



2020-20: Jaswal vs Prince George Citizen

*March 12, 2020*

The National NewsMedia Council has dismissed a complaint about a letter to the editor published in the February 27, 2020 edition of the Prince George Citizen.

Complainant Olivia Jaswal said the letter, “Racist Confession”, was a blatant, racist rant that should not have been given a platform. She said publishing the letter was especially concerning given cases of violence against Indigenous people.

The Prince George Citizen responded by saying the paper’s goal is to show the community as it is. It made clear that it does not condone the views of letter writers, but offers the platform to all viewpoints as its professional responsibility to allow people to speak out, within the limits of libel and hate speech laws.

The NNC recognizes that the letters to the editor section is a traditional part of any newspaper. It supports the widely-held view of letters to the editor as a venue for public comment on current events and community issues, to applaud or criticize public institutions, or serve as a gauge of public opinion.

Letters themselves are not held to journalistic standards, as they are not produced by journalists and are generally not edited as a news or opinion article would be edited. Nonetheless, the NNC’s view is that a news media organization is responsible for the content it publishes.

While the complainant described the letter in question as a “rant”, the NNC did not find evidence to support that view. The writer described making effort to understand a different point of view, was clear that he does not condone the “terrible things” related to residential schools, and stated that he came to his point of view “sadly and without pride”. There was no evidence that the letter writer or language used incited hatred or advocated any action.

In reviewing the complaint, the NNC found the Prince George Citizen letters to the editor section contained two letters that took the writer to task for his argument and made the case for an opposite point of view. Also published were letters for and against renaming a school, and commenting on regional and municipal ventures.

The NNC’s view is that the scope of letters to the editor and varied points of view indicates that the Prince George Citizen was fulfilling its role as a community newspaper by giving space to citizens to make an argument or state a position, and at the same time giving space to those with a differing view to rebut, argue or state an alternate position. While the NNC does not condone the content of the letter to the editor, it finds that letter writers, like opinion writers, have wide latitude to express views that may be hurtful or offensive.

For the above reasons, the NNC dismissed the complaint.

The NNC is mindful of ongoing controversy over local and national land and protest issues, and about the impact of inflammatory statements in a time of heightened emotion and polarized opinion. At the same time, it upholds the media's role as a platform for frank, democratic discussion.