

2018-11 Bedford vs Red Deer Advocate

March 16 2018 – For immediate release

The National NewsMedia Council has dismissed a complaint about inaccuracy in a Red Deer Advocate opinion column that criticized Canada's green energy initiatives.

The complainant, Evan Bedford, questioned the Red Deer Advocate about a December 5, 2017 syndicated column, “Green energy fairy tale turning into a nightmare for Canada”, asking if it is within journalistic standards to publish a “falsehood” in an opinion column, and whether it is permissible to use a “so-called ‘dog whistle’ tactic” to give implicit messages.

The complainant cited a statement where he said the opinion writer implied that CO₂ is not a significant greenhouse gas, with the implication that “since plants breathe CO₂ and soft drinks also utilize it, then excess concentrations of it can not be a threat to civilization”. Finally, the complainant asked how the Advocate intends to differentiate between opinion and facts in future. The complainant had detailed these complaints in a letter to the editor, but had not received a response.

The Red Deer Advocate failed to specifically address the lack of response to the complainant’s letter to the editor. It did note that it reserves the right to select letters to the editor for publication according to available space and subject matter, and stated that letters published too long after the original article lose their timeliness.

The news outlet defended the latitude of opinion columns to provoke discussion and comment while reflecting the author’s opinion on the subject, and the controversial nature of topics such as climate change.

Council noted the news outlet’s response did not address the allegation of inaccuracy, instead stating that the topic of a column such as climate change is highly controversial with opposing and supporting views. Council found this to be an inadequate response that left the complainant’s question about inaccuracy unanswered.

Council noted the news media organization failed to answer the complainant’s question whether ‘falsehoods’ can be published in an opinion article. Journalistic standards and ethics depend on the accuracy of reporting facts, and in the case of an opinion article, the facts that an opinion rests on must be accurate.

The complainant argued that the opinion writer implied that because plants use CO₂, excess concentrations of it can’t be a threat. A close reading of the article, which uses fantasy imagery in a harsh attack on environmental and conservation efforts, showed the opinion writer described CO₂ as “the very substance that plants need to breath” and the substance “that provides the fizz in soda drinks and the bubbles in champagne”. Both are factual statements.

In the same sentence, the article also stated that CO₂ “became the world’s most important environmental priority”. The reader may interpret the writer’s statement as irony, as confirming, or

as denying the role of CO2 in climate change. However, observing the trend of climate control agreements and environmental efforts, this can be understood as a true statement. For this reason, we recommend dismissing the complaint.

Reading the article as a whole, it uses satirical language to condemn attacks on the fossil fuel industry, and compares Canada's emissions to emission trends internationally. The reader may interpret the comments as downplaying the role of CO2 in climate change, or as defense of the efforts and contribution of Canada's oil and gas industry. Expressing a viewpoint that challenges or even opposes popular points of view is within the role of an opinion writer and acceptable journalistic practice. We suggest that given this reading, there is no breach of journalistic standards for opinion writing.

The NNC has found it is within a news organization's mandate to offer opinion articles and letters to the editor that express a diversity of views. However, best practice is to identify the affiliation of opinion writers, and in this case, the biography line should have made clear the writer's background as an executive in the oil and gas industry.

The second part of the complaint focused on 'dog whistles', with a subsequent request to know what the paper will do to insure there are no falsehoods in future articles. The NNC deals with specific, unresolved, complaints about accuracy or journalistic standards and ethics, and cannot comment on hypothetical or future situations. However, the paper could usefully have provided information that at least acknowledged the complainant's questions.

Similarly, Council noted that courtesy and good customer relations can help build trust in the media, and in that vein letters to the editor should be acknowledged in some form.