

2021-64 Morgan v Northern Sentinel

September 9, 2021

The National NewsMedia Council reviewed and dismissed a complaint about the naming of a minor in a June 18, 2021, news article published by the Northern Sentinel.

The article reported on a pride flag ceremony hosted by the RCMP in honour of a 15-year-old transgender student who died earlier that month. The article reported that the event aimed to promote diversity and inclusion, and included quotes from speakers and attendees, including a First Nations chief councillor and the deceased individual's step-father.

Stephanie Morgan, who identified herself as the grandmother and legal guardian of the deceased individual, filed a complaint with the NNC about naming her grandchild without her consent. She said it was a breach of privacy.

The news organization offered condolences for her tragic loss. It stated that the article reported on a public event that featured various public figures, including the mayor, a First Nations chief councillor, and an RCMP staff sergeant.

The news organization noted that the individual was "openly identified" during the ceremony, and that an image of the individual was featured on pins worn by participants. The news organization noted, "There was no indication whatsoever at the time that identification of [the individual] by the parents was an issue or required consent from anyone other than the parents."

The news organization also noted that it had previously covered a similar event, in remembrance of the same individual, and that coverage of both events was "very much in the public interest, as they sought to bring awareness to the issue of bullying and discrimination against transgender people."

The complainant reiterated that, as the legal guardian, only she had the ability to provide consent to having her grandchild named in any news reporting. She also took issue with the RCMP's characterization of the death as being related to bullying and discrimination, and expressed concerns over the difficulties she experienced in the legal system over the course of many years. Both parties cited privacy law to support their positions.

The news organization emphasized that the deceased minor had already been widely identified in both public events. It stated, “The core of the matter is that the Sentinel reported in good faith on a death that quickly became a matter of public attention and concern, with the permission and participation of the parents.”

The NNC recognizes that the death of a young person is a particularly sensitive subject deserving of appropriate care. It also recognizes the need for sensitivity when covering complex issues that involve Indigenous communities, child custody matters, and gender identity.

In reviewing the complainant’s concerns and article in question, the NNC recognizes that the complainant takes issue with law enforcement’s handling of her grandchild’s death and that she questions the extent to which bullying and discrimination were factors.

It is worth noting that the NNC deals with matters of journalistic standards and does not have the mandate to rule on matters of law or legal interpretation, nor does it have the mandate to deal with allegations related to police findings or treatment in the legal system. Standard journalistic practice calls for sensitivity when reporting on minors as well as on victims and deceased individuals.

Council accepts the news organization’s view that coverage of the event was in the public interest, as the event aimed to promote diversity and inclusion and to raise awareness about bullying and discrimination against transgender people. It also accepts that the individual was identified by public officials and the parents of the individual.

The NNC recognizes that this is a tragic loss for the complainant, and that reading about the death of her grandchild would be distressing under any circumstances.

In stories where bullying and discrimination are associated with mental health concerns, best practice is to provide resources for readers who may be dealing with similar concerns.

That said, the story in this case focused on a public event of remembrance to promote diversity and inclusion, and did not provide details about the particular individual’s experiences or specific circumstances surrounding his death.

Given that the deceased individual was identified during two public events, and coverage of the events provided relevant and important information to the wider community, the NNC found no grounds to support a complaint about a breach of journalistic standards and dismissed the matter.