



Media framing of graduated licensing policy debates

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 August 2009

Received in revised form 3 February 2010

Accepted 8 February 2010

Keywords:

Media
Road safety
Advocacy
Framing
Policy

ABSTRACT

Background: The overrepresentation of young drivers in road trauma statistics produces significant media interest. Graduated licensing restrictions involving night-time curfews and restrictions on passenger numbers are prominent topics within media coverage. This was particularly apparent in Australia between January 2004 and July 2008, when various models of either restriction were introduced in four states.

Methods: Australian newspaper and Sydney free-to-air television coverage during the peak period were analysed to identify the framing strategies used by news actors supporting or opposing these policies.

Results: Fifteen frames were identified. These predominantly assessed the proposed restrictions in terms of their need, evidence base, practicality and the degree to which they were consonant with 'common-sense' perceptions and had community support. While expert road injury reduction news actors primarily emphasised their moral imperative and likely effectiveness, opponents stressed their impracticality and proposed alternative solutions.

Conclusions: Research evidence is only one component of information presented as policy-relevant in policy discourse conducted in news media. Policy reform advocates using the media to advocate for evidence-based policies in road injury prevention need to appreciate that evidence is not the only currency exchanged in such debates and should study opponents' rhetoric in order to anticipate and counteract the framing strategies being used.

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1. Introduction

In response to the failures of education and driver training programs to significantly reduce the incidence of young driver trauma (Mayhew et al., 1998), graduated driver licensing systems (GDL), have been developed and implemented throughout Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Canada and several European countries (Senserrick and Whelan, 2003). Restrictions limiting night-time driving and peer-passenger carriage have been identified as important components of the most successful GDL models (Senserrick and Whelan, 2003).

Despite this, many jurisdictions have opposed these measures due to a range of political and ideological factors centred on practicality and values-based arguments regarding, equity, 'the right to drive' and the unacceptability of collective punishment (Smith, 2004). Despite having been recommended for introduction within

Australia by the Federal Government since 1983 (Drummond, 1994), none of eight Australian state or territory governments had introduced either restriction prior to 2005.

While there are significant costs resulting from road trauma involving young drivers, road transport is an integral economic and cultural component of all societies, and learning to drive is popularly viewed as a 'rite of passage' (Van Gennep, 1960) between childhood and adulthood. The tension produced by the societal expectation of young people to drive despite its inherent dangers makes novice drivers a prominent popular and political issue that attracts a great deal of media and research attention.

This was especially so in Australia from January 2004 to July 2008 when the New South Wales (NSW), Victorian (VIC), Queensland (QLD) and Western Australian (WA) State Governments engaged in various policy-related activities, which eventually led to the reform of their existing GDL systems to include various models of night-time and/or passenger restrictions. However, none of these governments implemented comprehensive models incorporating both night-time and passenger restrictions best supported by research evidence at the time (Senserrick and Whelan, 2003).

Due to the high level of community concern about young driver safety, policymaker perceptions of electoral support for policy alternatives may influence their decision-making. For this reason, advocacy campaigns designed to reduce harm caused to and by

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novice drivers often attempt to build interest group and electoral support for political action. As a major source of information and debate influencing public perceptions of public health issues, news media coverage is central to such campaigns (Holder and Treno, 1997; Menashe and Siegel, 1998; Henderson et al., 2000; Brodie et al., 2003; Kline, 2006).

The news media represent a primary battleground in which interest groups compete to win the 'hearts and minds' of both the public and politicians and in this way, influence policy. Yet as with other spheres of public health, news reporting of novice driver issues is often neglected and unresearched as a significant 'background' factor influencing policy change (Chapman, 1999). Novice driver news media coverage needs to be brought into the foreground of explanations of how community and political attitudes either resist or change toward supporting novice driver licensing policies.

Central to these attempts to inform and persuade the public is the way issues are framed in media discourse. Framing is the presentation of information and argument with the intent of consolidating or altering the way in which an audience views an issue or event (Goffman, 1974; Stanton, 2007). Frame analysis of media reportage assists in explaining how dominant meanings of both problems and their solutions come to be defined (Christofides et al., 1999), the aspects of a problem that need to be addressed (Wakefield et al., 2005) and which solutions should be considered sensible or 'obvious' (Tuchman, 1978). Thus, as Wakefield et al. (2005:54) propose, "frames diagnose, evaluate and prescribe solutions to social problems".

Despite the considerable media attention accorded to young driver regulation issues, there have been few analyses of the framing patterns employed in this coverage. This study aims to fill this knowledge gap and build on existing research (Blows et al., 2005), by analysing the framing of Australian print media coverage of the policy debates surrounding night-time and passenger provisional driver restrictions between January 2004 and July 2008 and Sydney free-to-air news coverage of these debates between May 2005 and September 2007.

2. Methods

As a small sample of Australian newspaper coverage of this policy debate has previously been analysed (Blows et al., 2005), it was deemed appropriate to try to expand this work by using a similar methodology, but incorporating television news coverage and extending the time-period of observation to cover more recent developments.

2.1. Print analysis

After experimenting with various search strings, the FACTIVE print media database was searched using 'young driver\$ AND restricts\$' to locate the maximum number of relevant articles. More specific search strings such as 'P-Platers' did not identify many relevant articles and were not considered sufficiently rigorous for the purposes of the media analysis. The FACTIVE media database includes news, editorials, letters and columnist pieces from all national, metropolitan and regional newspapers owned by the two major Australian print media groups, Fairfax and News Limited. Results were limited to articles published in the major newspapers of each capital city and the national newspaper, *The Australian*. With their large readerships, these were deemed most likely to influence community perceptions of road safety policy and as such, be most relevant to the aims of this study.

Searches were limited to articles published between January 1, 2004 and July 1, 2008. Previous research (Blows et al., 2005) identi-

fied 2004 as an historical 'tipping point' (Gladwell, 2000) within the Australian campaign to introduce night-time and passenger restrictions, while July 2008 represents the most recent date of state GDL reform involving either of these components. As such, the sample time-period chosen encompasses the most significant period of Australian public debate regarding these restrictions which ultimately resulted in their introduction to different extents in NSW, VIC, QLD and WA.

Articles with no mention of either night-time or passenger restrictions were omitted, with remaining articles then assessed as to whether they *critically* discussed, rather than merely listed or named, these policies. A lack of critical discussion was deemed to limit their potential to persuade or dissuade readers of their value to the community. As such, they were considered of minimal importance to the media debate and excluded from the analysis.

Each of the remaining articles was read and all statements within articles referring to night-time or passenger restrictions then coded as being supportive ('proponent') or oppositional ('opponent') of law reform involving the restrictions. A 'statement' was either a direct quote, journalist authored sentence(s) summarising the perspective of any individual or group, sentence(s) summarising the perspective of the author (including those of journalists), or sentence(s) summarising any relevant information. Each article was then coded as having a proponent or opponent 'dominant meaning' (Hall, 1980; Morley, 1992) on the basis of the relative number of proponent or opponent statements identified within it. Articles with approximately balanced numbers of proponent and opponent statements were coded as neutral.

2.2. Television analysis

Sydney free-to-air television news reportage of passenger and night-time restrictions was also reviewed. As with the print media analysis, only television reports including some mention of young drivers, that *critically* discussed night-time and/or passenger restrictions, were included in the analysis. Since May 2005, all news, current affairs, and 'infotainment' programs concerned with health or medicine on five free-to-air Sydney television channels have been digitally recorded in a research project at the University of Sydney (Chapman et al., 2009). Due to a technical malfunction and backup failure, full data were only available to September 2007 at the time in which this study was undertaken.

2.3. Frame analysis

Following a preliminary scan of all print and television news items in the combined dataset to discern the main news themes that were utilised, statements were reviewed and coded for their principal 'frames' of reference. Fifteen principal frame definitions were determined after preliminary coding and categorisation (see Table 1). Instances of these were considered and debated between the authors during preliminary coding and the lists refined and adjusted until a coherent scheme was determined that admitted all instances.

To determine the reliability of the categorisation of the statements into the fifteen main frames, 105 randomly selected statements from the combined print and television news dataset ($n = 945$) were also coded by a second coder issued with the frame definitions. The subsample size was calculated with an adjusted error rate of 9%, with a 95% confidence interval. The level of inter-rater reliability was measured using a kappa statistic for agreement over and above that expected by chance (Fleiss, 1981). This method of testing reliability is commonly used within similar types of media analyses (Elliott and Chapman, 2000).

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