

2024-29: Luciuk v Ottawa Citizen

June 19, 2024 - *for immediate release*

The National NewsMedia Council (NNC) found that corrective action was taken to address a complaint about attribution in an article published by the Ottawa Citizen.

Lubomyr Luciuk filed a complaint about an April 25, 2024, news story that reported the American Library Association had pulled an award for a book co-edited by the complainant over concerns that the book's content "whitewashes Nazi collaborators in Ukraine during the Second World War."

The complainant took issue with the article's use of sources and characterization of the book, and argued that the article demonstrates bias against the complainant and his scholarly work.

The complainant took issue with the fact that the article does not include scholarly sources that would indicate an in-depth investigation of the material and instead relies on comments by third parties. The complainant pointed to social media posts by the journalist and the article's use of "anonymous social media comments" to support his allegations. The complainant also noted that his letter to the editor outlining his concerns with the piece was not published.

In responding to the complaint, the news organization stated that the complainant was offered the chance to provide on-the-record comments, for inclusion in the story, multiple times before the story was published. The news organization also stated the materials provided by the complainant did not point to any specific factual errors in the piece.

The news organization noted that while the complainant did not respond directly to the journalist's request for comment, he did submit comments to the Citizen's editors, noting that the library association's decision was "perplexing." These comments were included in the article.

To address the complainant's concern about the use of anonymous social media posts, the news organization updated the story with hyperlinks to the specific posts. The news organization noted that the article's references to the posts were accurate and did not mention the complainant.

In reviewing the matter, the NNC noted that individual journalists' social media posts fall outside the mandate of the NNC, which is to deal with issues of journalistic standards in published articles. For this reason, the scope of the complaint was limited to the concerns about the published statements in the article.

The NNC considered standards surrounding opportunity to respond, sourcing, and attribution. Generally speaking, journalists are allowed to choose the scope and focus of a story and to select the sources they find credible and relevant to the article.

In this case, the NNC found that the requests for comment aligned with best practice to ensure appropriate opportunity for response. That said, as a matter of general information, the NNC would emphasize that best practice is to communicate clearly to sources and subjects about information on the record and what comments are to be attributed in any given story.

In reviewing the article in question, the NNC noted that it includes comments from multiple sources, including the book's publisher, who stated that the book was "rigorously examined before being released."

It is the view of the NNC that the social media posts, in this case, may be understood as providing relevant context about the larger issues reported in the piece as well as the reaction to the library association's decision.

The article attributes the posts to specific individuals, including social media posts re-shared by the co-author of the book. That said, given that the original posts were not directly attributed, the NNC supports the inclusion of hyperlinks to all of the social media posts in question to increase transparency and provide readers with more context on the content in question.

The NNC would note that while letters to the editor may serve a variety of purposes, such as offering alternative perspectives and additional nuance to issues covered, it is the prerogative of news organizations to accept or reject letters as they see fit.

For the reasons outlined above, the NNC considered the concern about appropriate attribution resolved due to corrective action and found no other grounds to support a complaint about a breach of journalistic standards in this case.