

2023-54 Shair v Kingston Whig Standard

November 2, 2023

The National NewsMedia Council has considered and upheld a complaint about the unpublishing of an article by the Kingston Whig Standard.

The May 12, 2023, news brief, “Vigil marks 75th anniversary of Palestinian displacement,” provided details on an upcoming event organized by a Palestinian support group in Kingston, Ontario. The original headline contained the word “expulsion” instead of “displacement.”

The brief was the subject of multiple complaints submitted to the news organization by different advocacy organizations representing pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian perspectives. The news organization originally updated the brief but, later, removed it from its website.

Tayla Shair, a member of the pro-Palestinian advocacy organization Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East, filed a complaint with the NNC stating concern with changes and subsequent removal of the article.

The complainant took issue with the initial update to the piece which, she alleged, removed necessary context about the meaning of the word “Nakba,” translated as “catastrophe” in reference to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in 1948, as well as statements about the current conditions of Palestinian refugees. She also objected to the fact that the headline was updated to replace the word “expulsion” with “displacement” prior to the article’s removal.

The news organization responded to the complaint by stating that it updated the headline and article to reflect more neutral language following a complaint from a pro-Israel advocacy organization.

The news organization stated that the reasons for these changes had been communicated to the complainant during a phone call. It explained that the purpose of the news brief was to publicize a local event, and given that the event had already passed, and recognizing that no side would be satisfied with further changes, the brief was removed from the website.

The news organization stated regret that it had not included a more general headline at first instance. At the same time, it acknowledged that there are strong and differing opinions about the larger issues in the Middle East.

The complainant remained unsatisfied with the response from the news organization and argued that the removal of the article in this case was “erasing Palestinian and pro-Palestinian perspectives,” and that the news organization’s actions failed to “uphold a standard of transparency and accountability.”

The news organization responded by reiterating its position and the challenges associated with finding neutral ground on this particular subject. The news organization emphasized that its practice is to inform readers about events in the community by way of such news briefs and to update pieces, where appropriate, based on specific concerns raised by readers.

At the same time, it explained, “this situation gives us pause to be more thoughtful and diligent in presenting information, understanding that in some circumstances there are various views to be taken into consideration.”

The complainant responded by reiterating her position and argued that removing the article was not neutral nor did it adhere to appropriate journalistic standards regarding the unpublishing of content.

In reviewing the matter, the NNC considered standards surrounding unpublishing and the coverage of sensitive issues, including language use and context.

Coverage of divisive issues will often prompt strong reader reaction. Although that in itself does not indicate a breach of journalistic standards, the NNC would emphasize that care should be given to covering such sensitive or contentious topics, including appropriate attention to language use and context.

That said, it is worth noting that journalists have discretion over specific word choice, and that news organizations have the prerogative to update articles and headlines with appropriate language when warranted.

Further, while including relevant context is standard journalistic practice, the NNC recognizes that the purpose of the news brief in this case was to highlight an event taking place in the community. The inclusion of significant historical information is not generally warranted for such

pieces. However, as the article was removed in this case, Council declined to assess the specific concerns over language and context in the headline and article.

The NNC has consistently supported news organizations' editorial discretion to decide which stories to cover and the amount of coverage presented. The NNC likewise recognizes that the journalistic weight of an event listing or news brief is minimal compared to a reported news story with multiple sources. That said, journalistic standards apply to all articles, regardless of word count.

Council has previously noted that unpublishing editorial content is reserved for rare cases based on significantly compelling reasons, such as egregious error. In general, standard journalistic practice is to update stories to ensure accuracy and appropriate coverage of sensitive topics, rather than remove articles.

In cases where changes are made to a published article, best practice is to alert readers to the update and communicate the reasons for the change where possible. For example, it may be appropriate when covering sensitive or divisive issues to emphasize that specific views are held, or that contested language is used, by certain organizations or individuals, and to attribute the statements accordingly.

Similarly, removing content on the basis of strong objections from readers or so-called 'pressure campaigns' from advocacy organizations is not in accordance with journalistic standards.

While the NNC is mindful of the pressures on community news organizations and supports the newsroom's objective to find a solution to concerns raised about accuracy and context in divisive matters such as these, the steps taken to address such concerns must be journalistically sound.

For the reasons outlined above, Council upheld the complaint about unpublishing the article.

The NNC recognizes that the complainant would like to see the article restored online in its original format. However, Council emphasized that the role of the NNC is to assess whether journalistic standards have been followed in particular cases rather than to compel news organizations to publish specific content, as that would be contrary to the values of freedom of the press and the editorial prerogative of news organizations that the NNC supports.

The NNC is likewise supportive of the news organization's commitment to ensure more careful consideration to all sides of the issue when reporting on similar matters in the future.