



2021-23: McCurdy v National Post

April 7, 2021

The National NewsMedia Council has dismissed with reservation a complaint about accuracy in a February 18, 2021, opinion article, "As Texas winter storm shows, hurling public money at renewable energy is pure folly," published by the National Post.

Patrick McCurdy filed a complaint with the NNC alleging that statements in the article erroneously conflated weather and climate change to deny the existence of climate change. As an example, the complainant cited the statement: "I thought we were not to have winter anymore according to the high priests of global warming. I thought snowfalls were a thing of the past, according to their acolytes in the media" and noted the use of outdated predictions, such as "The Los Angeles Times reported in 2009 on a government ecologist's prediction that all of Montana's glaciers would be gone in 2020."

The complainant also alleged that the column quoted inaccurate information published elsewhere, namely, a Wall Street Journal editorial that stated, "Texas's overreliance on wind power left the grid more vulnerable to bad weather. Half of the wind turbines froze last week, causing wind's share of electricity to plunge to 8 per cent from 42 per cent ... there wasn't sufficient baseload power from coal & nuclear to support the grid."

Lastly, the complainant argued that the column equated reliable energy with fossil fuels and misattributed the reason for power outages in Texas. Drawing on readily available information to support his view, the complainant said the column led readers to believe the outages were because of renewable sources of energy and not because of the widely accepted fact that outages were due to a lack of winterization of the power grid.

The news media organization responded by saying that the statements in the column were in line with the columnist's bombastic approach to commentary. It took the view that the statements in question were, in fact, criticizing years of dire predictions of global warming, not denying its existence.

The news media organization cited information to support the column's inclusion of figures related to the decrease in power generated by wind. The news media organization stated that the portion of electricity generated from wind had "a significant drop," and that "gas generated electricity at a higher percentage of the total after the outages than before the outages."

However, the news media organization acknowledged that the lack of winterization of the grid was the primary reason for power outages, and noted that "all forms of power struggled during the Texas storm, including renewables." Upon review, the NNC noted that this information was not presented in the column.

The news media organization stated that it had published other articles on the subject which offered a more complete view of the reasons for the power grid failure.

The NNC supports the wide latitude afforded to columnists to use strong language and express unpopular points of view that challenge the status quo. In that vein, it supports the latitude of columnists to adopt contrarian views or to take contentious stands on matters of public debate. It also recognizes that columnists have the option to employ rhetorical devices, bombast and exaggerated styles of speech to make their arguments and appeal to readers. That said, the NNC has consistently held that opinion pieces must be grounded in fact. Factual accuracy includes a commitment to providing relevant information that is accurate at the time of publication.

The NNC supports the prerogative of journalists to choose their own sources. Sources for news and analysis articles must be reliable, accurate and presented in context. That said, the NNC recognizes the widely-accepted practice that columnists, who are tasked with arguing a point, have latitude to be more selective with sources, provided they are supported by verifiable evidence. Readers may reject or find other sources to support their viewpoints or counter the columnist's argument. The failure of an opinion column to convince a reader of an argument, or change a reader's mind on a subject, is not a breach of standards.

The NNC recognizes that while the science has evolved over the decades, there is an overwhelming amount of evidence that points to the fact of climate change. However, it is not the role of the NNC to deliberate over the science, but to assess whether the statements in the column fall within the wide latitude afforded to opinion writers to express provocative views.

In reviewing the column in question, the NNC accepts the news media organization's characterization of the column's style as bombastic, and in keeping with that style, the columnist selected particular sources of information, and omitted others, that served his argument.

As stated, news articles are expected to provide readers with appropriate context and current information that accurately portrays a particular event or situation, but the NNC recognizes that columnists may opt to include particular sources of information and omit others to build their argument.

At the same time, the NNC cautions against relying solely on outdated observations for readers when newer, more reliable information is readily accessible. It accepts that a reader familiar with the columnist may understand that statements in the column are consistent with an exaggerated style of commentary. However, an ordinary reader may take the statements at face value, and might be misled as to the context and veracity of the information presented.

In this case, because the article did not include all relevant information, the reader may be misled into thinking that the primary cause of the outages was renewable sources of energy rather than the lack of winterization of the grid.

The NNC takes the view that published articles should stand on their own. It supports a news organization's efforts to provide readers with other opinion articles that offer differing or more

complete perspectives on the subject, but that does not negate the journalistic standard that an article stands on its own merits.

In considering this matter, the NNC noted that the column takes full advantage of the wide latitude of opinion articles to use exaggerated language, take an extreme position, and be selective about sources to support a position that is contrary or provocative. It recognizes that the column makes a political, not a scientific, argument. For this reason, Council did not find grounds to support a complaint about a breach of the standard of accuracy.

However, Council is concerned about the nature of the sources and lack of context that pushes the boundaries of logical argument and may mislead a reader unfamiliar with the writer's style. For these reasons, it dismissed the complaint with reservation.