REPORTING ON TRAFFIC CRASHES: BEST PRACTICES

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The way journalists write or speak about road traffic crashes **influences how the audience perceives** what happened, who is responsible and what should be done in response. The recommendations in this document illustrate how reporting can help **change the discourse** about road safety as a public health issue and **denormalize** the prevalence of these tragic events in our communities, which claim the lives of **1.19 million people** worldwide each year.

1. AVOID USING THE WORD "ACCIDENT"[1]

Road traffic crashes, injuries and deaths are **preventable**. Using the word "accident" conveys an undue sense of inevitability and leads the audience to interpret these events as unavoidable or the result of "bad luck" or "destiny." Use **road crash** or **collision** instead**.**

2. HIGHLIGHT THE HUMAN ELEMENT OF CRASHES[2]

Headlines focused on the object (vehicles), rather than the subjects (people) are common in road crash reporting. This **leaves out people and their actions** from the story of the crash, distancing the readers from the situation. By humanizing the event through language that speaks about people—and not lifeless vehicles—we **acknowledge the responsibility** of people on the road. For example, a headline that reads "**Cyclist dies after being hit by a truck driver**," is more relatable to readers, who are often themselves drivers, than the headline **"Cyclist dies after being hit by a truck."** The latter would be equivalent to a headline that says, for example, "Bullet kills shopkeeper during robbery" instead of "Gunman kills shopkeeper during robbery."

3. AVOID VICTIM BLAMING[1]

Studies on media coverage of road safety have found that when pedestrians or cyclists are injured or die in a road crash, **responsibility for the crash is often attributed to the victims** and not to the drivers. By focusing the discourse on the victims and their actions (whether or not they used a pedestrian crossing, for example) we de-emphasize the responsibility that governments and drivers have to set, enforce and obey road safety regulations such as speed limits.

4. AVOID SPECULATION[3]

Sticking to the facts and avoiding speculation is best when reporting a traffic crash. Identifying the exact causes of these events requires a comprehensive investigation, which takes time and resources. However, **the World Health Organization has prioritized four risk factors that contribute significantly to most road crashes, injuries and deaths**, according to research. These are: speeding; driving under the influence of alcohol; lack of or incorrect use of helmets; and lack of or incorrect use of seat-belts. Check with your local officials to see if they have identified the cause of a crash, with these top risk factors in mind.

5. PROVIDE CONTEXT[1]

The death of a person on the road is not an isolated event, **it is part of a public health issue with great consequences to society**. To put individual crashes into context, **include in your report local data** on the number of fatalities, injuries and overall crashes. If time permits, it can be helpful to contact mobility, urban planning or public health specialists for more context and to present different perspectives. Taking the time to interview victims or family members can also illustrate the widespread toll of crashes on families and communities.

Notes:
1. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2590198219300727
2. https://medium.com/@peterflax/journalists-heres-how-to-produce-less-horrible-stories-about-pedestrians-and-cyclists-getting-30c821e8686a
3. https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/179826/9789241508933_eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y