

**2021-60: Poulin v. Canadaland**

*August 20, 2021*

The National NewsMedia Council has reviewed and dismissed a complaint about the labelling, balance and anonymous nature of a May 19, 2021 opinion article “How Bilingualism Promotes the Mediocre,” published by Canadaland.

The opinion column was critical of the federal government’s hiring practices by arguing that official bilingualism unfairly determines the career prospects of public servants based solely on their ability to speak both of Canada’s official languages to a determined level of fluency. The opinion writer specifically identified how non-French speaking people are “de-selected” from working for the federal public service.

In his submission, Simon-Pierre Poulin, made several complaints about the opinion article. First, he argued the column was improperly labeled as ‘news’ on the Canadaland homepage. Second, the complainant took issue with the allowance made by the news organization to publish an opinion column without properly identifying the writer’s name. Third, the complainant argued that several statistics were not properly cited. Fourth, the complainant argued that the column was unbalanced and poorly contextualized, for example, in the application of the Official Languages Act. Lastly, the complainant took issue with the broad use of language used by the columnist in the opinion piece, particularly in reference to mental health and racism.

In response to the complaint, Canadaland stated the column in question is clearly labelled as an opinion piece when retrieved via its specific hyperlink. The news organization also acknowledged that while the name of the opinion writer has been withheld from publication, the reasoning for why their identity was withheld is explained in an editor’s note at the foot of the story.

With regards to the complainant’s concern about accuracy, the news organization noted the absence of footnotes or sourcing details do not mean the information presented is inaccurate.

The news organization also refuted the complainant’s views about the column being unbalanced by stating that it regularly runs commentary from viewpoints contrary to those found in the column under review. It stated that the phrases cited by the complainant were “rhetorical/satirical flourishes and could not reasonably be taken by readers as an attempt at a medical diagnosis.”

The NNC would also point out that the news organization offered the complainant an opportunity to publicly express their concerns about the opinion column in a letter to the editor. The complainant did not accept this offer as a remedy.

Generally speaking, the NNC supports the wide latitude afforded to opinion writers to express unpopular views or to raise pointed questions. Bias in an opinion article is to be expected, as the purpose of opinion writing is to express a particular point of view on an issue at the forefront of public

debate. At the same time, the NNC is also of the view that opinion writing is subject to widely-accepted journalistic and community standards.

In its review of the column, the NNC noted that the article is clearly labelled as 'opinion' in two places. The first label appears in blue font above the headline. The second is where the author's byline would typically appear. In this case, the byline reads: "OPINION BY THE SECRET PUBLIC SERVANT." In light of this evidence, the NNC dismisses the reader's complaint about improper labeling of the column. Council would, however, recommend the news organization consider adding a separate 'opinion' tab on the navigation bar of its homepage in the future to ensure absolute clarity.

With regards to the publication of an opinion column under a pseudonym, the NNC supports the strong points raised by both parties on this matter. Traditional journalistic standards dictate that writers and/or sources should only be granted anonymity under the most exceptional of circumstances.

Broadly speaking, freely granting writers or sources anonymity prevents the public from making informed decisions about their affiliations and/or credibility. Nevertheless, as the Canadian Association of Journalists ethics guidelines state, those rules are not absolute. The guidelines state that anonymity may be granted when the material is in the public interest, there is a clear and pressing reason to protect the source's identity, and there is no other reasonable means to obtain the information. In such cases, readers are informed of the reason for anonymity.

Under the particular and specific circumstances of the complaint at hand, Council supports the view that the news organization has taken both the necessary and appropriate steps to confirm the identity of the writer, which it has shared [publicly on its site](#), and that the opinions expressed could not easily be obtained if the writer was obliged to disclose their proper name. For these reasons, the NNC dismisses the reader's complaint about anonymity.

In considering the portion of the complaint about the accuracy of various statements, the news organization provided Council with [the references](#) where statistics about the composition of the federal public service are cited. While the NNC accepts the news organization's view that omitting references does not indicate a factual error, it would note that best practice in digital journalism supports the inclusion of links to source documents to ensure transparency and clarity, particularly for facts or data that is not widely known to readers.

On the final two portions of the complaint, Council supports the view of the news organization with regards to a perceived lack of balance and the use of language. While the opinion presented in the column may be provocative, controversial, or unwelcome to some readers, this, in itself, does not constitute a breach of journalistic standards.

The NNC recognizes the role of columnists, throughout history, has been to galvanize public dialogue on important issues and to do so in strong language. Ultimately, readers choose to invest as much or as little weight in the opinions presented as they see fit. An ordinary reading of the opinion piece, moreover, offers a perspective critical of a language policy, not of the people who speak a particular language. As such, the NNC accepts the news organization's view that the use of language by the opinion writer was hyperbolic in nature.

For the reasons outlined above, the NNC finds no evidence of a breach of journalistic standards and dismisses the complaint.