

Lac-Mégantic disaster named top story

Senate expenses, Ford fiasco also headlined 2013

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Heading into 2013, Lac-Mégantic was known as a quiet holiday town in a Quebec region recognized abroad for its mountaintop observatory and its inky, starry skies.

The community finishes the year remembered for a deadly train crash that horrified people around the world and ignited a fire so big its rage could be seen from space.

Last summer's Lac-Mégantic derailment, which killed 47 people and pushed the issue of rail safety into the spotlight, has been voted Canada's 2013 News Story of the Year in the annual survey of the country's newsrooms by The Canadian Press.

Editors and news directors across Canada selected a story that circled the world after a runaway train hauling crude oil careened off the tracks and exploded, levelling dozens of buildings in the heart of town.

The multiple layers to the July 6 catastrophe attracted interest with its gripping stories of survival and loss, the vast environmental consequences and the stunning images of the devastation. It also launched new debates about the continent's boom in oil-by-rail traffic.

In the News Story of the Year poll, the Lac-Mégantic tragedy received nearly 31 per cent of the ballots cast. Voters were asked to either choose a story from a list of candidates or to nominate their own selection.

"The Lac-Mégantic disaster was one which caused everyone who lives in a small Canadian city, or town that has freight trains rumbling through it, (to) stop and ponder, 'That could happen to me someday,'" said Murray Guy, assistant managing editor for the Times & Transcript in Moncton, N.B.

Adrienne Tanner, deputy editor for the Vancouver Sun, said, "Disasters don't get any bigger. A human tragedy with a lot of political and policy implications going forward."

The Lac-Mégantic story edged the Senate expenses scandal, which received 24 per cent of the votes.

Voters who chose the Senate controversy argued it's an issue that could bring longlasting change to Canada. "The Senate expense story strikes a deep core visceral nerve with readers," Jim Poling, the Hamilton Spectator's managing editor, said of a scandal that has swamped the Prime Minister's Office. "It's about the money, but it's mostly about the entitlement.

It's a story that has the potential to change the structure of government in Canada and who its leaders are."

Rob Ford, Toronto's notorious mayor who admitted to smoking crack cocaine, finished third after amassing nearly 23 per cent of the vote.

Those who selected the Ford story, which became the butt of jokes on American late-night TV shows, said they made their choice based on how much attention it grabbed around the world.

A media-monitoring firm found that the Ford story generated 1.4 times more international news coverage in 2013 than the Lac-Mégantic disaster. But the world still took notice of the rail tragedy - in a big way.

It remained a top-3 worldwide news item over the first four days following the disaster and reached as far away as Kuwait, India and the Philippines, says a recently released study by Montreal-based Influence Communication. The analysis also says Lac-Mégantic generated more coverage within Quebec than any story since the start of the century, ahead of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti and the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

In Lac-Mégantic, the mayor believes the crash that struck her community of 6,000 has potential repercussions for people across Canada and beyond.

"I think this tragedy allowed the whole world to reflect on rail safety," Colette Roy-Laroche said in a recent interview at the sports centre in Lac-Mégantic, about 250 kilometres east of Montreal.

Roy-Laroche hopes all the attention generated by the disaster will inspire governments and companies around the globe to push for improvements to train security.