

2018-56: Griffin vs Toronto Star

November 6, 2018

The National NewsMedia Council has dismissed a complaint about bias and refusal to report facts in a column by the public editor of the Toronto Star.

The complainant, Michael Griffin, objected to the September 29 2018 column, “Fair election coverage does not mean equal.”

The complainant rejected the view that the media’s job is to decide what information is suitable for public consumption, and argued that deliberately choosing not to cover “fringe “ candidates was a breach of duty to readers.

The Toronto Star responded by stating that the column in question was intended to help readers understand the decisions the Star makes in terms of assigning reporting resources in a civic election that involved 35 candidates for mayor and more than 200 candidates for council.

The news media organization said it was not a matter of “refusing to report facts on the ground,” as the complainant alleged, but a case of using facts to make critical news judgment in order to provide content that serves readers.

The NewsMedia Council supported the view of the news organization that making decisions about what to cover and how to cover it is the everyday work of newsrooms. The task requires editorial judgment about priorities, and the ability to discern and report meaningful issues.

The complainant recognized the news organization may have an editorial bias, but alleged that the news organization refused to accurately report ‘facts on the ground.’ The complainant further said that deciding not to name a candidate polling at six per cent of the vote was shameful. He argued the paper has a duty to provide “fair” coverage, which should mean “some” coverage as opposed to “no” coverage.

The news outlet said its approach is in line with journalistic practice in covering elections, and that its focus was to assess issues and candidates that are most likely to have an impact on voters in the coming term. It pointed out that the intent of the public editor’s column was to explain the news organization’s position that being treated fairly does not mean having equal space in news reporting.

Council found no statement in the public editor’s commentary to suggest the news organization was refusing to accurately report facts. The job of the public editor is understood as one of explaining how journalism works; not reporting the news. In this case, the writer spoke in the first person about her own decision regarding naming the candidate. That decision is within the latitude of opinion commentary and is not a reflection of, or directive toward, news coverage.

It is rightly the job of journalism to gather, assess, prioritize, and decide what news to report to the public. In this case, the article in question referenced news reporting on two lesser-known mayoral

candidates, planned reporting on individual wards, and the news organization's commitment to cover mayoral debates.

In view of the above, Council rejected the argument in the complainant's rebuttal that the news organization was censoring other candidates, and stated that it is the prerogative of the news media organization to cover news, events, and newsmakers based on the judgement of the newsroom staff and resources. It is also within the remit of a newsroom to set the news 'agenda' by using its journalistic judgment to assess which among competing issues resonate with readers or need public attention. In view of the above, Council found no breach and dismissed the complaint.

The NewsMedia Council declined to comment on the actions of broadcast media, or on complainant's references to the Society of Professional Journalists' code of ethics, as they are not within the mandate of the NNC.