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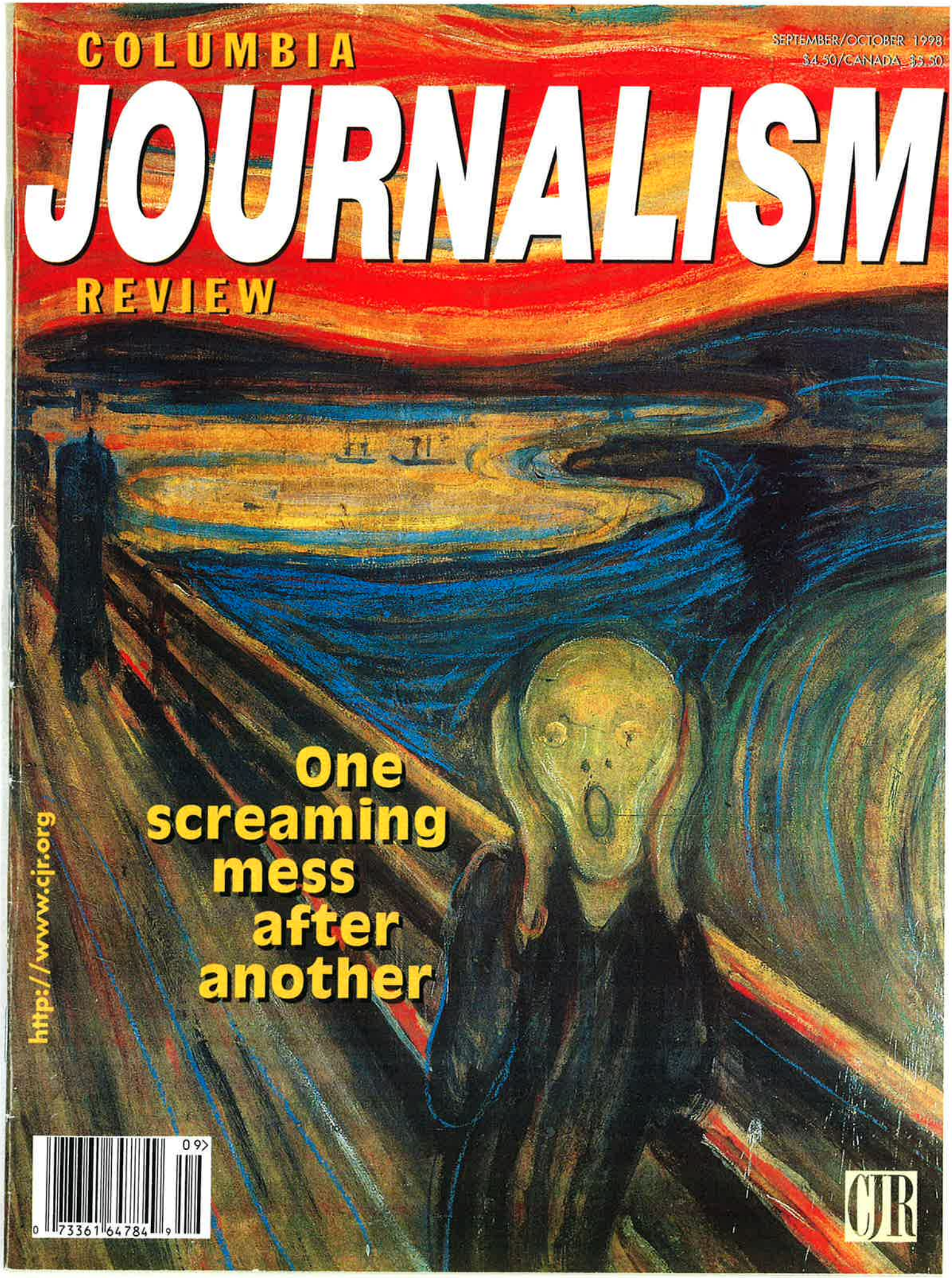

One screaming mess after another

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Awards and Anguish for A Driven Reporter

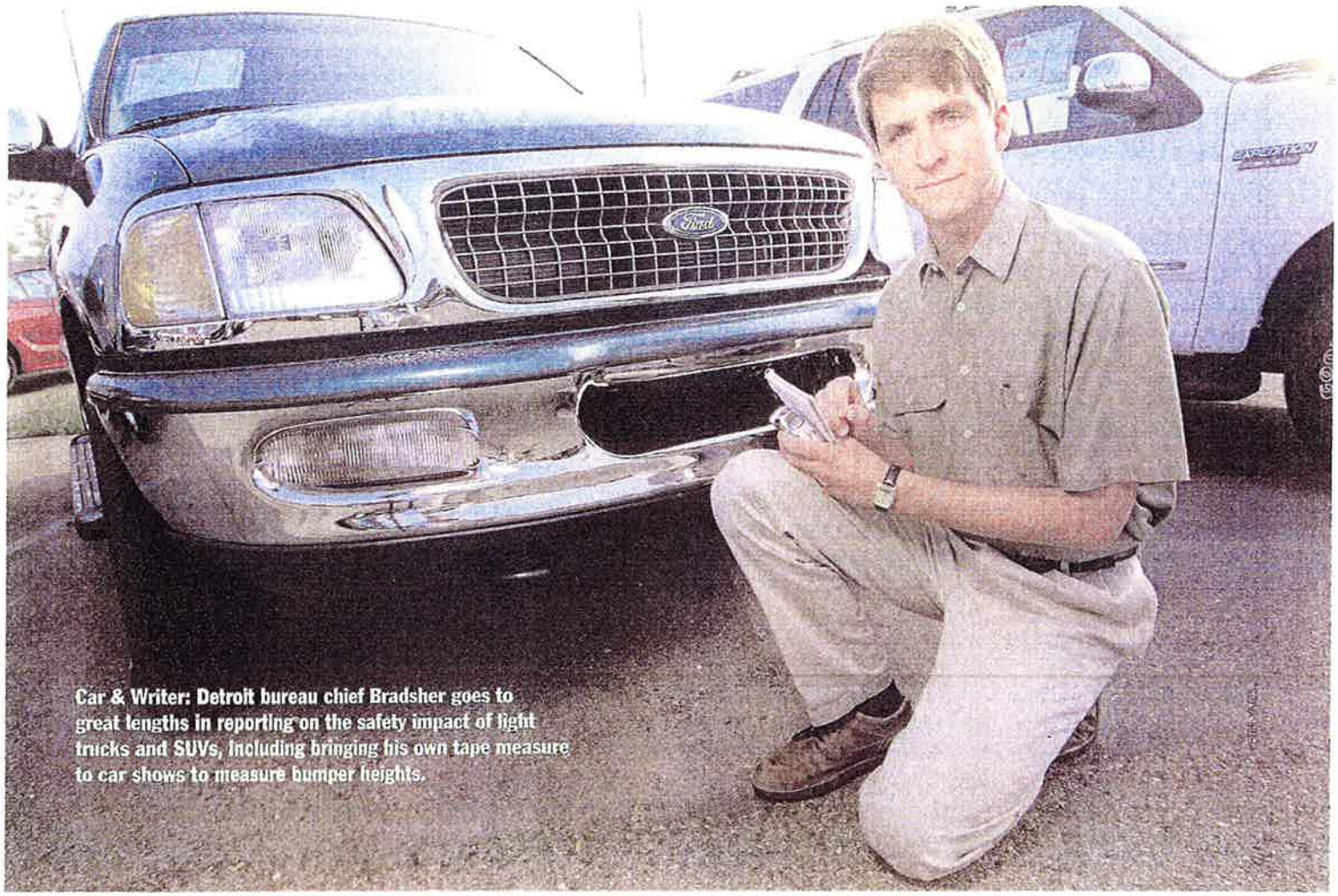
The New York Times's Keith Bradsher led the pack in revealing the growing dangers of sports utility vehicles. What did it earn him? A couple of prizes and a load of ill will.

BY CHARLES BUTLER

On a beautiful summer day in July, two-month-old Christopher Bradsher is being baptized in the Oregon Trail Memorial Church in his grandparents' ranch town of Eden, Wyoming. Too bad his father is missing the ceremony. Instead, Keith Bradsher sits in a spare Holiday Inn hotel room in Flint, Michigan, waiting for news to break in the General Motors strike — and talking about what it's like covering the automotive beat for *The New York Times*. Over the past year the job has been anything but peaceful. Says Detroit bureau chief Bradsher, 34, in a measured, methodical voice: "It can get depressing and difficult at times to be living in a company town where the companies hate you."

Auto company executives have yelled at him until they turned fire-engine red. Former Chrysler vice chairman Robert Lutz wrote Bradsher a letter saying he despised the reporter's brand of journalism. And at a small dinner party, one woman

Charles Butler, a Knight-Bagehot fellow at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism, is former editor-in-chief of Sales & Marketing Management *magazine.*



PETER YATES

Car & Writer: Detroit bureau chief Bradsher goes to great lengths in reporting on the safety impact of light trucks and SUVs, including bringing his own tape measure to car shows to measure bumper heights.

approached Bradsher and said, "You should die." Oh, well, all in a day's work.

The attacks have come along with Bradsher's groundbreaking investigation into the potential safety and environmental hazards of light trucks, a category that includes pickups, minivans, and the popular sport utility vehicles (SUVs) such as the Ford Explorer, Jeep Cherokee, Chevrolet Suburban, and other massive four-wheelers with raised bumpers and imposing grille work. Light trucks are Detroit's hottest selling and most profitable products, accounting for 45 percent of the nation's vehicle sales. Bradsher has blown the whistle on the harsh reality that their increasing presence on the roads can be deadly to passengers in smaller, standard cars. Auto executives, and many journalists on the beat, argue that larger vehicles have always had an advantage over smaller cars in accidents — so why all the fuss?

In many ways, Bradsher has become part of the controversy he is reporting. He has received recognition (including a George Polk award) and recrimination. Talk show host Rush Limbaugh likes to beat up on him. Speak with other auto reporters and they'll tell you that winning a Pulitzer is Bradsher's primary motive in devoting so much time and space to SUVs. Says one automotive writer: "He is the most talked about story in Detroit."

Fairly typical was this blast from P. J. O'Rourke, the conservative pundit, in the July issue of *Automobile Magazine*: "From a car enthusiast's point of view, *Times* reporters are some sort of ill-evolved hominoids who haven't discovered the wheel. Among these primitive sidewalk apes there is a certain Keith Bradsher . . . . How Mr. Bradsher picked the light truck as an object for his scorn I do not know. Perhaps he polled his bosses, his co-workers, and all the piffle-headed residents of Manhattan's Upper West Side, then put together a list of things they loathe: normal people, families, manual labor, nature when it's not endangered, Cub Scout troops, scary dogs, and snow and ice that ruin Monolo Blahnik pumps. An assault of light trucks is a blow struck against all of these."

Or consider the words of Dutch Mandel, editor of *AutoWeek*. Earlier this year, the popular car-enthusiast magazine ran a cover story, titled "The Truck Jihad," that took Bradsher and the *Times* to task. In a press release touting its story, Mandel said: "It was the *Times* which chose to pick up the sword against trucks and SUVs — and it is *AutoWeek*'s duty to not only support car and truck passion, but also to bring fairness to the discussion."

Says Bradsher, who probably wouldn't know a Monolo Blahnik pump if he tripped over one: "It's a shame it's gotten so personal." Then he adds: "The automakers have acknowledged they've got a problem. But it's easier to shoot the messenger than address the problem."

So how did Keith Bradsher, a gawky six-foot-four guy from suburban Washington, D.C., whom even *Times* colleagues describe as nerdy, get to down-and-dirty Detroit, where auto executives routinely broker deals in topless bars and most auto writers are classified as gearheads?

The son of a Polk Award-winning reporter for the *Washington Star*, Bradsher went to the University of North Carolina on a Morehead Scholarship, filed more than 140 business stories as a *Los Angeles Times* intern while simultaneously earning a public policy master's in economics from Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School. He joined *The New York*

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Times in 1989, at the age of 25. At the start of 1996, he moved to the Detroit bureau with wife Robyn Meredith, also a *Times* reporter.

There can be a fraternity feel to the auto press corps in Detroit. It's a clubby group, a pack of both writers for the car-buff magazines that flag-wave for the industry and longtime daily reporters. They include *The Washington Post*'s Warren Brown (fourteen years on the beat), the *Chicago Tribune*'s Jim Mateja (twenty-eight years), *USA Today*'s James Healey (ten years).

Enter Keith Bradsher, hardly a car buff; he drives a leased Chevy Lumina. Critics and colleagues describe him, variously, as diligent, cooperative, arrogant, aloof. Says David E. Davis, editor of the car-enthusiast *Automobile Magazine*: "Keith does a good job as a hard-working, humorless automotive journalist."

He became tightly focused on the SUV story when he and Glenn Kramon, the *Times*'s business editor, both began noticing the proliferation of light trucks and SUVs on the roads. In early 1997, Kramon recalls, he said to Bradsher, "Can you believe how big the new ones are? Doesn't it make you feel unsafe?" At Kramon's suggestion, Bradsher began talking to safety experts and reviewing federal reports on traffic deaths produced by such agencies as the National Highway Traffic Safety Association.

Bradsher's first piece, a page-one story on March 19, 1997, was headlined COLLISION ODDS TURN LOPSIDED AS SALES OF BIG VEHICLES BOOM. It revealed that of the 5,426 people killed in collisions between cars and light trucks in 1995, fully 80 percent of the victims were in the cars. Yet that story, and several follow-ups, drew little reaction. Says Kramon: "We were surprised when for many months no one in the media did anything."

But Bradsher kept on digging. He contacted close to 100 state and local police forces in search of accident reports. He called officials from the Johnson administration who explained why in the 1960s light-truck owners originally received special tax and pollution exemptions not afforded to car owners. At auto shows, he whipped out his tape to measure the height of truck bumpers to judge whether they could ram through the sides of standard car doors. And he sat through many tedious automotive engineering conferences to pick up facts about light-truck design; often he was the only newspaper reporter in attendance.

The payoff was a series of stories that were as detailed as they were provocative:

On September 24, 1997, a front-page story headed LIGHT TRUCKS, HEAVY RISK — A DEADLY HIGHWAY MISMATCH IGNORED. It cited reasons why carmakers and regulators have done little to correct the imbalance between light trucks and cars, including failure to conduct crash tests.

Glenn Kramon

Warren Brown

"Can you believe how big the new ones are? Doesn't it make you feel unsafe?"

On October 17, another page-one story. It reported that insurance companies were considering raising rates on light trucks because of safety concerns.

On November 29, a 6,000-word special report: LICENSE TO POLLUTE: LIGHT TRUCKS INCREASE PROFITS BUT FOUL AIR MORE. Bradsher detailed the environmental impact of light trucks, and the special treatment they have received from regulators for nearly forty years, including higher emission levels, and the pressures that the Big Three have put on government to head off any changes.

On December 12, a story disclosing that light trucks are more susceptible to rolling over than cars, potentially undermining their own safety value.

On January 18, 1998, a story by Bradsher concluding that when more light trucks go on sale in the used car market, at prices more affordable to younger and less responsible drivers, they will become even more hazardous to other motorists.

Auto p.r. people have fired back that Bradsher's stories are tainted by mistakes, like "flip-flopping" between the terms light truck, pickup, and SUV — technically different classifications — when citing statistics. They argue that he had exaggerated light trucks' hazards. How could you call SUVs dangerous when they cause only 3 percent of all auto fatalities? Says Brian O'Neill, president of the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, which is supported by the major insurance companies: "If you read these stories, it becomes pretty obvious that Keith came to this subject with a viewpoint, and it was largely anti-utility vehicle. The stories ranged from fairly accurate to pieces of wild speculation."

Reporters for several major dailies agreed, and they decided not to match the *Times*'s coverage. Says *USA Today* reporter Healey: "It seemed like it went beyond the facts."

The Washington Post's Brown did not even begin covering the story until February, nearly a year after Bradsher's first piece, and only after his editors "came to me and put pressure" for a story. Brown dismisses the *Times*'s coverage as obvious and overblown. "No one disputes the fact that a light truck crashing into a car will do more damage," says Brown. "But a fact doesn't become a crisis until there is a rate of occurrence that makes it a crisis."

Says *Automobile* editor Davis of Bradsher's work: "I think it was almost a piece of class warfare. It really does read like a piece from the land where cars are yellow and have a light on the roof. [The *Times*'s editors] don't get it. They don't understand the charm of sports utility vehicles. They seem to feel that if they don't like them — that they wouldn't be comfortable owning one — something ought to be done and nobody should be able to drive them."

Bradsher is cool to all this flak. His reaction: "It's an interesting industry — and it's my job to cover it objectively rather than being everybody's best friend all of the time."

For the most part, Bradsher says his stories have not prevented him from covering the auto beat. But in April, he was scooped by *The Wall Street Journal* about the merger between Chrysler and Daimler-Benz. At a news conference, an angered Bradsher confronted Chrysler's vice president for communications Steve Harris about why he had not been tipped off. "He came up to me and said, 'We know you did this to punish *The New York Times* for the SUV stories,' " says Harris, adding the company had no such intentions.

The key point is this: since Bradsher began his reporting, a number of initiatives *have* taken place. Earlier in 1998 the National Highway Traffic Safety Association conducted its first crash tests involving light trucks and cars. The tests are part of the increased pressure NHTSA is putting on automakers to correct the safety disadvantage that cars face against light trucks and SUVs. Already Ford and General Motors have responded. Both are reportedly working on SUV redesigns — including lowered suspensions — that should enhance road safety. Ford has also announced that beginning this fall fuel emissions of new light trucks and SUVs will be reduced to the same levels as cars. The Environmental Protection Agency has become more vigilant in examining light truck emission standards as well.

Did Bradsher provoke such actions? With little hesitation, he says his reporting "clearly influenced all of them but in no case was the sole cause."

Since Bradsher began his reporting, a number of initiatives have taken place.

Meanwhile, the honors have come. Besides the Polk, Bradsher has received the Deadline Award from the Society of Professional Journalists. In April he narrowly missed the Pulitzer. A five-person preliminary judging panel made him one of three finalists in the beat reporting category. "We were impressed at the breadth and depth of reporting," says panelist Kay Tucker Addis, editor of *The Virginian-Pilot*. "And anyone who takes on an industry, you give a lot of credit for doing substantial thoughtful reporting." Adds panelist Mel Opotowsky, managing editor of the *Press-Enterprise* in Riverside, California: "I not only recommended it, I made it [my] first choice."

But the Pulitzer board, which makes the final selection, chose none of the three finalists, instead selecting *The New York Times*'s Linda Greenhouse. Similarly, a few weeks later Bradsher finished as runner-up for a Loeb Award for business reporting.

The awards, as well as the announced truck redesigns, would seem to vindicate Bradsher's work. But vindication, he notes, was never his pursuit. Sitting in that Flint hotel room, missing his baby's christening, reporter Keith Bradsher says, "I believe the changes being made are going to save lives and reduce a lot of injuries." ■

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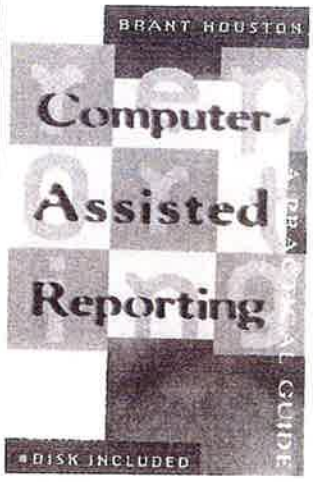

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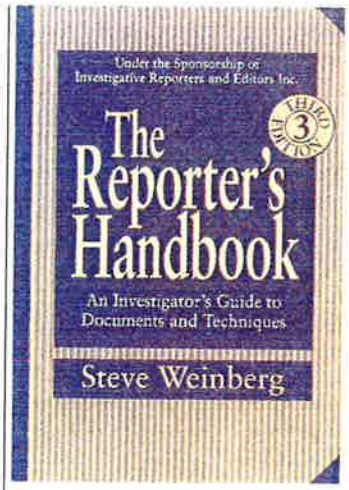

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