



## **2018-66 Masanovich vs Windsor Star**

January 10, 2019 – *for immediate release*

The National NewsMedia Council has upheld a complaint about journalistic standards surrounding poll reporting and attribution in an October 11 2018 article in the Windsor Star.

The article, “Jarvis: Three-way race in Ward 10, poll shows,” centred on three apparent frontrunners in a municipal election in Windsor, ON and detailed the remaining candidates’ standings based on polling results from an undisclosed source. The article also cited the number of undecided voters at 12 per cent and considered them to be possible “game changers” in the election.

Mark Masanovich was a candidate in the election and filed a complaint with the NNC about the article’s reporting on the polling results. The article placed him fifth in the race with eight percentage points and said that he was “gaining momentum.”

The complainant stated that the article failed to include specific information about the poll, including who conducted it, when it was conducted, the sample size, and the margin of error.

Challenging the legitimacy of the poll, the complainant cited the “discrepancy” between the reported polling results and the final results, which placed him in third at 18 per cent, 11 days after the article was published. The complainant also expressed his concern that the poll may have influenced voters’ decisions around strategic balloting.

The complainant directed his complaint to the news organization and was referred to the columnist to seek more clarification on the matter. Failing to be provided with the requested information about the poll, he directed his complaint to the NNC.

The news organization stated that it does not reveal sources based on “standard practice” but said that the article accurately reported on the poll. It subsequently provided information not included in the article to support this statement, including the name of the polling company, its sample size, and a margin of error of four percent. In a final response, the news organization stated that the poll was conducted in the first week of October.

Although anonymous sourcing may be the only way to obtain information in rare circumstance, best practice in those cases is to be transparent with the reader about the source’s qualifications and why it was necessary to withhold their identity. That said, the purpose of reporting on polls is to capture information about public opinion from a moment in time, which readers can use in context to make decisions.

Without knowing who commissioned the poll, or why, readers are not provided the necessary information to assess the reason the poll was conducted or the context of the results. For this reason, anonymity is not granted in reporting on polls and polling results.

As stated by the Canadian Association of Journalists, journalists must use care and provide context when reporting on surveys and polls. This includes providing information related to the commissioner of the poll, its sample size, and total population. Equipped with information about the source and methods of a given poll, readers are better positioned to determine the legitimacy and precision of the results.

In defense of the article's lack of details surrounding the poll, the news organization stated that the purpose of the article was not to report on the poll, as it "was only one part of her research," but that it was instead "a piece about a race heating up in ward 10." The news organization also provided notes from the columnist explaining how the number of undecided voters and subsequent candidates' debate could account for the change in standings in the final results.

The news organization noted that while polls are not always accurate, media reporting on public opinion is part of a longstanding "electoral tradition in democratic societies." It also noted that the role of a columnist is to "argue a point," regardless of whether candidates like it.

Although the article contained other information, including interviews with community members, the NNC did not accept the news organization's assertion that the article was not based on polling results. In fact, the article relied on the results of the poll to determine the focus of the piece: three apparent front-runners in the race.

While the NNC supports the wide latitude of columnists to express unpopular opinions, it is of the view that columnists must adhere to basic journalistic practices, including accuracy and conventions surrounding attribution.

The NNC agrees with the news organization that reporting on polls and other metrics of public opinion plays a part in the democratic process. Moreover, it is accepted that there will be discrepancies between polls conducted throughout campaigns and the final results, and that polls do not necessarily mirror final election results. However, given the weight that the public may invest in poll reports, journalists must take appropriate care to ensure that their reporting is accurate and transparent.

It is unfortunate that the news organization was not more forthcoming with its readers in the first place or following the complainant's queries. While the news organization did provide some unpublished information about the poll to the complainant, the precise date and details about the polling company have still not been published. This breach of standards denied readers the ability to assess the credibility of the poll-taker.

Standard practice is to provide readers with sufficient information about the poll and poll-taker in order to assess the legitimacy and precision of the polling results. In light of the omission of this essential information, the NNC upholds the complaint about journalistic standards of transparency in poll reporting and attribution.