

2024-09: Wood v National Post

March 28, 2024

The NNC found that corrective action was taken by the news organization to address a concern about accuracy in a January 26, 2024, opinion article, “B.C. court’s shaky logic puts unrestricted drug use above rights of general public,” published by the National Post.

The opinion column criticized a provisional ruling by the B.C. Supreme Court, which upheld a temporary ban on enforcing a law that prohibits illicit substance use in certain public spaces. The column examined the legal arguments in the ruling and argued that the court’s decision suggests, “addicts may have the right to openly use drugs in all public spaces, including playgrounds and splash pads.”

Byron Wood filed a complaint with the NNC stating, “Under Bill 34 it is illegal to possess or consume drugs in and around playgrounds and splash pads. After the Supreme Court of B.C. provisional ruling, it is still illegal to possess or consume drugs in and around playgrounds and splash pads.”

The news organization responded to the complaint by noting that while it agreed that under federal law, drug use in such spaces remains prohibited, it stated that the column correctly reported that the judge ruled individuals may have a human right to use illegal substances in those spaces. The news organization explained that the use of the word “may” in the statement is not definitive but instead signals to readers that the column is making an argument that the ruling suggests individuals could potentially have this right.

The news organization offered to consider a letter to the editor as a way to provide a different perspective on the ruling and noted it would be open to adding additional context to the column to clarify the facts for readers.

The complainant suggested language for a clarification and requested that the news organization publish an op-ed from a specific organization in response to the column.

The NNC clarified that editors and journalists have latitude over specific word choice in a story, where updates or editor’s notes appear, and the opinion pieces they decide to publish, including letters and op-ed submissions. While individuals may provide valuable information and perspectives during the newsgathering process, it is the editorial prerogative of the newsroom to decide on specific wording and placement of content, including updates and published responses to articles.

To address the concerns raised, the news organization updated the article with additional information clarifying the impact of the ruling and the columnist’s interpretation. It also appended the column with an editor’s note stating, “This column has been updated to clarify that under federal law, drug use in playgrounds, splash pads and skateparks remains illegal.”

The NNC supports the wide latitude afforded to opinion columnists to express their views and present readers with a range of perspectives. Columnists may use strong language and present unpopular arguments with which readers may disagree, but that is not a breach of standards. At the same time, opinion pieces must be factually accurate.

Generally speaking, best practice calls for particular care when covering complex or sensitive subjects. Clarifications, or updates, to articles often provide readers with relevant context not included upon initial publication and, in this way, address possible misunderstandings. In this case, the NNC supports the news organization's decision to include additional context in the column as a way to clarify the facts and argument for readers.

For the reasons outlined above, the NNC supports the steps taken by the news organization to address the concern raised about accuracy, and considered the matter resolved.