

2018-39: Wright vs Vancouver Sun

August 23, 2018 – *for immediate release*

The National NewsMedia Council has mediated and dismissed a complaint about a headline in an article published by the Vancouver Sun and also carried in the National Post.

Complainant Raymond Wright stated that the headline and article from the May 15 2018 article, “B.C. Mormons fret after polygamy conviction” was misleading and inaccurate. He said that the headline failed to specify that the Mormons in question are a splinter group.

The complainant argued readers cannot be expected to be familiar with previous reporting. He said it is important that news organizations inform readers that there is a mainstream church which does not incorporate the word ‘fundamentalist’ in its name, and does not practice polygamy.

The Vancouver Sun responded to the complaint by agreeing that definitions are important. It noted that the first paragraph of the column defined and limited the group being reporting on to those within the fundamentalist Mormon community. It pointed out that the article provided further definition by means of a direct reference to the community and to the church name “Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.”

The news organization also said the writer has covered the polygamy case in Bountiful, B.C., for many years, and that readers are familiar with the difference between the polygamist sect and mainstream Mormons.

The news media’s response stated that the words in the headline, “B.C. Mormons”, are sufficient on their own—and more than sufficient when combined with the name of one of the religious bodies as stated within the article—to distinguish the splinter group from the mainstream church.

The NNC agrees with the news organization’s position. In this case, specifying “B.C.” in connection with “Mormons” would easily be recognized by a reasonable reader to mean a group distinct from the same church elsewhere.

The NNC also noted that the article itself contained distinctions by stating “the fundamentalist Mormon community,” referring to “the religious community of Bountiful in southeastern B.C.,” and describing “Bountiful and the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.”

Given that the sect issue in Bountiful has been investigated and reported on for 20 years, we support the news organization’s view that readers are familiar with the issue and understand it to involve a distinct group. The use of descriptions serve to flag even a reader unfamiliar with the long history that this article is about a specific—not wider—group.

In light of the above, we do not support the complainant’s argument that the news organization breached a standard of accuracy by failing to distinguish between the splinter group and mainstream church, nor do we find evidence that failure led to negative results for members of the mainstream

church. We find no evidence of a breach of journalism standards of accuracy, and for this reason dismiss the complaint.

The NNC noted that the complainant cited and sought response from the National Post in making his complaint. While news organizations are responsible for content they publish, the National NewsMedia Council's policy on wire services and shared content is that complaints about content are handled by the originating news organization. We find no reason to deviate from that policy in this case.