

2020-08 Hockaday v National Post

February 18, 2020

The National NewsMedia Council has reviewed and dismissed a complaint about accuracy in a January 13 article in the National Post.

In the article, “The hidden cost of almond milk: ‘Exploited and disrespected’ bees are dying by the billions,” the writer explored the impact of various human activity on bee populations.

The complainant took issue with the statement, “[...] researchers have found that pesticides — such as glyphosate (an active ingredient in Roundup) — are the leading cause of colony collapse disorder, but they’re not the only threat facing the pollinators.” He argued that the statement was inaccurate in that it falsely attributed colony collapse disorder to pesticides without providing any scientific sources to support this conclusion, and that glyphosate was mischaracterized as pesticide when it is in fact an herbicide.

The complainant requested that the paper provide scientific sources to support the conclusion or a correction and an apology.

The news media organization responded by rejecting the complainant’s claim that the journalism was careless. It provided a list of links to sources to support the writer’s statement.

It is not the role of the NNC to decide on issues of scientific debate. Our role is to examine journalistic standards, which include accuracy, context, and opportunity to respond to harmful statements and allegations.

The NNC accepts the news media organization’s response that the journalist and editors exercised due diligence in examining research in this area and selecting sources.

In reviewing the article and related material, the NNC noted that the statement in question is qualified in two ways. While the phrase, “researchers have found,” suggests that research finds pesticides to be a factor in colony collapse disorder, it does not close the door to other findings. Second, the phrase, “but they’re not the only threat facing the pollinators,” recognizes that pesticides are considered only one factor affecting bee colonies. Read as a whole, the statement does not claim that pesticides alone cause colony collapse, but rather characterizes an area of research for readers.

The NNC would note that the term “pesticide” is commonly defined as an umbrella term that refers to substances that manage or destroy “pests,” including fungus, plants and animals.

The NNC supports journalists’ prerogative to choose the focus of a story. In this case, the NNC finds that the article explored several factors affecting bee populations, particularly, the mass transport of bees, and acknowledged that the exact causes of colony collapse disorder are unknown.

The NNC also defends journalists’ freedom to select the sources they deem credible. It does not dictate the type or number of sources in a story. While the reader may prefer to rely on other sources or to see more links in an article, this preference does not necessarily indicate a breach of standards.

For these reasons, the NNC found no evidence of inaccuracy and no breach of journalistic standards. We would also point out that the NNC does not compel its members to issue apologies.