[BE] Report Covering Funeral of Politician Not Unethical

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On 22 June 2011 the *Conseil de déontologie journalistique* (Council for Journalism Ethics of the French Community) pronounced its decision regarding a complaint filed against the public broadcaster RTBF because of a report covering the funeral of M.-R. Morel. The latter was attached to the extreme right political party *Vlaams Belang* (Flemish Interest) and she eventually died of cancer, after her illness had been widely publicised with her consent. The report was part of the public broadcaster's news bulletin. In this report an explicit link was drawn between the illness of M.-R. Morel and her commitment to the extreme right. According to the complainants, the report sent the message that M.-R. Morel had deliberately exploited her medical situation in the media to gain sympathy for and further the political goals of the extreme right. Not only is this believed to be defamatory to Ms. Morel herself, in violation of Article 5 of the Belgian Code on journalism ethics of 1982, which prescribes respect for human dignity and proscribes intrusions into personal grievance and pain, but it would also constitute an expression of hate culture against all Flemish people.

In its decision the ethical council emphasised the importance of the angle chosen as a basic element from a journalistic point of view. The RTBF had chosen to focus on the relation between Ms. Morel and her extreme right political engagement, whilst the Flemish media had opted to approach the story from another angle, a more emotional one, in which Ms. Morel was portrayed as a heroine in the fight against cancer. Given this different point of view, it is understandable that the approach of the RTBF shocked certain viewers, while being approved of by others. According to the Council, the choice of the RTBF may have lacked tact and refinement, but this does not make it illegitimate. A crucial element of the Council's argument lies in the fact that the RTBF considered the result of the media exploitation in terms of furthering extreme right political goals, instead of alleging that it was also the intention on the part of Ms. Morel to obtain such results. Although it is not certain that this nuance came through clearly in the rapidity of an oral communication, it still precludes an accusation of violation of the boundaries of journalistic ethics. Other claims in terms of invasion of privacy, racist anti-Flemish remarks, and incitement to hatred were easily swept aside, as the report contained no information that had not previously been made public by Ms. Morel herself and given that expressed differences between 'the north' and 'the south' of Belgium were purely factual and did correspond to well-known and verifiable realities.

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Avis du Conseil de déontologie journalistique, X c. Mitea / RTBF - JT, 22 juin 2011

http://www.deontologiejournalistique.be/telechargements/11-08_X_c_RTBF_JT_Morel_avis_final.pdf

Council for Journalism Ethics of the French- and German-language media in Belgium, X v. Mitea / RTBF - JT, 22 June 2011

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