

## ON THE COVER

## Promoting Road Safety

**MIKE ESBESTER**

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Where are they going, the couple on the motorbike that adorns this issue's cover? Somewhere exciting, no doubt, and at great speed, with the wind billowing through the man's scarf and the woman's hair. They are young and free, making the most of 1960s Britain, about to roar past the viewer and off into the distance. Wherever they are going, this 1969 road safety poster tells us, they are getting there *safely*—because they are wearing their safety helmets (fig. 1).

This image is a fitting one for the cover of a special issue devoted to the international history of road safety, not least because safety education—using persuasive methods to try to convince people to change their behavior and act more safely—has been deployed for over 100 years and has reached virtually every nation in the world. It represents a particular approach to road safety, though by no means the only one; engineering, training, and enforcement solutions often run alongside educative campaigns. Yet as artifacts, road safety education materials like this poster tell us a lot about prevalent perceptions of danger and people's interactions with automotive technologies, and about responsibilities for managing risks in everyday life. How should dangers posed by particular technologies be addressed? Who should be responsible for protecting individuals? What role, if any, should the state play?

In Britain, the educative approach to preventing deaths and injuries was well established by 1969. Drawing on the American "Safety First" movement, safety education was introduced into the workplace by the railway industry in 1913. It soon spread across other industries and other areas of society—chiefly road safety, from 1917, but also home safety after 1930. A huge range of methods were used: posters, booklets, films, songs, exhibitions, children's games, safety quizzes and competitions, "safety weeks," staged crashes to raise awareness, talks, and messages printed on

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FIG. 1 1969 British road safety poster, issued by the Central Office of Information and produced by Philip Castle (Source: [AUTHOR, PLEASE FILL IN].)

bookmarks, cigarette cards, milk bottle tops and even on Christmas wrapping paper and bars of soap. Hundreds of millions of items have been produced and disseminated over the last 100 years in Britain alone, making safety education a massively significant sociocultural phenomenon.

This material gives us insight into debates surrounding safety and harm reduction. Before 1939 most safety education was produced by voluntary bodies like the National “Safety First” Association, formed of con-

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cerned individuals coming together in their spare time to try to do something for what they saw as the civic good. The British state was hands-off in its approach to questions of personal safety, drawing on a long-standing tradition of reluctance to intervene too closely in the lives of its citizens—even if this intervention only meant offering advice about safe ways to cross a road, ride a bicycle, or drive a car. Only in 1934, in response to mounting public pressure about the rising toll of deaths and injuries on Britain’s roads, did the government make a limited financial contribution to the costs of the first national road safety campaign, something not repeated until part way through the Second World War.

The changed priorities of war meant that the state took a more active role in preserving the lives and well-being of its citizens. People became military resources, vital to the fighting (whether on the home front or overseas). As a result, road safety (and of course work safety) campaigns came under the remit of new government departments, the Ministry of Information and the Ministry of War Transport. After the war, the state accepted that it could play a role in the reduction of unintended deaths and injuries on the roads, something that formed one part of the work of the new Central Office of Information (COI), along with other matters of public interest such as health promotion.

The poster shown here was produced in 1969 by the COI as part of its road safety work. This became increasingly important after 1945, as the end of petrol rationing and greater availability of motor vehicles resulted in many more people driving and greater numbers of road traffic casualties. As is still the case, certain groups of road users were of particular concern—notably young drivers and motorcyclists—and reaching them with road safety messages posed particular challenges. Rather than stern admonitions or authoritarian finger-waving, this poster tried a different approach, perhaps more in keeping with the moment of production: a softer, advisory tone that tried to appeal to the young motorcyclist’s sense of style and freedom. The artwork would have helped in this; it was produced by Philip Castle, the graphic designer known for his “airbrush” style, who later went on to create classics such as the poster for the film *A Clockwork Orange*.

The poster is a particularly apt exemplar in that it joins two approaches to the safety issue: education and “engineering”—that is, the use of safety helmets as a technical fix to the problem. In part the poster wants to persuade and change behaviors, but it also wants to encourage more than simply “acting” safely. It seeks to add a level of physical protection should the motorbike rider or passenger be involved in a crash. As always with efforts to reduce deaths and injuries, there is rarely only one technique at play at any given moment.

Rather than simply presenting neutral messages or advice about safety practices (in this case, wearing a safety helmet), education always reflected

other values. Some of these might have been unconscious, a product of the assumptions of the times. The poster is clearly gendered, and responses to it would have differed between men and women. It looks as though it was aimed at young male motorcycle drivers—would they have deployed a sexualized gaze when looking at the female passenger, who stares directly back at the viewer? Reflecting and reinforcing prevailing notions of skill and mechanical prowess, the female passenger occupies a passive role on the machine, as the male driver “masters” the aggressive technology of the motorbike and the physical challenges of the road.

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At the same time, the very fact that methods such as posters were used to address the challenges of automotive technologies and road safety is part of the hidden values inscribed in safety education. Safety was viewed by many parts of the British state and by many people as a personal responsibility, something that a behavioral approach, like safety education, was believed well suited to address. By favoring education, other approaches (particularly enforcement) could be sidelined.

This poster was part of a wider debate, about individual liberties and the freedom to choose. Given the state’s long-standing reluctance to intervene through legislation or regulation, producing safety education allowed the state to be seen to be taking action but at the same time leaving individuals with the freedom to choose what safety precautions to adopt and what advice to follow. In the case of safety helmets for motorcyclists, at this time their use was not mandatory—hence the need to persuade and cajole. Despite attempts to legislate to make safety helmets compulsory in the 1950s and 1960s, it was not until 1973 that a law was passed and motorcyclists were required to wear them. On each occasion when legislation was debated, the issue of personal liberty was raised, with opponents preferring the use of education—and subsequently riding without helmets in protest. So, safety education was part of a politicized debate about individuals’ rights to judge risks and to follow their favored precautionary path.

These were not issues confined to Britain. Safety education had (and has) an international take-up. Examples are found throughout the articles in this special issue, but there was a much wider geographic impact, and a spread across the spectrum of political ideologies, left and right: fascists, socialists, communists, and democrats alike have made use of posters and other items to try to minimize the danger from the use (and misuse?) of the internal combustion engine. At the same time, it is an extremely problematic methodology in terms of proven impact in reducing deaths and injuries. Evaluations of the success of posters and similar road safety education were seemingly not attempted for the first decades of their existence—it was simply assumed that safety education worked. More recent studies have suggested that the positive good done is limited at best, as Claes Tingvall, director of traffic safety at the Swedish National Road Administration, notes in his concluding comments on this special issue.



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Despite questions about the success of campaigns, safety education remains, for good or ill, one significant tool in the attempt to reduce deaths and injuries on our roads. It is perhaps easy to see why: it can be eye-catching and provocative, as in this issue's cover image. While it is not the only technique that has been used, safety education is extremely significant as a means of shaping how people interact with and ascribe meanings to technology—even if those meanings have included “danger” and reminded people of the lack of safety in their daily lives. Perhaps we as historians of technology can apply our critical gaze to these sources and consider how societies have in the past addressed the unintended, unforeseen, and unfortunate consequences of technological systems—and reflect on how we might best address these consequences now and in the future.

