

How important is community support to the success of the National Road Safety Strategy?

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Sir Robert Peel is regarded as the father of modern policing. He developed a set of principles to guide the emerging Metropolitan Police in the London of the 1800s. Included in his set of principles was the observation that ‘The ability of the police to perform their duties is dependent upon the public approval of police actions’. This concept remains current across modern policing organisations and, if you visit the homepage of the New Westminster Police Service you will see the principle prominently displayed as part of their mission statement [1]. Peel’s observation about the need for public support raises the question as to whether the same principle applies to road safety efforts i.e. whether public support is required to achieve the road safety targets such as those proposed in the National Road Safety Strategy [2]. In this paper, it is argued that the support of the public is crucial to achieving these targets particularly given community attitudes towards issues such as speeding.

The primary influencers of public opinion

The news media play a significant role in defining Australia’s road crash problem. The news media also provide commentary on the effectiveness of proposed interventions and, as we have seen recently in relation to speed camera operations in NSW [3], the media exerts significant pressure on the political process by campaigning against some road safety countermeasures. The media do this in two main ways: by defining what is ‘normal’ through the use of thematic framing devices, and by creating spurious debates about the effectiveness of proposed interventions.

The news media normalise the ‘crash as accident’ scenario whereby road users are killed by seemingly unpredictable events. The media is full of stories about the human tragedy associated with road trauma: a family is lost, children are orphaned, a promising student is killed. The pattern is repeated and packaged in a predictable way: scenes of mangled wreckage, an ambulance leaving the scene, an interview with emergency service personnel who typically describe the crash as ‘the worst they have seen’. Grieving relatives and community leaders mourn the loss. What is missing from these narratives is a discussion of risk factors and possible counter-measures – information that could improve community understanding of these issues.

The message coming out of this coverage is one of unexpected and unpreventable loss. This view is reinforced by the language surrounding the crash event: police ‘accident’ report forms, police ‘accident’ investigation teams and ‘accident’ databases. These terms imply official reinforcement of the accident-paradigm, as do quotes from emergency responders.

An accident, by definition, is an unpredictable event beyond the control of the individual – according to the Oxford dictionary ‘an incident that happens by chance or without apparent cause’. Overseas researchers argue that describing crashes as ‘accidents’ fails to convey important safety information and potentially builds barriers that may block or inhibit the adoption of road safety countermeasures. In many respects those that are least qualified to comment, the news media, reinforce and restate the public narrative around crashes and it is easy to understand why. There is no real challenge to the existing paradigm and, on the rare occasions where road safety authorities speak out, they are immediately mired in conflict.

This phenomenon was illustrated when racing car driver Mark Skaife called for higher speed limits and better training for car drivers. The comment generated considerable debate in the news media [4]. The reporting suggested road safety laws were turning Australia into a ‘nanny state’ where the community is burdened by unnecessary regulation. The debate provided an opportunity, in the broadsheets at least, for a detailed scientific response from road safety experts [5]. As with all such debates the quick news ‘grab’ and emotive response dominated, particularly in the electronic news media, and a much smaller number of media consumers would have been exposed to the contextual arguments put forward by Mooren and Grzebieta [5].

The annual report produced by the Productivity Commission into Government Service Provision (which contains a chapter on Police and a section on Road Safety) indicates there is a significant proportion of the population regularly exceeding the speed limit by 10 kilometres per hour or more [6]. This suggests that the issue of speed remains a contested area with the public holding different views (as reflected in their on-road behaviour) to those involved in trying to improve safety and reduce road trauma.

As Tom Vanderbilt, a keynote speaker at the 2010 National Road Safety conference, writes on his blog *How We Drive*:

Since the car was invented, drivers have been reluctant to give up what they see as their ‘rights,’ even as these supposed rights keep changing. This is why, for example, cars are sold without ‘speed governors,’ a device that would greatly reduce, if not eliminate, the illegal — let’s call it what it is — act of speeding, and certainly reduce fatalities and injuries. It took years for people to accept that drinking and then getting behind the wheel was not a good idea, and obviously many still do think it’s acceptable. As the science emerges that cell phone conversations, not simply dialing, can seriously impair a driver’s attention and reaction times, the

very reasons we criminalise drunken driving, I'm not sure what the distinction is that should be made if a driver kills a pedestrian while drunk versus while on their cell phone, or for that matter who kills a pedestrian because they were driving 25 miles over the speed limit. Does one get years in jail and the other a slap on the wrist? Don't they both show an equal disregard for the law? People are leery of imposing stricter laws on negligent driving because it's always been viewed as a 'folk crime,' like fudging your taxes, sort of widespread and not as serious as others. People are reluctant to criminalise what they see as 'normal' behaviour. But how did it become normal behaviour?[7]

Media framing of speeding as 'normal' driving behaviour and speed cameras as 'revenue raisers' is a major impediment to improving road safety outcomes. Recent reviews of speed camera operations in NSW and the UK have further reinforced this populist perception. On achieving government in NSW, the new Premier, Barry O'Farrell, immediately ordered the Auditor-General to conduct an audit to address motorists' concerns that cameras had been used as mere cash cows. The NSW Auditor-General found overall there was no evidence that the state's speed cameras are used as revenue raisers; however, he found that 38 of the 141 fixed cameras should be examined 'as they appear to have no significant road safety benefit' [3] thus reinforcing public concerns about the cameras' effectiveness.

Public mistrust of speed cameras appears universal. The UK Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology noted:

National news coverage of speed cameras, especially in the tabloid press, has been largely negative. The word 'scameras' has been widely used and campaigns have been run to discredit the Partnerships by suggesting that safety is not their primary aim. Vandalism of cameras is often reported in the press, with cameras shot at, spray painted, set on fire and even bombed.[8]

Another factor impacting on public perceptions of what is safe is the marketing of motor vehicles. The issue came to a head in 2002 with the relevant Federal Minister, Senator Boswell, noting '...on the one hand we have governments and safety organisations spending millions of dollars to remind the public that speed kills, but on the other hand we have even more money being spent on car ads that promote excessive speed' [9]. The Federal Chamber of Automotive Industries (FCAI) subsequently introduced its 'Advertising for Motor Vehicles Voluntary Code of Practice' in August 2002 for newly-produced advertisements, expanding its scope in December 2002 to apply to all Australian motor vehicle advertisements. The code was revised in July 2004 as a result of stakeholder feedback.

A research project [10] was undertaken in 2004 to evaluate the effectiveness of the Australian code and its subsequent revision in regulating the content of motor vehicle advertising in this country. A random sample of 380 Australian motor vehicle manufacturer advertisements from 1999-2004 was selected for the study to enable a comparison of content before and after

the introduction of the voluntary code and its revision. As noted by the researchers, the most encouraging result coming out of the study was that the occurrence of the primary themes of 'Performance' and 'Exciting/Fun to drive', both of which have some sub-themes which could be interpreted as encouraging unsafe driving, have diminished significantly since the code was introduced. The researchers noted 'While this is a positive outcome, if indeed performance themes in advertisements are likely to encourage unsafe driving practices, then it would be desirable to encourage manufacturers to continue this good work and steadily reduce the occurrence of performance in future motor vehicle advertisements. The continued 'educative process' of manufacturers described in the revised code may serve an important purpose of encouraging safe depictions in motor vehicle advertising' [10]. Concerns remain about the marketing of certain vehicles and the undue emphasis on excessive power and speed.

Clearly, speeding is a major issue and this has been acknowledged in the NRSS:

Speed is highly implicated in a large proportion of serious casualty crashes. As well as having a direct causal role in many instances, speed contributes significantly to the severity of most crashes. Measures addressing vehicle speed can mitigate the severity of crashes regardless of the underlying reasons for the crash. The speed problem is partly a behavioural issue, with motorists frequently choosing to travel at illegal or inappropriate speeds. However, speed limits across the network should be aligned with Safe System principles. [2]

The question needs to be asked as to whether the NRSS has placed appropriate emphasis on addressing the broader social factors impacting on community attitudes towards issues like speeding? The following argues that more needs to be done.

Marketing the National Road Safety Strategy

The National Road Safety Strategy 2011-2020 (NRSS) was released on 20 May 2011 by the Australian Transport Council. The strategy is 'founded on the internationally recognised 'Safe System' approach formally endorsed by the OECD' [2]. This approach accepts that people using the road network will make mistakes and therefore the whole system needs to be more forgiving of those errors. The strategy acknowledges that 'road safety is a shared responsibility' and that 'achieving lasting change will require governments, industry and the broader community to work together'.

The NRSS envisages that in order to achieve its targets, cultural change will need to occur, that is 'we all need to change the way we think and act in relation to road safety'; **its ultimate success will depend on the willingness of individual community members and organisations to support the changes that are needed** (highlighting added). In releasing the strategy, the Australian Transport Council identified the need to promote public understanding of key policy directions

in road safety and encourage public discussion about new road safety proposals. The need to engender public support for road safety policy is therefore a key part of the strategy and is critical to its success. The strategy provides limited details of how this might be achieved noting that ‘Council plans to develop a National Road Safety Strategy website as a prime means of sharing road safety information and reporting on progress’. The strategy also indicates that it will ensure that public education campaigns and resources are aligned with the Safe System objectives of this strategy. This suggests a continuation of existing public education strategies that focus on tactical road safety campaigns about specific countermeasures and restricts policy debates to a small number of, largely internal, key stakeholders. Unfortunately, the news media tend not to be embraced as key stakeholders in road safety strategies [11]. More on this later.

Whilst the creation of a website is a good idea, most road safety authorities already have them. What is needed is a strategy that identifies and addresses fundamental community norms about issues like speeding. If we accept the proposition that road safety authorities need the support of the community to achieve their objectives, a more active engagement than proposed under the NRSS is required. The difficulties in achieving this are acknowledged but there are pointers to the way forward.

Leadership

France provides an example of the impact of executive leadership in improving road safety outcomes and engendering community support. As noted by the Federation Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA) [12], for many years the road safety situation in France was disturbing with the numbers killed and injured significantly higher than in some neighbouring countries. In 2002, in his Bastille Day address, President Chirac announced that road safety was one of the top priorities of his new presidential term. As observed by the FIA, road safety is not traditionally a subject that Heads of State make a major theme of one of their most important speeches of the year. But President Chirac did just that. And he encouraged his Ministry of Transport, the police, public authorities and above all the French people to take action to promote road safety. Notable progress has been achieved since that time. President Chirac was subsequently awarded the first FIA World Prize for Road Safety, the Environment and Mobility.

Sweden provides another example of national leadership with the adoption of its Vision Zero road safety philosophy with the aim that, eventually, no one will be killed or seriously injured within the road transport system. In October 1997, the Road Traffic Safety Bill founded on Vision Zero was passed by a large majority in the Swedish parliament. The Vision is an expression of the ethical imperative that ‘It can never be ethically acceptable that people are killed or seriously injured when moving within the road transport system’[13].

Vision Zero changes the emphasis in responsibility for road traffic safety. In all current road transport systems, the road user

has almost total responsibility for safety. In most countries, there are general rules that the road user should behave in such a way that crashes are avoided. If a crash occurs, at least one road user has, by definition, broken a general rule and the legal system can therefore act. The results in Sweden have been dramatic with fatalities on Swedish roads falling from 541 in 1997 to 431 in 2006 and a fatality rate that is amongst the lowest in the OECD.

The Australian political system is significantly different to that of France and Sweden. However, there is an opportunity for the Prime Minister, perhaps in conjunction with the Premiers, to more actively prosecute the road safety agenda. As we head towards the London 2012 Olympic Games, there is already much discussion surrounding our medal targets. Sports Minister Mark Arbib [14] launched a new initiative - the Green and Gold Project - that is designed to try to regain Australia's place among the top five Olympic nations at London 2012. It is a pity that Australia's political leadership has not embraced the opportunity to engage the public in a more active debate about road safety and adopt the sort of ambitious targets we see in the sporting arena.

The fact that the NRSS has adopted the terminology of ‘crash’ or ‘collision’, reflecting recent practice by the World Health Organization, the OECD and the National Highway and Traffic Safety Administration in the US, is to be welcomed but more needs to be done to encourage the news media and other stakeholders to adopt this practice.

Reframing media discourse

As argued in the author's Churchill Fellowship Report [11], there is a critical need to reframe media discourses about road safety. Newspapers typically present fatal crashes as dramas with a victim/villain storyline; in keeping with this narrative strategy, newspapers are most likely to cover stories where a driver survived to take the blame. By highlighting crashes that diverge from the norm, focusing on the assignment of blame to a single party, and failing to convey the message that preventive practices like seatbelt use increase odds for survival, newspapers remove crashes from a public health context and position them as individual issues.

Connor and Wesolowski [15] examined the public health messages conveyed by newspaper coverage of fatal motor vehicle crashes to determine the extent to which press coverage accurately reflects real risks and crash trends. Crash details were extracted from two years of newspaper coverage of fatal crashes in four Midwestern cities in the United States. Details and causal factors identified by reporters were compared to data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS). The newspapers covered 278 fatal crashes over the two year period, in contrast to 846 fatal crashes documented in FARS. Newspapers assigned blame in 90% of crashes covered, under-reported restraint use and driver's risk of death, failed to reflect the protective value of restraints, and misrepresented the roles played by alcohol and teen drivers. The study found newspaper coverage did not

accurately reflect real risk. Commissioning a similar project to examine the media frames in Australian newspaper reporting of road crashes could provide insights into cultural practices here and provide guidance for the social change process mentioned in the NRSS (certainly, based on the Churchill Fellowship study [11], the emphasis on such things as holiday road tolls seem to receive disproportionate attention in the Australian media compared to other countries).

As Cuthbert [16] argues, the media's anti-speed-camera discourse leads to disdain for speeding as a cause of injury. This discourse implies speed cameras are a paternalistic infringement of our privacy and wallets and are not effective at reducing speed. There are parallel discourses in print media and radio that publicise speed camera locations. Together, these result in a 'see if you can get away with it' attitude to speeding. This results in motorists behaving as 'manipulators' and 'defiers' towards speed cameras [17]. Even drivers who reduce their speed are encouraged to display similar defiant behaviours such as flashing their headlights at oncoming cars to warn of a radar unit ahead and reporting speed camera locations to radio stations. To overcome these attitudes and get maximum effectiveness from speed cameras, Cuthbert argues the negative discourse should be reframed to resemble the positive discourse. If speeding kills people during the holidays, it will kill during non-holiday periods; if speed cameras have reduced speeding during holidays they can reduce speeding at other times. The 'revenue raising' discourse could be diffused by the public return of funds generated by speed camera to road safety projects. Reframing the debate could also involve shifting the penalty emphasis away from fines towards loss of demerit points or warning letters for low range offences.

Commentary on individual crashes and trends over holiday periods is eagerly sought by the news media. These contacts provide police and other road safety commentators with an opportunity to redress the imbalance in reporting and to push important safety messages. Police and other road safety professionals could try and place less emphasis on the human drama of the crash and focus on known risk factors and broader safety messages.

The media could also be engaged at a professional level and be educated about the impact of their reporting. This has occurred with some success in relation to how the media reports on issues relating to mental illness and suicide. Research [18] established that media portrayals perpetuated a number of community myths about these problems. The *Mindframe Media and Mental Health Project* built a collaborative relationship with the Australian media and mental health systems to enable a more accurate and sensitive portrayal of suicide and mental health issues. Key activities undertaken by the project included:

- the development of a resource kit for use by media professionals including a companion website
- delivery of face-to-face briefings with a diverse range of media organisations providing opportunity for discussion on issues to consider when reporting [18].

The print and web-based resources are designed to help media professionals continue to report suicide and mental illness responsibly and accurately. Police, road safety authorities and the media could work together in a similar fashion to develop media resources to assist journalists in their reporting of road crashes. Consideration could be given to the development of guidelines that would assist police, other emergency responders and road safety experts when communicating with the media – this is something we are not good at. The NRSS provides an appropriate framework for such work.

Conclusion

The National Road Safety Strategy has acknowledged that cultural change is needed to achieve its targets. At this stage it is hard to see how this will be achieved. The community needs to be actively engaged through strong leadership and a more active approach towards addressing the primary drivers of public opinion. The news media play a crucial role in this process and yet it is largely ignored in the NRSS. There are precedents for positive engagement as we have seen with the marketing and sale of new motor vehicles and with reporting on other important social issues. We should adopt them.

About the author

Dr Jiggins is an Associate Fellow of the College, and Chair of the ACT and Region Chapter. In 2008 he was awarded a Churchill Fellowship to study the reporting of road crashes in the print media.

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It sounds counterintuitive, but can mobile phones be used to reduce driver distraction?

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Abstract

Being on the phone while driving is highly distracting. Drivers are four times more likely to crash while talking on a phone, and over 20 times more likely if texting. VicRoads needed a new way to educate young drivers about the dangers of using a phone while driving. Accordingly, it developed the iPhone App, *CityGT*.

Gaming and social media sites were used to inform the public about *CityGT*'s release. Outdoor billposters and specially branded cars were also deployed around Melbourne to promote its launch. Thousands of people attended a major launch which was held on 6 September 2009 at Melbourne's Federation Square. Research showed that *CityGT* succeeded in bringing the safety issue to mind for young drivers. It was downloaded more than 30,000 times, was ranked in the top three hottest Apps on iTunes, and was one of 2009's most popular free Apps on the Australian iTunes store.

Introduction

In Victoria, more young people die from road crashes than any other cause. Each year around 120 people are killed and 2,300 are seriously injured in crashes involving 18-25 year olds. This is about one-third of Victoria's road toll [1]. Inexperience is a major cause of these crashes; however, when coupled with other factors such as distraction, the consequences can be lethal.

International and local research is clear: being on the phone while driving is highly distracting. Drivers are four times more

likely to crash while talking on a mobile phone [2-6], and over 20 times more likely if texting [7].

Despite these risks, an increasingly large proportion of the Victorian population own mobile phones and carry them in their vehicles. Mobile phones remain an integral part of life for most adult Australians. In Victoria, the use of hand-held mobile phones while driving is illegal, and the dangers have been well publicised over recent years [8]. However, around three-quarters of 18 to 24 year olds still admit to regularly using their mobile phones while driving [9].

Traditional methods of targeting young drivers about the dangers of mobile phone use while driving did not appear to be getting through to them. VicRoads was looking for a way to cut through and engage with young drivers about this safety problem.

To educate this age group about the dangers of using a phone while driving an iPhone application called *CityGT*, was developed. The primary goal of *CityGT* was to reach young drivers aged 18-25 years and communicate the dangers of using a mobile phone while driving in a way that was more likely to resonate with this group.

To achieve this goal, three specific objectives were set. These were for *CityGT* to:

1. make users think about the dangers of using their mobile phone while driving
2. achieve at least 20,000 downloads
3. be listed in the 'Top 25' free Apps list on the iTunes store.