

2020-43 Mondoux v Toronto Sun

July 10, 2020

The National NewsMedia Council considered and found that corrective action was taken to address a complaint about a headline in a May 28, 2020, edition of the Toronto Sun.

The newspaper published the front-page headline, “Who made Houdini vanish.” The article reported the recent death of Toronto rapper Dimarjio Jenkins, who performed under the name Houdini, and noted the increased incidence of shootings in the city.

Michele Mondoux filed a complaint about the headline. She stated that the wordplay was insensitive to the victim and to the Black community, particularly in the wake of violent incidents that occurred in Toronto and the U.S. related to racial discrimination.

The NNC received seven other complaints in the immediate days following the publication of the headline. Complainants expressed similar concerns about insensitivity.

It should be noted that the complaints focused on objection to the headline and did not allege any breach in the article itself.

The news organization responded to the complaint by pointing to a May 31 editor’s note and published letters to the editor about the headline. The editor’s note stated, “Many readers were upset by our front page on Thursday, finding it in poor taste. Here is a selection of their views. We meant no disrespect to murder victim Dimarjio Jenkins, a rising, young rap star whose stage name was Houdini.”

Published letters to the editor reflected similar concerns raised by complainants. One letter writer stated that the ostensibly “tongue-in-cheek” headline showed disregard for loss of life and “perpetuates the belief that the loss of black lives is unimportant, comical even.”

The NNC recognizes the historical tradition of tabloid newspapers to shock, entertain, or provide a sensationalist tone on current events. Nevertheless, the NNC is of the view that despite these historical considerations, news organizations must strive to respect and show sensitivity toward individuals or communities in the wake of tragic events.

In reviewing the complaint and headline in question, the NNC noted that the flippant nature of the headline was incongruous with the article, which offered a straightforward account of the shooting and impact on the community, and provided contextual details related to gun violence in the city.

Council has previously expressed concern about the journalistic ethics of using inflammatory language to describe people who may be vulnerable targets in a highly polarized political and social environment.

In this case, Council observed that the choice of words in the original headline did not meet journalistic standards for the consideration due to victims of crime.

The NNC noted the news media organization acknowledged the complaints by publishing several highly critical letters to the editor, as well as an editor's note that spoke to the widespread reaction to the headline and stated the phrasing was not intended to disrespect the victim.

The NNC is of the view that letters to the editor are an effective way to express the range of opinion in the community on various issues, and in some cases may provide valuable remedy to addressing reader concerns.

In this case, the selection of published letters underscored the objectionable nature of the headline about the violent death of a member of the Black community, and provided readers' perspectives about why the headline was inappropriate and harmful to the Black community, particularly in light of recent events.

In light of the above, Council found that the news media organization acknowledged the headline was inappropriate and provided opportunity for expression of the harm it caused to family and the community. For these reasons, Council considers the complaint resolved due to corrective action.

While tabloid journalism often aims to provoke, language choice is important when reporting on sensitive subjects. In this case, it is regrettable that inappropriate wordplay caused pain to a community experiencing racism and violence.