

2016-75: Marvin Ross vs Dundas Star News

February 3, 2017 - *For immediate release*

The National NewsMedia Council has upheld a complaint about a misleading headline on the Dundas Star News website.

The complainant, Marvin Ross, stated that an online article carried the headline "Dundas school not opposing alley sale", while the school's principal was quoted in the story as saying "...our school community does not have a comment on (the) application to sell the laneway."

The complainant noted the principal was deliberately non-committal about a controversial issue, and said that by stating the school was 'not opposing' the sale, the news media organization removed the principal's stated neutrality.

The news media organization stated that the principal's quote that the school community "does not have a comment on (the) application to sell the laneway" could be argued to mean the school does not oppose the sale and does not support it either.

It maintained the web headline is true and supported by facts in the story, and disagreed that it is misleading or non-objective. The publication described the online headline as a plain statement of fact that made it clear the school would not be an active participant in discussion of the laneway.

The news media organization noted that most of the public commentary on the issue was opposed to the sale, and argued it was important to tell the community that the school "was not throwing its weight behind that effort".

Journalistic standards, as stated by the CP Style Book, require that "headlines face the same tests of accuracy and fairness as all other publishable copy".

The Council found the headline on the online version of the news article clearly stated that the school does not oppose the sale of the alley. That statement was contradicted by the quote from the school principal, which stated that the school "does not have a comment" on the application for the property sale.

The Council found the headline effectively removed the principal's intended neutrality. Under these circumstances, the news organization's headline was misleading and a breach of journalistic standards.

The news media organization argued that because most of the commentary reported was about opposition to the sale of the laneway, it was important to emphasize that the school was not taking that side of the debate. Journalistic standards demand fair and balanced reporting, but balance cannot be achieved by skewing a neutral position.