



2021-21: McGregor v Epoch Times

April 13, 2021

The National NewsMedia Council mediated and found that corrective action was taken to address a complaint about the accuracy of a December 16, 2020, news article, “Money From Facebook’s Zuckerberg Used to Undermine Election, Violate Law: Report,” published by the Epoch Times.

The article described a report by the Thomas More Society’s Amistad Project alleging that funds from Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg were used to “treat voters unequally and to improperly influence the election for Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden.” The article includes quotes from Amistad Project director Phill Kline for context. A version of the article also appeared in the January 2021 print edition of the Epoch Times.

Duncan McGregor filed a complaint with the NNC alleging that the article was misleading because it omitted key information and context that lent undue credibility to the allegations in the report. In particular, the complainant stated the article failed to mention that the organization that published the report had ties to the Trump team.

The complainant also expressed concern that the article described Kline as the former attorney general of Kansas without noting that Kline had been disbarred following allegations of misconduct. As well, the complainant took issue with the fact that the article did not state that the allegations made in the report had not been proven in any court of law.

The news media organization responded by updating the article on March 4, 2021, to include information that a lawyer who served as special counsel for Donald Trump’s campaign was also listed as a lawyer for the Thomas More Society, the Amistad Project’s parent organization. The article was appended with an editor’s note alerting readers to the update.

Regarding the description of Kline, the news media organization argued that the subject of the former attorney general’s disbarment fell outside the scope of the article. Instead, it updated the article to remove any reference to his former title of attorney general.

The news media organization stated that the article was published based on the content of the report released on December 14, 2020. It also noted that at the time of its publication, “all but one case filed in the federal system have been dismissed on procedural grounds such as lack of standing, or were voluntarily dismissed by the plaintiffs,” and that one was pending. It noted that it reached out to “the other side,” but that individuals did not respond to a request for comment, as noted in the article.

After the news organization updated the article on March 4, the complainant said he was satisfied with the corrective action taken to address his concerns about the Amistad Project’s links to the Trump team and the way that the director of the organization was described in the article. The complainant reiterated, however, that he still felt that the content of the article was misleading because it did not contain any reference to dismissed court cases involving similar allegations that formed the basis of the report.

In general, the NNC supports the prerogative of a news media organization to determine the newsworthiness of a story. Responsible journalism demands a commitment to accuracy, which includes providing relevant context for readers to understand and assess the facts presented.

The NNC is of the view that clarifying the affiliation of the lawyer helps readers assess the credibility of the information presented. Although the NNC acknowledges the updates were made more than two months after the article was first published, it accepts that corrective action has been taken to address the complainant’s concerns about the lawyer’s affiliation.

At the same time, the NNC accepts the news media organization’s response that the scope of the article in question was limited to the content of the report and did not include reporting on any court cases. For this reason, it found no breach of standards on this point.

For the reasons given above, the NNC found that the complaint was resolved due to corrective action.