



2021-09: Kulak vs Kamsack Times

February 10, 2021 – *for immediate release*

The National NewsMedia Council mediated and found that corrective action was taken to address a complaint about use of language in an article, “Local family overwhelmed by support from around the world,” published in the January 13, 2021 edition of the Kamsack Times.

The complainant, Chris Kulak, objected to the description of his family heritage and that the publication interviewed his 10-year-old daughter without consulting her parents. He described the majority of the article as a positive report about the outpouring of support toward his daughter, a young Indigenous child, who had been shamed by a staff person at her school for wearing a traditional ribbon skirt to school. However, he held the view that the article’s factual inaccuracy and use of inappropriate language in describing the family heritage revealed systemic racism.

The complainant understands the school staff person “made a mistake”. He was concerned about negative backlash against her and preferred that she use the experience to “learn and inform her own circles”. He acknowledged that the news organization took down the article in question upon hearing of his concern.

The news media organization responded by stating that an interview was conducted with an aunt on the understanding that she was authorized to speak for the family. The news organization noted the story was newsworthy for the local community, as the ribbon skirt episode had been the subject of national attention. The news organization stated that no insult or racism was intended and the error was an inadvertent oversight. It agreed to issue a correction and provide the complainant space for a letter to the editor to express his concerns.

In reviewing the complaint and language use in question, the NNC noted that the offensive nature of the inappropriate language was heightened by the factual error and the lack of consultation with the parents. The NNC does not find that any of those missteps was intentional. Nevertheless, it takes the view that the impact of the words on the family must be viewed through the lens of ongoing and systemic racism, whether subtle or overt.

The NNC recognizes the importance of language, particularly as it relates to reporting accurately on Indigenous issues and communities. A word that is used casually, and with no intent of doing harm, can raise memories and hurt from times when words were used intentionally in a derogatory or ‘othering’ manner. The NNC is of the view that news organizations must strive to use language and terms that respect and show sensitivity toward individuals or communities.

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. At the same time, the NNC recognizes that responsibility to educate about racism is an additional and arguably unfair burden on those affected by systemic racism.

The NNC noted that the news organization corrected the factual error, and that it also apologized for the hurt caused, pledged to review procedures to ensure a similar situation does not re-occur in the future, and offered the complainant space to provide his point of view. While these steps do not undo the harm done, the NNC views them as good faith, widely accepted remedial measures.

In light of the above, the NNC considered the complaint resolved due to corrective action.