

2022-47 Fantino v Globe and Mail

The National NewsMedia Council found that corrective action was taken to address a complaint about accuracy in a May 9, 2022, obituary, “Gifted magazine writer Gerald Hannon was no stranger to controversy,” published by the Globe and Mail.

The obituary recounted a number of stories penned by the deceased magazine writer, including a 1995 Globe and Mail feature, “The Kiddie Porn Ring That Wasn’t,” about an investigation into a child pornography ring in London, Ontario.

The obituary also noted that the 1995 piece was subject to a complaint filed with the Ontario Press Council (OPC), lodged by then London Police Chief Julian Fantino, who led the investigation. The decision from the OPC found that the piece should have been labelled opinion rather than a piece of news reporting.

Julian Fantino filed a complaint with the NNC stating concern that the obituary incorrectly characterized the nature and results of the police investigation, and that it presented readers with a false narrative of the issue by referencing the conclusions in the 1995 piece. He argued that the statements in question inaccurately described what was a legitimate investigation into the exploitation of young boys.

In particular, the complainant pointed out that the obituary incorrectly stated that 45 men were charged but never convicted as a result of the investigation. He cited data to show the scope of the investigation as well as the fact that it resulted in a number of convictions.

The news organization initially responded by noting that the investigation was not the focus of the piece, which was an obituary for the deceased magazine writer. It also noted that the piece contained a number of historical references to the writer’s published works, as is typical of obits.

The news organization suggested that the complainant write a letter to the editor as a solution to the complainant’s concerns. The complainant declined a letter to the editor as an appropriate remedy.

Upon review of the complaint, the NNC observed that the original piece referenced in the story had in fact reported that several individuals had already been convicted as a result of the investigation at the time and that a number of others had pleaded guilty. When the news organization was alerted to this fact by the NNC, it amended the statement in the article and appended the piece with an editor’s note alerting readers of the change.

The corrected statement reads, “In a Globe and Mail article in 1995, The Kiddie Porn Ring That Wasn’t, Mr. Hannon blew the lid off the story of a non-existent child sex ring in London, Ont., during which 45 men

were charged. Mr. Hannon reported eighteen had since pleaded guilty and several had received jail terms.”

The editor’s note states, “An earlier version of this article incorrectly said an article in 1995 by Gerald Hannon called ‘The Kiddie Porn Ring That Wasn’t’ noted there were 45 men charged but not convicted. In fact, the article reported that eighteen had since pleaded guilty and several had received jail terms.”

The complainant remained unsatisfied with the correction, arguing that it did not present readers with a full picture of the police investigation into the exploitation of children nor did it address the mischaracterization of the issue in the original reporting.

In assessing the matter, the NNC considered the journalistic standard of accuracy as well as the role of obituary writing, which, broadly speaking, notifies readers of an individual’s passing and often highlights their achievements, notable acts, or issues in which they were involved.

In this case, the NNC agreed with the news organization that the focus of the piece was not about the police investigation that began in the 1990s, but was instead an obituary that highlighted a number of stories by—and about—the magazine writer. That included his 1995 article about the police investigation, which the writer concluded was less about child pornography and more about investigating sex work by young gay men.

That said, the NNC would point out that the scope of the complaint was limited to the statements in the 2022 piece, as the NNC mandate does not extend to articles published more than 25 years ago.

The NNC agreed with the complainant that a letter to the editor was not sufficient remedy to address the accuracy issue in the obituary. In this case, a correction was warranted to accurately reflect the reporting in the original piece. For this reason, the NNC found that the news organization’s step to correct the statements in the obituary and alert readers to the change was an appropriate remedy to address the error.

While the NNC recognizes that the complainant takes issue with the 1995 article’s characterization of the police investigation, and that he would like to see the perspectives of the individuals involved in the investigation reflected in more recent reporting on the matter, such issues fall outside the scope of general obituary writing.

For the reasons outlined above, the NNC considers the matter resolved due to corrective action.