



2018-65: Barton vs Clipper Weekly

The National NewsMedia Council has mediated and dismissed a complaint about an article, "Bodnaruk defends expenses", which appeared in The Clipper Weekly on October 18, 2018.

The complainant, Gordon Barton, stated that publishing the article about an all candidate's meeting shortly before the municipal elections appeared to be a deliberate attempt to discredit a candidate and possibly cause him to lose the election.

The complainant said the publication's publisher and a reporter turned down his request for a follow up article with apology for the "error in timing" and details of all council remuneration. Instead, it offered the opportunity to submit a letter to the editor, which was subsequently published.

The NewsMedia Council carefully reviewed the article in question and the letter to the editor that was published on November 8, 2018. It found that as a report of an all-candidate's meeting, the article rightly appeared before the municipal election date. Comments related to the candidate's expenses were made in connection with publicly available information about spending by municipal leaders.

The accuracy of the figures cited was not in question.

In reviewing the article, the NewsMedia Council found the news organization gave the candidate the opportunity to speak to, and explain, the expenses without editorial comment in the reporting. The NNC accepted the news organization's statement that the expenses of all council members were detailed in an earlier article, and noted the article in question included relevant comparisons including mileage claims of other councilors and the total Council costs as ranked provincially.

Widely accepted journalistic practice is to examine the track record of candidates during an election campaign. Reporting on and holding public figures accountable, including reporting the 'track record' of candidates during an election campaign, is the job of journalism. In this case, the all candidates meeting was of obvious public interest ahead of a municipal election. It was appropriate for the news organization to report on the issues raised by the candidates and those in attendance. Journalists, however, are not stenographers and have the latitude to determine the focus or most newsworthy aspects of a story. In this vein, it was reasonable to report on the candidate's defense of his expenses.

Offering the opportunity to publish letters to the editor or op-ed articles is a well-established means of hearing other points of view, allowing diversity of opinion, and being responsive to the public. The NewsMedia Council views these measures as best practice for newspapers and online news sites, and supports the Clipper Weekly for encouraging the complainant to submit a letter.

Regarding comment that the article was unfair, heightened tensions during campaigns and elections are not unusual. Journalism has an important role to play in a healthy democracy, which includes examining the track record of candidates and pushing for accountability. The more public the figure; the more scrutiny can be expected. On careful examination of the article and complaint, this article was a factual report on an important issue of public interest and raised timely questions about the council as a whole. In the NNC's view it was a fair and appropriate article.