

2020-75: Tedds v Toronto Sun

January 29, 2021

The National NewsMedia Council has considered and upheld a complaint about accuracy in a November 18, 2020, article, “Audit demanded after more than 800,000 ineligible people get CERB,” published in the Toronto Sun.

The article reported that hundreds of thousands of people who had received Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) cheques were ineligible based on the fact that they had not filed their 2019 tax returns. It relied on statements made by a Member of Parliament calling for an audit of the program.

The NNC received a complaint from Lindsay Tedds, an academic in economics and public policy, who stated that the headline and statements in the article were inaccurate because tax filing was not part of the eligibility criteria to receive CERB. The complainant cited information on the Government of Canada website, which outlines eligibility criteria, to support her view.

The complainant was also concerned that several Postmedia news outlets had removed the article from their websites without a notice of correction or explanation to readers.

The Toronto Sun responded to the complaint by stating that the story was supported by data tabled in the House of Commons which showed that more than 800,000 CERB recipients had yet to file their 2019 tax returns. In particular, the Sun stated that the headline and statements in the article were correct in reporting that verifying eligibility for CERB was a legal requirement arising from the Canada Emergency Response Benefit Act. It stated that the Canadian Revenue Agency did not explain prior to publication how CERB eligibility could be verified if recipients had not filed a tax return, and cited statements from MPs expressing similar views.

The Sun stated that the story was re-written from original reporting by Blacklock’s Reporter, and that follow-up stories included comments from the CRA that clarified the news organization’s position. It referred to follow-up articles, published by Blacklock’s Reporter, to support its view.

The NNC also heard from Blacklock’s Reporter, which is not a member of the NNC, in response to the complaint. Comments largely echoed the original response provided by the Toronto Sun.

The NNC supports the view that news media organizations are responsible for the content they publish, including material from third parties and wire services. Best practice in such cases calls for appropriate acknowledgment of the original source or author of the material.

Standard journalistic practice demands accuracy in reporting, which includes headlines. Council has previously stated that journalistic rigor requires appropriate steps to verify the sources and accuracy of information. It has also held that in the event that an article contains inaccurate information, news organizations are expected to swiftly and consistently correct the inaccuracy in a transparent manner.

In reviewing the article, complaint, and related materials, the NNC considered whether the news media organization took reasonable steps to verify that the article's headline and statement about CERB eligibility were accurate at the time of publication.

Based on readily available information, the NNC observed that neither the Act nor the Government of Canada website stated that having filed a 2019 tax return was an eligibility requirement to receive CERB.

The NNC accepts that some MPs were of the opinion that tax filings from the previous year would have been used to verify income and eligibility status of recipients at the time of issuing benefit cheques. However, public statements based on inaccurate information and opinions expressed by MPs do not alter the existing eligibility requirements or render the information factually correct.

The NNC understands that journalism relies on the voices of expert sources to provide information and context. At the same time, however, it is the responsibility of the news organization to verify the statements and information from public officials, and to report any mis-statement of fact.

Given the readily available information at the time of publication, Council found that the news media organization did not adequately take steps to verify the claim that more than 800,000 ineligible people received CERB.

Council cautioned against publishing inaccurate statements and the consequences of failing to correct such statements in a timely manner. In particular, Council expressed concern over the impact of misinformation and unfounded statements about widespread fraud.

For the reasons outlined above, the NewsMedia Council upheld the complaint about accuracy.