

File number: 2017-63 Allan Smith vs St. Catharines Standard

October 11, 2017 – *For immediate release*

The National NewsMedia Council has dismissed a complaint from Allan Smith about plagiarism and lack of opportunity to respond in regard to an article in the St. Catharines Standard.

The complainant stated that a July 21, 2017 article, “Grimsby code of conduct case example for region, says mayor”, was copied from the Grimsby Lincoln news, and that the journalist did not interview those who were on the Heritage committee to get the other side of the story.

The St. Catharines Standard rejected the allegation that the story was copied. It pointed out that its story included an interview with the mayor that did not appear in the other paper, took a different angle on the disbandment of the town committee, and should properly be viewed in the context of the larger debate over codes of conduct and regional council.

The NNC found the article in question reported on the mayor’s suggestion that the procedure used by the town should be a model for the region’s handling of harassment complaints. The article included quotes and information from a commissioned report as well as quotes from the mayor. By comparison, stories from the other paper focused on the committee dissolution and attempts to resolve the controversy, with quotes from several sources.

The complainant stated he “was told” the journalist “copied” the article, but offered no examples of copied words, phrases or ideas. An accusation of plagiarism cannot be supported in the absence of evidence. All three articles dealt with the same report and controversy, but that does not meet the definition of plagiarism.

Accusation of plagiarism should not be made or dismissed lightly. In this case, Council found no evidence to support the allegation that the article was copied and no grounds for allegation of plagiarism.

Similarly, there is no evidence to support the complaint that those involved had no opportunity to respond, or that information was manipulated for political reasons. While it is best practice to state that a source failed to return a request for comment, the NNC accepted the paper’s position that the journalist omitted information about unreturned calls to the committee chair as irrelevant to the main focus of his article.

The article in question quoted the mayor, who had direct interest in the issue, and relied on the commissioned report, a standard practice that included paraphrasing or quoting contents of the report. Journalistic practice does require re-interviewing those queried and cited in the report.

No evidence, beyond the complainant’s unsubstantiated report of background conflicts, was provided to support the allegation that the story was manipulated for political reasons. The allegation is a serious indictment of the journalist’s integrity and cannot rest on an unsupported belief that the complainant knows the truth while the journalist is being manipulated.

Area – attribution Tags - plagiarism, opportunity to respond