

2022-28 Lopes v Voice of Pelham

April 14, 2022

The National NewsMedia Council dismissed a complaint about bias and the use of inappropriate language in a March 20 letter to the editor published by the Voice of Pelham.

The letter was published in response to an opinion column that argued that the Canadian flag had been “captured” by protesters during the recent “Freedom Convoy” in Ottawa. The letter writer praised the column and expressed strongly-worded criticism against the protesters.

Susan Lopes filed a complaint with the National NewsMedia Council stating concern about bias and derogatory language in the letter. In particular, she took issue with the characterization of protesters as “gullible” and “extremists.” She also expressed concern about inappropriate online comments in reaction to the published letter.

The news organization published an article acknowledging reader concerns about the letter. It emphasized that the content was not a news article but was in fact a letter from a reader, and noted that while a news story is “an objective telling of facts,” a “letter to the editor is a subjective opinion on a topic.” The news organization also underscored the point that readers are welcome to express their views on a wide range of topics.

The NNC does not generally accept complaints about letters to the editor. Generally speaking, letters from readers are not considered journalistic content and are, therefore, not subject to the same set of rigorous journalistic standards and practices as news stories. Further, letters express opinions, and the NNC supports freedom of expression that allows people to express opinions, even if they are strongly stated or unpopular.

That said, the NNC recognizes the importance of clearly distinguishing news stories, opinion columns, and other content, including letters to the editor. To that end, it upholds the practice of clearly labelling content for readers.

In reviewing the letter in question, the NNC observed that it was categorized under “letters and op-eds.” The NNC also noted that the letter included the name of the letter writer. It is the view of the NNC that the letter and author were appropriately identified for readers.

The NNC noted that the letter did not name a particular individual, but instead expressed a strongly-worded opinion on a political group.

Best practice is to include a range of viewpoints that reflect diverse perspectives and voices in the community. That said, it is the prerogative of the news organization to choose the content it views as best serving its readers. In this case, the NNC observed that the March 20 letters selection included a range of submitted opinions on various topics, including a letter calling for more “civility” and another that warned against judging others too harshly.

It is understandable that a reader may strongly disagree – or agree – with an opinion presented, but that in itself does not indicate a breach of journalistic standards. In this case, the NNC found no grounds to support a complaint about inappropriate use of language, and dismissed the matter.

The NNC would emphasize the prerogative of news organizations to exercise editorial judgment over their content, including the selection of which letters, news stories, opinion columns, and other content it publishes.

While the complaint in this case was about a letter, it raised a topic of significant public interest and underscored a frequent source of misunderstanding about journalistic works, namely, the important distinction between news stories, opinion columns, and submitted letters.