

2022-68: Harrison v SooToday

November 8, 2022

The National NewsMedia Council has dismissed a complaint about use of sensitive photographs in an October 3, 2022, article, “Fatality reported in weekend Highway 17 crash,” published by SooToday.

The article reported on a three-vehicle collision that resulted in the death of an 81-year-old man. Aerial photographs showed the damaged vehicles and first responders at the scene of the accident.

Diane Harrison filed a complaint with the NNC stating that her grandfather was the individual killed in the crash. She argued that the images were insensitive and requested that they be removed from the news story. In particular, she was concerned that some of the images showed part of a sheet that was used to cover the victim.

In reviewing the matter, the NNC examined the photographs in question and heard from the news organization.

Responding to the complainant’s concerns, the news organization offered their condolences to the victim’s family, but noted that they considered the photographs to be appropriate given the circumstances of such a serious and tragic situation. They stated that the images were not sensational in nature.

The NNC recognizes that local news plays an important role in providing community members with crucial information and events in their community. This includes reporting on serious incidents, such as fatal vehicle collisions, where injury or even deaths have occurred.

At the same time, the NNC understands that reporting on such accidents, particularly those involving serious injury or death, is a sensitive matter. For this reason, standard practice calls for sensitivity when reporting on and publishing photographs of tragic events.

The NNC has previously held that photographs are powerful tools that can serve to educate readers about the impact of a particular event. In cases of car accidents, they may also provide cautionary accounts or indicate the need for better safety measures.

In reviewing the article and photographs in question, the NNC noted that the photos were taken from a significant distance. It did not observe any details that were graphic in nature, nor any details that could reasonably serve to identify the victim from the angle and distance at which the scene of the accident was photographed. The NNC also observed that the sheet noted by the complainant is not clearly visible to an ordinary reader, nor does it show any aspect of the deceased.

We understand that individuals close to victims will undoubtedly have a difficult time reading about or viewing photos of the events that led to their deaths. However, given the angle and distance at which the photographs were taken in this case, it is the view of the NNC that the images adhere to widely accepted journalistic standards.

For the reasons outlined above, the NNC found no evidence to support a breach of journalistic standards, and dismissed the complaint.