



**To:** City Development

**From:** Adrian Davis

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**Subject:** Essential Evidence on a page: No. 73 Representation of cycling in newspapers

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Top line: News media coverage can shape public understandings of issues and influence policy and behaviours. Research into newspaper coverage in different cities shows that where there are significant increases in cycling, newspaper articles are more likely to be positive than negative.

Despite its popularity, the growth of cycling is limited by infrastructure constraints which prevent it being easy and safe. Perceptions of cycling and its safety are important because they shape public opinion and inform planning and investment decisions required to support cycling. How the media portrays cycling can shed light on the climate of beliefs and values in which policies that support or hinder cycling are made.

Researchers in Australia analysed newspaper articles in Sydney and Melbourne between 1998 and 2008 to determine any change in the proportion of articles about cycling in each newspaper over time, and to assess change in the proportion of articles that were positive or negative about cycling in each city.<sup>1</sup> There was a 42% increase in cycling in Melbourne for the work journey (up from 14,443 to 20,592) between 2001 and 2006 and a smaller rise of 8% in Sydney (11,131 to 12,132). The most common news angle was injury to cyclist(s) (13.2% of articles), followed by death of cyclist(s) (10.7%). About 10% of the news angles were about moves to support cycling or expressions of support for cycling. This 'support for cycling' news angle became more frequent over time (from 0 in 1998 to 23 in 2008). However, stories about people objecting to cycling or moves to facilitate cycling also rose over time (from 1 in 1998 to 9 in 2008). Cyclists committing misdemeanors on and off the road was the fourth most common news angle (7.4%), however this kind of story fell from 10 in 1998 to 1 in 2008. There were few (4.6%) stories about celebrities riding bicycles, but these became more frequent over time.

The main way cycling was portrayed negatively was that it is dangerous to cyclists (161 instances, present in 49.4% of cycling articles). One in ten stories also carried the frame that cycling is dangerous to non-cyclists. However, analysis detected that overall there were many more instances of positive portrayal of cycling than negative (510 vs 308) and that this largely reflected more positive reporting in Melbourne newspapers. Analysis of change in the portrayal over time showed that all positive portrayals were trending upwards especially 'deserves more support' and 'popular'. While there were fewer instances of negative portrayals of cycling, all negatives, except risk to cyclists, were also found to be increasing. The researchers noted that portrayals of *cycling* were far more positive than portrayals of *cyclists*. *Cyclists* seems to connote an image of people who cycle as different from the rest of the population and stereotyping of cyclists.

From a public health perspective media advocacy is central to advancing public health and has been critical to policy changes which have reduced death and disability from tobacco, firearms, HIV/AIDS and car crashes. A serious effort needs to be made to promote the benefits of cycling in order that media coverage can better inform and shape public policy maker opinion.

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<sup>1</sup> Rissel et, Representations of cycling in metropolitan newspapers – changes over time and differences between Sydney and Melbourne, Australia *BMC Public Health* 2010, 10:371.