

2016-29: Doug Dixon vs Toronto Star

*For immediate release*

The National NewsMedia Council has dismissed, with reservation, a complaint from Doug Dixon, who objected to and requested an explanation of the Toronto Star's crowd estimate in the March 31, 2016 article "Hundreds celebrate legacy of ex-mayor", describing the Rob Ford memorial service at the Toronto Congress Centre.

The journalist responded to the complainant's first inquiry, saying his report of "several hundred" people was based on his observation during attendance over a two and a half hour period. He said he spoke with other reporters, whose estimates ranged from 400 to 1,000.

The complainant quoted a crowd estimate from police, who indicated a total attendance of eight to ten thousand, understood to be over the entire three hours, and said another media organization reported the crowd at over 3,000 people. The paper said its estimate was for the time that Doug Ford spoke.

In responding to the complaint, the public editor referred to an August, 2009, column, where she said "Numbers matter. Reporting the size of crowds at public events provides readers with essential context for understanding the scope of those events and their impact within the community", though she noted "the reported number is always open for debate."

The paper vouched for the journalist's credibility and record, said he has been fair and accurate in his coverage of the Ford years, and "has no reason not to report accurately and fairly what he observed – keeping in mind that no crowd count is an exact science".

UC Berkeley journalism professor Herbert Jacobs developed a formula in the 1960s for estimating the numbers in dense, moderate and light crowds. The public editor referenced Doig's Formula, which involves learning the area of the event and dividing that by an estimation of the crowd's density. Another method involves dividing the area occupied by a crowd into sections, determining an average number of people in each section, and multiplying by the number of sections occupied.

The paper did not state whether any of these methods was used in arriving at the reported estimate.

In dismissing the complaint with reservations, the NewsMedia Council does not find any basis to state there is a factual error in the crowd estimate, but it draws attention to the abundance of advice about caution in making estimates. The Council underlines that caution in cases of reporting on events with strong potential for controversy, such as those related to the late Toronto mayor.

Council further recognizes that crowd estimates are important. In controversial or political contexts, they are significant for both supporters and opponents. Even without controversy, perceptions created by stating a crowd size can influence readers. Council notes that crowd size is an 'age-old' problem in reporting, and media in general should be aware of the need for accuracy in this matter as in any other.

In this case, the paper's estimate of "several hundred" is open to wide interpretation. The paper admits, in referencing a 2009 column, that uncertainty over estimates "all adds up to... reason for skepticism from both reporters and readers of any definitive crowd count."

There are accepted methods, noted above, for crowd estimates where the size of the space is known, but even then the crowd may ebb or grow over the duration of an event.

Better journalistic practice is to avoid reporting numbers and numerical estimates unless they can be verified.