

## Crash Course

*How to cover a car wreck*

THE FATAL CAR CRASH IS, UNFORTUNATELY, AN ALL-TOO-FAMILIAR STAPLE OF local journalism. Each of us can summon a grim collage of tragedy: the flashing lights; the fluttering yellow tape on the roadside; the “starburst” windshield; the phrase “he was too young,” or “our thoughts and prayers are with the family.”

There is no denying this can make for arresting and poignant viewing or reading. And, unlike sensational reports of deaths that far outweigh their actual occurrence (e.g., in the months leading up to the attacks of 9/11, there was a rash of shark-attack stories, though we were soon to learn that our greatest threat that season did not come from the sea), the frequency of the coverage seems justified: traffic fatalities are the leading cause of death in the U.S. for people ages one through thirty-four.

But to people who try to reduce the number of crashes, there is often something missing from the picture: context. “I see it every month where I live,” says Deborah Girasek, a director in the Department of Preventive Medicine at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, in Bethesda, Maryland. “A teenager dies in a crash, and the media coverage consists of that teenager’s friends putting flowers and teddy bears on the side of the road. You can go to a different town and it’s the same story. It’s formulaic, and it’s an easy story to write.”

While Girasek acknowledges that this in itself may not be a bad thing—“I understand that the person who died was a human being, and it’s certainly a very tragic loss for the community”—she worries about what is often absent from the stories, namely a sense of how accidents might have been prevented. “For instance, I never hear any discussion, when a teen dies, of the graduated licensing law in that state,” she says. “If they have the type where they weren’t supposed to be with other teens, were they?” (So-called GDLs, which restrict the access young drivers have to driving, are arguably the only successful intervention against teenage traffic deaths.) Further, Girasek asks, what were the road conditions? The type of car involved? At what speed was it traveling?

The investigation of vehicle crashes is a notoriously difficult procedure, and for a general-assignment reporter in the chaos of a crash scene, getting basic details (name, age, etc.) is challenging enough. And, as Girasek notes, “journalists don’t have the same job that I do—their job is not to reduce injuries.” Indeed, there is a kind of tension between journalism and the epidemiological work of reducing car crashes. Fatal car crashes are, at once, an individual human tragedy and an epidemic (there were 41,059 traffic-related fatalities in 2007, the last year for which complete data is available). Journalists instinctively look for the compel-

ling individual story, as in, say, the cruel, seemingly random death of a much-loved community figure in an “accident.” Epidemiologists, meanwhile, prefer the word “crash” to “accident” for its connotation that many of these events are preventable, and they look for data and patterns—in essence they try to reduce the individuality of a crash. To make matters worse, when journalists do try to emphasize the larger patterns, they sometimes get it wrong. I have noticed, for example, stories that will mention that “about 13,000 people are killed by drunk drivers annually”; given that at least half of these involve single-vehicle (and single-occupant) crashes, this is incorrect at best, and at worst may lead a reader to surmise the biggest threat is *other drivers*.

Even if journalists aren’t public-health professionals, Girasek argues that presenting basic information, such as how many people involved in the crash were wearing restraints, would help illustrate the preventive nature of many traffic fatalities. She points, as an example, to what must be the most famous fatal car crash of the twentieth century: the deaths in 1997 of Princess Diana, her boyfriend Dodi Fayed, and their driver, Henri Paul. “The only person who survived that crash [body-guard Trevor Rees-Jones] was the person wearing the seatbelt,” Girasek says. “That person wasn’t even in the safest seat. And yet that’s the person that survived. That never got covered.” (Interestingly, only late last year in the UK was the fact that Diana wasn’t wearing a seatbelt highlighted, in a public-service campaign by the road safety ministry, which speaks to the delicateness of emphasizing safety messages in the face of grief.)

While in certain ways, such as reporting whether alcohol was a factor, the coverage of car crashes has become better at emphasizing contextual details, a number of recent media studies suggest there’s still much relevant information that is left unaddressed. A study by Colorado State University researchers Monica Rosales and Lorann Stallones, published in the *Journal of Safety Research*, looked at 473 newspaper articles from across the U.S. from 1999 to 2002. The majority of stories used what

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— AN ORAL HISTORY —  
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**Gazette Dead**

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Efforts to put together an employee-investor purchase of the Arkansas Gazette "have been in vain," Little Rock attorney David Davidson said Thursday. He was joined by Gazette employees last week to avoid the possibility of an asset-grabbing by the Gazette.

Both Little Rock businessmen, Walter Searcy and Tom Knapton, television producer Harry Thomason studied the financial possibility of bringing together investors to buy the Gazette.

Davidson said he was pleased to see Davidson's efforts to "buy the Gazette" was to be reported in the Memphis, Tenn. Register on Monday. Reporters are putting up opposition in the region because of the newspaper's financial problems.

In an interview later Thursday, Davidson said "I think everyone is more or less anticipating that the deal will be pretty quick."

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**Last Years, Days, Hours Remembered By The Staff**

Walter E. Housman Jr., owner of the Gazette, and the Gazette Co. Inc., owner of the Gazette, have declined to comment on any of the rumors since they began seven months ago. Housman did not return calls.

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the researchers called "episodic framing," emphasizing the basic details of the crash—who, where, etc.—in essence treating the crash as an isolated event. Other kinds of details, the sort that are implicated in higher risk of crash or injury, were underreported. Only 1.3 percent of the stories surveyed, for example, included information about the weather; the speed limit, too, was mentioned in only 1.3 percent of the stories (and estimated travel speed was not mentioned for 83 percent of all vehicles involved in the stories); whether seatbelts were used went unreported for nearly 78 percent of the people mentioned in the stories; and even a basic detail, like the time of day of the crash, went unmentioned in nearly half the stories.

Unlike other public-health issues, the problem in the coverage of car crashes is not so much underreporting as how the stories are reported—quality versus

## News reports give a murky sense of what the real risks are of driving.

quantity. Indeed, one estimate has found that car crashes are reported 12.8 more times than what might be expected based on the actual rate of death (Girasek notes one Canadian study that found people actually *overestimated* the number of people dying on the roads every year).

The focus on teen drivers, similarly, is disproportionate to their actual statistical involvement in crashes. Also overemphasized, meanwhile, are things like vehicle recalls—despite a few high-profile cases, faulty vehicles account for a small percentage of crashes every year—as well as the traditional holiday-driving safety warnings. While it is true that fatalities peak during periods like the July 4 weekend, research has shown the fatality rate for impaired drivers during that weekend—when adjusted for the higher number of drivers—is only marginally higher than it is for a typical

weekend. On the other hand, much less coverage goes to traffic-related injuries broadly—a category that includes pedestrians hit by cars as well as nonfatal car accidents—of which there are nearly three million a year in the U.S. Such context, too, is often beyond the reach of crash-scene reporting, and whether for lack of resources or interest, the subsequent consequences of a crash do not receive much follow-up reporting.

Journalists are obviously under pressure, now more than ever, to report news that people will pay attention to, and in the necessary triage of the newsroom the most dramatic events (e.g., high-speed police pursuits) will always subsume the less dramatic. As Girasek notes, a story in which a young drunk driver is killed in a single-car crash, for example, will get much less attention than a case in which one driver is killed by another, who survived. "If the person they can blame is still alive, then they tend to play up what that person did wrong," she says. And then there's the sensitivity question. "I think journalists have a heart," she says. "If a child just died, the community's mourning that person, the journalist doesn't want to stand there and say the kid was totally drunk."

The problem with merely telling the story, with playing up the human drama, is that it does nothing to get at the root of why these are such evergreen stories. Even putting blame on certain parties in crashes, while perhaps appealing to some sense of social justice, might reinforce in the reader's mind the sense, as one report put it, that "the kind of person responsible for most crashes is the 'other'—someone not like 'us.'" The types of information presented in news accounts of crashes, and the episodic framing of those stories, give a murky, often skewed sense of what the real sources of risk are in driving—everything from speed to distraction to night driving to fatigue to the way cars behave around large trucks. Driving, after all, is the most dangerous activity most of us will ever do, even if we often do not fully understand why. We need fewer tears, and more facts. **CJR**

TOM VANDERBILT's latest book is *Traffic: Why We Drive the Way We Do (and What It Says About Us)*.