

2021-79 Yonson v Ottawa Citizen

November 18, 2021

The National NewsMedia Council has reviewed and found corrective action was taken to address a complaint about an inaccurate statement in a September 22 opinion column, “Status quo election shows Canada is not a divided nation,” published by the Ottawa Citizen.

The opinion column argued that the recent election was “pointless” and reflected Canadians’ satisfaction with the “status quo.”

Doug Yonson submitted a complaint to the NNC stating the column’s claim that the September 2021 federal election “produced the lowest turnout ever” was incorrect. The complainant pointed to voter turnout figures on the Elections Canada website to support this fact. The complainant also argued that the inaccuracy of the statement undermined the column’s argument.

The news media organization responded to the complaint by stating that initial reports on election night had suggested the election would result in the lowest voter turnout in Canadian history. Once mail-in ballots were counted, however, the figure proved to be higher and instead reflected “one of the lowest turnouts,” they said.

The news organization swiftly corrected the statement in the column, stating that the election produced “one of the lowest turnouts in history,” and appended an editor’s note to the article to alert readers to the change. It also ran an editor’s note in the opinion section of the October 15 printed edition of the Citizen notifying readers of the updated information.

The complainant pointed out that the editor’s note, both online and in print, included an inaccurate figure that stated the 2021 election had a “67 per cent” turnout.

The complainant questioned the news organization’s reference to earlier reports that suggested the election would result in the lowest voter turnout. He argued that the column should never have made that claim in the first place, as any voter turnout figure would be incomplete at the time the column was published due to the fact that mail-in ballots were not yet counted.

In response to a request for clarification from the NNC, the news organization noted that it had erroneously reported the 2019 voter turnout figure, and not the 2021 voter turnout estimate. It updated the editor's note to reflect the accurate voter turnout rate, which was 61.25 per cent, according to Elections Canada's most recent estimate at the time.

The news organization published a correction in the October 26 printed edition, stating, "A recent notice to readers contained inaccurate information about voter turnout in the Sept 20, 2021 federal election. The most recent figures from Elections Canada suggest at least 62 per cent of eligible voters cast ballots."

The complainant was not satisfied with the language in the published correction, and stated that it should have included the specific date and page on which the error had occurred. The complainant also took issue with the fact that the news organization took corrective action before Council had issued a decision on the complaint, suggesting that the news organization had wrongly "intervened" in the complaints resolution process.

At the start of the complaints process, both parties are provided an overview of the steps involved, which emphasize, "The news media organization may choose to take corrective action at any stage in the process. Likewise, the complainant is welcome to indicate whether the matter has been remedied or sufficiently addressed by the news organization's response. If the remedy is deemed sufficient, the complaint may be considered mediated and resolved due to corrective action."

The objective of the NNC complaints resolution process is to find journalistically sound resolutions to reader complaints. For this reason, the process encourages the news organization to provide thorough explanation and take appropriate action during the complaints process to address the concerns raised by the complainant.

Factual accuracy is a critical component of news and opinion journalism. Opinion columns rely on verifiable information to support statements and arguments presented.

The NNC recognizes that mistakes can occur, and that information may be updated as it becomes available in cases where stories are developing. Standard journalistic practice is to correct any inaccuracy in a prompt and consistent manner, clearly alerting readers to any mistake or change in an article.

In reviewing the column and concerns about accuracy, the NNC agreed with the complainant that the statement published in the column did not meet journalistic standards of accuracy and failed to demonstrate to readers a reliance on verifiable fact. It also found that the initial editor's notes contained a subsequent error.

In this case, the NNC appreciates the news organization's attempt to resolve the error promptly. It also supports the news organization's clarification notice to alert readers to the change, which acknowledged the inaccurate information and offered further context to the statement. However, the NNC found that the news organization's attempt to swiftly correct the error and provide more context to readers resulted in a subsequent factual inaccuracy.

Responsible journalism calls for prioritizing accuracy over speed. The NNC would caution against hastily reporting or correcting information at the detriment to accuracy. That said, the NNC accepts that upon being alerted to the subsequent inaccuracy, the news organization updated the notice to readers to reflect the accurate figure in a prompt manner.

In considering the complaint, Council pointed out that while the September 2021 federal election resulted in one of the lowest voter turnouts in Canadian history, the voter turnout rate was consistent with the other federal elections that have been held since 2000.

That said, the NNC supports the news organization's use of an online notice to readers and printed correction to alert readers of both platforms to the inaccuracy in the column and to provide them with the accurate figure. This follows industry best practice.

While the NNC agreed that the statement as it originally appeared was inaccurate and needed to be corrected, it did not accept the view that the inaccuracy undermined the argument presented in the column.

It is the view of the NNC that the article offers an argument criticizing the decision to hold an election and takes aim at commentary surrounding the election. The column argues that given Canadians re-elected the same party, the election was unnecessary and showed voters were less polarized than some commentators had claimed.

In light of the actions taken by the news organization to address the concern about accuracy, the NNC found that the matter was resolved due to corrective action.