

2017-51: Denise Davy vs Burlington Gazette

September 14, 2017 – *For immediate release*

The National NewsMedia Council has upheld a complaint that the Burlington Gazette breached journalistic standards in printing a correction that was inaccurate and did not provide opportunity to respond to an allegation.

Complainant Denise Davy stated that a May 23 2017 article, “The Gazette erred - Director of Education Miller did not meet with MPP McMahon”, provided no evidence to support a statement in the correction that false information was “knowingly given”, and allowed no opportunity to respond to that allegation.

The complainant stated that she was called by the Burlington Gazette for information related to a school closing, and in that conversation she stated the director of education met with the MPP about a school closing issue. The news media organization reported her information. Later the same day it ran a correction stating the meeting in question had not occurred, and that “false” information was knowingly given. The complainant alleged the inaccurate correction and accusation impugned her reputation as a writer. She provided wording for an amended correction.

In its response, the news media organization said the interview with the complainant was interrupted and not resumed. It justified the decision to rely on a single source for the original story by referring to the established working relationship with the complainant. The correction article reported the director of education stated the meeting format was by phone rather than in person. There was no evidence of effort to verify either source in either instance.

The paper’s correction apologized to the director of education and the MPP, and faulted the complainant for the error. The news media organization denied the correction impugned the complainant’s character as it did not specifically identify her.

Reviewing the articles, Council found the news media organization’s view that it did not specifically identify the complainant was disingenuous in view of reporting her gender, occupation and position on the controversy. As well, the complainant was named and her photo was included in the original article, which remained easily searchable on the news media organization’s website.

No evidence was provided to support the statement in the correction article that the information given by the complainant was known to be false. The unsupported statement in question is an allegation of intentional error or shortcoming, with no indication there was opportunity to reply to the accusation. Council found the correction breached journalistic standards of accuracy and accountability by making a serious allegation and by failing to provide opportunity to respond to the allegation.

In upholding the complaint, Council noted it is commendable that the news media organization corrected information about whether a high-level meeting on a contentious community issue was held in person or by telephone. However, no evidence was offered to support the allegation that the flawed information was known to be false.

Best journalistic practice is to avoid single-source material. Adherence to that practice may have avoided the problem in the first place. In this case, the error was in the format rather than in the fact of the meeting. Because there was a breach of best journalistic practice, a simple clarification noting a reporting error would have been appropriate.

The complainant specified the wording of a correction. Because the NNC supports the prerogative of news media to determine their own content, it will not dictate the wording of a correction or compel a member to publish an apology. The NNC does expect member news organizations to publish or post NNC decisions in the case of an upheld complaint.

The NNC's business is to consider complaints about journalistic standards. It declines to comment on the allegation that the complainant's character was impugned.

Area – accuracy Tags – opportunity to respond, corrections