

2018-43: Morris vs Toronto Sun

*August 21, 2018 – for immediate release*

The National NewsMedia Council has dismissed a complaint about breach of standards in reporting the address of an alleged shooter.

The complainant, Sheila Morris, stated a July 24 2018 Toronto Sun article, “Was Danforth attack terror, or terrorism?”, was irresponsible in publishing the address of a man alleged to have shot into crowds on Danforth Street in Toronto, killing a young woman and a girl.

The complainant characterized the reporting as “careless”. She said publishing the exact address was dangerous, and that the information had no relevance to the story, which was inherently inflammatory.

The Toronto Sun rejected the complainant’s categorization of the reporting, saying that media regularly report the addresses of suspects. It noted that, in this case, there was a large media presence at the apartment building and great public interest in police activity at the building.

The news organization pointed to a similar and recent case of public interest and address reporting when police sealed off the Toronto apartment building where a suspected serial killer lived.

Reviewing the article in question, the NNC noted that writer is a columnist and has wide latitude to express opinion and a provocative point of view. The complainant described the article as “inherently inflammatory”, but a careful reading found that while the language and reporting of the writer tended to focus on the search for a terrorism link, it was within the latitude of opinion writing.

The allegation that the address had no relevance to the story must be considered in balance with the view that an address is relevant in terms of the ability of journalists to gather facts in the public interest, and to provide reports that inform those living in the area, who may want or need to take safety precautions.

A survey of other media showed that in this case, other news organizations varied from reporting no address to identifying the street alone, the street and building type, or the street and floor number.

The same variations were employed in the similarly high profile case noted by the newspaper, with combinations ranging from the unit number and size to street or floor number, to street name only.

In an open and democratic society, journalists need information, including names and addresses, in order to investigate and interview family and neighbours as part of their job to uncover facts and tell newsworthy stories.

Nevertheless, the NNC recognizes that newsrooms must grapple with the impact of publishing sensitive information on polarizing issues. While a column or news report may not in itself be inflammatory, the newsroom should consider the tenor of the times, the impact of social media, and the potential for retributive action by individuals or groups. Case by case consideration will determine whether to publish all or withhold some information such as addresses.

While the NNC sees no breach of journalistic practice and dismisses this complaint, it supports the use of particular editorial discretion in view of the public interest, and of family or neighbours who may be made vulnerable due to the actions of others through no fault of their own.