

### **2018-54: Elchuk vs Victoria News**

The National NewsMedia Council has reviewed and upholds a complaint about the use of promotional content contained in a special section of the Victoria News.

The complainant, Ashley Elchuk, objected to two stories that appeared under the banner “A Parents Guide to Back to School” in the publication’s August 24, 2018 print edition.

The complainant argued that the two stories, “Make sure your smile is ready for school” and “Middle School lays foundation for character and values”, were advertorials disguised as editorial content.

The news organization defended its decision to publish these pieces of content. It responded by stating that the paper had on previous occasions created content for specific audiences and accepted content from advertisers, and described the targeted content as a long-standing practice in many community newsrooms. The news organization also defended its position by stating that any sections that carry branded content are properly labelled as such.

As a general principle, the NewsMedia Council supports a news organization’s editorial right to publish material, including branded content, that it deems important to readers. The Council also recognizes that “advertorial” material is a long-standing reality, and that ad departments have pushed to make the material attractive to readers.

At the same time, Council is mindful that not all readers are familiar with how journalism is constructed. As described in a policy paper on branded content, the Council understands that the intent of branded content, sponsored content or advertorials lies with the interests of the sponsor, while the intent of news and opinion writing aligns with the interest of the public good.

The news organization in this case did ensure that each page of the special section carried a consistent banner that read ‘A Parents Guide to Back to School’, however in Council’s view it did not adequately inform readers that this section consisted of sponsored content.

Council accepted the news organization’s position that a back to school section is a long-standing tradition for the community. The news media organization also stated that most readers understand the section to be advertising, supplemented with editorial content that supports the advertising and theme. However, Council noted that in light of increasing demand for trusted, accountable journalism best practice is to use consistent terms to clearly label an advertising section, and that those explicit labels were absent in this case.

The news media organization acknowledged that it should have ensured proper attribution of the information presented in the story about the private school. The Council found that regardless of intent, both articles in question were promotions for businesses, and there should have been more effective measures to differentiate those articles from the regular content.

The NewsMedia Council also noted that while the news organization has a clear policy on use of bylines, it is not evident those policies are well understood by the reading public.

The NewsMedia Council declined to comment on newsroom management decisions about assigning reporters to write content for advertising sections, but is of the view that the articles in question clearly presented the advertiser's point of view, and should have been readily identified as promotional material in order to avoid reader confusion and any concern about bias on the part of the news organization or journalist. Best practice is to label the article clearly and directly, rather than leaving the reader to make an inference based on placement of an article, font style or form of byline.

For the above reasons, we uphold the complaint.

In reviewing the articles and materials submitted, the NewsMedia Council reiterated its position that best practice for news organizations is to clearly distinguish for its readers what is 'journalism' and what is not.

Terms such as 'branded content', 'native content', or 'advertorial', need to be explained to help readers understand that some articles are provided to promote marketing. Similarly, use of different fonts may be intended to differentiate news from sponsored content, but without assurance the ordinary reader is alive to such signals, the line between news and other content is easily blurred.