

What does the research tell us?

Rationale for the Guidelines and references

Some of the rationale for the Guidelines comes from academic or other research, some from consultation responses, discussions with journalists, editors, policing and legal experts with extensive experience in the field. We have tried to balance professional journalistic challenges and media professionals' understanding of the topic, with research and knowledge from those with expertise in the field of road safety.

Guideline 1: *At all times be accurate, say what you know and, importantly, what you don't know. Often emergency services will release scant information and key details won't emerge until an inquest or court case. If further details do emerge, do update stories with the facts.*

This clause reflects a key tenet of professional journalistic practice, i.e., accuracy, and was further developed following conversations with journalists and editors with experience of reporting on road collisions.

Often there is little information available, from emergency services or otherwise, in the immediate aftermath of a collision. In cases, some certain details can't be shared publicly until a trial has taken place. By saying what is known, as well as what isn't, journalists can avoid encouraging readers or viewers to fill in the blanks themselves. Accuracy is a central tenet of professional journalistic practice, and the way this principle applies to road collisions is no different from any other crime or incident reporting.

"There is a public interest in the reporting of major incidents, to inform the public of what has happened and over time allow the public to make sense of those events.

"Journalists must take care to distinguish between claims and facts when reporting on major incidents", (IPSO, 2019).

"Increasingly little is known in the immediate aftermath of a collision. You used to know from police the direction of a collision, or where vehicles were in relation to one another. Now with police, because it's done via the press bureau it's almost impossible to get a sense of where people are in terms of road placement, which means you end up with vague descriptions of how the collision happened. You may not know which hospital a patient was sent to, even.

"This vague reporting can lead readers jumping to their own conclusions. Reporters might go to a scene later to get witness statements but these are likely to be partial reports, and may contain horrific details of an incident. Remember these should be treated with caution not only because they will be partial accounts but because family members can be very distressed by such accounts." Taken from a conversation with a journalist interviewed as part of the consultation process.

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IPSO, 2019. Guidance on reporting major incidents [online]:
<https://www.ipso.co.uk/media/1713/major-incidents-ed-and-journ.pdf> [accessed 5 May 2021]

Guideline 2: *Avoid use of the word 'accident' until the facts of a collision are known. Most collisions are predictable and before an enquiry or court case the full facts are unlikely to be known. It is particularly important to avoid the word when*

someone has been charged with driving offences. Using 'crash' or 'collision' instead leaves the question of who or what is to blame open, pending further details.

The dictionary definition of accident is “an unfortunate incident that happens unexpectedly and unintentionally, typically resulting in damage or injury” or “an event that happens by chance or that is without apparent or deliberate cause”. This is generally the layperson’s understanding of the word.

However, the legal definition of ‘accident’ differs in that it can describe a deliberate act. While some courts are beginning to replace the default use of ‘accident’ in reference to road collisions, legal reports are more likely to use ‘accident’ than not, in cases involving road collisions. Journalists can avoid the use of ‘accident’ without fear of implying blame, however.

While almost no-one sets out to harm others on the roads, we know actions like speeding, driving while using a mobile phone, drink driving, and failing to pay proper attention on the roads, significantly increase the likelihood of a collision. Calling collisions accidents by default suggests an assumption such incidents overwhelmingly happen unexpectedly, or by chance, when that is not the case.

Quotes from contributors

“Generally, roads policing professionals do not use the word ‘accident’ to describe collisions. They are more aware than most that ‘accidents’ are rare events.” - Dean Hatton, NPCC Roads Policing, for Chief Constable Anthony Bangham (head of roads policing)

“I think ‘accident’ is problematic because it prejudices a reason for the event. It’s like labelling a death as murder before an investigation has taken place. Collision, or crash, as alternatives are simply statements of fact in that they describe what has happened.” - Helen Wells, Senior Lecturer in Criminology, Director of the Roads Policing Academic Network.

“I really encourage everybody to stop using the phrase ‘road accident’ which doesn’t always reflect the nature and recklessness of the driving involved and can be very offensive to bereaved families or people left seriously injured. I have always used the phrase collision and that is the term used and supported by professionals within roads policing / road safety.” Detective Superintendent Andy Cox, Head of Crime at Lincolnshire Police, and the National Lead for Fatal Collision Investigation.

From an interview with a news editor: “Everything we report is a collision or crash, rather than an accident, and we’d go to the point of unless we’d seen evidence that one was a guilty party we’d always describe two vehicles colliding, we wouldn’t apportion responsibility, that’s the only safe legal thing to do. In courts we describe where blame is apportioned, [but not before then]”.

Quotes from other sources

“Use of the term ‘accident’ is inappropriate until all the facts of the case are known.” - RoadPeace (RoadPeace, 2019).

“Road crashes on the alarming scale we witness today are not accidents. They are the failure of a system which does not sufficiently value safety.” - United Nations Secretary-General’s Special Envoy for Road Safety, Jean Todt (UNECE, 2020)

“Road traffic injuries are a growing public health issue....But road traffic crashes and injuries are preventable” - The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2004).

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RoadPeace, 2019. It's a crash, not an accident. End the language of denial. [online]. Available from: <https://www.roadpeace.org/download/crash-not-accident-briefing-sheet-2019/?wpdmdl=13258&refresh=60867eea162f51619427050> [Accessed 26 Apr 2021].

UNECE, 2020. Special Envoy Jean Todt and UNECE issue urgent call for new road safety paradigm for 2030 . *United Nations Economic Commission for Europe* [online]. Available from: <https://unece.org/transport/press/special-envoy-jean-todt-and-unece-issue-urgent-call-new-road-safety-paradigm-2030> [Accessed 26 Apr 2021].

WHO, 2004. *World report on road traffic injury prevention* [online]. Geneva, Switzerland. Available from: <https://apps.who.int/iris/rest/bitstreams/50878/retrieve> [Accessed 26 Apr 2021].

Guideline 3: *If you're talking about a driver, say a driver, not their vehicle.* *This is particularly important when describing actions such as speeding, or leaving the scene of a crash. Journalists may not always know what happened in the aftermath of a crash but in collision reports, initially describe human actors as e.g., 'driver and pedestrian in collision', before mentioning vehicles. Where one human actor is clearly particularly vulnerable or has limited personal agency - for example a child, or someone on a pavement - it may be better to say, e.g., 'HGV driver collided with a child in a pushchair'.*

"There is no legal reason why you couldn't say driver, and talk about the person, rather than talking about the instrument" when describing a collision. Detective Superintendent Andy Cox, Head of Crime at Lincolnshire Police, and the National Lead for Fatal Collision Investigation, 2021.

In reporting of road collisions there will inevitably be a tension between reporting in a neutral way when facts are limited, and acknowledging fundamental differences between parties - and journalists have a legal obligation not to apportion blame before the facts are known. It is also the role of the journalist, albeit not an easy one, to avoid turning neutrality into a kind of false objectivity. One example of this is the difference in physical power and protection afforded to occupants by motor vehicles, compared with people walking, cycling, riding a horse or motorcycle, where a larger, faster object can objectively be said to collide with a smaller and slower one - and a scenario that also involves different human actors capable of both agency and being harmed. The guidelines try to strike a balance between those two elements.

Although 'pedestrian collided with car' may appear technically accurate, it subtly shifts the reader's focus (and the blame) to the pedestrian, because the pedestrian is both the focus of the sentence and the only human actor presented. By changing this to 'driver and pedestrian in collision', and mentioning the driver's vehicle in the following sentence, journalists humanise both parties and avoid premature blame for the collision when such detail isn't known.

An American study found "local news coverage tends to subtly shift blame away from drivers and toward VRUs [Vulnerable Road Users]," using the object-based 'car jumped a kerb' rather than 'driver drove over a kerb', when motor vehicles were involved, but human-based language when cyclists or pedestrians were involved. This practice, the researchers suggest, assigns unequal agency among the two groups. (Ralph et al., 2019)

The researchers found that most sentences focused on the vulnerable road user (74%), followed by the vehicle (13%), followed by the driver (11%). In 81% of cases the car/driver was referred to as a vehicle, and in just 19% of the time as a driver. In a third of sentences describing crashes, there was no agent, and in the 65% that did, 74% of the time VRUs were the focus [because they were the ones injured, presumably]. Counterfactuals, such as swerved, darting, not being on a crossing [or cycle lane], were sometimes used, and in 27% of articles no driver was mentioned at all. They added that "the use of object-based language was particularly jarring in the case of hit-and-run collisions, where 'the vehicle drove away'." (Ibid.)

A subsequent study tested some of these findings by presenting readers with differently written reports on the same road collision involving a pedestrian and driver. It found that even subtle shifts in focus can dramatically alter perceptions of blame, and that shifting away focus from the pedestrian can reduce victim blaming among readers. (Goddard et al., 2019)

There are cases where 'x and y in collision' risks creating a false equivalence, as where differences in physical size, and agency are most acute. Where children are involved the balance of power, and of agency, shifts further. Not only are children smaller and more vulnerable to injury, research has also found differences in their ability to assess and respond to traffic threats (Schieber and Thompson, 1996). Meanwhile, infants in pushchairs have, effectively, no agency, and therefore "lorry driver and pram in collision" creates a false equivalence - and worse, "pram crash" endows an infant with an agency it doesn't have and therefore, linguistically, blame. "HGV driver collided with baby in pushchair", therefore, was a special clause. Elderly people may also have reduced agency on the roads, due to decreased accuracy of speed perception and mobility impairments (Dommes and Cavallo, 2011).

While acknowledging the above, other factors may be at play in a collision, such as road design, HGV design, a presence of parked vehicles, or economic factors such as delivery deadlines and the insecure and pressurised working conditions of 'gig economy' drivers (Pyta and Kinnear, 2021).

Overall, we feel it is important publishers are mindful of the differential in terms of power, protection from harm and relative degrees of personal agency, between a child and motor vehicle drivers.

Evidence shows larger vehicles such as lorries and buses pose a greater risk to road users than smaller vehicles (Aldred et al., 2021) _

A ten-year analysis of news reporting of road collisions in Hillsborough County, Florida, an area with a "disproportionately high number of bicyclist and pedestrian deaths" found "The vocabulary, grammatical structure, and narrative framing of the news reports" ... removed blame from the motorist and highlighted the bicyclist's actions. The main strategies that had this impact include using nouns in place of verbs ('in collision with' rather than 'collided with') in passive sentences that refer to the type of vehicle in place of the driver. This strengthened the perception that the responsibility for safety rests on the bicyclist and detracts attention from social policy reform that would lead to fewer bicyclist fatalities (Scheffels et al., 2019).

However, the use of nouns in place of verbs may be acceptable in active sentences that refer to those involved as people ('driver' rather than 'car') in order to avoid the premature attribution of blame when information is still scarce.

Framing of collisions affects who readers blame and how they perceive solutions. Even subtle differences in editorial patterns can significantly impact attribution of blame and choice of punishment (Goddard et al., 2019).

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Guideline 4: *Consider the impact on friends and relatives of publishing collision details.* *People deal with grief differently, and publishers should check with families when publishing injury detail.*

This clause was developed following conversations with journalists and editors with experience of reporting on road collisions, as well as RoadPeace, the national charity for road crash victims. See also journalist conversation for Guideline 1.

In its guidance to journalists on reporting on major incidents, IPSO summarises: “There is a public interest in the reporting of major incidents, to inform the public of what has happened and over time allow the public to make sense of those events. Legitimate reporting of major incidents will often include approaches to individuals who have witnessed or been otherwise affected by the events; the Code does not seek to prevent this. Journalists must approach individuals caught up in these incidents, or affected family and friends, with sensitivity and sympathy. Journalists must take care to distinguish between claims and facts when reporting on major incidents.”

Quotes from contributors

“Not only could publishing information about collision details potentially jeopardise a court case, it can be distressing for friends and family to read about the injuries that their loved one has suffered. Journalists should contact the victim’s family when detailing circumstances of a collision.” Victoria Lebrec, Head of Policy, RoadPeace, the national charity for road crash victims.

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IPSO, 2019. Guidance on reporting major incidents [online]: <https://www.ipso.co.uk/media/1713/major-incidents-ed-and-journ.pdf> [accessed 5 May 2021]

Guideline 5: *Treat publication of photos with caution, including user generated footage or imagery.* *Photos including number plates, or anything related to victims at the scene of a crash could cause distress to friends and relatives, particularly if they aren’t yet aware of the collision. Be wary of publishing footage that could have been taken from behind the wheel, that may be seen to endorse mobile phone use while driving.*

This clause was drawn up following conversations with journalists and editors with experience of reporting on road collisions, as well as RoadPeace, the national charity for road crash victims.

In its guidance to journalists on reporting on major incidents, IPSO summarises: “Journalists should also carefully consider whether they should publish any information about the death in the immediate aftermath that may inadvertently identify the deceased and thereby break the news of the death.”

From an interview with a news editor: “I remember a case when [a major news outlet] used an image of two lorries crashed, when both drivers had died. We won’t use such images unless we know nobody has died. The worst pics of crashes you’ll see [from us] is if someone has walked out of it”.

Quotes from contributors

“Imagery of crashes should be dealt with with caution. Publishing imagery can be distressing for friends and family, and can potentially impact on police investigations. Reporters should speak to police prior to publishing imagery of crashes.” Victoria Lebec, Head of Policy, RoadPeace, the national charity for road crash victims.

Guideline 6: *Be mindful if reporting on traffic delays not to overshadow the greater harm, of loss of life or serious injury, which could trivialise road death. Remember emergency response staff may close a road following a collision while trying to save a life.*

Quotes from contributors

Helen Wells, Senior Lecturer in Criminology, Director of the Roads Policing Academic Network, said: “In traffic and travel reporting...” collisions are often reported “in a euphemistic way by mentioning delays, obstructions, investigations, incidents.

“As well as being some of the worst offenders for using the term ‘accident’, they contribute to this overall sense that road deaths and injuries are an inconvenience – often by bemoaning the extent of tailbacks or delays caused by ‘accident investigation work’. This term, to me, means someone has died, is going to die, or has suffered life changing injuries and a criminal investigation may be needed. But the casual listener would not get this.

“I know that the purpose of these reports is not to educate drivers on road safety, it’s to tell them about anything that might impact on their journey, but perhaps we could consider a change in nomenclature that could capture the real events better, without becoming a lecture or prolonging the reports in a way that people will refuse to engage with? Replacing the word ‘accident’ is a first essential step, but even a change in tone of voice could help to shift the underlying message from one of inconvenience to one of avoidable tragedy.”

Guideline 7: *Journalists should consider whether language used negatively generalises a person or their behaviour as part of a ‘group’. Research shows that if people see a road user, such as cyclists, as an outgroup, or less than human, they are more likely to act aggressively towards them on the roads. Violence on the roads lies on the same continuum as everyday, normalised discrimination tolerated by the public. Be mindful that language insinuating there is a ‘war’ or ‘battle’ on the roads risks in itself inflaming tensions.*

Research has found that dehumanising cyclists predicts self-reported aggression directed towards them (Delbosc, 2019). It is ‘commonly deemed acceptable to suggest violence towards people when they’re on a bike.’ (Johnson, 2014).

Other research notes that whilst ‘forms of extreme violence are often presented in the news as acts carried out by some [extreme individuals]’, they can be better understood as ‘the extreme point of a continuum’ linked to ‘everyday, normalised forms of discrimination, generally accepted or at least tolerated by the majority of the population’ (Caimotto, 2020). Press reporting can contribute to such normalisation, especially when it places road users into an outgroup.

Recent analysis of UK and Scottish newspaper reporting found that reporting of walking and cycling is broadly negative (Sustrans’ Research & Monitoring Unit, 2019).

Experiences of ‘near misses’ from drivers occur regularly while cycling (one ‘scary incident’ per week is the norm), and interventions targeted at road culture and driver behaviour are recommended (Aldred 2016).

Guardian journalist Peter Walker has previously made links between headlines and articles ‘joking’ about or making light of violence against cyclists in the media and real-world consequences for those who cycle on UK roads (Guardian, 2015, 2019, 2020)

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Guideline 8: Coverage of perceived risks on the roads should be based in fact and in context. Larger, faster vehicles have a greater potential to cause injury and death, while those on horseback, on foot and cycles are more likely to be seriously injured in a collision - figures that are reflected in road casualty figures. Providing context, such as local or national collision trends is particularly powerful in helping readers understand the scale of a problem, and avoids portraying incidents as isolated, when this is often not the case. High visibility clothing and helmets don’t guarantee users safety, and mention of these elements has a powerful impact on readers, encouraging them to apportion blame before the full facts are known.

Small changes to editorial patterns can have a profound impact on public perceptions – particularly where it comes to thematic framing of collisions. Readers who encounter episodic framing of road collisions, i.e. that each is an isolated case, are more likely to blame individuals and less likely prefer systemic changes to be made that will improve safety (Goddard et al, 2019).

Analysis of news stories in the USA found “coverage almost always obscures the public health nature of the problem by treating crashes as isolated incidents, by referring to crashes as accidents, and by failing to include input from planners, engineers, and other road safety experts.” (Ralph et al., 2019)

Researchers add: “This pattern of coverage likely contributes to the limited public outcry about pedestrian and bicyclist fatalities.” Their recommendations were: “Journalists can counteract these patterns by subtly altering their coverage. Planners can assist these efforts by making their expertise readily available to journalists. These simple changes would help the public identify links between seemingly isolated events and increase public pressure to reduce road deaths.” (Ibid.)

A study of young road users’ deaths found understanding broader themes around how collisions happen can help inform why they occur (Pilkington et al., 2014)

Sweden’s Vision Zero programme shifted the burden of road safety from individual users to designers and operators of the transport system (Vision Zero Academy, 2019). By not including those thematic references, researchers argue, there is a missed opportunity to bring about public health benefits.

In a similar vein, not only in road danger, thinking is beginning to shift from a focus on the victims of risk and violence to its perpetrators. A recent study examined relative risk posed to other road users, a different take from a traditional focus on rates of injury (Aldred et al., 2021); while a report by PACTS produced an analysis of the issue, relating to ‘active modes’ of transport (PACTS, 2018).

Press reporting that focuses on counterfactuals such as the victim’s clothing can also encourage the traditional focus on victims (Ralph, 2019). Yet evidence shows that, while hi-vis and fluorescent clothing can make pedestrians and cyclists appear more visible, there is little proof this translates to making them safer (Summary of research on the topic, Cycling UK, 2018). Indeed, depicting cyclists in hi-vis can make cycling seem more dangerous, according to research, and discourage people from doing it (Williams, 2017).

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Guideline 9: *Avoid portraying law-breaking or highway code contravention as acceptable, or perpetrators as victims. An example of this is stories of speed camera use somehow ‘targeting’ road users, or causing danger on the roads. Speed is a major contributory factor in road collisions, serious injury and death on the roads and media attention for targeted enforcement of speeding, distracted driving, and impaired driving can increase awareness of—and support for—those efforts, research shows. Covering outcomes of investigations or prosecutions allows the public to see justice in action.*

The negative effects of speed are wide ranging but often misunderstood (Job and Mbugua, 2020). The UN’s Global Road Safety Week, 17-23 May 2021, focuses on speed management, with the acknowledgement that excess speed not only increases the likelihood of collisions, but worsens the severity of such collisions (United Nations, 2021).

Portraying law-breaking as socially acceptable risks suppressing public support for action on the causes of road danger. The phenomenon of driving bans perhaps indicates a societal reluctance to act on causes of road danger where that danger comes from drivers. More than 10,000 drivers in Britain still hold licenses despite having 12 or more points on their licenses, often claiming ‘exceptional hardship’ exemptions (Brake, 2019, p.9).

According to road safety charity, RoadPeace only five of the 63,342 driving bans given at court in England and Wales in 2018 were lifetime bans - approximately one in 12,500 (RoadPeace, 2018, p.2). Driving ban rates have dropped dramatically in the past ten years, with magistrates apparently increasingly reluctant to ban drivers for offences from no insurance to speeding (RoadPeace, 2017, p.12).

Higher speeds give us less time to identify and react to conditions, and worsen the outcomes of collisions. A 1mph speed reduction would reduce collision rates by around 5%. According to RoSPA, “Inappropriate speed contributes to around 11% of all injury collisions reported to the police, 15% of crashes resulting in a serious injury and 24% of collisions that result in a death. This includes both ‘excessive speed’, when the speed limit is exceeded but also driving or riding within the speed limit when this is too fast for the conditions at the time (for example, in poor weather, poor visibility or high pedestrian activity).” (RoSPA, 2018).

Speed is a factor in 40% of reported road incidents involving horses and horse riders, and drivers passing too close to riders is a factor in 81% of incidents, according to 2020 research by the British Horse Society (British Horse Society, 2020).

The UN has declared a decade of action on road safety, starting January 2021 (United Nations, 2020).

The 2020 Stockholm Declaration on road safety acknowledges the role of society in reducing road danger, noting those present: “Recognize our shared responsibility between system designers and road users to move towards a world free from road traffic fatalities and serious injuries and that addressing road safety demands multi-stakeholder collaboration among the public and private sectors, academia, professional organizations, nongovernmental organizations and the media” (Stockholm Declaration, 2020)

Quotes from contributors

Helen Wells, Senior Lecturer in Criminology, Director of the Roads Policing Academic Network: “[There is a] need to follow cases to, and through, court. The crash is inevitably the interesting part... but including the legal consequences helps to show that its not the case that unless anyone dies, there are no consequences other than a rise in insurance premium. Reporting of drivers in court, and their sentences from fine to disqualification, to prison, might chime with some drivers who [are] only concerned with themselves and not the fate of other people.

“Reporting of traffic policing more generally... should not be reported in terms that imply it is a game, or a ‘war on motorists’, or that motorists were ‘trapped’ for example. Speed cameras sell papers/get clicks it seems but they are reported as the enemy of the motorist and often the role of speed in crash causation is still challenged.”

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Guideline 10: *Road safety professionals can help provide context, expertise, and advice on broader issues around road safety. Journalists aren't expected to be experts in all fields, and it is good practice if reporting on road collisions to maintain regular contact with those experts, who can provide context or viewpoints emergency services may not mention.*

Analysis of news stories in the USA found “coverage almost always obscures the public health nature of the problem by treating crashes as isolated incidents, by referring to crashes as accidents, and by failing to include input from planners, engineers, and other road safety experts.” (Ralph et al., 2019)

Researchers add: “This pattern of coverage likely contributes to the limited public outcry about pedestrian and bicyclist fatalities.” Their recommendations were: “Journalists can counteract these patterns by subtly altering their coverage. Planners can assist these efforts by making their expertise readily available to journalists. These simple changes would help the public identify links between seemingly isolated events and increase public pressure to reduce road deaths.” (Ibid.)

“Advocacy organizations often do a good job in highlighting the special concerns of constituent groups, such as older drivers or bicycle commuters in urban areas. The Global Alliance of NGOs for Road Safety (www.roadsafetyngos.org) counts 140 member organizations in 90 countries. These organizations can be valuable resources for journalists around the world; their activities range from providing support to victims and their families and advocating for road users rights to promoting safety initiatives. In order to be prepared for future stories on road safety, you should be aware of the key road safety NGOs in your city or country and what type of information you can get from them.” (WHO, 2015.)

Reporter for the Estado de Minas newspaper in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, Paranaíba Gouveia, notes tight deadlines and staffing numbers mean journalists can end up verifying stories with one or two sources, often emergency services, which can leave them poorly prepared to understand and write about the broader trends and add context to stories.

“The challenge was to come up with novel approaches to stimulate in-depth discussion and to move beyond the typical, mundane stories on road traffic crashes and congestion. Then, one day, I attended a road safety workshop in our newsroom. The speakers showed us what comprehensive analytical coverage of the issue is and how it contributes to deeper understanding of road safety issues. They explained how such coverage can pressure authorities to take action to improve road safety. From that point on, my stories began to change.” (Paranaíba Gouveia, from WHO, 2015).

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