



2018-59: Hunter vs Toronto Sun

December 11, 2018 – *for immediate release*

The National NewsMedia Council has reviewed a complaint in relation to an October 3 column in the Toronto Sun, and upholds the portion of the complaint about accuracy while dismissing with reservation the portion of the complaint about racism and inciting violence.

The NNC received seven similar complaints about the column, and selected the complaint from Shannon Hunter as representative of all seven.

The column, titled "'Irregular' migrants continue to flock into Toronto," originally referenced a TripAdvisor post claiming that "'goats were being slaughtered' in the public bathrooms." The complainant objected to the reference to this claim on the basis that no other sources aside from a TripAdvisor post corroborated it. The complainant argued that this uncorroborated statement resulted in arson at the hotel, and that the column was hateful and racist.

The news organization responded by stating that although the original column did not present the claim posted on TripAdvisor as fact, the columnist took additional steps to verify the claim. However, it noted the columnist "did not receive immediate replies" and that the hotel "refused comment." The news organization acknowledged that inability to corroborate the claim "should have been in her original column," but said it was instead included in follow up pieces.

The reference to the TripAdvisor post was later removed from the original article, and an undated correction to the online column stated that the original column "referenced a trip advisor post that wrongly claimed" goats were slaughtered.

The news organization also pointed to that subsequent column by the same columnist titled, "Refugee outrage spent on wrong target," published on October 28, which alerted readers to the error in the original column.

In that later article, the columnist stated she was able to find one person who "confirmed" that the hotel was busy with "throng" of people milling around. She admitted the post about goat slaughtering was false, and interviewed a social services representative who stated there have been "serious misrepresentation of the refugee claimants and the hotel" and "anyone walking into the hotel will know it does not resemble a refugee camp."

While the follow up article included effort to substantiate information posted on a crowd-sourced opinion site and sought out other and potentially different viewpoints, the NNC noted these basic journalistic standards of seeking accuracy were noticeably lacking in the article that was the subject of complaint.

The NNC supports the wide latitude afforded to opinion writers to express unpopular views, but is of the view that columnists must adhere to the journalistic standards of the news media organization, including commitment to accuracy. In this case, the columnist referred to TripAdvisor, a crowdsourced

platform for online reviews, as “reputable,” thus giving credibility to it as a source even as the columnist was unable to confirm or deny any of the information reported from that source. Neither did the writer describe any attempt to visit the hotel, verify the claim, or offer any caution about the failed efforts to do so. The NewsMedia Council views this as a serious breach of journalistic standards for accuracy in reporting. The news organization’s response, acknowledging the error in not citing the unsuccessful effort to find verification, is noted but is not in our view adequate remedy for the breach of journalistic standards.

Crowdsourcing information online can be used to inform reporting. However, journalistic rigor requires appropriate steps to verify the sources and accuracy of such information. Citing an unsubstantiated post from a crowdsourced platform as evidence is akin to citing a rumour. Without supporting facts around what was a potentially inflammatory report, this represents a failure of basic, widely accepted journalistic standards. It falls far short of best practice, which would have been to verify the claim before using it as evidence to support an opinion. If verification was not possible, the story was not ready to go to publication.

News organizations are expected to swiftly and consistently correct inaccuracies in a transparent manner. In this case, the NNC acknowledges the false information was removed from the original column and readers were alerted to the fact in a subsequent article. However, the lengthy delay in updating the error in fact is concerning, particularly given polarization around the refugees issue. Best practice is to provide transparency by indicating the date of the correction.

Moreover, had the news organization taken appropriate steps to fact-check claims from an online platform prior to publication, no correction would have been required.

In light of these considerations, the NewsMedia Council upholds the complaint about accuracy.

In response to the complainant’s allegations of racism and inciting violence, the news organization stated that the column “clearly did not suggest anyone commit violence against refugees.” Council accepts the news organization’s position on that point. The news organization also argued that the column focused on the inappropriate conditions of the refugees and the columnist did not take issue with refugees on the whole but with “the failure of government to adequately fund or care for them.”

That argument was substantially undermined by the fact that references to immigrants or refugees were modified by “illegal,” without evidence as to the accuracy of that description. The Council found the inaccurate use of the word “illegal” may not have been racism, but was inflammatory in the context of a racially charged topic. In this case, Council found ‘illegal’ is not simply an innocuous word when paired with ‘immigrant’, and for this reason dismissed this portion of the complaint with reservation.

While the NNC supports the prerogative of a columnist to use strong language and take a provocative point of view, it maintains that a columnist must be factually accurate. The NewsMedia Council remains concerned about the journalistic ethics of using unsubstantiated and pejorative terms to describe people who are vulnerable targets in a highly polarized political and social environment.