



Media reporting of traffic legislation changes in British Columbia (2010)



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ABSTRACT

Introduction: In 2010, British Columbia (BC) introduced new traffic laws designed to deter impaired driving, speeding, and distracted driving. These laws generated significant media attention and were associated with reductions in fatal crashes and in ambulance calls and hospital admissions for road trauma.

Objective: To understand the extent and type of media coverage of the new traffic laws and to identify how the laws were framed by the media.

Methods: We reviewed a database of injury related news coverage (May 2010–December 2012) and extracted reports that mentioned distracted driving, impaired driving, or speeding. Articles were classified according to: (i) Type, (ii) Issue discussed, (iii) 'Reference to new laws', and (iv) 'Pro/anti traffic law'. Articles mentioning the new laws were reread and common themes in how the laws were framed were identified and discussed.

Results: Over the course of the study, 1848 articles mentioned distraction, impairment, or speeding and 597 reports mentioned the new laws: 65 against, 227 neutral, and 305 supportive. Reports against the new laws framed them as unfair or as causing economic damage to the entertainment industry. Reports in favor of the new laws framed them in terms of preventing impaired driving and related trauma or of bringing justice to drinking drivers. Growing evidence of the effectiveness of the new laws generated media support.

Conclusions: BC's new traffic laws generated considerable media attention both pro and con. We believe that this media attention helped inform the public of the new laws and enhanced their deterrent effect.

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1. Introduction

Motor vehicle crashes (MVCs) are a major public health problem. Traffic laws designed to deter dangerous driving are known to reduce road trauma (Morrison et al., 2003; Traynor, 2009; Shepherd, 2001). For deterrence to be effective, the public must be aware of the laws and have the perception that the probability of being apprehended and punished for breaking them is high (Stafford and Warr, 1993; Wright, 2010; Nagin and Pogarsky, 2001). As Homel (1993) put it when discussing the deterrent effect

of random breath testing: "the aim is to create a sense of unease about drinking and driving amongst potential offenders through highly visible police enforcement which gives the impression of being unpredictable, unavoidable, and ubiquitous". In addition to visible enforcement, public education and awareness campaigns that emphasize traffic law enforcement also play an important role in road safety (Snyder and Hamilton, 2002; Tay, 2005). Unpublicized enforcement blitzes, even if they result in a high number of charges, are often ineffective in reducing MVCs (Mercer, 1985). A systematic review found that media campaigns can help prevent alcohol impaired driving by enhancing the deterrent effects of impaired driving laws (Elder et al., 2004). In addition, social marketing can promote social responsibility and healthier shared norms such as social norms against drinking and driving (Perkins

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et al., 2010; Wakefield et al., 2010). Therefore many jurisdictions pay for social marketing campaigns to increase public knowledge about critical road safety issues and to raise awareness of enforcement campaigns.

Newspapers are a source of news, opinions, education and entertainment and over 75 percent of Canadians read a newspaper (NADbank, 2013). Therefore, newspapers can play an important role in informing people of traffic laws and enforcement campaigns. However, unlike paid marketing campaigns, news coverage can be unpredictable. This is because traffic laws and enforcement, like most issues, can be viewed from a variety of perspectives or discussed in a way that emphasizes one attribute over another (Chong and Druckman, 2007). The term “framing” describes how an issue is defined and presented or which perspective is emphasized when discussing an issue. As Entman (1993) notes, frames ‘define problems’, ‘diagnose causes’, ‘make moral judgments’, and ‘suggest remedies’. How an issue is framed influences how people choose to process information and may influence their opinion about that issue (Chong and Druckman, 2007; Scheufele, 1999). Favorable media coverage may provide legitimacy to new laws or enforcement campaigns. Prior research has found that unpaid media coverage can increase public awareness of specific issues (Holder and Treno, 1997) and may result in behavioral change (Wakefield et al., 2010). In fact, unpaid media coverage can be more effective than paid public information campaigns in increasing public awareness of the harmful effects of alcohol misuse (Holder and Treno, 1997). However, newswriters may also frame road safety laws or enforcement campaigns from a negative perspective that turns public opinion against the laws.

In 2010, British Columbia (BC) amended the BC Motor Vehicle Act to target major driver-behavior based crash risk factors: alcohol, speeding, and cell phone use. Starting in February 2010, drivers who use cell phones can be fined, prior to this there was no penalty for cell phone use. In September 2010, police were given authority to administer immediate roadside penalties (IRPs) consisting of license suspension of 3–90 days and vehicle impoundment of 3–30 days based on the results of a roadside breathalyzer. Drivers with BAC > 0.08% were also subject to criminal code convictions, as had been the case for decades. Although criminal code penalties were more severe than IRPs, they required criminal proceedings before being implemented and were therefore neither certain (many drivers charged with drunk driving were acquitted) nor swiftly implemented. British Columbia had administrative penalties for drivers with BAC > 0.05% for many years but the new IRP penalties were more severe and came into effect immediately instead of after a grace period. Also, starting in September 2010, police were given the authority to impound vehicles for racing or excessive speeding (7–60 days of vehicle impoundment). These laws are described for the public on the BC Ministry of Justice website (British Columbia Ministry of Justice, 2014a,b,c) and the full legal details are contained in the amended BC Motor Vehicle Act (Anonymous, 2014).

The BC government framed the new laws in terms of prevention and justice and stated that they were “designed to get impaired drivers off the roads with clear, swift, and severe penalties” (Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General, 2010). They were promoted as a means of preventing deaths such as that of Alexa Middelaer, a 4 year old girl who was struck and killed by a drunk driver in 2008. Police application of the new laws was immediate and extensive. In the first full year, BC police issued over 22,500 immediate roadside prohibitions for drinking and driving and 8500 penalties for excessive speeding. At the same time, the number of criminal code convictions for driving above the legal limit (i.e., BAC > 0.08%) fell from an average of over 8000 per year in the five years before the new laws to 1843 in the first full year following the new laws.

Two months after the laws were implemented, there were reports that some roadside breathalyzers were inaccurate and may have indicated that some drivers had BAC > 0.05% when they were actually below this limit. In response, breathalyzers were re-calibrated to give a warn reading at BAC > 0.06% rather than at BAC > 0.05%. Some groups criticized the laws as being overly severe without adequate mechanism for appeal. A legal challenge of the new laws was launched in spring 2011. On November 30, 2011, British Columbia Supreme Court judge, the Honourable Mr. J.S. Sigurdson ruled that the part of the laws pertaining to drivers with BAC > 0.08% breached section 8 of the Canadian Charter of Rights although the provisions pertaining to drivers with BACs between 0.05% and 0.08% were held to not violate the Charter. Following this decision, the laws were temporarily suspended, then amended to include an appeal process for drivers with BAC > 0.08%, and finally re-implemented in June, 2012.

There is strong evidence that British Columbia drivers were aware of the new laws and changed their drinking and driving habits as a result. A 2012 roadside survey found that 82.5% of BC drivers were aware of the new legislation and 89.6% agreed that the new laws would make roads safer (Beirness and Beasley, 2014). Another 2012 survey found that public perception of police commitment to traffic enforcement had increased (Public Attitude Survey, 2012). In BC roadside surveys, 6.5% of evening and nighttime drivers tested positive for BAC in 2012 compared to 9.9% in 2010 before the new laws were introduced (Beirness and Beasley, 2014). Telephone surveys found that the percentage of BC drivers reporting driving while over the legal limit was above the national average in 2009 and 2010 but fell below the national average in 2011 and 2012 (The Road Safety Monitor, 2012). These surveys also found that drinking and driving is at the top of the list of societal issues in BC and that drinking drivers were rated as a very or extremely serious problem by 82.9% of British Columbians. In November, 2011, the BC government reported that there were only 68 impaired driving related fatalities in the year after the new laws were implemented, compared to an average of 113 impaired driving deaths per year for the previous five years (Shaw, 2011). In 2013, a sustained 40% reduction in alcohol related road fatalities was confirmed by independent researchers (Macdonald et al., 2013). Our group conducted a time series analysis of the new laws and found a 21% decrease in all cause fatal crashes (mostly due to reduction in alcohol related crashes), an 8% decrease in hospital admissions for road trauma, and a 7% decrease in ambulance calls for road trauma (Brubacher et al., 2014).

These laws, their extensive enforcement, and the court challenge, generated substantial media coverage. This report explores newspaper coverage of the new traffic legislation in BC, with a focus on the immediate roadside prohibitions for drinking and driving—the most controversial facet of the new laws. Our objectives are (i) to understand the extent and type of unpaid media coverage related to the new traffic laws, (ii) to describe how the new laws were framed by the media, and (iii) to discuss how the media discussion of the new laws changed over time. Although our analysis is descriptive, our findings provide insight into the potential role played by the news media in informing and shaping the opinions of BC drivers regarding the new laws.

2. Methods

We analyzed unsolicited media reports published in commonly read print newspapers. We focused on two national newspapers (National Post, and the Globe and Mail), twelve metropolitan newspapers and all community newspapers published throughout BC, due to their influence on every community in our province.

We have a contract with a professional media monitoring company (Wasserman + Partners Advertising) to capture all injury

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