

2016-17: Ryan Jansen vs Toronto Star

The National NewsMedia Council finds that while the statement that “Black Lives Matter – just not so much to cops” may be offensive to some, it is within the wide latitude given to columnists.

The Council dismissed a complaint from Ryan Jansen, who objected to the statement by columnist Rosie DiManno in her column “Police pushback doesn’t move newly political Beyonce” on February 21, 2016.

The column offered comment on controversy involving the Miami police union and a concert boycott. DiManno described the political gestures of the concert performer, the boycott and similar politically-motivated actions, and quoted the police union president.

The complainant alleged that the columnist provided no data, statistics or studies to support her claim. He found the column offensive and divisive, and said that publishing it is a “deplorable attempt to further damage” relationships between minority communities and police.

The Toronto Star noted that the columnist cited facts in relation to her opinion, including a year-long study by The Guardian into police use of deadly force in the U.S., as well as information from the Florida State Attorney’s Office. The paper also explained the wide latitude given to columnists to express opinion, and noted that latitude is supported by press councils and courts.

The complainant remained unsatisfied, arguing that the columnist “cherry-picked” facts to support her view and did not describe circumstances of the police shootings. He alleged the columnist portrayed all officers on the actions of a few, and questioned whether that is congruent with the paper’s principles.

Council found the columnist cited shooting statistics, demographic information, and Bureau of Labour trends. The column looked at shooting death numbers but did not describe the circumstances of the shootings. Instead, the focus was on police response to political messages from entertainers.

The paper stated the columnist was expressing views on a matter “of significant public interest, informed by her extensive experience researching and writing”.

The paper denied intent to damage relationships, and noted the columnist’s point that police should “apologize for their “trigger happy” membership”, which the paper said is an opinion on a matter “of high public interest to our own community and beyond.”

In dismissing the complaint, the Council noted the columnist cited two sources of data to support her opinion, was specific about the particular police behaviour she criticized, and offered comment from police officials to balance her viewpoint.