



Owner-Operator's Business
Association of Canada
Association professionnelle des
routiers autonomes du Canada

*...from the
director's chair*

Shock Value

It's time to fight back over misleading headlines

Nothing gets me more wound up than a shocking headline that misrepresents our industry. We're already fighting mistaken public perception and negative stereotypes, but when the media sacrifices truth for a punchy headline, it's time to fight back.

Here's an example of the crap I'm talking about. The headline from a recent story in the Newark Star-Ledger reads: "Shirtless man is killed by truck on turnpike."

The opening sentence states that "a 28-year-old man wandering shirtless on the New Jersey Turnpike in South Brunswick was killed after he was struck by a bus and tractor-trailer Friday night..."

The victim, it turns out, was first hit by a bus. Furthermore, according to authorities, he may have already been dead when he was struck again by a tractor-trailer. So, why the "killer truck" headline when the guy was clearly first struck by a bus? It's inaccurate, it's misleading, and it makes me sick.

And here's another example of a headline that sacrifices truth for sensationalism, this time from a television news report on TV10 News in Sacramento, Calif. "One dead in Highway 12 big rig crash."

The story reports that one person was killed and three others injured in a three-vehicle accident "involving a big rig." Investigators believe that the 19-year-old victim "allowed his vehicle to drift into oncoming traffic and hit another car, causing the trailing big rig to swerve to avoid the collision before running into a ditch and blocking the road."

After describing the dead and injured, the reporter quotes a highway patrol spokesperson as saying "the uninjured driver of the big rig was able to pull (the victim) from his car just as the

vehicle burst into flames..."

That story could easily have been about a heroic driver who ditched his truck to avoid complicating an already tragic situation, and then returned to the burning wreck to save the life of the wretch who – allegedly – caused the crash. The truck driver's name isn't even mentioned – but it's duly noted that he's blocking the road with his ditched truck.

And our own media do a pretty good job of twisting the facts as well. When the driver of a pickup truck struck and killed six members of a wedding party in Abbotsford, B.C. a couple of summers ago, headlines from one end of Canada to the other screamed: "Six dead after truck hits wedding parade," and "Truck mows down B.C. wedding party guests."

And this is not just me feeling put out by media coverage of trucking. Last year, a study by Transport Canada revealed that the media sensationalizes truck collision reporting regularly. The report, which focused primarily on advertising in the automotive industry, also contained a section analyzing motor vehicle collision reporting in Canadian media.

Findings showed that close to 60% of reported collisions involved fatalities, and over 80% of reports included either deaths or serious injuries. The research also showed that "larger sized vehicles being involved in a collision also appears to be linked to increased likelihood of fatality and newsworthiness; this becomes particularly apparent when smaller vehicles collide with large transport trucks."

Big trucks are involved in a disproportionate number of stories that make the news because they're more likely to be travelling on highways, and about half the accidents reported in the media occur on highways. Bigger roads, more traffic, and



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higher speeds mean increased likelihood of fatality, which in turn means a higher level of newsworthiness. In other words, if it bleeds, it leads.

But while the involvement of trucks in crashes appears to be rampant, statistics tell a much different story. Trucks are actually involved in a small percentage of all on-road collisions. In Ontario for example, the most recent road safety numbers show that trucks were involved in less than one half of one per cent of all personal injury and property damage collisions, and in less than 10% of all fatal collisions.

If you compare these numbers to the Transport Canada research on accident reporting, the mainstream media over-reports collisions involving trucks by a margin of at least three to one.

For headline readers, as roughly six out of 10 people are, the "killer truck" caption alone can do the damage. Details that exonerate the truck, if they're present at all, often get buried deep within the story, where two-thirds of readers never go. So public angst is fueled, motorists remain terrified of big trucks, and you're the loser.

Help expose this kind of reporting by writing to editors and publishers of media outlets that exploit truckers, or pass the information on to OBAC and we'll do it for you through Truck Writers of North American (TWNA).

Most of the truck writers you know are part of TWNA, and one of our goals is to ensure that the industry is portrayed in a balanced, accurate manner in the mass media. We've got a long way to go.