

# Railway safety and the media

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# Outline

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- Rail safety, rail privatisation, and the media
- What stories of transport accidents and casualties get into the media?
- How do the media (and society) cope with 'value for money' in safety

# Rail safety, rail privatisation, and the media

# Post-privatisation fatal train accidents

| <b>Year</b> | <b>Location</b>          | <b>Fatalities</b> |
|-------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
| 1994        | Branchton (Strathclyde)  | 2                 |
| 1994        | Cowden (Kent)            | 5                 |
| 1995        | Ais Gill (Cumbria)       | 1                 |
| 1996        | Rickerscote (Stafford)   | 1                 |
| 1996        | Watford Junction (Herts) | 1                 |
| 1997        | Southall (London)        | 7                 |
| 1999        | Ladbroke Grove (London)  | 31                |
| 2000        | Hatfield (Herts)         | 4                 |
| 2002        | Potters Bar (Herts)      | 7                 |
| 2007        | Grayrigg (Cumbria)       | 1                 |

# Post-privatisation fatal train accidents

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- Previous slide lists the fatal train collisions and derailments in the 20 years since privatisation in 1994
- There were 9 in 1994-2003 and 1 in 2004-2013
- Some received enormous publicity, notably
  - Ladbroke Grove (aka Paddington) (1999), in which the death toll was at first estimated to be ~100 rather than the final 31
  - Hatfield, which led to speed restrictions over the whole network, doubling journey times
- But some, notably Cowden, received little publicity

# Media and popular conclusion on safety after a decade of privatisation (~2004)

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- After a decade of privatisation, there had been 9 fatal train accidents, some very serious
- All of them involved failures by railway organisations
- The railway organisations were in the private sector
- Some accidents involved communication failures between fragmented former parts of BR
- Conclusions
  - (1) At least some of these accidents wouldn't have happened under BR, and therefore
  - (2) Privatisation made safety worse

# Fatal train collisions and derailments 1964-2013

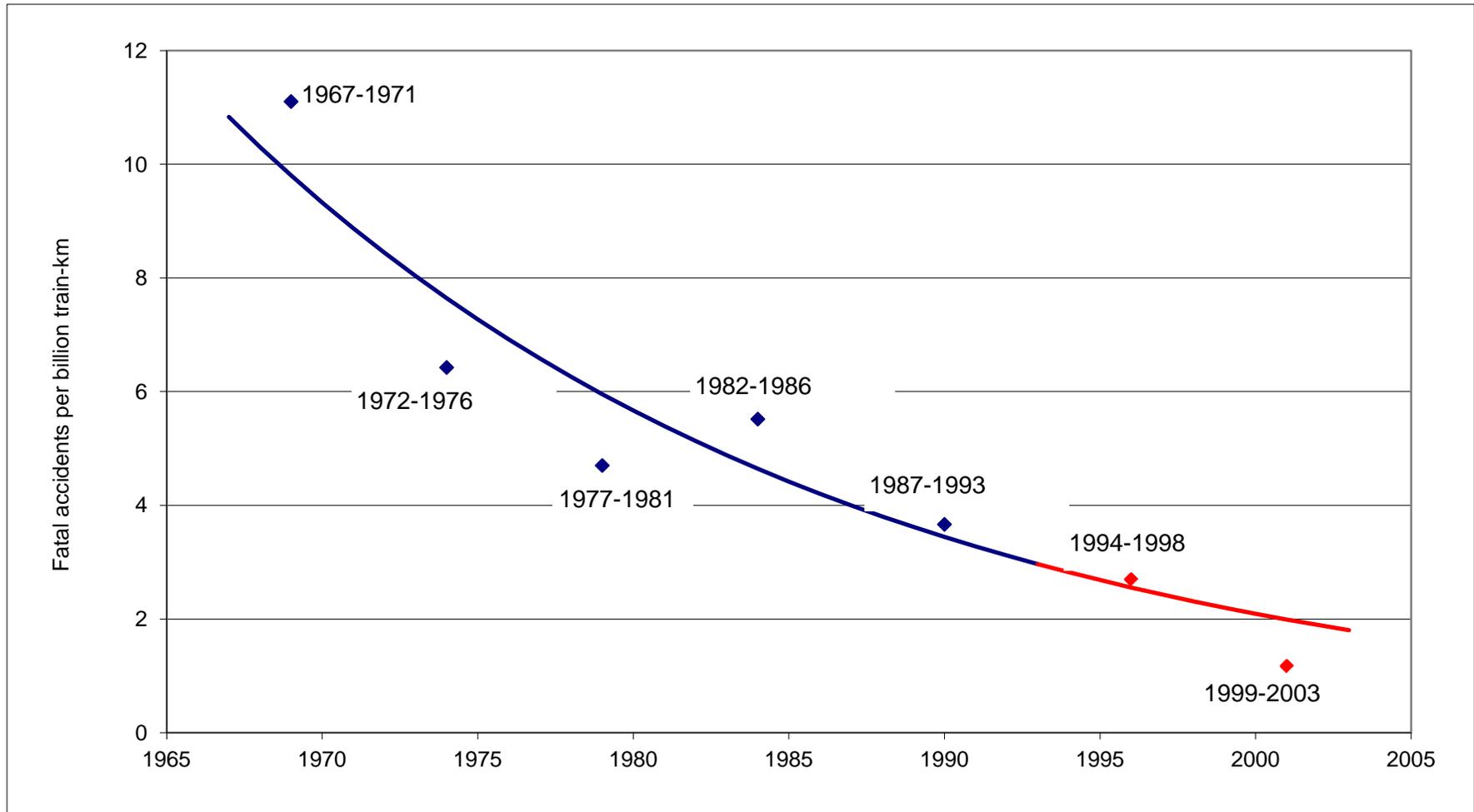
| <b>Decade</b> | <b>Number of accidents</b> |
|---------------|----------------------------|
| 1964-1973     | 42                         |
| 1974-1983     | 23                         |
| 1984-1993     | 18                         |
| 1994-2003     | 9                          |
| 2004-2013     | 1                          |

# Counterargument on safety and privatisation

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- Look at BR's safety performance in three preceding decades (previous table)
- Ask: how many accidents would BR have had in 1994-2003?
- BR had far more than 9 fatal accidents per decade – but they were falling sharply
- Following graph suggests that BR would have had about the same number as the privatised railway
- Conclusion in 2004: privatisation did not worsen safety
- Strengthened by excellent safety performance in 2004-2013 – better than any other sizeable European country

# Fatal train accidents per billion train-km: 1967-2003



# Media involvement

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- Frequent TV appearances as an 'expert' in late 1990/early 2000s, especially after Ladbroke Grove
- No appearances now since the railways have got safer
- First presentation of argument that privatisation had not worsened safety was at a public lecture at Imperial College in 2005
- Appearance on BBC Radio 4's 'More or Less' programme
- Good safety performance now both accepted and expected
- Emphasis has now shifted to level crossings

What rail casualties get into the media?

# Railway fatalities per year 2008-2013

|                                 | <b>Deaths/y</b> |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|
| Passengers in train accs        | 0               |
| Other passengers                | 5.2             |
| Staff                           | 2.0             |
| Level crossing users            | 8.8             |
| Other public (excl trespassers) | 1.6             |
| Trespassers                     | 43.2            |
| Suicides                        | 226.2           |
| Total                           | 287.0           |

# Railway fatalities

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- Previous slide shows number of railway fatalities in the last five years
- 79% were suicides and a further 15% were trespassers, leaving only 6% (or 18 per year) that were accidental and to people who were legitimately on the railway
- Of these 18, about half were level crossing users (pedestrians or road vehicle occupants)
- The rest were a mixture of largely personal accidents.
- No fatalities in train accidents, because there were no fatal train accidents

# Railway fatalities and the media

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- Almost all fatal train accidents are reported in the national and international media
- Level crossing fatalities are almost always reported in the local media, and sometimes in the national media. Not so in the past.
- Trespasser fatalities and suicides are reported only occasionally. (To avoid 'copycat' actions?)
- It seems that accidents are likely to be reported in the media if
  - The railways are wholly or partially responsible
  - There were multiple fatalities
  - They were otherwise unusual

How do the media (and society)  
cope with 'value for money' in  
safety?

# Value for money in safety measures

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- Expenditure on possible accident reduction measures is typically far greater than available budgets. For some safety measures, the benefits are small relative to the costs.
- Therefore to maximise lives saved for a given budget, projects with lower value for money should be foregone
- This is accepted in road safety. The official Value for Preventing a Fatality (VPF) on the roads is currently about £1.7m.
- The railways formally adopt the same approach.
- But it raises problems not apparent in road safety

# Issues in Value for money in safety measures

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- Railway managers, regulators and politicians are understandably reluctant to forgo known safety measures that would save lives, however few
  - Classic example is Automatic Train Protection
  - Ministers of both parties (Cecil Parkinson, John Prescott) have said 'money is no object' with regard to railway safety
- What do the railway managers say to the relatives of the victims of preventable accidents?

# Thank you

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