

Industrial “Accidents” in the Media

Sheena Richard

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The image of the diligent worker using his or her hands to earn a living is common among the American public. Unfortunately so are the stories of workers losing their limbs to machines or being crushed under heavy equipment while at work. Such stories are read in newspapers or watched on the evening news all the time. Sometimes the victims' families are even shown and the public feels sympathy for those involved. The coverage of these industrial accidents in the media influences what the public considers important about them. It determines how much the public knows about the incidents and often who they think is responsible. It is important to determine what messages the media is actually conveying to the public about industrial accidents. Only when these messages are identified, will it be apparent what messages are being avoided and what the media is choosing to draw the public's attention away from.

It is not at all uncommon to open a newspaper and find an article about some "accident" that occurred in a factory or on a jobsite. Accidents happen every day but I am curious about the media's use of this term to explain injuries and even deaths in the work place. In Fort Lauderdale, Florida a crane boom collapsed onto a building (Nolan and Ba Tran 2008). Although the investigation is not yet complete, authorities say that the boom was overloaded. Because workers were on their lunch break at the time, no one was injured. In addition to that amazing luck, the building suffered only minimal damage. The article goes on to talk about possible legislation that would require certification for crane operators. It is mentioned that OSHA currently does not have a program in place for crane certification and that safety is in the hands of the employer, in this case the Beyel Brothers Crane Service. I find this very discomfoting. Especially when I take

into consideration the fact that co-owner Danny Beyel considers the crane's collapse a "freak accident" (Nolin and Ba Tran 2008). In my opinion, a "freak accident" is something that cannot be predicted or avoided. The overloading of a crane boom does not qualify in my definition. Obviously if a piece of machinery is used to do more than it was designed to, incidents are bound to happen. It is frightening for me to think that safety is in the hands of someone with this attitude. The article, however, does not place blame on the company. Instead, it focuses on the equipment and the operator. I think that faulty equipment could qualify the incident as a "freak accident" so long as the machinery was properly maintained and inspections were performed (Nolin and Ba Tran 2008). However I hesitate to place blame on the operator because he or she would have been working under orders from a boss. Another article about a separate crane accident pointed the blame at the city of Manhattan for its inspection failures of the building under construction ("Family" 2008). Putting the blame on the equipment, operator, and other sources distracts from the attention on and questions about the company's involvement and fault in the incident.

A twenty-nine year old man, whose name has not yet been released, lost his right arm in an industrial accident at New Milford Farms (Barnes 2008). The article covering this was written two days after the accident occurred. It did not include specifics as to how the accident occurred or why. Instead it focused mainly on how the man was transported to medical facilities and the time it took for outside medical help to arrive. At this time, whether or not the man's arm was able to be reattached is unknown. Upon questioning, STAT Flight Air One Captain Mrazik stated, "We see no criminal aspect to this accident" (Barnes 2008). I think that the inclusion of this quote in the article is

extremely significant. The article mentions that OSHA is currently in the process of investigating the accident but that STAT Flight Air One will not interfere because no criminal activity seems to be involved (Barnes 2008). Primarily this says a lot about what is viewed as criminal activity by authorities and the media. It is far too soon to know the outcome of OSHA's investigation but the captain openly states that there is no criminal activity involved. Now how would he already know that? I think what the captain meant is that it doesn't appear that anyone intentionally caused the accident. What he has done though, is excused the company from any possible criminal activity. If OSHA should determine that the accident was caused because the company violated safety procedures, I am sure that they will be fined. However, it is not treated as criminal activity and no one is held personally responsible. If a man were to lose his arm in an automobile accident or as a result of a direct attack from another person, the driver or the attacker would certainly be facing criminal charges. However, when a company disregards safety requirements and knowingly endangers its workers, it is not considered criminal activity. There is no evidence or even suggestions that the company was at fault in this case but it is still a possibility. I think that such a premature statement from an authority figure wrongly dismisses companies from the "criminal" label.

Another article talks about company responsibility for accidents and the penalties they face for ignoring safety requirements. The Northrop Grumman Corporation was charged with violating safety standards and fined five thousand dollars after a nineteen year old male employee fell to his death in the James River (Frost 2008). The corporation did not enforce the wearing of safety harnesses because they claimed that they did not foresee the possibility of an employee falling on this particular job (Frost

2008). The article also discussed the levels of violations and the fines associated with each. This completely shocked me because the company knowingly and intentionally ignored safety regulations that led to a man's death and only received a five thousand dollar fine. An OSHA representative declared the fine "appropriate" (Frost 2008). I strongly disagree and am upset by the fact that OSHA deems minor fines acceptable punishments for companies that knowingly endanger their employees. I am not alone in that belief. Melissa Lee also found the fines imposed by the Mine Safety and Health Administration on Kentucky Darby Mine No. 1 to be insufficient after losing her husband in a mining explosion. "My husband was worth more than that," she stated and even went so far as to call the fines "a mockery to the men who died" (qtd. in Alford 2007). Crimes committed by average people with this same level of knowledge to the danger present and that resulted in death would result in much more severe punishments. I do not think that the media presents corporations and companies as entities that should be held accountable for their mistakes. It is another example of how the media excuses companies from "criminal" labels.

Another issue about industrial accidents is how the media presents corporation and company owners. An article about a man being killed by an accident with a wood chipper includes that the owner of JM Tree Service was "too distraught to talk" (Haldane 2007). Following the death of an employee, a Northrop spokesperson commented on how sorry the company was for the family's loss and how the family is "in our thoughts and prayers" (Frost 2008). Such statements convey a certain image of the companies. It makes it seem like they have experienced this loss with the family and that they are grieving too. I think that this image may make it more difficult for families of the victims

to publicly speak against the companies for the ‘accidents’ because the public may also sympathize with the companies. I do not believe that all companies and their spokespersons are immune to feeling sympathetic for the family. However, I think the bottom line for most companies is money. IPSCO Koppel Tubulars Corporation, for example, commented only on the fact that the company would be appealing the fines for safety violations it had been issued after the death of an employee (Vidonic 2008). This presents a different image of companies to the public. It makes the company seem far less sympathetic for the family and far more concerned with losing their profits. The media’s presentation of these companies after the ‘accidents’ occur has a great influence on how the public views the company and its officials.

I have absolutely no doubt in my mind that the media and even media coverage influence what people think about and the opinions they have. However, I was very surprised to find one particular man’s opinions about the recent collapsing of cranes. Jim McLaughlin believes, “It is unfortunate that it’s been happening more and more but there’s nothing you can do about it” (qtd in Nolin and Ba Tran 2008). I was shocked that this man lives in the area where the crane collapsed and this was all the passion he seemed to have on the subject. I think that the collapsing of cranes is far more than “unfortunate” and I wonder where this feeling of helplessness comes from. I think that the term “freak accident” might be partially responsible. Labeling incidents as ‘accidents’ makes it seem like there is nothing that can be done to prevent them and no one is to blame or at fault. I think it is very possible that this leaves people with the feeling of helplessness that McLaughlin is experiencing.

The coverage of industrial accidents in the media has a huge influence on how the public views the industrial accidents and the companies associated with them. The inclusion of a short quote from a government agency official can completely alter the definition of a crime. A seemingly simple suggestion in an article can remove the blame from a corporation and place it on faulty equipment or some other source. It may even erase the idea of blame from the minds of the public completely. Knowing what messages the media conveys through its coverage of these accidents is essential in understanding why the public focuses on certain aspects or thinks about industrial accidents in certain ways.

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