

Unpleasant words can't be hidden

Reporting landlord's comments about his tenants doesn't fan racial stereotypes, it exposes them.

One of the functions of the media is to reflect the community covered, and to report the thoughts, words and deeds of the various facets that make up that community. Sometimes the stories record joy and exhilaration — not often enough, many readers feel — and other times the darker side of life, which leads to controversy.

And controversial stories tend to bring out reader reaction. An example is the continuing story of the Cheyenne Avenue apartments and the living conditions there.

The latest series began with a Page B1 story on Nov. 8 headlined: *Won't pay \$6,000 fine for not making repairs, London landlord says*; and the deck head read, *The owner blames conditions at his buildings on the tenants, mainly Asian immigrants, saying 'they're like little pigs.'*

The headlines reflected the story by Greg Van Moorsel that the landlord, Elijah Elieff, was fined \$6,000 for not completing city-ordered repairs to the Cheyenne buildings. Elieff blamed his tenants, mainly immigrants from Cambodia, for the conditions and said "they're like little pigs. They think they're still living in the jungle."

"Moral outrage" immediately followed in comments from a United Church minister, Cambodians, a spokesman for the London Urban Alliance on Race Relations, and city aldermen. Elieff clarified his statement in a Nov. 9 story: "I'm not saying they're pigs, but they're doing only what pigs would do."

Calls came into the ombudsman after the Nov. 8 story appeared. A man said he was taking the matter to the human rights commis-

sion, but he felt it was a case of history repeating itself: "My Irish ancestors went through the same things many years ago."

Another man, who said he was of Chinese extraction, felt the deck head "was too inclusive" and labelled all Asian immigrants.

A woman caller felt The Free Press was "irresponsible" in carrying the quote, and by doing so "was playing into the hands of people who would like to continue the stereotype they have of people."



JACK BRIGLIA
OMBUDSMAN
The London Free Press

have had the desired effect without having offended and insulted your readers. I strongly suggest that the LFP consider the impact of this sort of sensationalist news coverage on all members of our multiracial community."

The question is whether the quote should have been carried.

Managing editor Tony Bembridge reacted: "I am dismayed that there are folks out there who feel prejudice, and all that goes with it, will disappear if only the media will ignore it."

"After all, you don't quote everything a person says," she said. She added that the landlord was entitled to his opinion, and could have expressed it in a letter to the editor had he wished to do so.

A letter writer expressed her "outrage" at The Free Press for reproducing verbatim Elieff's remarks. She felt that by doing so the newspaper has "played a significant role in the creation of racial stereotypes."

"This is irresponsible and unacceptable press," she said. She stated a descriptive report of what the landlord said "would

"Ignorance may be bliss, but ignoring statements such as those which upset the readers would indeed have been irresponsible on the part of the reporter and The London Free Press."

"We have a responsibility to the community to be honest every day in every story."

City editor Mary Nesbitt added:

"I won't defend our use of Elijah Elieff's quotes on the basis that he said those words and we just reported them. In writing and editing stories, we routinely pick and choose what information and quotes to use, rejecting some material for such reasons as irrelevance, questionable taste, racism, sexism, libel"

"So the use of the quotes was a conscious decision to show Elieff's feelings toward the tenants over whose lives, in that he is their landlord, he has some measure of control."

"It was important, too, to seek reaction from others in the community with some knowledge of or interest in the situation — a community outreach worker, the aldermen for the area, a spokesman for the ethnic community which Elieff criticized, a neighboring apartment superintendent and so on. These people were free to comment on the situation in the way that objective journalists are not, and comment they did, saying Elieff's words and actions were shocking."

"I don't agree that our stories fan racist sentiments and racial stereotypes. Quite the opposite — they expose a situation to which observers have reacted with repugnance."

Cheyenne is a continuing story and one that will not go away. There are high and intense feelings on both sides and I feel readers need to know about them so they can make up their own minds. What has been said and felt is not pleasant, but it is reality. And to present reality is one function of the press.

If you have a question, complaint or comment about what you see in The Free Press call (519) 667-4501, or write the ombudsman, Box 2280, London, Ont. N6A 4G1.

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