Hang Back: Autopsy of an Error

Arguments, Messaging and the Politics of Cycling

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ADAPT Project: Analysis and Development of Argumentation in Personal Transport

Compiling the STCD: Sustainable Transport Communications Dataset

To investigate the effectiveness of different kinds of argument on changing behaviour in the transport domain.

To develop argumentative strategies and delivery methods that will improve rates of behaviour change.

But today: analysing the reaction to a very bad cycle safety campaign
Things you shouldn’t get caught between
The Full Response to ‘Hang Back’

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THINK before you blame the victim

‘Hang Back’ from lorries is this morning’s message from the DfT to cyclists. No mention on safer direct vision lorries, better infrastructure, driver responsibility or lorry restrictions. Just a message to cyclists about what they need to do to avoid being killed. Oh dear – perhaps the DfT should have looked and listened first.
The Full Response to ‘Hang Back’

Hang Back: Autopsy of an Error

- Victim Blaming
- Bad Taste
- Wrong Campaign
- Unclear Message
The Wrong Campaign Response
Hang Back: Autopsy of an Error

Research shows that a large number of incidents involving cyclists are with lorries at junctions.

We want to protect vulnerable road users by raising awareness of specific dangers.

The best safety initiative for our roads would be for Government to back the use of direct vision lorries in major building projects just like the Mayor of London has done.

The ‘Hang Back’ campaign was the wrong campaign to run.

The cyclist would have been visible with a Dennis Eagle Elite or Mercedes Econic direct vision lorry.

It ignores the fact that unsafe lorry designs are still being used, when safer direct vision lorries...can be purchased now.

[It ignores possible improvements in infrastructure]

Until we adopt a road danger reduction approach to keeping people safe on the streets, the miserable toll of death and injury on our streets will continue.
The ‘Wrong Campaign’ Response
Hang Back: Autopsy of an Error

• All criticisms here can be understood as raising critical questions against an implied practical reasoning scheme ascribed to THINK!

• Relevant CQs here are CQ3, CQ4, and CQ6

• Is ‘Hang Back’ the most effective option?

• Are other options available?

• Are other options practicable?

Scheme for Value-based Practical Reasoning

I have a goal $G$.
$G$ is supported by my set of values, $V$.
Bringing about $A$ is necessary (or sufficient) for me to bring about $G$.
Therefore, I should (practically ought to) bring about $A$.

Critical Questions for Value-based Practical Reasoning

(CQ1) What other goals do I have that might conflict with $G$?
(CQ2) How well is $G$ supported by (or at least consistent with) my values $V$?
(CQ3) What alternative actions to my bringing about $A$ that would also bring about $G$ should be considered?
(CQ4) Among bringing about $A$ and these alternative actions, which is arguably the best of the whole set, in light of considerations of efficiency in bringing about $G$?
(CQ5) Among bringing about $A$ and these alternative actions, which is arguably the best of the whole set, in light of my values $V$?
(CQ6) What grounds are there for arguing that it is practically possible for me to bring about $A$?
(CQ7) What consequences of my bringing about $A$ that might have even greater negative value than the positive value of $G$ should be taken into account?

(Walton 2007)
The Unclear Message Response
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The Hang Back advert does not clearly express the intended message.

...being charitable... if they wanted to display a scene where a cyclist clearly undertakes a lorry, this video does not do that.

The video actually shows a lorry overtaking a cyclist before turning left rather than waiting behind the cyclist before doing so.
Relevant Critical Question: CQ7 “What consequences of my bringing about A that might have even greater negative value than the positive value of G should be taken into account?”

Some evidence that ‘shock tactics’ work, although disliked by the public (Huber et al. 2011)

Suggests the criticism is valid only if the campaign doesn’t work
'Victim Blaming' Response
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Road Users have a responsibility to make our roads safer by being more vigilant.

The Hang Back campaign is an instance of Victim Blaming.

Doesn't speak to the person who's doing the damage.
The ENF message at least implies that if you do it, it is your fault if something awful happens.

Their ill-considered and HSJ study shows that drivers are more likely to do

You might not have chosen to put yourself in that position.

The message should have been directed at the lorry drivers to ask them to stay back from people cycle to avoid them being exposed to the risk of causing a crushing collision.

The message at least implies that if you do it, it is your fault if something awful happens.

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‘Victim Blaming’ as a concept initially used with reference to injustices faced by African Americans. (Ryan, 1971)

Now often used to critique how the law deals with sexual assault and advice around women’s safety.

Important **difference**: identifiable perpetrator  
Important **similarity**: background oppression

Is ‘Hang Back’ an instance of the **wrong kind** of Victim Blaming?

Other morally significant differences between cycling and sexual assault/racial injustice:

Activity is more dangerous, perpetrator is (often) less responsible in the cycling case

If victim blaming *per se* is not always wrong, then more needs to be said here.
“It is important that cyclists “are aware that HGV drivers and motorists might make an error. That could cause serious injury or death””

(Andrew Jones MP, correspondence with Cycling UK, October 2016)

“Just to be clear, Cycling UK has always supported the 'Be Aware' message to cyclists when approaching the rear of a lorry. We do not advocate cyclists undertaking left-turning lorries. We agree with the idea behind the THINK campaign, that cyclists should be aware of the danger zones caused by lorry blind spots.” (Cycling UK, October 2016)
Things you shouldn’t get stuck between:

- A sensitive topic and an unclear message
- A backlash and an unconvincing retcon
- Sophistry and valid criticism