

'12 Years a Slave' headlines miss the mark

The movie "12 Years a Slave" earned three Academy Awards at Sunday's Oscars ceremony in Los Angeles, including Best Supporting Actress and Best Picture honors, and several newspapers attempted witty headlines to commemorate the accolades.

The front-page headline in the Daily Breeze of Torrance, Calif., read, " 'Slave' becomes master." Other newspapers ran similar Page 1 headlines. The East Central Illinois News-Gazette's headline was, " '12 Years a Slave' escapes with top Oscar." The Denver Post's headline read, " '12 Years a Slave' escapes pull of 'Gravity' for win."

Headline puns are staples in the news business. The Dow Jones News Fund calls headlines the entry point for all readers. This leads to a reliance on witty headlines that draw readers' eyes to front pages, especially in a digital-first climate that values page views as much as quality.

Yet, in journalism, headlines that can be misinterpreted are discouraged and avoided. Given the sensitive content matter in "12 Years a Slave," it is interesting that several newspapers chose headlines that use the terms "slave" and "escape" as puns.

Watchdog organizations such as Poynter and Mediate quickly responded to this crop of pun headlines.

Mediate called the Daily Breeze's headline the worst post-Oscars attempt at humor, while Poynter went a step further. Poynter contacted Michael Anastasi, vice president of Digital First Media's Los Angeles New Group. (Los Angeles News Group publishes the Daily Breeze.)

Anastasi told Poynter the headline is “tacky, ridiculous, stupid.” He also said he “winced” when he read it.

Despite these missteps, there was a balance in headlines and coverage of the acclaim garnered by “12 Years a Slave.” The Miami Herald’s headline read “ ‘12 Years A Slave’ rises up at the Academy Awards,” while the Los Angeles Times’ Page 1 headline also was simple: “ ‘12 Years a Slave’ wins best picture Oscar.”

The New York Times even published a correction 161 years after it initially ran Solomon Northrup’s story.

Some media outlets missed the mark on “12 Years A Slave,” but most followed the “grab the reader, but don’t offend” headline guidelines.

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