**Is it too dangerous to cycle?**

With 13 cyclists killed in London this year, Rob Penn and Gerhard Weiss debate whether our roads are too risky to brave on two wheels.

**Rob Penn, writer and author of *It's All About the Bike: the Pursuit of Happiness on Two Wheels***

It depends, of course, on where we're cycling and who's pushing the pedals. Is it dangerous to ride along a disused railway line in the Peak District? No. Is it too dangerous to ride down the Euston Road at rush hour? Not for me, but I've ridden a bike most days of my adult life.

I found the report this week about the rise in "cycle deaths" this year very upsetting. But the news emboldens me to cycle more, and encourage others to do the same, rather than lock my bikes away in the shed and drive a car.

**Gerhard Weiss, development officer at the London Cycling Campaign**

We certainly should not take news about people being killed while cycling as a reason not to ride a bike. But the hazards that cyclists are exposed to and that put people off cycling in the first place are real. Statistically you should be absolutely fine on Euston Road. But what the statistics hide is the impact even a minor collision has on people who are not encased in a metal box. It can easily cause life-changing injury without ending up as a statistic. Even a near miss or just the sheer aggression one might experience on our streets is clearly enough for too many people to give up cycling or to cycle less than they would like to.

There is huge capacity to improve our streets, not just for cycling but for everyone, by making them better for cycling. This will involve behaviour-change measures, but the way we design our streets has a big role to play and would also affect behaviour.

**RP** Part of the problem in the UK is that pro-cycling a*dvocates* compare our plight to the promised land – the two-wheel tranquility of Copenhagen or Amsterdam. Our situation is very different: we're densely populated and space on our roads is heavily contested. Also the bicycle was overlooked in transport and planning policy for half a century.

Granted, the *status quo* is not acceptable. We have to keep pressing for better *infrastructure*, greater motorist awareness of cyclists and institutional acceptance of the bicycle as a valid form of transportation. But my concern is that by making all the noise about the dangers of cycling in the UK, that noise discourages people from cycling rather than reducing the danger itself. Would it be better to shout about the pleasures and benefits of cycling, and work to improve cycling safety *sotto voce*?

**GW** Yearning for the promised land is perhaps part of human nature. But cycle provision in the Netherlands or Copenhagen has a much more practical, down-to-earth appeal. Cycling is a key element in transport planning and feeling safe is part of it. It means everyone is *empowered* to choose cycling, the hurdles are taken away.

I agree that space on our streets is often heavily contested, but that's not dissimilar to Amsterdam. And you hit the nail on the head that the bicycle was for too long the UK's forgotten mode of transport. It was of course a mistake that has to be *rectified*, which will take a lot of work.

We have a duty to shout about street designs that cause danger to people on bikes. Whilst a junction itself, being inanimate, is not dangerous, it is often designed in a way that encourages dangerous behaviour. Unfortunately the media is sometimes too happy to just run with the simplistic "cycling is dangerous" message.

**RP** When I first commuted in London in the early 90s, the bicycle was a pest. There was an overt sense of cyclists versus motorists on the city streets. Riding a bike could feel like an act of anarchy. In the intervening years, health concerns, transport issues, the environment, the price of oil and the profile of cycle sport have driven the bicycle back to the centre of public consciousness in the UK. There is a whisper that we might even be at the dawn of a new golden age of the bicycle. I certainly think so. You and your colleagues should give yourself a pat on the back for being a part of that.

Right now, though, we need to keep transmitting a positive message, a message that *extols* the *utilitarian*, democratic virtues of the bicycle, a message that encourages people to wheel their steeds out of the garage and into the sunshine. Which brings me back to my first point: if you increase the number of cyclists, it becomes safer to cycle. The nub, then, is how best to encourage people to ride. *Exhorting* the dangers of cycling is not the best way.

**GW** I would hate to live in a society where we are driven to ride a bicycle because of economic and environmental pressures. Nor would I simply bank on the safety in numbers concept and thereby rely on the brave to pave the way. To me it would be a sign of a truly civilised society when people choose to cycle because it feels like the obvious, safe and convenient choice. For this I think the approach needs to be more *multi-faceted* and requires positive promotion as well as better and safer street design. Perhaps most importantly bicycle traffic needs to enter our planning at a strategic level.

Yes, it is important how we balance the public message. And it would be ridiculous to tell people not to cycle until all streets are super-safe. Many more people could enjoy cycling right now.

Pre-reading tasks

1. What do the following words mean?

* *advocate (noun)*
* *infrastructure*
* *empower*
* *sotto* *voce*
* *status quo*
* *rectify*
* *extol*
* *exhort*
* *attest*
* *multi-faceted*
* *utilitarian*

**What are the two writers’ viewpoints on each of the following topics?**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Topic | Rob Penn | Gerhard Weiss |
| What do they say about riding along Euston Road? |  |  |
| What do they say about how the situation in Copenhagen or Amsterdam is different to the UK? |  |  |
| What do they say about how planning and infrastructure helps/hinders? |  |  |
| What do they say about the best kind of message to communicate about cycling? |  |  |
| What do they say about why people are now choosing to cycle? |  |  |

**Write up the points into full sentences on each of the points.**

For example, *Rob Penn says …. Gerhard Weiss disagrees and says …*

1. What do they say about riding along Euston Road?

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1. What do they say about how the situation in Copenhagen or Amsterdam is different to the UK?

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1. What do they say about how infrastructure helps/hinders?

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1. What do they say about the best kind of message to communicate about cycling?

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1. What do they say about why people are now choosing to cycle?

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