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What the Media Should Know About Aircraft Accidents

Note: This editorial was originally published in August of 2005 immediately following the crash of Air France Flight 358 at Toronto's Pearson International Airport.

Another plane crash. Another deluge of phone calls from the media asking what caused the plane to crash. Speculation is immediately and unhesitatingly articulated by witnesses, passersby, and experts. "Lightning must have brought it down" says one. Another says, "He thought the airplane was just traveling too fast to stop." Pretty presumptuous for an eyewitness; extremely presumptuous for a non-pilot. Yet, the media, in their call to action, begin to use these very accounts as an explanation as to why the airplane crashed. Amidst rampant speculation, the media have their story; albeit lacking necessary credibility.

Aviation crashes have had a long history of being glorified by the media. Airplane crashes themselves are highly salient events. After all, they involve a large transportation vehicle carrying many people at high speeds and when they crash they are typically transformed into pictures of utter destruction.

The media need to start being a little more careful in their initial and highly speculative "possible reasons" of why a "plane went down" or "overshot the runway." In fact, when Air France Flight 358 initially departed the runway on August 2nd, 2005, the media were quick to point out that the airplane "overshot the runway." In fact, if the airplane overshot the runway it

would have never landed on it to begin with. It would have simply overshoot it. This is drastically different from what actually happened; the aircraft departed the opposite end of the runway after it had actually landed. By reporting inaccurately the events that really did occur, the media face an erosion of credibility. And credibility is what it is all about. Just throwing out contrived tidbits for the sake of viewership or readership needs to stop. We owe that to the survivors, the victims, and the families.

Air France flight 358 was fortunate in many respects. Although there were numerous injuries, there was fortunately no loss of life. It appears that all of the things that went wrong that led up to the crash (whatever they may be) went absolutely right in terms of evacuation and cabin crew performance. As far as myself and my colleagues can see, this was a textbook evacuation and the crew should be commended. However, luck also played a role in this accident as the ensuing fire that broke out was at a time and location (outside the fuselage) that allowed the passengers to deplane the aircraft swiftly and efficiently. Shortly after the last passenger out, the plane erupted in flames. The scene was not too unlike a Hollywood movie.

According to the Federal Aviation Administration, approximately 80% of aircraft accidents are due to pilot error (Source: FAA Advisory Circular 120-51E). Because of this, the media, in fact people in general, immediately and conveniently assign the blame to the pilots as the sole cause of the accident. While it might be true that pilots often have the "last say" before a crash, in actuality an accident is a complex series of events that can be initiated or traced back all the way through the organizational structure and in some cases all the way to its highest levels.

Therefore, while the pilots may not be absolved of contributing to this accident, we need to understand that it is unjust to immediately assume that the pilots were the sole contributors to the

events that led up to the crash. If in fact the pilots made a series of bad judgments or decisions, they will be thoroughly investigated and pointed out in the official accident investigation report.

In summary, I ask the media to refrain from immediate and careless speculation on the causation of an airplane accident. There are numerous factors that are investigated by the appropriate investigative agencies. Yes, it might take months or even years for the final official report, but at least until then there are substantive and credible facts made available by these agencies. Holding out for these facts is beneficial and good business. Speculation should be left to supermarket tabloids.

When the media call me for my take on "why did the airplane crash?" I am in no better position to tell you than anyone else, even with my extensive background in aviation safety and human factors. I can guess but then I might be totally wrong. After all, I wasn't even there. I can rehash the facts of the moment but then you might want me to use those facts (however scant) to explain what happened and why it happened and be as explicit as possible. It is indeed frustrating for all of us.

Let the investigation process play its course. The agencies do a fine and thorough job. And in the end, the answer to the question "why did the plane crash?" will likely be answered, thanks to their pragmatic and meticulous fact finding, data collection, and interview processes.