

2020-03: Morrison vs Toronto Sun

*March 16, 2020*

The National NewsMedia Council has upheld a complaint that a January 5, 2020 Toronto Sun opinion article “Lilley: NDP MPPs sing and chant as dead terrorist honoured,” inaccurately described a rally attended by two members of the Ontario legislature.

The complainant, Erin Morrison, who works for Ontario’s New Democratic Party, stated that the opinion article inaccurately described and misrepresented the context surrounding a public protest outside the U.S. Consulate in Toronto. She said the protest was to oppose U.S. aggression that resulted in the death of Iranian general Qassem Soleimani, who was killed in a U.S. military strike. The complainant stated that the article unfairly accused two NDP MPPs of supporting terrorist organizations, of mourning Soleimani’s death, and of standing with Hezbollah flags at the protest.

The Toronto Sun responded by saying that the statements in question were factual, or part factual, and fair comment. It also pointed out that the article in question was an opinion column.

The NewsMedia Council supports the wide latitude of opinion writers to present provocative points of view, and to express themselves in strong language. However, the NNC has consistently held that the facts on which opinions are based must be accurate.

The news organization relied on fair comment as defense of several points. In the NNC’s view, fair comment in journalism must meet the conditions of being honest opinion in the public interest, presented without malice, and based on provable facts presented in the story.

The MPPs’ attendance at the event is not contested. The complaint centres on the reported purpose of the event and the characterization of the MPPs’ involvement in that event. Specifically, the complainant objected to the characterization of two members of provincial parliament as supporters of terrorist organizations, and that they mourned and honoured Soleimani.

In its review, the NNC found the tweets published by the MPPs and used in the article conveyed that they attended the protest to express an “anti-war” point of view and a position against “aggression.” The NDP statement as quoted in the article described the event as a peace rally.

There was no evidence reported in the article to support the statement that the MPPs were anti-American, or that they mourned the death of Soleimani.

The complainant also disputed that the MPPs intentionally stood by, or supported, the Hezbollah flag-carriers, and cited a quote from the NDP that denied any association between the MPPs and the unknown flag carrier.

The news media organization did not provide information to support its description of the MPPs’ intent in attending the rally. Its response pointed to guilt by association, based on the presence of individuals at a counter-rally, whose presence the MPPs had no ability to control.

It is worth noting that interviewing or reporting counter protesters at a rally is accepted journalistic practice. In this case, however, the writer stated the intent of individuals based on the actions of those in their proximity, and conflated anti-war and pro-terrorist sentiment. Facts by way of quotes and tweets reported did not support the writer's characterization of the event or of the MPPs' attendance.

The news media organization's response appeared to conflate an anti-war position with anti-American sentiment, and to equate concern about military escalation with honouring a dead leader. In this case, the conflation resulted in a report that coloured the reader's understanding of the primary nature of the event.

It is the NNC's view that read as a whole, the article failed to accurately describe the event and facts reported did not accurately characterize the MPPs' attendance.

For the above reasons, the NNC upholds the complaint.