive at the scene and reportedly died on the way to the hospital. Police say the driver was not impaired and remained at the scene. <u>This is the eighth death of a pedestrian in the city this year, an increase of 20% from last year at this time. Three pedestrians have died on this stretch of Main Street, which, despite being a busy shopping area, has high traffic speeds, and a lack of streetlights.</u>	← "Crash" ← Person-based language ← Thematic framing ← Person-based language, agentive ← Thematic framing