Public health framing in local media coverage of crashes involving pedestrians or bicyclists in Hawai'i, 2019

Project Background:

People walking and bicycling are **vulnerable road users (VRUs)**, a term which acknowledges their lack of protection in the event of a motor vehicle traffic crash and, more generally, their exposure to unsafe and inequitable travel conditions (Sandt et al., 2020). Media coverage of traffic crashes involving people walking and bicycling tends to frame crashes as isolated events rather than as a public health problem that disproportionately affects vulnerable populations. This study assessed public health framing in local media coverage of traffic crashes involving pedestrians and bicyclists in Hawai'i.

Project Objectives:

Describe the general features of news articles that cover traffic crashes involving VRUs.

Describe which types of traffic crashes involving VRUs generate news coverage.

Assess language patterns that attribute blame and responsibility for the traffic crash.

Assess the prevalence of thematic public health framing elements in news articles.

Methods:

Our study was guided by the media analysis assessment methods established by Ralph et al. (2019) following the framing and editorial patterns that they tested in previous research. We expanded our content analysis to understand what types of crashes involving VRUs generate media coverage at a statewide scale over a one-year period.

We systematically searched the websites of 4 local newspapers and 3 local television stations to identify articles about Hawai'i traffic crashes involving pedestrians/bicyclists that were published in 2019.

We created a coding instrument to extract relevant data for the content analysis.

The team completed multiple rounds of interrater reliability testing to ensure internal validity and refine the coding instrument.

Using content analysis, we extracted information on title and article attributes, crash details, language patterns, and public health framing elements.

After screening 738 news articles for inclusion, 162 articles comprised the final sample. These articles reported on 164 crash events, representing 57 unique crash events.

Project Findings:

Our findings contribute to growing evidence base suggesting that media reports of traffic crashes are presented as isolated events, miss opportunities to illuminate their preventable nature, assign responsibility and blame for the crash to the people walking and bicycling over the people driving the vehicles, and tend to lack humanizing elements (Magusin, 2017; Brömmelstroet, 2020; Ralph et al, 2019; Scheffels et al., 2019; Schmitt, 2020).

We found that the majority of media reports were relatively brief (100-499 words), and most articles described the crashes factually as isolated events.

Language patterns in article titles were non-agentive (77%) and focused on the pedestrian or bicyclist (77%) without mentioning the driver or vehicle (69%).

When articles ascribed agents, vehicles (53%) were mentioned more often than drivers (13%).

One-quarter of articles contained a counterfactual that subtly assigned responsibility for the crash to the person walking or bicycling.

About 15% of articles described a traffic safety solution.

These findings serve as a benchmark for local media coverage and can be used to inform state-level actions to improve local media reporting. Media coverage that considers the contextual and systematic factors contributing to the crash could better support local government policy change to protect pedestrians and bicyclists.

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