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MARCH 8, 2010, 7:34 P.M. ET

Toyota Knocks ABC News Report

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By NEAL BOUDETTE

Toyota Motor Corp. on Monday criticized ABC News, saying the broadcaster "staged" part of a report that purported to show electronic problems could cause Toyota vehicles to accelerate unexpectedly.

The attack on ABC was part of what the Japanese car maker has called a broader push to rebut critics and win support for its view that the electronics in its vehicles are not defective.

At a news conference, engineering consultants hired by Toyota also showed they are able to cause vehicles made by three other auto makers to rev suddenly by making the same electronic modifications used by a college professor who was the subject of the ABC report, and who testified before Congress last month.

David W. Gilbert of Southern Illinois University-Carbondale has said he found a way to make Toyotas surge by causing a short in the wires that carry signals from the gas pedal to the engine computer, and can do it in such a way that the vehicle's diagnostic system doesn't notice a fault in the circuit. According to Mr. Gilbert, that suggests sudden acceleration could be caused by electrical problems. Toyota has blamed floor mats and stick pedals for the problems.

On Feb. 22, ABC News aired a report on Mr. Gilbert's findings. In it, a Toyota Avalon sedan driven by investigative reporter Brian Ross is shown traveling about 20 miles per hour, and when Mr. Gilbert causes a short in the electronics, the engine suddenly revs and the vehicle speeds up.

The original report included a shot of the car's tachometer needle racing up to more than 6,000 revolutions per minute, near the safe limit of the engine's design. At its news conference, Toyota presented a still frame from the video that showed dashboard lights indicating the car was in park, the speedometer was at zero and the seat belts weren't buckled.

"They staged it when the car was sitting still," Toyota spokesman John Hanson said.

The discrepancies in the clip were noted by gawker.com, a media web site, and on Friday ABC replaced that part of the video on its Web site. The new clip shows a shaky video of a tachometer surging inside a moving vehicle, though it doesn't reach 6,000 rpm.

ABC's Web site notes the change and says the network taped multiple demonstrations by Mr. Gilbert, and that the engine's surge "was comparable" in each of them.

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"We have updated our story," the spokeswoman said. She added that ABC was preparing its own report on Toyota's news conference.

Mr. Gilbert said in an interview Monday he wasn't in a position to respond to Toyota's news conference, which was transmitted over the Web, because he saw only about half of it.

The dispute is somewhat reminiscent of an incident in 1993 when General Motors Co. sued NBC for defamation, alleging the network's "Dateline" show rigged a test crash of a pickup truck with explosives to show the vehicles can catch fire. NBC eventually acknowledged it staged the video and reached a settlement with GM.

At the Toyota news conference, consultants from Exponent Inc., the engineering firm hired by the company, and a Stanford University professor also criticized Mr. Gilbert's work, which included cutting into wires and creating a connection where none had existed.

"You cannot rewire a circuit and expect it to behave the way it was designed," said the Stanford professor, J. Christopher Gerdes.

Mr. Gilbert has said the modifications he made could mimic faults in the accelerator's electronics.

Mike Michels, a Toyota spokesman, pointed out that Mr. Gilbert was paid for some of his work by an auto safety advocate who works with lawyers who have filed lawsuits against Toyota.

The advocate, Sean Kane, founder of for-profit firm Safety Research & Strategies Inc., confirmed he paid Mr. Gilbert \$1,800 for work Mr. Gilbert already did on sudden acceleration and additional testing Mr. Kane's company asked the professor to do. Mr. Kane added that Mr. Gilbert's testing was never intended to replicate real-world conditions, only to raise questions about alternate causes of sudden acceleration in Toyotas.

At the car maker's news conference, Matthew Schwall, an Exponent engineer, caused the engine of a BMW 325 sedan to race by making what he said were the same modifications Mr. Gilbert made to the Toyota Avalon in the ABC report.

"There is no defect with this vehicle," Mr. Schwall said. "The engine only accelerated because we rewired the same way as in Dr. Gilbert's method." Two other vehicles also raced in similar demonstrations.

In none of the cases did the vehicles' on-board computers generate a fault code that indicates trouble. Mr. Gilbert had said that in Toyota's case the lack of a code showed a car could have an electronic problem and there would be no record of it.

Toyota has recalled more than six million U.S. vehicles after incidents of sudden acceleration.

Monday's webcast was somewhat effective, said George Magliano director of auto research in North America for IHS Global Insight. "It does help them a little bit, not a heck of a lot," he said. But, he added, "at the end of the day is that going to cause anybody to get back into a Toyota if they're afraid right now? No. Toyota is going to have to prove that they know exactly what is causing this issue and they're going to have to prove that they've corrected it."

Separately, a congressman pressed the auto maker Monday on a news report that Toyota employees warned superiors in 2006 that cost-cutting measures could compromise vehicle safety. Rep. Edolphus Towns (D., N.Y.), the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee chairman, urged Toyota to release an employee-drafted letter containing the warning, the contents of which were reported by the Los Angeles Times.

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