

Globe's cab crash raises eyebrows

Drove taxi while reporting story

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A Boston Globe reporter masquerading as a Hub taxi driver gave a disputed version of a two-car crash that sent him and his two passengers to the hospital in a front-page story yesterday that's raising questions about liability and whether he misrepresented himself.

The one-sided account of the crash, included in a report about Boston's cab industry, also came after the reporter appeared to conceal his Globe employment in an application to the cab company that hired him.

In the application, Spotlight Team reporter Bob Hohler stated to Boston Cab Co. that his occupation was "sports" and he worked for "NYT Company," but he did not disclose his role as a Globe investigative reporter on assignment. The New York Times Co. is the Globe's parent company.

The article in question, written by Hohler and editor Thomas Farragher, described Hohler as driving a cab that was totaled in a Nov. 4 accident at approximately 10 p.m. after a "motorist ran a red light at Stuart and Clarendon streets," sending the reporter and his two passengers to Tufts Medical Center with facial and head injuries.

But a Boston police report doesn't paint the crash as so clear-cut. "At the scene there were two versions of what had happened," according a police report.

Hohler initially told cops that "while he had a red light," another car "came out of nowhere" and struck the left side of his cab, causing him to slam into a traffic light, according to the report.

But in a handwritten supplemental police report filed six days later, Hohler said he in fact had a green light and the other driver had run a red light, citing "confusion on the scene" to explain the "misinformation."

The other motorist, driving a gray Nissan Maxima, told police he believed he had the green light all along and instead was struck by the cab, according to the first police report. As of yesterday, no one had been cited in the crash, according to state Registry of Motor Vehicles officials.

Brett Barenholtz, CEO of Boston Cab, said he's "sure" the company is now in the cross hairs of a potential lawsuit from the passengers "because they got injured in one of our cabs and he was working with the Globe at the time.

“We feel if he’s a guy that is not a cab driver and then he goes out, wrecks a cab because he’s probably busy — who knows what he’s doing — while he’s out there, he’s not a professional cab driver,” Barenholtz said.

Although Hohler insisted in his statement to police that he was not at fault, the accident raises liability questions in any actions stemming from the crash.

“If he was a reporter on deadline and he’s distracted and making phone calls and texting, then that’s something that adds to his fault. You’re not supposed to be distracted in a cab, you’re supposed to focus fully on your job,” said Douglas Sheff, a Boston personal injury lawyer and president-elect of the Massachusetts Bar Association.

Additionally, there are questions of appropriate journalistic practice in not being up front about a reporter’s agenda. Hohler, who says he has previous cab driver experience, worked as a licensed cab driver for eight nights while reporting the story.

“Deceptive methods are only acceptable if there was no other way to get the story,” said Stephen Ward, director of the Center of Journalism Ethics at University of Wisconsin-Madison. “This strikes me as a story you could get without having to go with these pretenses.”

A Globe spokeswoman emailed a response late last night. “The reporter revealed his identity to the Boston Police, and consistent with company policy he listed his company affiliation with Boston Cab. When conversing with passengers, he revealed his identity as a Globe reporter. In the days after the November accident, which was chronicled accurately in Tuesday’s story, the reporter obtained the official copy of the police report and corrected a factual flaw.”

Ward, the ethics expert, called the decision to report only one point of view of the accident “incredibly self-serving.”

“They should have had all perspectives of the accident in there. That’s a no-brainer. Especially when you’re participating in an investigative report. ... You should pull back and play the role of the reporter and ask how would you report this if you weren’t a participant,” said Ward, who also questioned whether the Globe took the proper steps before putting their reporter behind the wheel.

“You have to take precautions that innocent parties are going to be protected.”

Erin Smith and Joe Dwinell contributed to this report.