

The Toronto Star: Bryant and bike courier a class issue

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"A journalist's job is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable."

Attributed to American critic H.L. Mencken (1880-1956)

On Sept. 1, after former Ontario attorney-general Michael Bryant was charged with "criminal negligence causing death" and "dangerous operation of a motor vehicle causing death," there wasn't much comforting the afflicted.

Anyway, bicycle courier Darcy Allan Sheppard was more than afflicted.

He had been left bleeding from his nose and mouth on Bloor St., only to die in hospital after allegedly being bashed against a mailbox while hanging on to Bryant's convertible.

These are the claims that Toronto has learned from witnesses, police and media reports.

There is no dispute that, not only did Bryant engage one of the best criminal lawyers money could buy, he lined up a top-tier communications firm called Navigator to handle his public representations and, as the Star reported, shopped for a private investigator to dig up evidence.

It's very difficult not to remark on the unfair physical match between a cyclist and a motorist.

It's also tough not to notice the imbalance between a once-promising politician and the unfortunate product of just about the very worst sequence of disadvantages any Canadian can be born into.

So yes, this is very much a class issue.

Since that tragic late summer evening which has divided this city – cyclist v. motorist, rich v. poor, right v. left, pitbull lover v. Bryant's hated legislation – there's been much ink spilled on whether Sheppard was drunk, whether he grabbed Bryant's wheel, whether he slammed his backpack on the hood, as well as his past.

Just this week in Maclean's, for example, there is no sympathy spared for the victim.

But, as former Olympic cyclist and cycling lawyer **Bob Mionske** outlines on Bicycling.com, it's all spin.

"Why do I think it's spin?" he asks. "Because details about Sheppard's ancient run-ins with the law over stolen cheques had nothing to do with what happened the night of his death. Neither did stories about noise complaints from neighbours, or his problems with alcohol ... But they had everything to do with shaping public opinion, turning the public against Sheppard, and in support of Bryant."

That's why you can't help but get the impression that some people are more equal than others.

Except that now, Twitter and YouTube have brought yet another perspective. Which brings us to @BryantTruths and HonestEdits.

HonestEdits, who has been posting surveillance videos from the scene on YouTube, prefers to remain anonymous. HonestEdits' videos, compressed for clarity, string together two clips in a chronological sequence that the corporate media have not presented.

True, they're not exactly high-definition. (Try an iPhone.) And they may not tell the whole story. In fact, last week, when the first video popped up, the Bryant camp, via its blog, denounced its narration as "inaccurate and one-sided."

Now that post is gone – but I have screen grabs.

Interestingly, what's not gone is the video, plus others since added, now viewed some 40,000 times, collectively, and on various blogs.

PR pro and cycling advocate Don Weidman is @BryantTruths, tweeting what he calls "the other side of the story."

He does it because he feels that the PR profession is getting a bad name – and also because he has found himself in street face-offs with "guys in their 40s in big black cars."

As he told me, "I want a better world. I want to fight for the underdog."

Which is what journalism should be about.

Meanwhile, the Navigator-produced bryantfacts.wordpress.com and tweets (@BryantFacts) have scaled back – with the former now containing only a terse announcement that it "will be used for the release of any official statements."

Bryant will have his day in court next month – and, presumably, a trial will eventually follow.

As both Weidman and Honest-Edits tell me, Sheppard may be dead – he

won't be silenced.

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