

There’s a dangerous new mobility trend on American streets that’s captured the attention of the New York Times: e-bikes. Or so the Times, and some other media outlets, are suggesting with their editorial choices.

“The e-bike industry is booming, but the summer of 2023 has brought sharp questions about how safe e-bikes are, especially for teenagers,” writes Matt Richtel in a long feature titled “A Dangerous Combination’: Teenagers’ Accidents Expose E-Bike Risks.” The story centers largely on one anecdote from the town of Encinitas, California in June when a 15-year-old riding an e-bike was clipped by a van and thrown violently while waiting to turn left on a 55-mile-per-hour road. The cyclist was treated at a nearby hospital but died of his injuries. A few days later the same hospital treated a second teenager injured while riding an e-bike. The small town declared a “state of emergency for e-bike safety.”

The New York Times–with its international reach–used these incidents in Encinitas, a beach town north of San Diego with a population of about 60,000, to explore safety

issues around electric bikes. Fueling the media interest is AB 530, a state bill in California that would prohibit people under 12 from using e-bikes “of any class” and “state the intent of the Legislature to create an e-bike license program with an online written test and a state-issued photo identification for those persons without a valid driver’s license.”

Obviously, these incidents–and all serious injuries caused by cars colliding with bicyclists–are tragic. There’s a real public interest in exposing safety deficiencies, pursuing ways to protect cyclists (especially kids), and exploring policy ideas for how to widen access to safe cycling. Instead, the NYT has framed the growing pains of e-bikes as one more shady technology like vape cartridges or hoverboards. There are many reasons why this framing is faulty and does a disservice to public discourse. Here are three:

E-bikes are a powerful climate solution.

For decades, Americans have searched unsuccessfully for ways to replace gas guzzlers in cities and towns. Electric bikes are proving to be a viable alternative for commuting and making short and medium trips, as NPR reported in January.

Electric-assist bikes open a world of possibilities for people who want to abandon 4-wheels but are unable to physically ride several miles daily. Cargo bikes meanwhile allow people who would otherwise drive to lug groceries or transport children to opt for a bike instead. These car trips are a significant source of emissions that can and should be erased. Cities across the country have realized this climate solution and are starting to offer rebate programs for removing one of the big barriers to these bikes: cost. Would requiring people to take a written exam to obtain a photo ID place a brand-new barrier on uptake? All of this is important context for any story about e-bikes even if it’s not the paper’s desired angle, because it tells you what’s at stake if access to e-bikes is further limited. But there’s no mention of “climate change” and only a passing mention of emissions reductions in the NYT coverage. (“As a transportation solution, e-bikes seem promising.”) The one bicycle advocate quoted in the piece is from Colorado, not California and they are not asked to weigh in on the possible state bill in Sacramento. A cyclist should have been given space to make these and other points.

All e-bikes are not the same.

Manufacturers separate e-bikes by class for a reason: They function very differently,

and these distinctions should be made clear.

- Class 1 are electric-assist bikes that have to be pedaled to move.
- Class 2 can be motor-powered without pedaling thanks to a throttle.
- Class 3 are electric-assist, reach speeds up to 28 mph, but motor capacity less than 750W.
- Class 4 have a motor over 750W and are classified as offroad, motorized vehicles.

Any serious news coverage that's going to touch on possible regulations should distinguish between these various classes of e-bikes, as should policymakers. The NYT story fails to do this, instead opting to publish a separate (search-engine friendly) explainer story titled "What is an e-bike and how safe are they?" In fact, the distinctions between these bikes are blurred throughout the story because the main "experts" quoted are law enforcement. A San Diego sheriff's deputy is quoted high up saying, "It's not like a bicycle. But the laws are treating it like any bicycle." This statement is so overly broad it is inaccurate. An electric-assist bicycle that has to be pedaled to move and rarely goes above 15 mph is absolutely, 100% a bicycle. It would be a mistake to pass new laws that make this same error in logic.

Cars and car-centric design are often the problem.

Injuries and fatalities of cyclists almost always involve drivers and car-centric infrastructure.

The main anecdote in the NYT story about the Encinitas teenager is apt: he was stopping to turn left and was hit by a van. "He did everything right, including signaling to make a left turn," witnesses said. So, the problem was almost certainly the one-ton van going 55 miles per hour, or the van's driver, or the lack of protected bike infrastructure–not the e-bike. In fact, all of the incidents mentioned in the story involved a car. If city officials were serious about addressing the uptick in cyclist injuries and fatalities, they would raise questions about the safety of driving next to a growing number of cyclists. Journalists should too.

How do teen injuries on e-bikes compare to teen injuries in cars? How often are cyclists killed by drivers? According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 932 bicyclists were killed in motor-vehicle traffic crashes in 2020, an 8.9% increase from 856 in 2019. The number of preventable nonfatal injuries to cyclists was 325,173 in 2020. The growing number of e-bike injuries and deaths is

troubling, but it's part of an even more troubling epidemic on American roadways. How are other countries regulating e-bikes? A true attempt at solutions journalism could examine how cities like Madrid, Brussels, Toronto, or Amsterdam are handling the explosion of e-bikes and balancing the benefits and the risks. How is New York? Even if you're going to chase a 'man bites dog' story to examine the risks of an emerging technology over an existing technology (cars kill is not breaking news, sadly), it is important to include the context of just how frequently drivers kill cyclists. If policymakers are going to consider new requirements of cyclists, they should consider updating drivers tests to include new lessons about sharing the road with bicycles, including e-bikes, and the dangers of road rage. Instead, as Electrek notes, this kind of story attacks e-bikes while ignoring the dangers whizzing all around us.

Come to think of it, maybe the "dangerous combination" mentioned in the NYT story's headline is actually vehicle drivers and cyclists. Or maybe the dangerous combination is New York Times writers and e-bikes.