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METROPOLIS

Crash Course

News organizations need to relearn how to cover car collisions—especially when the victims are on foot.

BY DAVID ZIPPER

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On the evening of Nov. 13, Roy Saravia Alvarez was walking home along the sidewalk of West Glebe Road in Alexandria, Virginia. At around 8 p.m., the driver of a truck jumped the sidewalk while turning left, striking Saravia Alvarez and pinning the 46-year-old underneath the vehicle. The driver, later identified by authorities as Fredy Ortiz-Dominguez, remained in the truck, spinning its wheels and rocking it back and forth for nearly five minutes. A passerby stopped and told Ortiz-Dominguez to get out of his vehicle, but he did so only when police arrived. By then, Saravia Alvarez was dead.

We know these details because a television journalist chose to investigate. “I saw the Alexandria police [tweet](#) about it,” says Julie Carey, the Northern Virginia bureau chief of local TV station NBC4. But “the police report was terrible,” she says. The [report](#) stated that “the incident involved a single vehicle striking a pedestrian,” and that while the pedestrian died, “the driver of the vehicle remained at the scene and sustained no injuries.”

Faced with that vague report, Carey went to the crash site. “I could see skid marks on the sidewalk. When we found out that Saravia Alvarez wasn’t crossing the street, that changed the whole complexion of the story.” She said the police report “gave no indication that the driver was at fault, that the victim was just a pedestrian walking on the sidewalk.” Carey approached a nearby vape store, which offered her security camera footage of the collision. “He played it for us on a big screen in the store,” she says.

NBC4’s [story](#) about the crash aired on Nov. 15, two days after it happened. In a [follow-up segment](#), Carey noted that an autopsy indicated that Saravia Alvarez had survived the initial impact of the collision, and that the rocking of the truck likely killed him.

This reporting is notable because it was exceptional. To find out the basics of what happened, Carey had to examine skid marks and obtain security footage, because that information existed nowhere else. In contrast, on Nov. 16, the day after the first NBC4 report, the Washington Post ran a brief [story](#) about the incident stating that Saravia Alvarez was hit by a car (not a truck) and that “police said the driver stayed on the scene and was not hurt.” Three days later, the Post [followed up](#) noting that police had issued a warrant for Ortiz-Dominguez’s arrest and that he had turned himself in, but made no mention of the video NBC4 had uncovered showing Ortiz-Dominguez trying to drive forward while Saravia Alvarez was trapped underneath. (Neither the reporter who wrote those two stories nor the top editors of the Post’s local section would comment for this story.)

The Post’s account of the collision in Alexandria drew criticism (including from [me](#)), especially since it was not the first time the paper had produced skewed coverage when a pedestrian or cyclist died in a crash. Last September, when a driver fatally struck 5-year-old Allison Hart while she was biking at a crosswalk in D.C., the Post’s account initially claimed it was “unclear why the child was on the roadway,” a victim-blaming framing that was also widely criticized (local public radio reporter Martin Austermuhle [accused](#) the newspaper of “crap reporting”).

These problems go deeper than a single reporter, or even the Post itself. (Certainly, how

news organizations choose to or are able to allocate resources—and even the medium they work in—plays a role.) After the death of a Citi Bike rider in 2017, the New York Times cited police in an article stating that the cyclist had “swerved” to go around a parked van prior to being struck and killed by the driver of a tour bus, an account that video footage later refuted (and led to the driver’s conviction in court). The New York Daily News drew criticism a few years ago for mentioning that a pedestrian was “wearing all black” when fatally hit by a driver, a subtle form of victim-blaming that other media outlets have also used.

Across the country, media outlets consistently employ practices that traffic safety experts and advocates object to—writing headlines about pedestrian and cyclist fatalities in the passive voice and highlighting the vehicle instead of the driver (i.e., “pedestrian struck by car” instead “driver strikes pedestrian”). Research suggests that American reporting is much more likely to focus on the pedestrian or cyclist who is struck, rather than the driver behind the wheel. Recognizing the problem, a 2018 Columbia Journalism Review article offered guidance to reporters and editors: “When covering car crashes, be careful not to blame the victim.”

Because most people learn about these incidents from the press, reporting habits around roadway deaths have attracted more scrutiny as pedestrian and cyclist fatalities rise, surging 46 percent and 36 percent, respectively, from 2010 to 2019. Roadways have grown even more dangerous during the pandemic, with more than 42,000 people dying on American roadways in 2021, a 10.5 percent annual increase, the highest on record. Meanwhile, traffic fatalities have fallen steadily across most of Europe and East Asia.

“We face a crisis,” said U.S. Department of Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, as he announced the surge in deaths during 2021. A new safety plan from the department emphasizes policy measures that can protect vulnerable road users, such as building protected bike lanes, giving pedestrians a head start crossing intersections, and creating incentives for carmakers to design safer vehicles.

But the Department of Transportation can only do so much to improve street safety, since local and state agencies manage the bulk of streets, roads, and sidewalks. Many officials in those agencies show little enthusiasm for reconfiguring roadways to protect vulnerable road users, instead opting to focus on “education campaigns” intended to reduce human error (a convenient way to deflect attention from dangerous road and car engineering). Many such campaigns put the onus on pedestrians to watch out, such as a bizarre 2019 effort from the Colorado Department of Transportation that featured employees walking along Denver streets wearing giant eyeballs.

The media's role in this conversation matters. Public pressure can help push transportation agencies to revise their approaches to road safety, something that the growing death toll suggests is overdue. Media coverage can be instrumental in shaping such pressure, but only if newsrooms dig deeper in their crash reporting and guard against blaming the very people who are getting killed.

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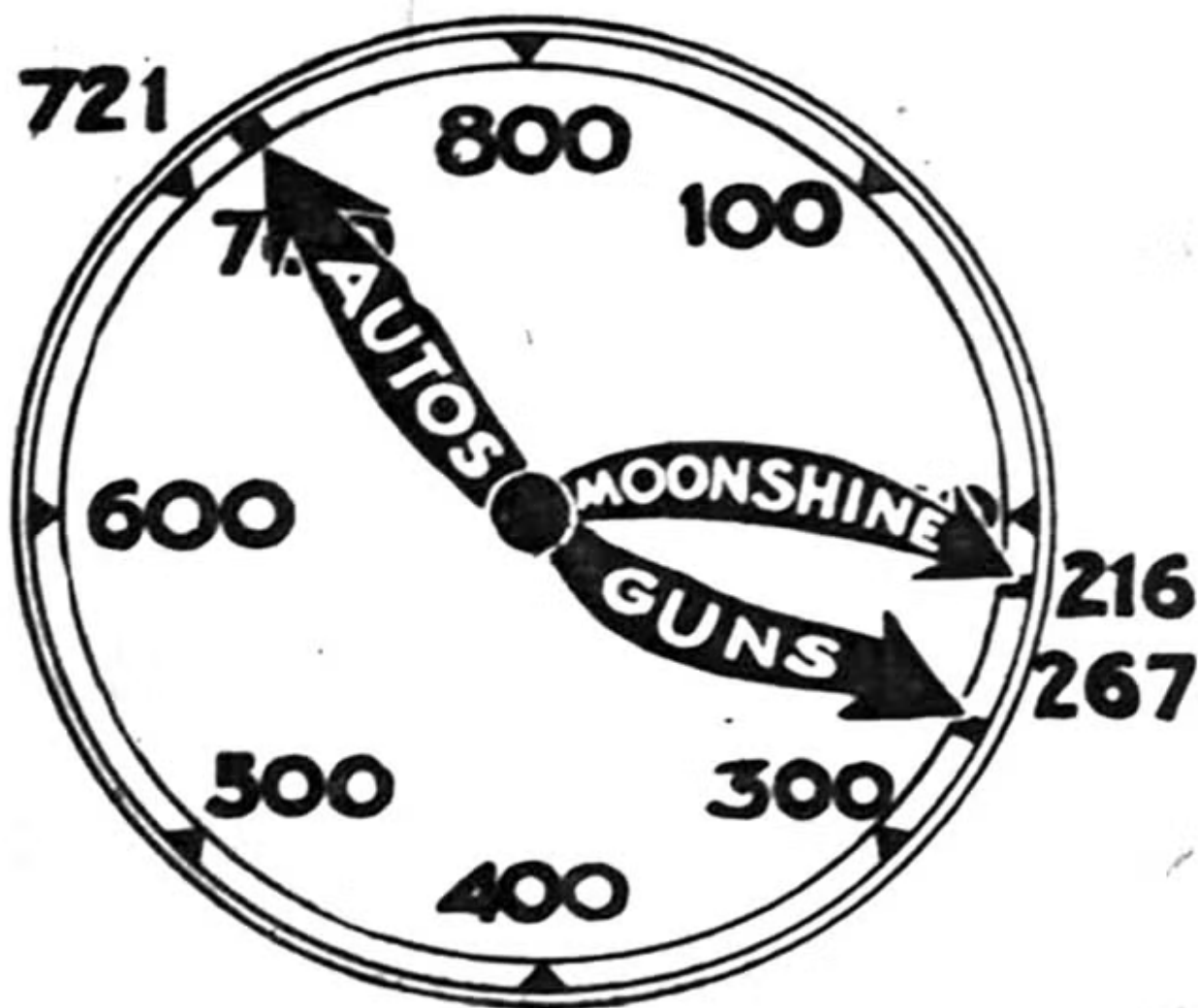
A century ago, when automobiles were controversial new arrivals in American cities, the media's approach to traffic fatalities was far less deferential to drivers. Children, accustomed to playing in city streets, were among the most vulnerable, and they made for sympathetic victims.

During the 1910s and early 1920s, "news coverage was pretty uniformly hostile to the motorist," says University of Virginia historian Peter Norton, whose book *Fighting Traffic* examines the automobile's arrival in urban America. Citing the many letters to the editor that criticized urban cars, Norton says that "the newspapers were reflecting the popular perception that the car is inherently hazardous in cities."

Norton's book features a winning poster for a traffic safety competition in 1920, sponsored by the Milwaukee Journal. The poster depicts a small child looking at a weeping mother, brushing away her tears, asking, "Was Daddy hurt much?" A weekly feature in the Chicago Tribune at the time depicted a clock with three hands that kept a running tally of fatalities in Chicago due to "guns," "moonshine," and "autos." (The final clock of 1923 shows 721 deaths from car collisions, over 200 more than the combined total of the other two categories.) Headlines of this era did not pull punches: "Nation Roused Against Motor Killings," proclaimed the New York Times in 1924.

Concern for pedestrian safety prompted protests and memorials—as well as the consideration of aggressive new policies. In 1923, Cincinnati residents voted on a proposal to mandate speed governors set at 20 mph on any automobile within city limits. Although the referendum failed, "the Cincinnati dust-up scared the hell out of Detroit," Norton says. The auto industry quickly resolved to take a more active role shaping popular perceptions of pedestrian deaths. In 1924, the Chicago Motor Club purchased space in the Chicago Tribune to run a column called "Traffic Talks" that claimed "reckless pedestrians" caused "almost 90%" of the crashes in which they were injured or killed.

The National Automobile Chamber of Commerce, an industry group, created a wire service



A clock of Chicago fatalities that ran at the end of 1923 in the Chicago Tribune. Courtesy of Peter Norton

to offer newspapers free articles about crashes, reliably placing blame on “jaywalkers,” a newly coined term. Newspapers lapped up the free content. “Sometimes the newspaper will say that the story is via NACC,” Norton says, “and sometimes it will simply look like a local story.” Such efforts were largely successful. “You can watch the term *jaywalker* take off, becoming a normal word,” he adds.

As popular outrage at pedestrian deaths faded, the media’s attention waned, too. The national auto safety debate prompted by the 1965 publication of Ralph Nader’s book *Unsafe*

at Any Speed focused, like the book itself, primarily on hazards to car occupants, not pedestrians or cyclists. By 2020, the toll from automobile crashes was seen as so unremarkable that Republican leaders, including then-President [Donald Trump](#) and Wisconsin Sen. [Ron Johnson](#), cited the supposed inevitability of tens of thousands of annual traffic deaths as justification for rejecting pandemic restrictions. Like many Americans, such leaders treat traffic deaths as unavoidable collateral damage from the pursuit of a car-centric American dream.

“We’re totally immune to this idea that 40,000 people die every year on U.S. roads,” says Kelcie Ralph, a professor of urban planning at Rutgers University. “We shrug it off.”

Newspapers’ scant coverage of traffic crashes reflects this widespread disinterest. “These would be low-priority stories,” says Robert McCartney, who recently retired from a long career at the Washington Post that included a stint as the top editor of the Metro section from 2005 to 2009.

Car crashes typically fall under the coverage beat of the “cops and courts” reporter—a position that’s in increasingly short supply as local papers have shrunk. “You’ve got one or at most two reporters covering the whole District of Columbia [at a given moment],” says McCartney. “Meanwhile you’ve got murders, rapes, armed assaults. Reporters are busy with a lot of different things, and those who cover local stories think that the readership is more concerned about gun deaths than vehicular deaths.”

Tight deadlines and heavy workloads might help explain why the first Post account of Ray Saravia Alvarez’s death on Nov. 16 didn’t mention the vape-store video that NBC4 had already broadcast—the same Post reporter had two other short articles under her byline that same morning. But it doesn’t explain why the newspaper didn’t update the story once the omission became apparent.

Reporters under a time crunch to file a collision-related story tend to rely on police reports, generally available over the phone or by email, which saves the reporter time required to visit the crash site. Newspaper stories about traffic deaths are “usually single-sourced from police, with just the bare facts,” says former Baltimore Sun police reporter Gus Sentementes, who wrote many articles about crashes during his 12 years at the newspaper.

Compared with print journalists, television news reporters have a far greater incentive to investigate traffic fatalities—especially if there’s a chance to obtain dramatic footage. “Car crashes are one pretty reliable place to go for video,” says Bill Grueskin, a professor at the

Columbia Journalism School who previously held senior roles at the Miami Herald and Wall Street Journal. “Any schmoo with a video camera can take a picture of a crash that gives you 10–20 seconds of reporting.”

Carey, the NBC4 reporter in Northern Virginia, says that when covering a collision, “we have to go to the scene. We have no choice because we’re a visual medium.” Once at the site, it can be relatively easy to collect new and important information about the collision. (She says she obtained the critical security camera footage of the Nov. 13 incident in Alexandria simply by asking a store clerk if he had any available.)

Asked how often she encounters Washington Post reporters, Carey says, “I almost never see them at the scene of a fatal pedestrian crash.”

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Limited reportorial capacity and lack of reader interest constrain newspapers’ crash coverage, whether it be a car-on-car collision or one involving a vulnerable road user. But stories about cyclist or pedestrian fatalities bring their own, unique challenges within newspaper newsrooms. To understand why, consider the powerful role of police reports.

“You tend to be heavily dependent on what the cops are telling you,” says Grueskin, the Columbia professor. But police are typically wary of divulging anything that could compromise an investigation.

“You have this hunker-down mentality from police, where they put out the bare minimum of information,” says Sentementes, the former Baltimore Sun reporter. Under-the-gun reporters may be inclined to use whatever police are willing to share about a crash—even if perhaps they shouldn’t.

Take the question of whether the driver “stayed at the scene” after striking a pedestrian or cyclist, a detail frequently included in newspaper stories. The answer matters to police, since a driver who left after a collision would be committing the crime of hit and run. But is it newsworthy? After all, remaining at the crash site is the *absence* of a crime, legally comparable to refraining from punching the barista who serves you coffee. By choosing to include such elements in a story about a pedestrian or cyclist death—even under the qualifier of “police say”—a journalist can subtly shift the article’s tone to favor the driver.

Similarly, police will want to know if a pedestrian was struck at a crosswalk, which helps

them assign responsibility during their investigation. But including such information in an article (“the victim was not at a crosswalk when the collision occurred”) might obscure failures in road design. What if the nearest crosswalk was a quarter mile away? If the reader knew that, she might be more sympathetic to the victim and eager to support changes to street design.

But such contextual information is seldom included in newspaper accounts. “Reporters rarely tell readers about vehicle speeds, the availability of crosswalks, or whether crashes are typical at that location,” wrote Ralph, the Rutgers professor, in a 2020 article. Some pertinent information is easily accessible; Google Maps can provide detailed street information, and an online public records search reveals if the vehicle involved in the crash has a history of reckless citations. But such sources are rarely used. “I’ve generally only seen it in specialty media like Streetsblog,” Ralph says.

Sentementes sees newsrooms’ disinclination to use digital tools as a systemic failure. “Journalistic practice needs to take a look at these new databases and decide how we’re going to use them to shed light on traffic fatalities,” he says. “I don’t think we’ve caught up.”

Worse, newspaper accounts of a crash seldom reference patterns of fatalities in a particular intersection, neighborhood, or city (as the Chicago Tribune’s clock did during the early 1920s). “Coverage almost always treats crashes as isolated incidents,” Ralph and her colleagues wrote in a 2019 academic paper. “This pattern of coverage likely contributes to the limited public outcry about pedestrian and bicyclist fatalities.” McCartney, the former Post editor, generally agrees: “We have not tended to see car crashes as a societal problem.”

Once the story is complete, newspaper staff must craft a headline, which might be the only information absorbed by someone scrolling through Twitter or Facebook. Here, too, subtle pro-driver bias creeps in.

“Newspapers refer to a car as the actor four times as often as the driver,” Ralph says. “Sometimes there isn’t an agent at all, and the headline just says, ‘A Pedestrian Was Hit.’ By what? By whom? We don’t know.”

Case in point: The headline for the Washington Post’s initial story about Ortez-Dominguez striking Saravia Alvarez and pinning him beneath the truck read “Pedestrian Struck and Killed Saturday in Alexandria.” Such wording can tilt reader perceptions against the vulnerable road user. “There’s lots of media studies research showing that the focus of a sentence gets more of the blame,” Ralph says.

The power of language can be profound. In another [study](#), Ralph and her colleagues gave 99 test subjects different versions of a story about a hypothetical crash. Those who received a pedestrian-focused account (“pedestrian struck by a car”) were 30 percent more likely to lay blame on the person on foot when compared with those who read a driver-focused summary (“driver strikes a pedestrian”).

Grueskin pushes back against such critiques, suggesting that newspapers’ most pedestrian-focused word choices stem from a sensible desire to amplify what readers care about most. The majority of the time “the victims are more interesting than the driver,” he says. “If the person behind the wheel is an armed robber and driving 90 mph, you might lead with ‘Alleged bank robber plowed into a pedestrian crosswalk, killing two children.’ But if it’s just an ordinary incident, you might say, ‘5-year old struck and killed at the corner of Elm and Pine.’ There’s a bit of editorial judgment.”

McCartney notes the paucity of information conveyed by the generic word *driver*. “If you say *driver*, it could be any kind of vehicle,” he says. “If you say car or truck or van, it’s more specific.”

Grueskin says that ethical considerations also play a role in word choices. “You have to be careful not to say a drunk driver killed a little girl, because what if it turns out that the breathalyzer test was bad, and the driver hasn’t had a drink in 10 years?”

But Ralph thinks journalists are deceiving themselves if they think they can avoid bias by opting for passive, victim-oriented language. “We’re then implicitly assigning blame to the pedestrian, which we seem not to have qualms about,” she says. “We should see that as a problem as well.”

* * *

Journalistic norms may be slowly shifting in Ralph’s direction. In 2018 the Associated Press [encouraged](#) reporters to use *crash* and not the implicitly exculpatory *accident* when describing collisions. In the United Kingdom, reporter Laura Laker worked with the University of Westminster’s Active Travel Academy to produce [“Media Reporting Guidelines for Road Collisions,”](#) offering suggestions such as “If you’re talking about a driver, say a driver, not their vehicle.” Newspapers including the [Dallas Morning News](#) and [Detroit Free Press](#)—as well as the [Washington Post](#)—have published stories about the surge in pedestrian deaths.

Still, those newspapers' coverage of individual crashes often fail to mention their own articles about systemic problems like a dangerous intersection, the inability of cities in states like [Texas](#) to deploy automatic traffic cameras, or the relative safety of people inside a car compared with road users outside of one. That disconnect, and the limited resources available to most local sections, shows how challenging it will be to correct newsrooms' bad habits.

Do journalists merely reflect society's attitudes toward traffic crashes, as Norton suggests was the case a century ago, or do they actively alter them, as Ralph's research indicates? McCartney says it's both, but that he's sympathetic to Ralph's perspective. "You have to take into account the role the media plays contributing to the zeitgeist and reinforcing it. If urbanists and progressive-minded journalists can move the needle on coverage, that could change the zeitgeist."

In recent years, McCartney says he has noticed the Post's newsroom pay more attention to pedestrian and cyclist crashes, an evolution he credits to pressure from safe streets advocates. "A traffic crash is generally a low-priority story, but if it becomes grist for activists' campaign, that's different."

Indeed, a week after the Post's coverage of the collision in Alexandria drew criticism, the newspaper ran [an additional, longer story](#), which credited NBC4's reporting and focused on the victim's grieving family. The article quotes Odali Saravia Castro, Saravia Alvarez's 18-year-old daughter: "if [the driver] would have just stopped for a second and not kept on pushing down the pedal to drive, my dad would have been here with us. He would have been injured, but he would be here with us."

NBC4's Carey looked back on her own coverage of that incident. When such a crash occurs, "There's almost never enough information given at first, so you need to poke around to see if there's more," she said.

"There almost always is." 📌

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