

2017-48: private individual vs Caledon Enterprise

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The National NewsMedia Council has dismissed a complaint from a private individual related to stories in the Caledon Enterprise that he said were causing severe hardship in his professional life.

The news media organization published an online article in 2015 stating charges of sexual offense were issued. Nine months later the paper published a story stating the charges had been withdrawn, and updated the original online story with that information.

The complainant did not dispute the accuracy of the reporting, but requested the stories be deindexed, a process that would leave the stories on the news media organization's website but make them less searchable on the internet. He stated the ease with which the articles could currently be recalled online prevented him from finding employment and providing for his family. He cited a specific case of a job lost due to the old articles being brought to his employer's attention.

The news media organization responded by stating that it does not remove content from its website, but does update articles with relevant information. In this case, it reported on the withdrawal of charges and updated earlier articles with a link to the story that charges were withdrawn. It said its ethics committee considered the deindexing request on two occasions, but declined.

In dismissing the complaint, the Council supported the news media organization's view that considers web content to be a historical record that is important to preserve. Council also supported the news media organization's view that removing links to published content diminishes transparency and trust with readers.

Council found there was no breach of accuracy or accepted journalistic practices in the news media organization's reporting around the articles in question, noting the news media organization followed good practice in both updating the stories and posting notice of the updates.

Council acknowledged the harm done to the complainant, and noted that requests for deindexing are an increasing issue for news media. However, it also recognized the news media organization's sensitivity about the implications of deindexing, including control over content, transparency, and the potential for precedent.

Recognizing the strong views on either side of the deindexing issue, and in light of increasing numbers of requests from members of the public who feel harmed by the enduring life of online stories about withdrawn charges and acquittals, Council recommended a committee to seek a broad range of the public and news media practitioners' views, with the goal of developing best practices that will guide decisions on future requests for deindexing.