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Assessing U.S. Media's Reaction to a Suggested Terminology Shift from "Accident" to "Incident" in News Reports of Childhood Agricultural Injury: A Pilot Study

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: This pilot study aimed to: 1) quantify the usage of "accident" and related terms in media articles describing agricultural injuries and fatalities involving children; and 2) assess journalists' reactions to a suggested terminology shift from "accident" to "incident" in recent U.S. news media reports about youth agricultural injuries.

Methods: United States (U.S.) news reports covering agricultural injury events were obtained from the AgInjuryNews.org dataset. Quantitative text analysis was performed to identify news articles that mentioned "accident" or related terms (e.g., "accidental," "accidentally") in their title or narrative. Chi-square tests, post-hoc procedures, and univariate logistic regression were used to determine whether and to what extent "accident" and related terms were used to describe youth agricultural injuries. To assess journalists' reactions to using "incident" instead of "accident" when describing youth agricultural injuries, a one-question survey was emailed to authors of news reports. Qualifying articles in the AgInjuryNews.org database were from June 1, 2022, to February 28, 2023, describing an agricultural injury involving victims under the age of 18 and featuring "accident" or its variations. Responses were coded based on sentiment.

Results: A total of 3,675 U.S. media reports were included in the quantitative text analysis for aim 1. "Accident" or related terms were used in 66% of the articles about youth agricultural injuries, compared to only 53% for reports about adult agricultural injuries. Agricultural injury events involving youth were more likely to be described using "Accident" or derived terms in U.S. news media than incidents involving adults (odds ratio: 1.73). For the second aim, 31 articles met the inclusion criteria for the journalists' survey. The survey response rate was 39% ($n = 12$). Of the 12 journalists who responded, 1 disagreed with the proposed terminology shift, 5 were neutral, and 6 were in agreement.

Conclusion: The findings from the quantitative text analysis and survey results support the need for additional research and provide evidence to support efforts to create lasting change in the way youth agricultural injury and fatality events are reported by U.S. news media.

KEYWORDS

Accident; agriculture; framing; injuries; injury prevention; journalism; media; terminology

Introduction

Many injury events, including agricultural injuries, have been traditionally referred to as "accidents," suggesting they are both unintentional and unpreventable.¹ This study sought to improve understandings of how youth agricultural injury events are described in the U.S. news media and assess the likelihood of initiating a terminology shift among journalists. Building on improved knowledge of injury etiology over the past several decades, public health scholars and injury preventionists have argued that "accident" is not always an accurate term, because many injuries, while unintentional, are preventable.^{1,2} Referring to

injury events as "accidents" can stifle prevention efforts and evade accountability. Moreover, the continued use of words such as "accidents" in injury reports can reinforce existing public perception that these injury events are inevitable. These concerns influenced the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) to make formal statements in 1997, nearly three decades ago, that motor vehicle crashes are not accidents.³ This terminology shift led to a greater emphasis on managing traffic patterns and improving public roadway construction.⁴ Additionally, the terminology shift provided a distinction of personal, risky behaviors such as

speeding or driving while impaired for which a driver can be held accountable.⁵ Other occupational industries have similarly adopted terms other than “accident” when describing unintentional injuries.⁶

Fatal and nonfatal agricultural injuries, on the other hand, continue to be referred to as accidents in public discourse and news media. Identifying and comprehending the injury event is the cornerstone of prevention, so it is important to acknowledge that many injuries have identifiable causes and are not merely the outcome of chance. Recently, it has been argued that agricultural injury events, especially those involving children, should never be referred to as accidents.⁶ The preferred terminology advocated by the National Children’s Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety (NCCRAHS) includes words that describe the event such as “crash” or “tractor rollover,” due to these events being preventable.^{6–8}

However, many news reports refer to agricultural injury events as “accidents,” undercutting notions of preventability and evacuating the responsibilities of the agents involved in the situation. News media play a major role in shaping perceptions of public health issues among the general public and policymakers, and many agricultural injuries and fatalities are covered by media reports.^{9–11} Thus, news reports have the potential to be useful educational tools by drawing attention to agricultural injury events and trends, providing prevention messages, and shaping public perceptions of health and injury risk.^{12–14} Media is a key source for risk information among agricultural producers, and media coverage of risks has been shown to encourage individuals to search for additional resources and implement prevention measures.^{15,16} Improving the terminology used and the information shared by media outlets can be a useful strategy for increasing public awareness and influencing agricultural safety and health-related behaviors.¹⁷ The present study takes a first step in that direction.

Purpose and research objectives

The objectives of this 12-month pilot project were twofold: 1) quantify the usage of “accident” and related terms in media articles describing

agricultural injuries and fatalities involving children (under the age of 18); and 2) assess journalists’ reactions to a suggested terminology shift from “accident” to “incident” in US news media reports about youth agricultural injuries. Ultimately, the project results will serve as the foundation for a larger initiative that aims to improve understandings of and promote a shift in the language used to describe agricultural injuries and fatalities throughout the U.S. This paper highlights the design and findings of the pilot study.

Methods

The two objectives of this project proceeded independently, and the methods and results of each are described in separate subsections. The AgInjuryNews.org dataset was utilized for both aspects of the project. AgInjuryNews.org is a searchable web-based dataset of injury cases derived from publicly available news media reports and similar sources that serves to fill the gap in agricultural injury and fatality surveillance.¹⁸

Quantification of “accident” usage

To achieve aim 1, the research team performed a quantitative text analysis of the usage of “accident” and related terms used to describe youth agricultural injury events in U.S. news media reports. News reports from 2016 to 2023 were extracted from the full AgInjuryNews.org database. Microsoft Excel was used to perform data transformations, including table joins, column concatenation, and textual analysis of both the title and body of news media articles. Primary news articles (i.e., not reprints or follow-up reports from a different outlet) from the 8-year period were included in the analysis. The resulting table was saved as a comma-separated value file and loaded in the statistical program R.

In R, a contingency table of article counts was created for two variables: 1) age group of victim(s) involved in the agricultural incident described in the news article (youth only, adult only, or both); 2) use of “accident” or related terms (e.g., “accidental,” “accidentally,” etc.) in either the title or body of the news article. A chi-square test of

independence was performed to examine whether the observed and expected proportions of news articles that used “accident” or related terms (e.g., “accidental,” “accidentally,” etc.) in either their title or body was associated with whether the article described an agricultural incident involving youth only, adults only, or both youth and adults.¹⁹ Cases where the age groups of the victims were unknown were withheld from the analysis. Post-hoc pairwise chi-square tests with Bonferroni correction were completed for each pair of age group treatments (youth only vs adult only; youth only vs both; adult only vs both) to identify the degree to which each of the specific pairs of treatments contributed to the chi-square statistic.^{20,21} The chi-square tests, however, do not tell us the degree to which a specific age group treatment impacts the proportion of articles using “accident” or related terms. Thus, odds ratios based on a univariate logistic regression were calculated to measure estimated effect size (i.e., the odds of “accident” or related terms appearing in a news article about victims in each of the age group categories).

Assessment of reactions to terminology change

To assess U.S. journalists’ willingness to using “incident” instead of “accident” when describing youth agricultural injuries, the research team identified news reports included in the AgInjuryNews.org database that were published from June 1, 2022, to February 28, 2023, and met the following criteria: 1) described a fatal or nonfatal injury event where at least one of the victims was

younger than 18 years; and 2) used “accident” or a derived term (e.g., “accidental,” “accidentally”) at least once in either the article title or body. Once the reports were identified, the research team located a point of contact for each of the injury news reports (e.g., reporter’s name or newspaper editor) and emailed them a one-question survey about their willingness to use “incident” instead of “accident” in future reports of youth agricultural injuries (Figure 1). The email also included information about the importance of replacing “accident” with “incident,” including justification and examples from other injury types (e.g., “motor vehicle crashes.”) No participant incentive was offered for participation in the survey. Participant responses were entered into Microsoft Excel for sentiment analysis. Responses were coded as “negative,” “neutral,” or “positive” towards the suggested terminology change. All responses were coded independently by two members of the project team, and the results of their analysis were compared. Discrepancies in the results of the two coders were resolved with input from a third member of the project team.

Results

Quantification of “accident” usage

A total of 3,675 U.S. news reports were included in the quantitative text analysis. Of the articles included, 85% described agricultural injuries involving only adults (aged ≥ 18), 12% involved only youth (aged 0–17), and 3% involved both youth and adult victims. More than half of the

SUBJECT: Your article, [title words 1-4...]

Dear editor/reporter/producer,

I came across your article titled “_____” that was published on _____. Thank you for highlighting dangers that are sometimes part of the agricultural worksite. We are conducting a research study assessing “U.S. media’s reaction to a suggested terminology shift from ‘accident’ to ‘incident’ in news reports of childhood agricultural injury”. We have seen similar shifts elsewhere in journalism, such as “accident” to “crash” in motor vehicle cases. Yet, agricultural injury reporting often uses “accident” to describe the event.

Although news reports of farm trauma have traditionally used the term “accident,” we are wondering: if you cover a similar story in the future, would you be willing to replace “accident” with “incident”?

Please reply to this email with your response. Your response to this yes/no question will help us formulate future research strategies.

Figure 1. Email sent to journalists.

Table 1. Counts of articles by age group(s) of victims and presence of “accident” or related term in article title or body and results of initial chi-square test.

Age Group	Articles (n = 3,675)	Includes Accident or Related Term (n = 2,003)	Does Not Include Accident or Related Term No (n = 1,672)	χ^2	df	p
Adult	3,136 (85%)	1,666 (53%)	1,470 (47%)	29.399	2	<.001***
Youth	436 (12%)	289 (66%)	147 (34%)			
Both	103 (3%)	48 (47%)	55 (53%)			

Table 2. Results of post-hoc chi-square tests with Bonferroni correction.

Sub-Category Comparisons	χ^2 p-value, crude	χ^2 p-value, Adjusted
Adult : Youth	p < 0.001	p < 0.001
Adult : Both	0.192	0.576
Youth : Both	p < 0.001	p < 0.001

articles (55%) used “accident” or a related term in their title or body. Of the articles about adult injuries, 53% included an “accident” term, whereas 66% of the articles involving youth injuries included “accident” or a related term (e.g., “accidental,” “accidentally,” etc.). The chi-square test indicated that there was a statistically significant association between the age group of the victims and whether the article used “accident” or a derived term (Table 1). The post-hoc tests indicated the differing proportions of “accident” usage for the adult vs. youth age groups were the primary contributor to the chi-square statistic (Table 2). According to the results of the univariate logistic regression, the likelihood of a news article using “accident” or related terms to describe an injury event is 70% higher for articles describing injury events involving youth compared to injury events involving adults (Table 3). Importantly, the lower bounds of the 95% confidence interval for the odds ratio are greater than one, providing very strong evidence that agricultural injury events involving children are much more likely to be described using “accident” or related terms than incidents involving adults, or both adults and children.

Assessment of journalists’ reactions to terminology change

There were 31 articles identified in the AgInjuryNews.org dataset that met the inclusion criteria for this part of the study. All 31 articles were written by different authors/publishing teams. These articles included 14 fatal and 17 nonfatal events. The articles came from news

outlets in the Appalachian, Midwest, Northeast, Northwest, Southeast, and Southern regions of the U.S. The broad geographical distribution of incidents reduces regional bias potential in the terminology used by agricultural media professionals. Of the 31 journalists, 12 responded (39% response rate). One of the responses was categorized as negative (8%), expressing some resistance to the proposed terminology shift. Five of the responses were neutral (42%), reflecting a lack of an opinion to the terminology shift. The remaining six responses were positive (50%), reflecting agreement to the proposed terminology shift (Table 4).

The responses coded as positive ranged from brief affirmations such as “Yes” to more detailed feedback such as, “If I do a similar story I can replace ‘accident’ with ‘incident’” and “Thanks for reaching out. I will make a note to use the term ‘incident’ instead of accident moving forward for stories related to youth agricultural injury. That makes a lot of sense.” Responses coded as neutral

Table 3. Odds ratios of a news report containing “accident” or related term for agricultural injuries involving youth, adults, and both youth and adults.

Age Group	Odds Ratio	95% CI
Adult	1.00 (reference)	n/a
Youth	1.73	(1.41, 2.14)
Both	0.77	(0.52, 1.14)

Table 4. Sentiment of response received from journalists.

Sentiment of Responses	n (%)
Negative	1 (8%)
Neutral	5 (42%)
Positive	6 (50%)
Total	12

were generally polite acknowledgments without clear commitment like, *“Thank you for reaching out. We’ll keep it in mind for the future, and we appreciate your viewpoints.”* and *“Thank you for this information.”* The only response that was coded as negative expressed clear disagreement with the proposed change, stating, *“Whether you call it an accident or incident, it is unintentional which means it was accidental. We will consider your request.”*

Limitations

Several limitations were noted in this study. The quantification of “accident” usage was limited in its inclusion of only the age group variable. Future studies should include multiple variables (e.g., victim gender, agent of injury, etc.) to provide a more complete understanding of how injury event characteristics influence whether a news report uses “accident” or a related term to describe the event. Further, quantitative text analysis is a method best utilized for high-level assessment of patterns in a text or corpus. While appropriate to the aims of this study, researchers seeking a more fine-grained analysis of how youth agricultural injuries are portrayed in the U.S. news media should employ content analysis or other qualitative techniques.

The small sample size of journalists surveyed is another limitation that impacts the generalizability of our findings. The small budget and short completion time of this pilot project did not make it possible to recruit a larger sample. The survey could be repeated with more journalists to make the findings more robust. Furthermore, while the language in the recruitment email sent to potential participants was crafted using the “Media Guidelines for Agricultural Safety” created by the National Children’s Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety,²² and the team incorporated input from an external media advisor, different variations of the email were not tested. Nuances in verbiage, terminology, sender address, subject line, or length can all impact participants’ willingness to open, read, or respond. Additionally, the scope of the results was limited

by the one-question survey. Further, there is some concern that the term “incident” is too weak as a replacement for “accident,” and other options should have been provided. Follow-up studies should aim to conduct a more in-depth survey with a large sample of journalists to increase the robustness of the findings. It would be especially worthwhile to gather more in-depth information regarding why journalists are in favor of or opposed to the proposed terminology change.

Discussion and conclusion

This pilot project was intended to serve as the first step towards influencing U.S. news media to play a role in increasing awareness of the preventability of youth agricultural injuries. The study also provided an improved understanding of how victim age impacts the way agricultural incidents are covered in U.S. news reports.

The analysis of the AgInjuryNews.org data from 2016 to 2023 emphasizes the prevalence of the term “accident” in youth agricultural injury media reports. News media reports covering youth agricultural injuries are much more likely to include “accident” or related terms in their reporting than incidents involving adults. We hypothesize that this difference occurs for one or multiple reasons, including: 1) journalists do not want to imply blame, whether towards the parent or grandparent, thus that courtesy tends to be reflected in the empathetic tones of their reporting. A manuscript published in 2011 by Smith et al. analyzing the terminology used in U.S. press articles indicated the use of the term “accident” or “freak accident” when describing injury events could be a practice used by journalists to diffuse personal or familial blame, thus supporting our hypothesis;²³ 2) rural small town journalism is influenced (directly or indirectly) by the readers and advertisers of its publications. This is supported by a body of literature suggesting that rural/small town journalism is closely shaped by the expectations of local readers and advertisers.^{24–26} More broadly, though, the results indicated over half of all news reports included in the analysis used “accident” or a related term. This points to

a general cultural problem of agricultural injuries being naturalized as accidental “facts of life” by the U.S. media.^{10,27}

While the small sample size of the survey portion of the study limits the generalizability of those findings, positive responses from half of the respondents suggest media professionals are receptive to the terminology shift from “accident” to “incident.” Neutral responses by 42% of the journalists surveyed indicate opportunities for targeted outreach and education to influence authors to adopt the terminology shift. These findings have important implications for practice. They suggest that evidence-based, targeted education, and outreach campaigns to news media outlets could result in a significant terminology shift by increasing awareness on the topic. Outreach and education have been successful strategies in the past to shift media language. For instance, the Associated Press (AP) stylebook updated their guidelines to de-sanction the use of “illegal immigrant” or “illegal” when describing people, and they also updated their guidance on covering the transgender population to promote fair and inclusive reporting, as a result of sustained efforts from advocacy organizations.^{28–30} Similar successes have been seen with other professional organizations such as the Association of Health Care Journalists regarding the use of person-first language.³¹ Journalists could be persuaded to adopt this terminology shift through methods used in influencing the above mentioned examples such as consistent messaging from trusted sources, updated professional style guidelines, and longitudinal exposure to rationale backed with evidence.

When considered together, the findings from this study demonstrate the need for additional research and public health practices to provide evidence in support of efforts to create lasting change in the way agricultural injury and fatality events are reported by U.S. news media. The finding that 50% of the respondents to the brief, one-question survey with minimal follow-up used in the pilot project were supportive of the terminology shift demonstrates even minimal outreach can begin to shift thinking. A more robust and sustained approach could lead to more accurate terminology in agricultural injury reporting. As

a recommendation for practice, public health organizations should collaborate with professional associations and journalism educators to craft/update style guidelines and educational modules focused on agricultural injury reporting practices. As a recommendation for future research, a larger more detailed follow-up study should explore the underlying sentiments, editorial limitations, and potential barriers to shifting away from the use of “accident” in agricultural injury reporting. In addition, future research should explore what terms are most used in place of “accident” or related terms in agricultural injury reporting. Identifying these alternative descriptors could help guide outreach efforts. This level of analysis would require a more detailed linguistic or qualitative approach to assess the full range of language choices used by journalists and the contexts in which they are employed. Understanding the specific vocabulary used may also result in avenues for promoting preferred terminology, especially if some alternatives already align with public health messaging.

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Author contributions

Christopher Benny: Conceptualization, Data collection/Curation, coding, analysis, funding acquisition, investigation, methodology, project administration, interpretation of findings, writing – original draft, review and editing.

Bryan Weichert: Conceptualization, data collection/curation, coding, analysis, funding acquisition, interpretation of findings, writing – review and editing.

Jakob Hanschu: Data curation, software, data analysis, methodology. Interpretation of findings, writing – original draft, review and editing.

Barbara Lee: Conceptualization, methodology, interpretation of findings, writing – review and editing.

Scott Heiberger: Writing – Methodology, interpretation of findings, writing – review and editing.

Data availability statement

Publicly available datasets were analyzed in this study. This data can be found here: <https://www.aginjurynews.org/>.

Ethics statement

This study was reviewed and approved by the Marshfield Clinic Research Institute's Institutional Review Board (IRB) as exempt. Written informed consent for participation was not required for this study in accordance with national legislation and institutional requirements. No Protected Health Information was used for this project, and therefore HIPAA Privacy Regulations are not applicable.

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