

2017-38 various vs Maclean's  
May 26, 2017

The National NewsMedia Council has dismissedd four complaints related to a Maclean's article by Andrew Potter, "How a snowstorm exposed Quebec's real problem: social malaise", March 20, 2017.

The article drew on Census Canada figures and anecdotal material to make the claim that Quebec society is dysfunctional and that compared to the rest of the country it is deficient in social capital.

Complainants Patrick Ostiguy, Michel Seymour, France Seguin and Julie Forget pointed out factual errors and described the article as racist and hateful. They said it made unsubstantiated claims and portrayed misunderstanding of the culture. One complainant alleged that the article contained all the characteristics of Quebec-bashing.

Responding to the complaint, the news media organization pointed out that two factual errors were quickly corrected. Those corrections were made in accordance with accepted style, with notice of the correction and the nature of the correction prominently placed.

The news media organization stated that an editorial published after the controversy acknowledged its editing process "fell short" and apologized for shortcomings with the article. It also noted that the columnist "expressed regret" about the tone of the article and generalizations, and provided a link to those statements by the columnist.

The NNC defends the prerogative that gives opinion writers wide latitude to use strong language and to state unpopular views. The Council generally will consider a complaint on an opinion article only in case of factual error or unnecessarily hurtful language.

Noting that principle, the news media organization said that hurtful language is a subjective matter, and pointed to journalism's job of examining uncomfortable issues. The Council found that while the descriptions portrayed were unflattering, the language did not cross the line into gratuitous or hateful speech.

The Council noted that corrective action by the news media organization was in place by the time complaints were received. It also noted the detailed apology by the columnist as well the editorial and apology from the news media organization, and that there was no further comment from complainants after those remedies were offered.

Area – sensitive reporting Tags – bias, hate speech, balance