



**Brisbane Central Business District Bicycle User Group
(CBD BUG)**

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Mr Neville Stevens AO
Chair
Australian Press Council
PO Box 1014
NORTH SYDNEY NSW 2059

Via email: info@presscouncil.org.au

Dear Mr Stevens

Advisory guidelines for reporting on road crashes

We write to request the Australian Press Council (APC) develop advisory guidelines for publications and journalists reporting on road crashes.

Our concern is the Australian media's misguided use of language in reporting on road crashes – which reduces the significance of these crashes. Most notably, the media commonly reports that crashes are “accidents” as if these crashes were an act of God, and not the result of several, usually avoidable, human factors.

Another potentially misleading media practice is describing a crash using passive voice, as if a vehicle acted autonomously - by using phrases such as “pedestrian struck by car”. This approach disconnects the driver from the operation of the vehicle. The horror to both the vehicle driver and the vulnerable road user who is the victim of the crash is absent. Along with the regular use of a passive voice, this approach dulls the emotional impact of crashes on the public. In using this inaccurate terminology vehicle drivers are not invited to see themselves as potential agents of these crashes, and instead may see themselves as absolved.

Another highly inappropriate aspect of the Australian media's reporting on traffic crashes is its all-too-common focus on the delay to other road users caused by a crash. Not only does such reporting trivialise the trauma for the people involved in the crash, but it also paints the emergency services personnel who may have to close a road while they deal with the crash aftermath in a negative light.

Research has demonstrated that the way journalists describe and discuss crashes affects how people see the causes of, and solutions to, road danger. It also influences how we treat others on the roads – with language that dehumanises and even victim-blames other road users, particularly vulnerable road users like people riding bicycles and people walking. (Source: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2590198219300727#t0005>)

There are so many recent instances of this type of reporting by the Australian media that to provide some examples in this correspondence could not do justice to the wholesale level of such practices.

Instead, adopting a solution-focused approach we draw your attention to the “Road Collision Reporting Guidelines” released in the United Kingdom on 18 May 2021 and backed by their National Union of Journalists. You can find details of the exhaustive process by which the guidelines were developed and more explanation of the rationale here: <https://www.rc-rq.com/guidelines>. Australia is no different to the United Kingdom in these regards.

Furthermore, we understand that in 2016 the Associated Press revised its style guide to recommend journalists use "crash, collision, or other terms" instead of "accident" when reporting on automobile crashes (at least until culpability is proven). Additionally, the guide recommends that when negligence is claimed or proven, journalists avoid using “accident”, as this can be read as exonerating the person responsible. (Source: <https://www.michigan.gov/mdot/travel/safety/road-users/crash-not-accident>)

Although other jurisdictions have adopted improved reporting standards, we are disappointed that the Australian Press Council has still not issued any advisory guidelines on reporting traffic crashes. This is a serious omission given the Australian national road toll of 1,300 road deaths in the past 12 months (a 3.3% increase from the same time last year), of which 483 were vulnerable road users (a 9.3% increase from the same time last year). (Source: <https://datahub.roadsafety.gov.au/progress-reporting/monthly-road-deaths>)

If fatalities of this scale occurred in other circumstances (e.g. commercial airline disasters, terrorist attacks) there would be a national uproar. Instead, the community's apparent indifference to these alarming figures seems based on these entirely avoidable deaths not being the responsibility of motorists, and just a cost of nearly everyone driving all the time. With crashes on the increase, it is time the community's apathy towards this situation is addressed.

We view the Australian media as having a key responsibility in providing accurate, appropriate descriptions in their reporting of traffic crashes. Therefore, we call on the Australian Press Council to adopt guidelines for the reporting of traffic crashes.

We look forward to hearing from you on this issue, as it is essential the Australian media publishes accurate, balanced and insightful reporting on traffic crashes.

Yours sincerely

Paul French

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Cc: Bicycle Queensland
Space for Cycling Brisbane
Queensland Walks