

Summary:

Cycle rules, OK?

A survey of information and familiarity with changes in the regulations for cyclists

Background

New traffic regulations were introduced on May 1, 1998. The new regulations primarily concerned the bicycle and changes where the cyclist was now obliged to give way to others when they are leaving the sidewalk. In addition to changes in the text concerning cycling on the sidewalk, changes were also made to definitions. Some changes were also made to regulations relating to traffic signs and road norms.

The background for the changes was that the Norwegian Ministry of Transport and Communications (MoT) required clearer and more precise regulations for cyclists. The MoT requested that the Directorate of Public Roads undertakes a comprehensive review of the regulations and to make any proposals for new regulations. The Directorate's proposals for new regulations were approved with minor changes by governmental decree on March 6, 1998.

The Norwegian Central Information Office (CIO) expressed the desire to be informed of the work carried out in connection with the changes in the regulations. The CIO required a survey of the entire process from the outset as a political idea to the implementation of the regulations, and also of public awareness of the new regulations. Further, the CIO wanted two hypotheses to be examined: a) much more information was available prior to the implementation of the new measures than afterwards; b) this results in the public believing that the regulations are in place before this was, in fact, the case.

Method

In order to register work with information preparation and dissemination, we interviewed persons involved employed in the Public Roads Administration, The Norwegian Society for Traffic Safety, and the Police. We studied written material including brochures, newspaper advertisements and articles, minutes from meetings, and so forth. The CIO commissioned a report into media coverage before and after the regulations were put into effect, and which was supplemented with material from the Norwegian Broadcasting Company's news archives.

In order to examine whether information on the changes in regulations had reached the general public, we obtained data from two different samples. The first – the road user's sample – comprised 447 motorists and cyclists in Oslo and five other

counties.¹ These were interviewed in traffic situations. The other – a sample of schoolchildren – comprised 5619 pupils from junior high schools and junior colleges in 16 counties. These completed a questionnaire at school. Both samples were interviewed in the autumn of 1999.

Organisation, communication, channel

In order to carry out the information concerning the regulations, the Directorate of Public Roads established a working group which was to carry out the information campaign. The working group had its first meeting in January 1998. The changes in the regulations were approved by governmental decree on 6. March 1998 with effect from 1. May 1998. The working group had very limited time within which to plan the implementation of the campaign. In association with an advertising agency the campaign was given the title ‘Cyclist ahead!’, and brochures, posters and advertisements prepared. In addition the changes in the regulations were announced in the normal manner in about 160 newspapers.

The working group delegated much of the practical work of distributing brochures and posters to the county highway authorities, and used active persons who were ‘burning enthusiasts’ of the bicycle. These were largely concerned with information activities and a ‘cycle coordinator’ was appointed at the county offices. Information activity was financed by the Public Roads Administration authorities and a major insurance company.² Information material was distributed via the county highway offices and to schools, clinics, firms etc.

The message of the campaign was that ‘it’s tough enough for cyclists to show consideration to other road users’ (pedestrians). The figure-head of the campaign was Gunn Rita Dahle, a well-known Norwegian professional cyclist. The campaign was directed towards ‘all who participate in traffic ...’, but was particularly aimed at youth. The choice of message and the figure-head also emphasised that youth was the main target group.

The campaign ‘Cyclist ahead’ was carried out again in 1999. The brochure was changed slightly with even more emphasis on ‘being tough’, and the target group was now both cyclists and car-drivers. Attempts were made to reach motorists through the local FM radio channels. Advertisements were not placed in newspapers this time, but brochures continued to be distributed through the county highway offices and the Norwegian Society for Traffic Safety.

Results

The results from the CIO media survey indicated that there was relatively little information about the new regulations prior to them coming into effect. The same picture is also provided by the Norwegian Broadcasting Company’s news archives. To the extent that information about regulations is given, most relates to the period after the regulations had been changed.

¹ Akershus, Hedmark, Buskerud, Møre og Romsdal, Sør-Trøndelag.

² KLP Forsikring.

The results of the interviews with representatives of the relevant organisations and authorities show that most were familiar both with changes in the regulations and the campaign, and the majority had also sent out information on this. Much of the information on regulations was linked to other information concerning bicycles which these bodies disseminated, such as cycling maps, bicycle handbooks, etc. The majority considered that the information had been well received. They also considered that the extent to which information is disseminated and the manner in which work is carried out with questions associated with cyclists is dependent upon the enthusiasm of individuals behind it. If this enthusiasm does not exist, then activities are very limited. Even though there are 'burning enthusiasts', this is not a guarantee in itself that information will be given on, for example, the 'Cyclist ahead' campaign. Where a regional highway office did not approve the content of the campaign brochure, these were not necessarily distributed further.

The working group behind the campaign also carried out a survey where the views of the highway offices were made known. This survey suggests that activity in many places was at a low level and that many were critical of the campaign.

The surveys enquiring whether information had been received by the public was carried out through two sample groups: one comprised road users who were interviewed in traffic situation – the traffic sample; and a group of school pupils who filled out the form at school – the school sample.

Both samples were asked whether they had heard of the campaign and whether they had heard of the figure-head, Gunn Rita Dahle, and also whether they knew that the traffic regulations had been changed.

In addition they were asked who had the right of way in a number of traffic situations where a cyclist and a car were involved. Many of the situations were also used in a corresponding survey carried out by the Institute of Transport Economics in 1996. By enquiring into familiarity with the right of way in the same situations as in 1996 it is possible to register whether knowledge had changed in accordance with the new regulations of 1998, and whether such developments that had occurred were 'in the right direction'.

It appears that there are very small changes in what is regarded as right of way among road users between 1996 and 1999. At junctions between the cycle-pedestrian lane and the traffic lane, the majority clearly believe that both the cyclist and the motorist believe that the motorist shall yield right of way; the same was the case in 1996. In both 1996 and 1999 it is, in fact, the cyclist who is obliged to yield right of way. The proportion answering correctly had, however, increased by 3 percentage points. It appears that what was of importance for an understanding of 'right of way' under these circumstances is whether the point where the pedestrian-cycle lane traverses the traffic lane is marked as a pedestrian crossing. If there is a pedestrian crossing, many more consider that the car shall yield the right of way.

Those interviewed were presented with two different situations where a cyclist was using the sidewalk and cycles over a pedestrian crossing at a road junction. In these two situations the changes in the regulations now oblige the cyclist to give way while in 1996 it was the motorist who had to yield right of way. The percentage relying that the cyclist should give way had increased, but by only four and six percentage points respectively for the two situations. Between a quarter and a third meant that the car should give way in these situations.

The road users mainly gave the correct answer to the question on right of way in the two other situations. When the cyclist is using the cycle lane, nine of ten considered that a car which is to turn must give way to the cyclist. When the cyclist is in the traffic lane and is coming from the right, almost all answered correctly – that the car should give way.

In the road user sample, about 30 percent had heard of the campaign, and a slightly smaller percentage were aware that the regulations had been changed. About 60 percent had heard of Gunn Rita Dahle. These percentages varied considerably from one county to another, suggesting that the samples may differ between the counties.

School pupils had heard considerably less about the campaign, fewer knew that the regulations had been changed and fewer had heard of Dahle. There was also a larger percentage of incorrect replies regarding right of way in the various situations. Among school pupils only 5 percent had heard of the campaign, 17 percent who knew that the regulations had been changed, and 36 percent who had heard of Dahle. There are far fewer differences between the counties than was the case with the road user sample.

In all traffic situations except 1b (pedestrian-cycle lane without a pedestrian crossing which crosses a normal road), the school pupils have a larger proportion of wrong answers than the road user sample. In the corresponding situation with the pedestrian crossing (situation 1a), three of four school pupils consider that the motorist has to yield right of way. The correct answer is that the cyclist has to yield right of way in this situation. Of the four situations where the cyclist is obliged to yield right of way, there was only one situation where a majority of school pupils answered this correctly. In the other situations a majority considered that the motorist should yield right of way.

School pupils are clearly far less well informed about the regulations than is the case of adult road users. To a greater degree than the adult road users they consider that it is the motorist who shall yield in situations where, in fact, it is the motorist who has the right of way.

Discussion

The practical tasks concerning the dissemination of information were largely delegated to the county highway authorities. The working group, which was located centrally, made much use of the cycle enthusiasts to provide information concerning the 'Cyclist ahead' project. This form of organisation contains both advantages and disadvantages. The advantages are that much activity can be generated at those places where the 'burning enthusiasts' are to be found. The disadvantages are the opposite – little activity where they are not to be found! Further, problems can arise where these enthusiasts have particularly strong views on the subject, and there is therefore a risk in that they can, in fact 'sabotage' those parts of the programme where they disagree with the aims or methods used. The results suggest that there are both advantages and disadvantages which emerged in connection with the dissemination of information relating to 'Cycle ahead'.

Information distributed through state institutions is required to follow specific guidelines and principles. The 'Cyclist ahead' project was not carried out in compliance with all these principles. In respect of the 'Totality principle', there is

a problem in that the regulations do not appear as more consistent and uniform following the changes in the regulations than previously. With regard to the 'Communication principle', the campaign had, in many respects, selected the right target group (school pupils with a bicycle), but questions can be raised regarding the message ('it's tough enough for cyclists to show consideration to other road users'), the selection of the figure-head (Gunn Rita Dahle, who was known to only one in three pupils), and the selection of channel. For example, Internet was selected as a central channel, but virtually none of the school pupils or the road users considered that this was a useful channel by which information on traffic regulations could be disseminated.

The information was essentially carried out in accordance with the 'Departmental Principle', 'The Principle of Active Information' and 'The Principle of Information as Management Responsibility'. The Departmental Principle and the Principle of Information as Management Responsibility could have been followed more closely had the regional highway authorities been instructed to provide information on 'Cyclist ahead', and not merely encouraged, as was the situation. Directors of the regional highway authorities could have become involved to a greater degree.

The Principle of Active Information can essentially be said to have been followed in so far as the campaign was an active project by which changes in the regulations were to be announced. However, the principle also implies that clear goals and plans exist for its execution, something which existed only to a limited extent in this instance, largely on account of the short time available for planning.