

2020-12 Various v Vancouver Province

February 19, 2020

The National NewsMedia Council has dismissed 13 complaints about discrimination and inaccuracy in a headline published in the February 5, 2020, edition of the Vancouver Province.

The NewsMedia Council received a number of similar complaints about the front-page text, “2nd China virus case in B.C.” Complainants stated concern that the term “China Virus” was not the appropriate medical term and that it discriminated against Chinese people.

Many of the complaints reflected statements, some verbatim, in a Change.org petition that called on the news media organization to apologize for its headline. While the NNC is cognizant that at least some of the complaints originated as part of a campaign, it is nevertheless responsible for examining complaints that allege breaches of journalistic standards.

Consistent with NNC process, each complaint was carefully reviewed, and a representative complaint was selected. The complainant, Sophia Hou, took issue with the fact that the words “China Virus” appeared in large letters on the front page, compared to the term “coronavirus,” which appeared on the front page and elsewhere. The complainant argued that in contrast other viruses—such as the Zika virus, Ebola, or H1N1—were not interchangeably used or strictly referred to by their place of origin. She also referred to statements from the World Health Organization that caution against naming diseases that could stigmatize people or places.

The NNC reviewed the article and headline, and heard from the news media organization about the steps it had taken to respond to the complaint.

The news media organization stated that it had sought to address concerns raised by individual readers by explaining to them that the use of the term served only to geolocate the initial outbreak of the virus, not to replace the official name of the virus. The editor of the Vancouver Province also responded publicly to accusations that the headline discriminated against Chinese Canadians, in an appearance in a local radio program.

The NNC accepts the news organization’s position that it did not use the term to replace the proper name of the virus in this instance and that it does not intend to in any future headlines.

In reviewing the complaints and relevant material, the NNC notes that the term “coronavirus” was used in the front-page headline, which reads in full, “Coronavirus threat – 2nd China virus case in B.C. – local officials preparing for imminent return of people stranded in city of Wuhan, epicenter of global crisis.” Additionally, the online version of the The Province’s story on February 4, 2020 uses the term “coronavirus.”

The front-page headline in The Province clearly directs readers to a story on page three. The story adhered to standard journalistic practice by finding a local angle and relating the breaking news about what local officials were doing in light of the crisis. No evidence of discrimination against China or the Chinese community was identified in the print or online versions of the headline or story.

The coronavirus story is a global one, and from a news perspective worthy of front-page placement. This headline states the medical name and provides both general and specific locators – China and Wuhan city. No evidence was provided to dispute these facts.

The NNC recognizes that association with war, natural disaster, or disease can bring negative attention to a geographic location and the people living there. However, it remains the job of journalism to provide facts and information about such events.

In this case, the NNC found that the headline provided information about a concerning topic that is of both global and local interest. No evidence of inaccuracy or pejorative comment was identified in the headline or reporting in question. For these reasons, the NNC found no breach of journalistic standards and dismissed the complaint.