

Older Drivers in the News: Killer Headlines v Raising Awareness

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Key Findings

- Calls for mass age-based testing persisted despite contra-indicative research outcomes
- Reporting unusual driving incidents reinforced negative images of older drivers
- In-depth coverage of the complex issues involved in ageing and driving was rare

Keywords

Print Media, Newspaper, Headlines, Stereotypes, Ageing, Older Driver

Abstract

The daily print media continues to be an important political and social influence, shaping opinions and setting agendas. Yet few studies have examined Australian newspaper coverage of older drivers, despite researchers calling for increased public awareness of issues related to the growing number of older drivers on Australian roads. This study analyses the content and discourse of articles on older drivers and issues related to them from 11 Australian metropolitan daily newspapers, representing all state and territory capitals, over three periods: 2010-2014 (inclusive), 2016 and 2017. It focuses on three main areas: the topics covered; keywords, stock phrases and stereotypes used; and attributed sources, including who is quoted and where. Several patterns were apparent from the qualitative and quantitative analysis. Articles appeared sporadically but tended to cluster around reports of serious crashes where at least one driver was aged over 60 years. The debate was focused on age, with calls for testing and compulsory age-based restrictions common but few articles mentioned the contribution of the 'frailty bias' to the over-representation of older people in fatality and serious injury crash statistics. A better understanding of the way newspapers present such issues has much potential to identify and address misperceptions around safe driving and ageing.

Introduction

The ability to remain mobile as people age is recognised as important to healthy ageing (WHO, 2015). Maintaining this ability, however, presents serious challenges in car-dependent societies, such as Australia. Ceasing to drive in older age is recognised as 'a key determinant of declines in mobility' (WHO, 2015, p. 180), alternative transport options may not necessarily be 'available, accessible or safer than driving' (Charlton et al., 2010, p. 557) and the population is ageing (Odell, 2009).

The United Nations highlighted the importance of transport and mobility in its 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015). The goals set out to make 'cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable' (Goal 11). Clause 11.2, for example, pledged to work towards the provision by 2030 of transport systems for all 'with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons' (UN, 2015, p. 21). The year 2030 is significant. The last of the 'Baby Boomers', those born between 1946 and 1964, turns 65 in 2030 (ABS, 2003). By then almost a

quarter of Australia's population is expected to be aged 65 and over (Odell, 2009; OECD, 2001). Most adults walk and drive (Satariano et al., 2012) but driving remains important for older people as they age. The conditions that increase an older person's risk of death or serious injury as a driver – such as age-related frailty and slower recovery from injury (Li et al., 2003; Oxley, 2009) – also increase vulnerability as a pedestrian (Oxley, 2009). Giving up driving is associated with significant adverse effects on older adults' physical and mental health, such as feelings of loss and dependence (Mullen & Bédard (2009), increased social isolation (Ragland et al., 2004), depression (Caragata et al., 2009; Fildes, 1997; Marattoli et al., 2000; Unsworth, 2009), and an increased risk of moving to an aged care facility (Freeman et al., 2006, cited in Caragata et al., 2009).

Authorities have called for communication campaigns to raise public awareness of issues related to safe driving and ageing (WHO, 2015; OECD, 2001) but such campaigns present a key challenge: how to raise public awareness of issues related to road safety and ageing without adversely

affecting the community's view of older people. The World Health Authority's 2015 *Report on Ageing and Health* warned that stereotypes of older people as forgetful and less able to learn and make decisions are prevalent in society, including among older people themselves, their families and health and other care providers (WHO, 2015). The organisation (2015, p. 175) highlighted the importance of challenging stereotypes by improving 'knowledge of and understanding about' the process of ageing.

Journalism is a disseminator of information (Tuchman, 1978) and, as such, has the potential to play an important role. Journalism can enhance public awareness by providing medical information in an easily understood form, disseminating public health messages and creating forums for people to share their stories (Phillips & Lindgren, 2010). 'Personal stories, which engage listeners and readers in an immediate and emotional way, can provide a more telling warning than impersonal health messages.' (Phillips & Lindgren, 2010, p. 200). The daily print media, however, focuses more on action than reflection and seldom has space to explore complex issues in detail (Ricketson, 2014). Equally, journalistic stories have the potential to impact negatively on issues.

Researchers in the fields of road safety and ageing have argued that the media contributes to public misconceptions about the risk posed by older drivers through its high level of attention on road fatalities involving this age group (Langford, 2009; OECD, 2001). Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Economics (BITRE) statistics reveal that road deaths for the over 65 age groups increased significantly between 2008 and 2017 but the increase was 'consistent with a growing older population as there has been a slight decline over the decade in the rate per 100,000 population'. (BITRE, 2018). In the same period total deaths for all road users in Australia fell from 1437 in 2008 to 1226 in 2017 (BITRE, 2018a), with significant decreases in deaths for age groups under 40 years. However, analysis of the statistics reveals that 24% of fatalities for those aged 75 and over were pedestrians, compared to 18% for the 65-74 age group and 7% for those aged 17-25. Passengers made up 20% of fatalities in the two older age groups and 25% for the youngest; and drivers represented 51% of fatalities for those aged 75 and over, 40% for the 65-74 age group and 49% for those aged 17-25. Decreasing the number of older drivers may not necessarily decrease total fatalities if the safety of older people as passengers and pedestrians does not improve.

Road safety researchers have also pointed to the disjunct between the media's calls for increased restrictions on older drivers (Charlton et al., 2009; OECD, 2001) and advice from road transport and medical experts that compulsory age-based assessment does not improve road safety (Hakamies-Blomqvist, 2004; Langford, 2009; Langford et al., 2008a; Langford et al., 2008b; OECD, 2001) and may be discriminatory (Charlton et al., 2009).

This paper is based on a study of how older drivers and issues relevant to them were presented in Australia's mainstream print media. The aim was to see what issues

related to driving and ageing were covered, from what angle and who was quoted. The study formed part of a larger PhD research project on older drivers. The aim of the PhD project is to produce a non-fiction book as a resource for older drivers, their families and those working with them. The book will include experiences related to driving and ageing from these groups to help broaden awareness of issues around safe driving for an ageing population.

Methods

The study involved qualitative and quantitative analyses of 11 daily newspapers: *The Australian*; *The Canberra Times* (ACT); *Adelaide Advertiser* (South Australia); *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane); *Hobart Mercury* (Tasmania); *Daily Telegraph* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* (New South Wales); *The Age* and *Herald Sun* (Victoria); *Northern Territory News* (Northern Territory); and *West Australian* (Western Australia). Articles were selected using the Factiva and Newsbank databases and four search terms: 'older driver', 'older drivers', 'elderly driver' and 'elderly drivers'.

The study covered four periods: 2010-2014 (inclusive), 2015, 2016 and 2017. The period 2010-2014 included several high-profile fatality and serious injury crashes involving older drivers in Queensland, which introduced mandatory medical examinations for drivers aged 75 and over from January 1, 2014. Another fatality crash involving an elderly driver occurred in NSW in 2016. The search was repeated for the periods 2015, 2016 and 2017 to see if newspaper coverage changed following Queensland's adoption of tighter regulations for older drivers in 2014 and changes to licensing regulations in South Australia and Tasmania in the same year.

South Australia abolished compulsory medical tests from September 1, 2014 for drivers aged 70 and over who held car licences only. The state introduced a self-assessed annual medical form from July 2015, to be completed by drivers at age 75, to notify the Transport Department of medical conditions such as arthritis, eye problems, diabetes and mental health issues. Tasmania abolished compulsory annual medical tests for drivers aged 75 and over, who did not have a pre-existing condition affecting driving, from October 2014.

The 11 newspapers analysed, represented all Australian state and territory capitals. The study examined how issues related to older drivers were framed, the sources quoted and use of keywords, stock phrases and stereotypes. Framing involves selecting some aspects of an issue or situation and making them 'more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described' (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

Such an examination is important. Framing affects whether information about an issue is considered newsworthy or not: the 'principles of selection and rejection ensure that only information material seen as legitimate within the conventions of newsworthiness appears in the account'

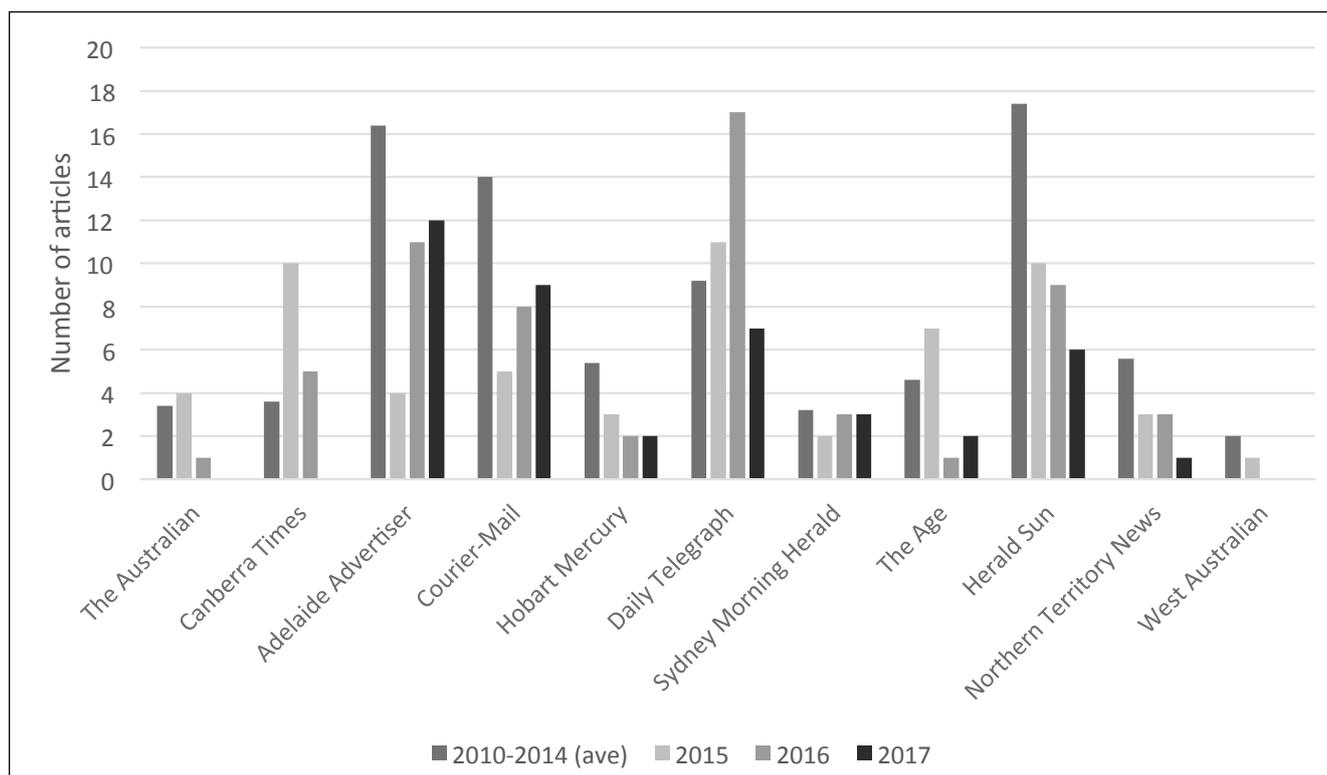


Figure 1. Number of articles, by newspaper, 2010-2014 (average p.a.), 2016, 2017

(Zelizer & Allan, 2010, p. 48). Repeated association of negative images with a community group can impact on the way issues affecting them are viewed (Gerbner et al, 1986, cited in Baker et al.). Such negative images 'influence decision-making, choices about public policy and public attitudes and behaviours' (WHO, 2015, p. 159). The sources journalists choose to quote are also important. Citing outside sources allows journalists to 'borrow from the credibility of others and to demonstrate they have done their due diligence in seeking out relevant interviewees' (Benson & Wood, 20015, p. 805).

News stories, features and commentary were included. Most linguistic analysis of print newspapers includes the 'news' section (Bednarek & Caple, 2012). Examples include Baker et al.'s (2013) study of representations of Muslims and Islam in the British national press (2013) and Blood et al.'s (2003) analysis of representations of illegal drugs in the Australian press. Larkin et al's (2008) study – of media coverage of crashes which left a child, Sophie Delezio, seriously injured – omitted from analysis of news stories text that repeated details of the child's injuries and crash location (Larkin et al, 2008). This research project has taken a different approach, retaining similar repetition in the texts analysed as repetition reinforced the representation of older drivers presented. News stories provide prominent coverage of issues related to older drivers and as such are potentially an important source of influence on society's perception of older people.

Commentary was included as it was an important part of the debate about older drivers. Car reviews were also retained

as they indicated the aspect of the car that the journalist was suggesting as relevant to older drivers. Reader comments, such as letters to the editor, were excluded, as were articles that clearly were not about drivers aged 60 and over, such as those on motor racing.

The search returned 424 relevant articles (172,870 words) from 2010-2014 (inclusive), an average of 85 articles per year; 60 articles (29,347 words) from 2015; 60 articles (29,966 words) from 2016; and 42 articles (22,671 words) from 2017. Figure 1 summarises the data for 2010-2014 (average per year), 2015, 2016 and 2017. Content analysed included headlines and text but not graphic elements such as photographs and diagrams. The unit of analysis was the article, as analysis in discourse studies usually focuses on the 'structures and strategies of a whole event' rather than the word or sentence (van Dijk, 2009a, p. 192).

A random sample of 10% of the articles from 2010-2014 was produced. Topics present and sources directly and indirectly quoted in the random sample were coded by the first author and her two PhD supervisors to calculate inter-coder reliability. The inter-coder reliability results for the coding of topics from the random sample are summarised in Table 1. The inter-coder reliability results for the coding of sources are summarised in Table 2.

The first author re-coded the random sample to calculate the intra-coder reliability, which was 100% for all topics except 'solution' (97%). The intra-coder reliability for sources was lower: Source 1, 82%; Source 2, 85%; Quote 1, 87%; Quote 2, 92%. The first author reviewed the random sample, listing

Table 1. Inter-coder reliability for cross-coding of 40-article random sample

Topics	Road safety risk	Assessment	Regulation	Incident	Solution	Effect on older drivers	Discrimination	Frailty
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Inter-coder reliability	82	97	87	85	82	68	97	100

all sources named and researched to clarify which category they represented. Similar source categories were grouped together, reducing the categories from 15 to the seven used for the full analysis. These were based on those used in similar studies, such as Benson & Wood (2015).

The source coding exercise was repeated, resulting in intra-coder reliability of 100%.

Six topics were added for the final analysis: (6) fatality and serious injury crash statistics; (7) advice on suitable cars for older drivers; (11) taking away the keys; (12) using the accelerator instead of the brakes; (13) road rage; (14) the role of family and friends. The first author then coded the full database for 2010-2014 (inclusive) and the databases for 2015, 2016 and 2017. Results were recorded in Excel spreadsheets using binary coding, allowing use of Pivot tables to aid interpretation. The coding produced descriptive statistics to report frequencies for each of the relevant variables.

Coding of topics

A list of topics relevant to older drivers was produced from analysis of peer-reviewed journal articles on older drivers from researchers in fields such as gerontology and road safety as well as initial reading of the 424 articles from 2010-2014. The articles were coded according to the presence or absence of these topics.

The topics were: (1) whether older drivers were a road safety risk or not; (2) assessment of driving competency; (3) driving regulation, both by licensing authorities and older drivers themselves (self-regulation); (4) specific driving incidents involving older drivers; (5) solutions, other than punitive measures, such as improved road infrastructure and older driver education; (6) fatality and serious injury crash statistics; (7) advice on suitable cars for older drivers; (8) effect of driving cessation on older drivers; (9) discrimination; (10) frailty; (11) taking away the keys; (12) using the accelerator instead of the brakes; (13) road rage; (14) the role of family and friends.

Coding of sources

Table 2. Inter-coder reliability for cross-coding of 40-article random sample

Sources	First source mentioned	Second source mentioned	First source directly quoted	Second source directly quoted
	%	%	%	%
Inter-coder reliability	45	55	80	85

Sources can range from government officials to ordinary citizens or official records (Harrower, 2013). Direct quotes present exactly what the person said; indirect quotes summarise or paraphrase what the person said but must retain the source's meaning and sentiment (Lamble, 2011).

Sources included (1) government-related representatives, such as politicians, bureaucrats and other official spokespeople; (2) legal sources, including police, judges and lawyers; (3) experts, including academics and medical spokespersons; (4) influence or lobby groups representatives; (5) business representatives; (6) media; and (7) ordinary citizens (unaffiliated individuals). The source was coded as 'media' when opinions were clearly presented as the views of the editor or journalist, such as in editorials, car reviews and commentary. Where sources fitted more than one category they were recorded in the category that best summed up the capacity in which they were represented in the article. Where the source category was unclear, no category was recorded.

The analysis of articles from 2010-2014 included quotes from official reports as sources. To gain a clearer view of the voices heard, the analyses of articles from 2015, 2016 and 2017 only included people who were quoted, not reports and similar published texts. Coding of legal and political sources and ordinary citizens was straightforward but coding of representatives of semi-government bodies, lobby groups and some business associations was more problematic as it required detailed knowledge of the sector the organisation represented. The first author overcame this difficulty by recording sources' names and affiliated organisations and researching online to clarify the category the source represented where this was unclear. Readers may also have difficulty recognising the sector such sources represent, particularly when a source is affiliated with more than one organisation. For example, Val French was the spokesperson for Queensland lobby group Older People Speak Out but was also a member of the Queensland Government's Ministerial Road Safety Advisory Committee.

Results

Articles on older drivers appeared sporadically in all four

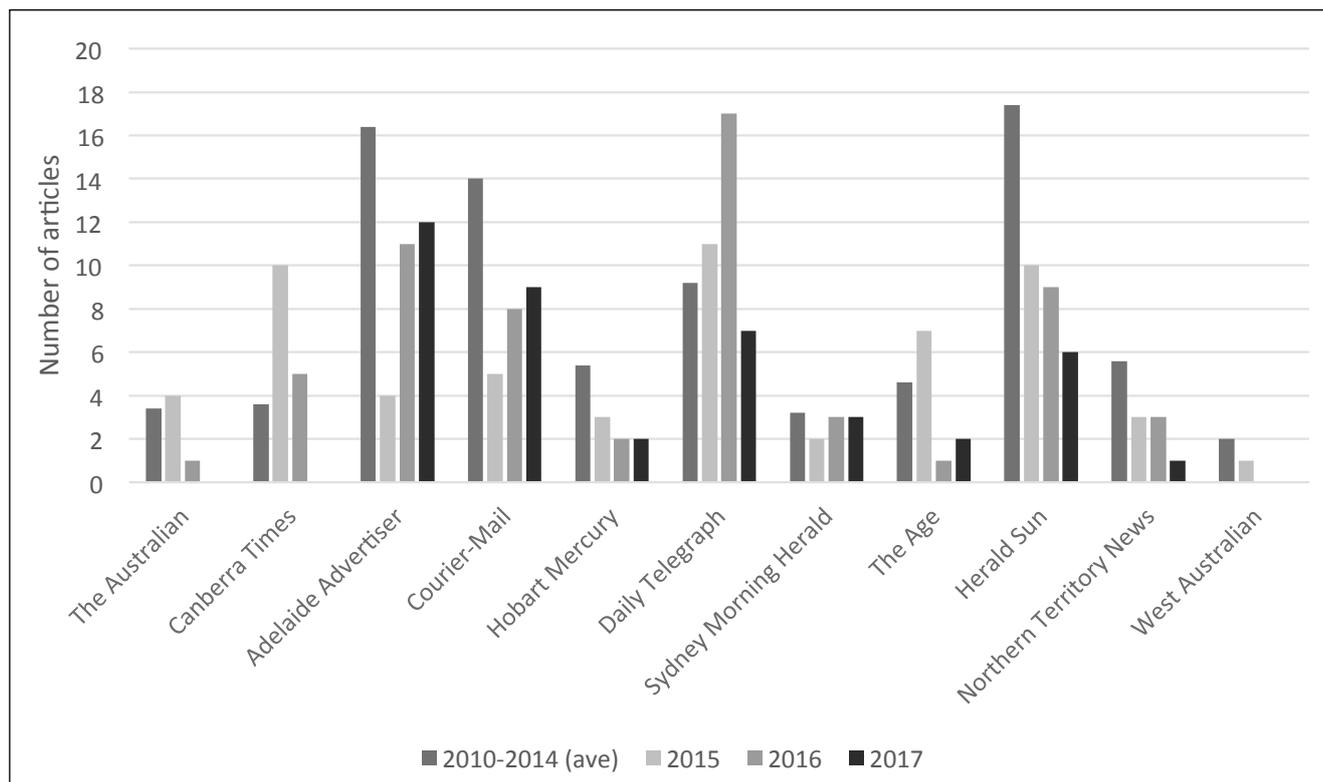


Figure 2. Content topics, by article, 2010-2014; 2015; 2016; 2017

periods. Use of pivot tables in Excel revealed articles clustered in the *Courier-Mail* (Queensland), *Advertiser* (South Australia) and *Herald Sun* (Victoria) in response to fatality and serious injury crashes in 2010-2014. Similar clustering occurred in the *Advertiser* and *Daily Telegraph* (NSW) in 2016 but was not apparent in content analysis results for 2015 and 2017. The search returned fewer articles in 2015, 2016 and 2017 than the average for 2010-2014 but the decline was not uniform across the newspapers. *Herald Sun* articles fell from an average of 17 in 2010-2014 to 10 in 2015, 9 in 2016 and 6 in 2017; *Daily Telegraph* articles increased from an average of 9 in 2010-2014 to 11 in 2015 and 17 in 2016 before falling to 7 in 2017. The 2017 search returned no articles from *The Australian*, *Canberra Times* and *West Australian*. Figure 1 summarises the number of articles, by newspaper, for the four periods, including the average per year for the period 2010-2014 to facilitate comparison of the three period. Articles appeared most frequently in the *Daily Telegraph*, *Herald Sun* and *Canberra Times* (10 articles) in 2015 but in the other three periods, the *Advertiser*, *Courier-Mail*, *Herald-Sun* and *Daily Telegraph* topped the list.

Topics

Whether older drivers posed a threat to public safety on the roads or not was the most common topic in all four periods, appearing in almost two-thirds of articles in 2010-2014 and more than three-quarters in 2015, 2016 and 2017. About a third discussed assessment of older drivers in 2010-2014, 2015 and 2016, although this fell to just under a quarter in 2017. Regulation of drivers' licences was mentioned in more than a quarter of articles in 2015 and about a third in the other three periods. These three topics appeared together in 25% of articles in 2010-2014 and 2015, 32% in 2016 and 24% in 2017.

About a quarter of the articles referred to specific driving incidents involving older drivers in 2010-2014, rising to close to half in 2015 before dropping to a third in 2016 and slightly more than a fifth in 2017. Almost a quarter of the articles from 2010-2014 mentioned fatality and serious injury crash statistics but only 8% mentioned the 'frailty bias' – the contribution of frailty to the over-representation of older people in those statistics. About a third of articles mentioned crash statistics in 2015 and 2016 and more than a quarter in 2017 but references to frailty fell to 3% of articles in 2015, 5% in 2016 and 2% in 2017.

Stock phrases about taking 'the keys' off older drivers appeared in less than 3% of the articles in 2010-2014 and 2% of articles in 2015, 2016 and 2017. Use of catch phrases related to hitting the accelerator instead of the brake occurred in less than 5% of articles in 2010-2014 but rose to

13% of articles in 2015, fell to less than 2% in 2016 and rose again to 7% in 2017. References to older driver car choice were rare in 2010-2014, occurring in just 8% of articles but this category has increased steadily through the periods analysed, rising to 12% of articles in 2015, 23% in 2016 and 26% in 2017. However, most were car reviews involving brief mentions of older drivers in very long articles. Other topics were noted but occurred in too few articles to be recorded as separate categories, including calls for special plates for older drivers' cars. Figure 2 shows the topics most frequently present in articles for the four periods plus the topic 'frailty'.

The newspapers publishing most articles on road incidents involving older drivers were all tabloids. These included the *Courier-Mail* (31 articles), *Herald Sun* (23), *Daily Telegraph* (17) and *Adelaide Advertiser* (12) in the five-year period 2010-2014; *Herald Sun* (7 articles) and *Daily Telegraph* (6) in 2015; *Daily Telegraph* (8), *Adelaide Advertiser* (3) and *Herald Sun* (3) in 2016; and *Courier-Mail* (3) in 2017. Those publishing most articles on assessment of older drivers were also tabloids: the *Courier-Mail* (31), *Adelaide Advertiser* (28) and *Herald Sun* (27) in the five-year period 2010-2014; *Herald Sun* (7) and *Daily Telegraph* (6) in 2015; *Daily Telegraph* (8), *Adelaide Advertiser* (3) and *Herald Sun* (3) in 2016; and *Courier-Mail* (3) and *Adelaide Advertiser* (2) in 2017.

Sources

In the five-year period 2010-2014, 367 articles (87%) indirectly quoted at least one source and 285 articles (67%) used at least one direct quote. In 2015, 58 articles (97%) used at least one indirect quote and 39 (65%) had at least one direct quote from a source. In 2016, 54 articles (90%) used at least one indirect quote and 38 (63%) had at least one direct quote from a source. In 2017, 35 articles (83%) included at least one indirect quote and 27 articles (64%) included at least one direct quote.

The first source indirectly quoted in each article was tallied. The top groups for 2010-2014 were legal sources such as police (74 articles, 17%) and ordinary citizens (73 articles, 17%), which included witnesses to crashes and other driving incidents as well as crash victims and their family and friends, and drivers of various ages. In 2015, legal sources, specifically police, topped the list (23 articles, 40%), followed by the media (8 articles, 14%), academic and other expert sources (7 articles, 12%), government and other official sources, such as emergency service representatives (7 articles, 12%). Legal sources topped the list again in 2016 (15 articles, 25%) followed by ordinary citizens (11 articles, 18%), which included witnesses and others. In 2017, however, the top group was the media. The first statement of opinion was from a journalist or editor in 13 articles (31%). This total included eight car reviews by the newspapers' motoring writers. Academics and other experts (5 articles, 12%) followed with ordinary citizens, business representatives, legal sources and government sources each the first indirectly quoted source in 4 articles (10%).

Ordinary citizens were the first source directly quoted in 74 articles (17%) from 2010-2014, followed by government sources (46 articles, 11%). In 2015, legal sources were quoted first in 13 articles (33%), followed by government and emergency service representatives (7 articles, 18%) and academics and other experts (6 articles). In 2016, legal sources were quoted first in 10 articles (17%), followed by ordinary citizens and representatives of lobby groups, both of which were the first quoted sources in 7 articles (12%). In 2017, ordinary citizens were the first sources directly quoted in 10 articles (24%), followed by business sources (8 articles, 19%).

Headlines

Use of age-related keywords in headlines was recorded. The term 'older drivers' appeared 48 times in headlines in 2010-2014, 3 times in 2015, 8 times in 2016 and 3 times in 2017. The results for use of the other search terms in headlines were: 'elderly drivers' 12, 2, 0, 1; 'older driver' 1, 0, 0, 0; and 'elderly driver' 22, 3, 1, 1. Use of other age-related keywords in headlines was also noted, including 'elderly motorists', 'old drivers' and 'seniors'. Table 3 includes examples of headlines that drew a clear link between age and risk.

Articles were analysed qualitatively but not classified quantitatively as positive, negative or neutral. Quantitative classification of the whole article would involve analysing each sentence and including a weighting for its position in the article. Position is important in journalism. Headlines and the largest image are the first things readers notice on the printed page, followed by captions, then finally an article's text; few people read articles to the end (Stark, 2012; Paul, 2007). Headlines were analysed quantitatively according to how older and elderly drivers were portrayed, with neutral the default if the headline was not clearly positive or negative. Most headlines were neutral across all four periods. The percentage of negative headlines peaked in 2010-2014 and 2016 but they outnumbered positive ones in all four periods. The results were neutral 75%, negative 22% and positive 3% in 2010-2014; neutral 88%, negative 12% and positive zero in 2015; neutral 77%, negative 23% and positive zero in 2016; and neutral 88%, negative 5% and positive 7% in 2017. Negative headlines occurred most frequently in the *Courier-Mail* in 2010-2014, particularly in 2011. Examples included 'Seniors in denial over driver risk' (4/12/11), 'Elderly driver of crash car escapes jail – No recollection of hitting woman who had to have leg amputated' (30/6/11), and 'Senior drivers again under scrutiny as toll overtakes last year's figure' (3/10/11). However, negative headlines were not restricted to the tabloids. 'Elderly dying like teens used to' (*The Age*, 2/1/14), 'Elderly drivers as dangerous as young hoon because cognitive, physical abilities diminish' (*The Age*, 4/5/15) and 'Elderly drivers as dangerous as hoon' (*Canberra Times*, 4/5/15) were published in former broadsheets. The *Daily Telegraph* used neutral headlines to represent older drivers in 2016 despite publishing more articles on road incidents involving the cohort than any of the other newspapers.

Table 3. Some headlines drew a clear link between age and risk

Headline	Newspaper	Date
Too many old drivers have a licence to kill	<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	4/12/11
Seniors in denial over road risk	<i>Courier-Mail</i>	4/12/11
Older drivers a road menace	<i>Herald Sun</i>	19/8/14
Elderly drivers as dangerous as young hoons because cognitive, physical abilities diminish	<i>The Age</i>	4/5/15
Elderly drivers as dangerous as hoons	<i>Canberra Times</i>	4/5/15
For safety's sake, test older drivers	<i>Herald Sun</i>	19/2/16
Safety focus needs to shift to older drivers	<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>	15/9/16
Driving is a privilege. Many older drivers have lost their ability and are a danger to themselves and others	<i>Advertiser</i>	22/9/16
Elderly drivers on the nose	<i>Herald Sun</i>	9/12/17
Put brakes on old drivers	<i>Courier Mail</i>	3/12/17
Can't teach an old biker new tricks	<i>Sun Herald</i>	24/12/17

Discussion

The newspaper analysis supported concerns that the media inflated the risk posed by older drivers through its attention on road fatalities (Langford, 2009; OECD, 2001). However, the attention to road incidents went beyond news stories on fatality crashes, as qualitative analysis revealed. Newspaper editors make choices in the way a particular topic is presented. The choices can result in overstatement for dramatic effect and impact the way information is emphasised or de-emphasised, what van Dijk (2009a, p. 195) terms 'structural transformations'. Such effects contribute to the way an article is framed, using Entman's definition of framing as selecting 'some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text' (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

The media commonly presents issues in terms of problems, causes and solutions. Benson & Wood (2015), for example, noted 'problem' frames, 'causal' frames and 'solution' frames in their study of British press coverage of immigration. However, one frame or aspect of the issue dominated the articles analysed on older drivers: representations of older drivers as a problem for society in terms of safety. Almost two-thirds of the articles discussed older drivers and issues related to them in terms of a safety risk to other road users or themselves in 2010-2014, increasing to more than three-quarters of articles in 2015, 2016 and 2017. Mandatory age-based assessment of older drivers was the most frequently presented solution, as road safety researchers had earlier noted (Charlton et al., 2009; OECD, 2001) but few articles specified appropriate tests. About a third of the articles discussed assessment of older drivers in 2010-2014, 2015 and 2016, falling to just under a quarter in 2017. Regulation of where and when people drove, predominantly focused on legislative regulation, was mentioned in about a third of articles in all periods except 2015 when slightly more than a quarter raised this issue. These three topics appeared together in 25% of articles

in 2010-2014 and 2015, 32% in 2016 and 24% in 2017, more frequently than any other cluster of topics, indicating application of a public risk frame for coverage of issues related to older drivers, rather than frames focusing on causes or less punitive solutions.

More than a quarter of articles in 2010-2014 referred to specific driving incidents involving older drivers, rising to almost half in 2015, before falling to a third in 2016 and less than a quarter in 2017. Three crashes involving elderly drivers dominated coverage in 2010-2014 and 2016, igniting calls for tougher restrictions on older drivers. Two resulted in the death and serious injury of pedestrians in Queensland; the third involved the death of a cyclist in NSW. Pedestrian Ali France sustained serious injuries that resulted in the amputation of part of one leg when she was hit by a car in a car park in Queensland in 2011. France was a former *Courier-Mail* journalist and the daughter of then-Queensland state MP Peter Lawlor. Kerryn Blucher and her unborn child died when the young mother was hit by a car in Queensland in 2012. Cyclist Maria Defino died after she was hit by a car in NSW in 2013. Newspaper reports at the time quoted police stating the elderly driver had lost control of her car after suffering a seizure. Several articles included summaries of traffic incidents involving elderly drivers, including 'Leadfoot oldie, Spate of car accidents triggers a caution for the elderly' (*Herald Sun*, 17/7/13). Aggregating traffic incidents reminded readers of the events but the repetition also exaggerated the danger posed by older drivers. Repetition strengthens an image until it becomes the commonly held view, having a long-term effect that begins small but compounds over time 'as a result of the repetition of images and concepts' (Baker et al, 2013).

The risk posed by older drivers to themselves and other road users was further distorted by reporting of traffic incidents involving older drivers even when no fatality or serious injury occurred. When a man, 90, lost control of his car at Sydney's Bondi Beach in February 2014, for example,

the story appeared in *The Australian* ('Rain saves the day as elderly driver avoids Bondi Beach crowds', 5/2/14), Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* ('Bondi beached', 5/2/14) and Brisbane's *Courier-Mail* ('Beachfront park sparks panic, foreshore', 5/2/14). The Brisbane headline gave no indication that the incident was not local. Another incident involved an elderly woman in Victoria, who became lost after dropping her son at Melbourne Airport in 2012 and ended up sitting in her car, teetering above a ravine almost 200km from home. The incident was reported in the *Herald Sun* ('A woman on the edge, Elderly driver's wrong turns almost end in disaster' 16/8/12). The headline's keywords – 'woman', 'elderly driver', 'wrong turns' and 'disaster' – emphasised age, gender and cognitive decline. The article included no expert opinion or advice. The unusual nature of an elderly woman's predicament became news to entertain rather than inform.

Traffic incidents and crashes involving older drivers sparked interest in testing the cohort, despite research suggesting that compulsory age-based assessment does not improve road safety (Hakamies-Blomqvist, 2004; Langford, 2009; Langford et al., 2008a; Langford et al., 2008b; OECD, 2001). A *Courier-Mail* article ('Car crashes into fence' (22/9/12), for example, stated that an elderly driver had lost control of her car and crashed through a fence while following an ambulance taking her husband to hospital. Readers were not told until paragraph four that the crash occurred as the driver was backing out of her carport and the fence she hit was her side fence. The second paragraph had reminded readers of the death of Queensland pedestrian Kerryn Blucher and her unborn child several weeks before. The third paragraph had called for more rigorous tests for older drivers. A crash in which no-one was injured was linked to an on-going campaign for tighter age-based assessment of older drivers. One elderly driver crashed into her own side fence. Another pleaded guilty to dangerous operation of a vehicle causing death (ABC, 2014). Linking such events suggested the crashes had a common cause – the drivers' ages – misrepresenting the risk posed by older drivers. The headlines used, the way stories were told, the types of words repeatedly associated with older or elderly drivers in news articles, features and opinion pieces contributed to a perception that the cohort was a threat to community safety.

In-depth articles discussing issues related to driving and ageing appeared most frequently in 2010-2014, when 14 articles included at least eight of the topic categories, compared to six articles in 2015, two in 2016 and three in 2017. They included 'In for the long haul' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 8/1/10) and 'Who will be driving Mrs Davis'

(*Courier-Mail*, 5/11/13), which mentioned the effect of frailty on older people in crashes and featured a 100-year-old driver and her son. The *Sydney Morning Herald* article also discussed the effect of frailty, as well as health issues affecting driving ability, the need to retain mobility where possible as people age and the economic cost to society of restrictions on older drivers.

Comprehensive articles, however, were not always so positive in their depiction of older drivers. 'No need for speed – Ageing population forces rethink on road' (*Courier-Mail*, 7/10/12) focused on a recently released Queensland Government's Older Driver Safety Advisory Committee report. Its lead (in this case the opening sentence) stated that the government was reviewing speed limits because older people 'like to drive slowly'. Such an explanation would hardly endear older drivers to the broader population. The article further stated that 'experts' had given the government recommendations to prepare for a 'tsunami of ageing motorists', clearly presenting the ageing population as an impending disaster.

Articles that stood out from the basic news stories on crashes and road incidents included 'Some models more prone to prangs' (*The Australian*, 10/1/15), which reported on the over-representation in crashes of small cars, such as those popular with older and younger drivers; and 'GPs wary on drive bans' (*Herald Sun*, 7/2/12), which presented the results of a survey of general practitioners on medical tests for older drivers. This was an aspect of the assessment debate that most articles ignored. The *Herald Sun* also published articles from road safety experts, such as 'Keeping older drivers on the road is the test', (Charlton, *Herald Sun*, 18/7/13) and 'Should there be mandatory testing for older drivers?', (Congiu, *Sunday Herald Sun*, 24/6/12). Such articles highlighted important information that was under-represented in most of the articles analysed.

Frailty of older people is acknowledged as a major contributor to death and serious injury in crashes for the age group (Li, 2003; Langford, 2009; Whelan, et al., 2006) yet the number of articles referring to the effect of frailty on crash outcome fell from 8% in 2010-2014 to 2% in 2017, despite an increase in the number of articles discussing road fatality and serious injury crash statistics. Failing to acknowledge the frailty bias may contribute to the public's distorted view of older drivers and the risk they pose for other road users. Articles on road fatality statistics focused on drivers, particularly the older and youngest age groups. However, statistics present total fatalities for drivers, pedestrians, passengers, motor cyclists, bicyclists and their pillion passengers. Table 4 shows 2017 statistics for driver,

Table 4. Road fatalities by road user, 2017, based on analysis of BITRE (2018a)

Road user	Drivers	Passengers	Pedestrians	Total
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
Age 75 and over	89 (51)	34 (20)	41 (24)	174 (100)
Age 65-74	47 (40)	24 (20)	21 (18)	118 (100)
Age 17-25	112 (49)	57 (25)	15 (7)	230 (100)

passenger and pedestrian fatalities in the youngest and oldest age groups. Almost a quarter of elderly road fatalities were pedestrians.

Headlines may further contribute to distorted public perceptions of the risk posed by older drivers, as well as contributing to an ‘us’ and ‘them’ division. The succinct summaries at the top of articles are among the tools newspapers use to attract readers. Most people read headlines before captions and the article’s text (Stark, 2012; Paul, 2007). Verbs are ‘the headline writer’s friend’ and those used in headlines should not only describe an action but also ‘demonstrate a mood, an emotion and a characteristic’ (Downman, 2008, p. 76). However, such newspaper conventions aimed at attracting readers to an article have the potential to promote social division, particularly when verbs such as ‘kill’ are used in headlines that focus on the age of drivers. Two headlines from the same newspaper illustrated the difference between a headline focused on a driver’s age and one focused on a specific crash: ‘Elderly driver on trial for killing’ (*Courier-Mail*, 7/6/13) and ‘Death driver walks free’ (*Courier-Mail*, 12/2/14). Both described actions related to the same fatal crash. The first drew attention to the driver’s age, the second did not.

Pronouns used in headlines may imply division of a newspaper’s readership. ‘Get them off the road – Seniors fight push for elderly drivers to hand licences in’ (Herald Sun, 20/2/12), for example, divided readers into ‘them’ (seniors) and an implied ‘us’. ‘Brakes on our oldies – 80 seniors a week forced to surrender licences – Families, doctors urged to do in seniors’ (Herald Sun, 12/8/13) implied responsibility for ‘our oldies’ in a way that disempowers them. The verb ‘do in’ in the headline is also an example of how word-choice can derail a message.

Newspaper headlines tend to include short words, active verbs and references to people (Layton, 2011). Short verbs can convey meaning precisely but take up little space. They are used in body text for the same reason. An article in 2016 informed readers that VicRoads wanted families, doctors and carers to ‘do in anyone they know whose faculties are failing’ (For safety’s sake, test older drivers, *Herald Sun*, February 19, 2016). The verb ‘do in’ has negative cultural overtones, making its use to describe the process for reporting at-risk drivers to licensing authorities problematic.

Researchers argued that comprehensive assessment of driving requires specialised training (Dickerson, 2014) but there was a shortage of trained assessors (Charlton et al., 2009). They further reported that common tests to screen drivers were unable to predict driving performance and future crash risk with sufficient accuracy to be reliable mass screening tools (Bedard, 2008). Such issues received scant coverage. When governments proposed changing licensing regulations to reflect published research results, however, the issue became newsworthy.

The South Australian government’s proposal to ease medical requirements for drivers aged 70 and over in 2014 was front page news in *The Adelaide Advertiser* (‘New drive for

elderly to self test’, 3/9/14) and discussed further on page 4 (‘No tests for old drivers’). The proposed change also allowed self-assessment of driving capability if a driver had no relevant pre-diagnosed medical conditions. The headline above an opinion piece – ‘We can’t rely on safety of test-yourself drivers’ (5/9/14) – was consistent with the ‘older driver risk’ frame noted above, despite the proposal reflecting Austroads’ guidelines suggesting all drivers notify their licensing authority of medical conditions likely to affect their safe driving (Austroads, 2016). News about bad aspects of ‘them’, particularly against people like ‘us’, are considered more salient than the reverse (van Dijk, 2009a). The article focused on *older drivers* rather than *all drivers* with notifiable medical conditions and presented a stereotyped image of old people with poor motor skills, slow reaction times and vision that was ‘kaput’.

Use of ‘older drivers’ and similar terms as keywords or labels linked incidents to more serious crashes and contributed to the perception of older people as incompetent, unpredictable and dangerous. Treating them as a homogeneous group also ignored differences in age, gender, level of physical and mental capacity, and socioeconomic status as well as the effects of environmental factors, such as differences in road infrastructure and transport depending on where they live.

Stereotyping for dramatic effect

The representation of older drivers depends, however, not just on the topics discussed but on how the discussion unfolds. Discourse analysis revealed significant differences between two articles – ‘Still here, still driving’ (*The Age*, 13/3/14) and ‘Too many old drivers have a licence to kill’ (*Sunday Telegraph*, 4/12/11) – both of which included in-depth coverage of issues related to driving and ageing. The *Age* article focused on an older driver who was ‘mindful of the responsibility of being an older driver’; the *Sunday Telegraph* article presented an anecdote from the columnist about being missed ‘by inches’ by a car driven by a man ‘so old he possibly didn’t even know he was in a car’. The columnist wrote about an elderly driver who ‘looked like he was 90 in the shade’, wore thick glasses and drove with ‘his neck stuck forward’ and ‘squinting through the windscreen’, and about a second ‘old man, face pressed up against the glass again’ who ‘happily coasted through’ a pedestrian crossing while the journalist waited to cross.

Such descriptions are examples of overstatement for dramatic effect, one of the structural transformations discussed by van Dijk (2009a). The overstatement emphasised poor cognitive skills and bad eyesight, details about the drivers that the journalist could not actually know. Such anecdotes present negative personal experiences as ‘objective proof’ (van Dijk, 2009b, p. 207), promoting a stereotype of elderly drivers as poor decision-makers with poor eyesight, reminiscent of the cartoon character Mr Magoo, as noted by Larkin et al. (2008).

Qualitative analysis revealed the difference in tone between the two articles, quantitative analysis did not. *The Age* article presented a series of quotes from expert sources,

including a comment from MUARC spokesman Brian Fildes that age-based testing of drivers is discriminatory. The statement was offered without direct response from the journalist. The *Sunday Telegraph* article, by contrast, quoted a comment from Older People Speak Out spokeswoman Val French from a report on driver's licence regulations in Queensland, in which Ms French expressed frustration with discrimination against older people. The quote was followed by a comment from the journalist that 'Val should look up from her knitting' and read a paragraph from a NSW study on car driver fatalities. The journalist treated her in the way Tuchman et al. (1978) noted that the US media treated women in the 1970s – trivialising them and dismissing them 'to the protective confines of the home' (Tuchman et al., 1978). Such gender-based and ageist stereotyping was not indicative of all newspapers analysed. The *Sunday Telegraph* article ran in other states ('Seniors in denial over road risk', *Sunday Courier*, 4/12/11); 'Seniors can't all be allowed at wheel', *Sunday Herald Sun*, 4/12/11) but the versions published in the *Sunday Herald Sun* and *Sunday Mail* omitted the Val French quote and the knitting reference.

Conclusion

The driver licensing system in most Australian states relies on families, police and medical professionals notifying the driver licensing authority of at-risk drivers, although it is not compulsory for third parties to do so (Charlton et al, 2009). Public education is needed to raise community awareness of the importance of identifying at-risk drivers. The challenge is to raise awareness without adversely affecting the mobility of safe drivers. Reducing the number of at-risk drivers is a whole-community task, requiring respectful treatment of older people whose skill set makes driving a danger to them and other road users.

This study is the first to focus broadly on Australian mainstream print media coverage of older drivers and issues related to them, rather than on coverage of specific high profile crashes involving the cohort. It included commentary as well as news and features, as print media commentators were an important part of the debate about mass age-based screening of drivers. Its results suggest that the decline in negative headlines from 2016 to 2017 is a step towards improving social cohesion. The study has also shown that articles in mainstream newspapers in Australia appear too infrequently to address adequately the identified need for community education. Analysis revealed that the newspapers that published the most articles on older drivers were also those most likely to report crashes and other road incidents involving the cohort. The predicted increase in older drivers was predominantly framed as a risk to public and individual safety, to be tackled through punitive measures rather than through economic or social measures, resulting in coverage of a narrow range of information.

The study did not examine representations of older drivers and issues related to them in other forms of traditional media, such as radio and television. Nor did it explore portrayal of the cohort online, such as on the websites of mainstream media organisations, in social media and in podcasts. Googling 'older driver shop window', however, in

October 2018 produced more than 5 million results in less than a minute, indicating at least one aspect of ageing and mobility is receiving attention online. Examining what sort of attention is fertile ground for further research.

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