

**2023-14 Latif v Waterloo Region Record**

*April 4, 2023*

The National NewsMedia Council has considered and found that corrective action has been taken to address a complaint alleging that statements in a February 1, 2023, article, “A Kitchener school has cancelled Valentine’s Day. Is it time for an ‘evolution’ of the day of love?” published by the Waterloo Region Record, perpetuate harmful stereotypes about Muslims and immigrants.

The article reported that a Kitchener, Ontario, elementary school would not be celebrating Valentine’s Day this year. The article provided context on the history of Valentine’s Day as well as current perspectives on the holiday, noting that some foreign governments have banned celebrations.

In its reporting, the article included comments from several sources with different views on the school’s decision, including quotes from a philosophy professor whose research area focuses on the relationship between love and personal identity. He noted some of the drawbacks and pressures of celebrating the holiday for families and students, and suggested that a more positive and inclusive approach to the day might be possible in the future.

Anam Latif submitted a complaint to the NNC stating concern that statements in the article were speculative in nature and perpetuated negative stereotypes about Muslims and other immigrants by unfairly linking the school’s decision with “changing demographics” and the fact that the holiday is banned in some countries. In particular, the complainant took issue with the statements that noted specific Muslim majority countries have banned celebration of the day.

The complainant said the statements were offensive and Islamophobic, and argued that such “editorializing” perpetuated stereotypes of new immigrants. She explained, “The framing of Valentine’s Day as a day of ‘innocent romance’ is pitted against the ‘Islamic culture’ of the countries mentioned.”

The complainant also raised concerns about the letters to the editor that were published in response to the piece, stating that they expressed harmful views. She said that simply because a country bans a holiday, that does not mean that an entire group of people share that opinion.

In her submission, the complainant noted that she was formerly employed by the news organization as a journalist.

The news organization responded to the complaint by stating that it engaged in discussions, both inside and outside of the newsroom, about context and sensitivity in light of the concerns raised.

The news organization stated that the story about the school's decision to cancel the holiday was accurate and that the piece provided contextual information. Such context included perspective from a researcher who studies issues relevant to Valentine's Day and who commented that, given increased diversity in schools, and diversity of opinion on romantic love, it may be appropriate to examine how the holiday is celebrated.

It was the view of the news organization that, "The context adds to an interesting and contemporary discussion, particularly on an issue from a school board that has made a point of saying to the community that change is important and part of a community's evolution."

The news organization also pointed out that it regularly reports stories about how the demographics of the community are changing, based in part on Statistics Canada data.

That said, the news organization stated that out of sensitivity to the concern, it removed the paragraph that mentioned a specific religion and countries. The updated article noted the date of the change and appended a note to the article stating that the story had been modified from its original version.

The complainant remained concerned with the wording of the correction, and indicated that she wished to see a more detailed note to readers about the specific content that was removed for the sake of transparency and education. She also expressed concern with the amount of time it took to update the article.

In accordance with the NNC complaints process, NNC staff worked with parties to try to resolve the matter through mediation. In working to resolve the outstanding concerns raised by the complainant, the news organization revised the editor's note on March 1 to read: "This story has been modified from its original version to remove a paragraph noting the fact certain countries

have banned celebrations of the holiday. The original statement was removed to avoid singling out any group."

In assessing the complaint, the NNC considered standards of accuracy, context, and appropriate journalistic care when reporting on issues of race and religion. Standard practice dictates that references to race, ethnicity, or religion are only included when pertinent to the story and that journalists should take care not to perpetuate stereotypes that could be harmful to a particular community. At the same time, the NNC acknowledges the vital role journalism plays in fostering greater understanding of diversity in communities.

The NNC does not generally advocate for the removal of content. In cases where clarification is warranted, it is often preferable to provide readers with more information and context, rather than less. That said, when mistakes are made, standard practice is to correct the error swiftly and to alert readers to the change.

The NNC agrees with the complainant that corrections should be transparent and informative. In this case, the NNC recognizes the news organization's intent to resolve the matter without repeating the statement in question.

In assessing the complaint, the NNC noted that the statement was removed, and an editor's note explaining the nature of the removed content and reasons for its removal was appended to the article. It is the view of the NNC that the content of the updated correction aligns with standard practice.

While the NNC holds that errors should be corrected as soon as possible, it also recognizes that the newsroom undertook a series of discussions on the issue to address the specific concerns in this case as well as how to prevent similar issues in the future.

Regarding the complainant's concerns about the published letters, the NNC has previously stated that letters to the editor are not generally considered journalistic content. While best practice is to publish a range of perspectives, news organizations have the prerogative to publish submitted content, including letters, that they view as best serving their readers.

For these reasons, Council found the complaint resolved due to corrective action.