

**2017-87: Michael Olsen vs Ottawa Citizen**

*February 14, 2018 – for immediate release*

The National NewsMedia Council has dismissed with reservation a complaint about errors in fact in an Ottawa Citizen article, “An Inconvenient Ottawa? What will climate change actually mean for the nation’s capital?”.

The complainant, Michael Olsen, stated the November 20 2017 article contains errors in fact and omitted important context.

Noting the statement that “More Canadians will die in a hotter climate”, the complainant said the overall number of deaths will decrease, as more hot weather deaths will be offset by fewer cold weather deaths. He said the article did not mention a May 2015 study in the medical journal *The Lancet* that indicated deaths from cold outnumber deaths from heat. He alleged the journalist cited no data to support the statement that more will die in a hotter climate, and criticized the inclusion of four national and international stories about heat wave deaths while ignoring stories about cold-related deaths.

The complainant said the article’s statements on future snowfall predictions did not define the word “major” in connection with a 50 cm snowfall in Columbus, Ohio. He referenced an earlier Ottawa Citizen article, co-written by the same journalist that used the term “major” to describe a snowfall of 16 cm in Ottawa on December 29, 2015.

The complainant also noted the article’s statement, in respect to the city of Columbus, that “a typical July day reaches 30C. No one in Canada today has summers like that.” He said the statement was inaccurate and cited temperatures in the Okanagan Valley BC that are regularly in that range.

The Ottawa Citizen defended the article as a good-faith effort to illuminate a large and important issue for readers. It said the reporting was “not meant to imply that an excessively cooling climate would not be a risk, but rather to explain the risk of the rising temperatures”, and named the sources used for the article.

Responding to the complaint about numbers of cold weather deaths compared to hot weather deaths, the paper said stating the detrimental effects of a warming climate did not suggest a dramatically cooling climate would not also be a source of danger.

The paper challenged the complainant’s selection of Osoyoos area as an example of Canadian July weather, and stated that as an acknowledged micro-climate, that exception did not substantially undermine the point made by the article.

Regarding the complaint about snowfall amounts, the paper admitted the definition of a large snowfall is subjective, but said the article’s point about Columbus, Ohio, was a broad one: Ottawa’s future temperature will be similar to that of Columbus, and less snowy than Ottawa today. It said the specific points about Osoyoos’ temperature and Columbus snow falls may merit a clarification but did not take away from the substance of the article as a whole, nor the larger points it makes.

The Council found the article is an explanatory piece that addresses an important topic. It was prefaced with the statement that it was “admittedly, just one vision of the future and of climate change”, and included descriptions of forestry, agriculture, water quality, and bird life, all aimed for the general reader.

The complaint about total deaths due to weather was, in Council’s view, based on a close scientific reading of the article as opposed to a broad reading from a general interest point of view. The complaint was dismissed because, for a general reader, the discussion of heat-related deaths was germane to the focus of the story. The sentence in question was preceded by the statement “Most obviously, extra heat is bad for our health”, which indicated that the statement “More Canadians will die in a hotter climate” related to increasing heat, and not to a comparison between heat- and cold-related deaths, which were not addressed by the article.

The complaint about snowfall predictions was dismissed on the basis that a comparison was intended to convey that Ottawa’s climate will become more like that of Columbus, where snowfall is less in volume. It is reasonable to expect, when making comparisons, a general understanding that exceptional climate and weather events do happen. However, Council’s reservation in this case was that the relative term ‘major’ should be defined.

Similarly, the discussion about hotter temperatures can be read to refer to Canada in general. As noted, Okanagan area is an exception, and as such does not undermine the general principle. The complaint was dismissed with the reservation because the exception should have been noted, or the statement should have been less absolute.

Council found an offer to the complainant by the newspaper to write a rebuttal, or a letter to the editor in response may have satisfied the complainant and precluded the Council complaint – and would be a good practice for all members.

Regarding the complaint about whether and when the Citizen saw *The Lancet* study, the NNC found in other cases involving research for explanatory articles that journalists have the prerogative to use the sources of their choice.