

2018-64: Smith vs Niagara Independent

December 21, 2018 – *for immediate release*

The National NewsMedia Council has dismissed one portion of a complaint, while upholding a second, against the Niagara Independent about an October 12, 2018 story published under the headline ‘website exposes A Better Niagara group’.

The complainant, Ed Smith, stated that this article presented several factual inaccuracies and that the media organization did not take the appropriate steps to contact the third-party group being discussed in the story. He said, moreover, that the article’s overall tone was “heavily slanted” and portrayed A Better Niagara Group as an organization with “hidden” or “radical agendas”.

The news organization defended the piece by stating that the article was intended to point out the rise of third party groups becoming involved in a municipal election, and to point out their potential ties to larger political parties. The news organization acknowledged that no other sources were contacted for the story.

In reviewing the article, and complaints raised, Council was unable to find specifics of - or evidence to - support the complainant’s allegations of factual inaccuracy. For this reason we dismiss the portion of the complaint alleging factual inaccuracy.

The complainant also stated that the article in question was highly slanted and subjective. The news media organization responded by stating that subjectivity rests in the eye of the beholder. It argued that the overarching point of the article was to draw attention to third party groups and their potential connections to established political parties. It examined the work of the organization in identifying like-minded candidates and objectives. At the same time, it argued that the article noted such campaigns are not limited to any specific third party group or political party, and quoted four sources in examining the role of advocacy groups in general as well as the one in question.

The news organization stated the article did not say that the third party group advocated for any kind of “radical” agenda.

Council found the article is within widely accepted journalistic standards in terms of making larger connections to civic affairs for its readers, particularly in the lead up to an election. In this context, the NNC supports the role of a free press to present challenging viewpoints and other information as an essential ingredient to a vibrant public sphere, and, by extension, a healthy democracy. While the article focused on a particular third party, we accept the news media organization’s statement that the group was chosen as an example to explain a broader issue. The article also cited a variety of sources on the issue and used information from the site in question.

That said, Council did note that the article in question read as analysis rather than as a news story. The National NewsMedia Council recognizes that election campaign periods can be fraught times, with heightened tension between journalists, media organizations, political organizations, and other stakeholders. At such times the importance of distinguishing news from opinion or analysis is likewise

heightened. Best practice demands a clear delineation between hard news reporting and opinion or analysis. While Council agreed that the intent of the article was laudable, it was undermined by improper labelling.

In this light, the article lacks the balance and opportunity to respond that is expected in a news story, and for this reason the NNC upholds this portion of the complaint.