

STREETSBLOG

Commentary: In Streetsblog Denver's absence, local news has a responsibility to get out from behind the windshield

By David Sachs | Jan 31, 2022 | 



David Sachs, Sept. 25, 2018. (Kevin J. Beaty/Denverite)

This guest commentary is by David Sachs, founder and former editor and executive director of Streetsblog Denver. More recently he covered the city for Denverite and Colorado Public Radio. He and his family recently moved from Denver to Barcelona. Follow him on Twitter: [@DavidASachs](https://twitter.com/DavidASachs).



Do you remember when climate change was covered in the news as an opinion? There were the people who said climate change was real, there were the people who said it was nonsense, there were the journalists who gave both sides equal play, and there was the general public that is, to this day, still coming to grips with objective facts backed by science as the world burns.

Just as mainstream journalists changed their tune and began covering climate change as objectively true and bad, I believe that mainstream journalists covering urban transportation in Denver must change theirs. It's especially important now that Denver will be missing the voice of Streetsblog Denver, which I founded in 2015.

Like with the climate, there is a science to cities. Cities with plenty of safe and easy ways to move around other than driving — walking, riding public transit, and rolling on a wheelchair or bike or scooter — are more equitable, healthier, and safer for everyone than cities that prioritize cars, trucks and speed, according to research from the [Brookings Institute](#), the [Journal of Advanced Transportation](#), [The Lancet](#) medical journal, University of Colorado academics, precisely 1 million stories documented on this website, and common sense.

In Denver, cars and trucks are the top excuses for why sidewalks can't be wider, bus lanes can't exist, homes can't be built, and bike-and-scooter lanes can't be safer... if they can be at all. These excuses usually come in the form of Parking Fears and Traffic Woes, ideas for which traditional news sources carry water, even though a transportation-rich city would actually address these things.

It is common for some news outlets to cover transportation with either a windshield bias — automatically taking the perspective of a driver — or false balance, also known as bothsidesism. There are [countless examples documented on this website](#) so I won't go into all of them.

But a particularly representative practice is printing statements from the Denver Police Department after a car crash that suggest victims — often people walking — are to blame for their own deaths because, say, they weren't wearing bright clothing or they weren't in a painted crosswalk. These stories are typically relayed to the public before an investigation (or any real reporting) is complete, and rarely if ever include information about speed, street design or distracted driving, let alone a follow up.



That's just one way that news organizations play a role in a systemic problem. Cars and trucks dominate Denver because an antiquated system is working exactly as designed. Politicians, planners, and traffic engineers have long prioritized cars and trucks over every other mode of transportation with one-sided decisions about infrastructure and land use, making it inefficient, dangerous and sometimes impossible to travel by any other means.

The inequity has been rampant for the better part of a century, and only for the last six years has there been a publication dedicated solely to covering them.

The stakes of those decisions have been high: [unnecessary death, injury, inequity, displacement](#), and [poisonous air](#), among other things. If you are a journalist who believes these things to be objectively bad, you have a responsibility to cover them that way. For example, before publishing it, you should question the intellectual rigor of [a column by the state's top car salesman](#) who stood on a corner and counted vehicles, proving that the key to air pollution is to sell more cars.

The reality is that even if the city government ever implements its [many, many, many, many, many, many, many, many](#) plans for a city of super-mobility, Denver is in no danger of cars and trucks losing their god-like status any time soon. But their god-like status is full of danger. The street designs, policies, and culture of the automobile in Denver lead to people being maimed, killed, displaced, unhealthy and, in the case of both human lungs and the climate, poisoned with pollution.

If journalists need more reasons to cover Denver's urban transportation landscape without the windshield bias, there's always the matter of fairness (which should not be confused with bothsidesism). It's a simple equation: Denver's streets belong to everyone but are not organized in a way that lets everyone use them. Local journalists should elevate the voices of the under-served and the more vulnerable street users who don't drive because of age, disability, income or choice, not the ones protected by steel cages, airbags and wealth.

Another simple equation I hope journalists use is about holding decision-makers accountable. The Hancock administration has [thousands of pages of documents](#) with [concrete goals](#) for [walking, biking and transit trips, traffic deaths and injuries](#). Some of these plans have been adopted by both the executive and legislative branches and include commitments like [prioritizing pedestrians over every other user on the street — and moving solo drivers to the bottom of the food chain](#). How's the follow-through on that?

There's also the issue of [geometry](#) in a city with finite space. Even if more highways and wider streets could appease the insatiable hunger of cars and driving — [they cannot; they do the opposite](#) — the city would run out of room. If Denver continues to grow, which is what cities do and often the sole purpose of political agendas, there is no option but to add sustainable transportation options. Reporting otherwise would be in bad-faith.

I don't think it's a coincidence that since I founded Streetsblog Denver, the city's media landscape has shifted, at least somewhat, to question the status quo of automobile dominance and the general lack of good alternatives. Hell, [one-time A-Line agitator Kyle Clark](#) is now [a hero of the movement](#). Clark said, on live TV, "You don't own the street in front of your home. We, the public, own the street in front of your home. Our streets belong to everyone, so everyone can get from here to there with as little fear of being killed as possible." A prime time local news anchor said that. That's huge. More of that, please.

(Do I have a bruised ego because my pal Kyle gained even more fame for saying something once on TV that I had been yelling about for years on this blog? Yes, yes I do. Am I thrilled that the message went mainstream? Absolutely. That's the whole point.)

I don't mean to sound overly indulgent or cast stones from afar. My family and I moved away from Denver four months ago, but the city is still in my thoughts every day. I believe local journalists have a responsibility to report the news in a way that improves lives, even if that means — especially if that means — changing the status quo.

So with Streetsblog Denver closing its doors for good, I hope other journalists step up.

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