

Norman Baker – Transcript

I'm going to talk about this from a different angle and I will start by concentrating on the media and how the media deals with matters.

Is it not astonishing there is always the exact amount of news to fill a 10-minute news bulletin? Never too much, never not enough! Of course, I'm being slightly facetious but what that means is that the news gatherers make judgments on how to fill their 10 minutes. It means for example that if something dramatic happens everything else gets chopped off the agenda. If nothing much is happening, then a story which you might think is not very important ends up as a main story of the day. We will see that in August, I think. There's not much news in August normally and you'll see all sorts of trivia being promoted.

The reason I say all this is because one can't assume what was in the news necessarily reflects the importance of an issue. It depends how much is happening elsewhere. I went to a very interesting event held at the BBC. It was a weekend away and they wanted to just tell us about how they were covering news and get some input from us and to what our perspectives were. What became very apparent – I will get to transport in a minute by the way – was that what fills a news bulletin is something which is sensational but not necessarily important. At the time I think that was great concentration on something like bird flu which was slightly esoteric. It didn't really affect that many people anywhere in the world but it was a main item on the news and therefore caused people to worry about bird flu.

You might say at the moment there's a big concentration on what's happening with the coronavirus pandemic and everyday we are told on the news that yesterday say 50 people died of coronavirus. There's nothing on the news about how many died from heart disease or died of cancer or anything else that is a long-standing problem. And here is the issue with the news: that the news will concentrate on something which is dramatic and new but not on something which is longstanding and perhaps more of a problem to society.

You'll see where I'm going perhaps in terms of road safety here because the same thing applies in transport. In 2000 we had the Hatfield rail crash. That is the last major rail crash in this country to occupy the news for many days. It caused the Labour government at the time to divert itself onto rail safety, ended up with railways being closed for remedial works over a couple of years and during that time of course people were diverted onto the roads, to make up for the absence of rail services. That rail crash, I don't want to minimise it, but it killed four people in 2004 people and injured about 70. The number of people who died on the roads that year was 3,409 with about 38,000 serious injuries and 79,000 slight injuries. In other words, if that day of the Hatfield rail crash was typical for the roads, more than twice as many people died on the roads that date as died in the Hatfield rail crash but we heard nothing about that on the media. There are two reasons. One is because it is not new, it's longstanding and people have now assimilated road deaths into life, that's how they see it, just part of living. And secondly because it's not one big instance but a series of individual instances throughout the year adding up to the figures we've got.

That doesn't constitute a story so even when you have a motorway crash and a pile up, that is not something which occupies the first item of news. It is not something that causes the government to change direction, it doesn't lead to a statement in parliament. It will lead to internal analysis by

Highways England who will look into the cause if it is a particularly serious crash. It may be item three or four or five or the national news; more likely it won't be there at all. It will be probably be on the local news for the area in which the motorway is situated but the consequence of that is that people believe that when a rail crash happens like Hatfield or indeed the one up in Scotland which is the one we saw recently, that somehow they ought to worry about the safety of rail.

They don't worry so much about the safety of road because that's not on the news. We have to bear in mind that public perception is shaped by media outlets who are not reporting level of danger in any particular circumstance but are reporting something which happens to be of interest in terms of news gatherers and which they think the public will respond to. That's a problem for those of us who are seeking to try to make sure that we take action on roads.

Of course, statistically rail is a much safer form of transport than road. I think if you asked the public they wouldn't necessarily come to that conclusion themselves in the same way as at the moment the emphasis from the government is on wearing masks on public transport which leads people to conclude, because that's how the media reports it, that public transport is unsafe, even uniquely unsafe. No doubt there are people standing at the bar in pubs, jostling each other for a pint of lager, who are telling people how unsafe it is a travel by tube. It is not unsafe, but we have to factor in the way the media reports matters.

Now the good news is not necessarily covered in a great deal of detail either. There is good news they could use – that the number of people who die on the roads has been reducing quite substantially over recent years. In fact, looking at the figures the highest rate of fatalities was actually in 1941 when 9,109 people died on the roads. The highest peacetime rate was actually in 1966 when 7,985 people died on the roads.

So we can congratulate ourselves I think with some justification in this country as successive governments have actually done quite a lot to reduce the number of fatalities on our roads. Why that happened is because cars are better designed, with crumple zones which fold when they crash. My car is a 1971 Triumph Herald convertible which I love to bits. However, it is a box chassis design which means if I hit anything I go through the windscreen and the car remains by and large as it was. Modern cars are a lot safer than that used to be.

We've now got more awareness from the public. People wear seat belts automatically without thinking about it in the way they wouldn't have done 40 years ago when a common phrase was “one for the road”. Thank goodness people do not drink and drive as much as they used to. They still use mobile phones by the way which is the matter that needs to be sorted out, but they stopped drinking and driving by and large so that has led to a big improvement.

Also roads are safer than they used to be. Looking back at some of those old British films from the 1930s you will see some clips where people are driving along and you realise how sharp some of the bends are, and how absent road signs are. It is astonishing perhaps in 1926 when almost nobody had a car, thousands were killed on the roads.

When I went to my honeymoon my wife and I hired a 1932 Morris 8. It was to drive down to Somerset which is a delightful drive but I might say that brakes were somewhat lacking so you had to brake a very very long way ahead of where you would normally brake in a modern car. My wife drove it 25 yards and refused to drive any further. I had to drive the rest of the way myself. So cars are now a lot better and this is a matter of congratulations I think to everybody, successive governments and others.

We have now got the situation where the number of deaths on the road is under 2,000 – still too high, it's still 2,000 people who are dying and far in excess of the figures for rail or air or other forms of transport. But it's still a lot better than it was. If you look at the number of deaths in other countries and compare per 100,000 inhabitants per year, we actually come out rather well in the United Kingdom. I think the figure is 2.9 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants per year, we are behind Norway and Sweden and the same level as Ireland. But when you think about other countries, we are a lot better. If you have to be in the Central African Republic it is 33.8 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants per year.

The reality is that the car or the motor vehicle is a big killer across the world and part of what we can do in this country is perhaps try to export some of our knowledge gained over many years to try to help other countries to take some quite simple and quite cost effective steps to try to reduce deaths in those countries. We could try to export what we've learned the hard way, if you like, over many decades. The fact is that across the world there are 1.35 million deaths each year - that's the 2016 figure – as a consequence of road traffic accidents; one person is killed every 25 seconds somewhere in the world as a consequence of road accidents.

There is a great more to do I think to try and make roads safer now. We've come a long way in our country but there are still steps we can take to try to improve matters further. First of all, we need to have realistic speed limits. This may sound counterintuitive but there's been a blanket 20 mile per hour limit introduced in many urban areas. I should say I was the MP back in Opposition days who actually successfully called for the government of the day, a Labour government, to allow councils to introduce 20 mph limits without having to go through the Department for Transport for permission. So I'm all favour 20 mile per hour limits, but I think it's a mistake to make urban areas completely blanket 20 mph limits because that doesn't differentiate between the sections of road where is actually is probably safer to go faster than 20 and those where it absolutely isn't.

In my own town of Lewes there is a clear point where the 20 mph should start which is a bottleneck where the traffic lights are, going into the town centre proper. The County Council has started the 20 mile limit half mile up the road, down a hill and only 20 mph down that hill actually causes the speed limit to be ignored. Which means when drivers do get to the bit where 20 is appropriate, they do not adjust their speed down, so we need to be realistic about where speed limits should apply.

There's more yet to be done on cycle safety and I'm grateful that the government has both in my time and subsequently taken cycle safety seriously. We still see too many accidents with cycles being caught on the inside of lorries or buses turning left. Part of that I think it's about driver training but it's also about making sure that drivers actually see what's happening outside of their vehicles. The technology exists to be able to do that now, there's no reason why it should not be standard on all such vehicles so that people can see cyclists properly.

We need to look at the way mobile phones in cars are used. The government pushed up the penalty to six points for these using mobile phones while driving which sounds quite severe but I can tell you from my time in office as Home Office minister for crime prevention, and this is the lesson which by the way the present Home Secretary seems to ignore, the way you stop crime, and I include using mobile phones in cars, is not by the severity of the sentence. It is by the likelihood of being caught and prosecuted successfully – that's what determines it. You can have a sentence as long as you like but if people don't get caught, they pay no attention to it, so we need to first of all have better enforcement of using mobile phones in cars. Secondly peer pressure which is what we saw years ago to make it socially unacceptable to not wear a seat belt, or to go drink driving. It was largely peer pressure, societal pressure which curbed drink driving and it needs to kick in to curb illegal and

dangerous mobile phone use. Media campaigns can help and they will probably have to be quite garish and draw attention to one or two incidents where mobile phone usage has actually led to death and highlight these matters and to try and get people to understand that is not a good idea to do this. We've had the successful introduction of speed awareness courses which I think has done quite a lot to reduce excessive speed on our roads.

My brother was always driving far too fast. He was finally caught for speeding and went on the speed awareness course and actually came out rather mortified and has been driving much more responsibly in my view since then. So these things can work, the education side can work.

I'm in favour of what they do on French roads. Where there's been a particularly bad stretch of road for accidents they have a sign up saying, you know, 15 people killed on this roads since January or whatever it happened to be. Actually those kind of shock tactics, not everywhere and not over used, but on particularly bad locations can be effective. Just making people think again about how they are driving. If you think you know the road, that's sometimes more dangerous than those who don't know the road.

I think we need to look at the condition of roads. You have to say that local authorities have been short of cash but the condition of roads in East Sussex is quite shocking at the moment. It really hasn't been as bad as it is at the moment. It's causing drivers to end up in potholes, it's causing them to swerve, it undoubtedly adds to the accident rate on our roads. I think people expect a road condition which isn't there and it's got worse in the last six months.

Lastly, I think we need to look at modal shift because it is safer to go by public transport than to go by car. There are people who can be stopped from going by car if we can make it attractive to go by bus or by train and people want to use one of those methods of travel rather than cars. One of the additional features will be that it is safer. My daughter who's 21 has no wish to learn to drive, neither do her friends. They want to go out clubbing or whatever. They want to drink and they don't want to have to abstain in order to drive a car back. They want to get back by public transport so I think what we can do is try to encourage that sort of attitude in young people – understanding how public transport or Uber or taxis can actually be a better way of getting around. I think we try to roll that out as well, that's useful thing to do, so public transport has to be available and has to be attractive and to be properly priced of course.

I make that point for any Department for Transport colleagues who are here and listening. I have to say in the real world, the form of transport which emits less carbon should be cheaper than those which are more carbon-polluting. Yet we've got rail fares being pushed up above inflation, we've got bus fares which have rocketed since 2010, while on the other hand fuel duty has been frozen for ten years by the Treasury. And the government, god help us, is consulting on cutting air passenger duty which is the only charge at all on airlines. So let's try and get the right incentives and disincentives in place to get people to take the right decision.

If we do all those things, then perhaps we can even go past Sweden and Norway to become the safest country in the world for road safety with the fewest deaths per 100,000 inhabitants. Wouldn't it be great if we could do that?

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