

*March 9, 2018 – For immediate release*

2018-06 Ako-Adjei vs Burlington Gazette

The complainant, Kwabe Ako-Adjei, said the December 15 2017 Burlington Gazette article, “Major organizational moves by the city manager seem to be out of focus”, contained inaccurate information.

He cited specific examples including errors in the reporting of a department re-organization and a staff change. He argued the errors could have been avoided with an email to city staff for verification. The complainant emailed the news organization a list of five points it felt were inaccurate and asked for a correction of the article.

The complainant also objected to the manner in which corrections were done, which was to append portions of the complainant’s email, in a different font colour, to the top of the article.

Subsequently, the complainant provided an example of an article that was critical of a city manager and published without giving the staffer opportunity to respond.

The Burlington Gazette responded by contacting NNC staff for clarification about the complaints. Staff stated a response should speak to the method of correction, and the reasons to seek verification of the information or not.

After three weeks with no further response from the news organization, NNC staff issued a warning that a recommendation would go ahead based on the information at hand.

At that point, the news organization responded with information detailing conflicts with municipal officials and expressing the opinion that city hall was trying to ‘shut down’ the Burlington Gazette.

The response also noted the publisher previously met with NNC staff for a discussion on journalistic standards about separating news from opinion in articles.

Finally, the Burlington Gazette suggested the complaint should be set aside until the publisher’s legal conflict with the city is settled.

On reviewing the complaint and related materials, the articles in question, and the news organization’s response, Council upheld the complaint about accuracy. The complainant, who is a city staff member, provided information that pointed to reporting errors. The publisher acknowledged one error and did not contradict others, nor did he defend his original material.

The complainant invited the publisher to call city hall to verify facts. There is no evidence that the publisher responded to those invitations. In contrast, the publisher stated that the city manager is trying to shut down the news organization.

In reviewing the article in question, the news organization failed to follow generally accepted journalistic practice for making corrections, which is to label the correction, state the correct material, and make clear what material it replaces. Council upheld this portion of the complaint.

Council found repeated instances in the submitted material where news and opinion were not adequately separated. The article in question was labeled both 'News' and 'News Analysis', which is not helpful in letting the reader know if news or opinion was being presented.

It was also evident that the news organization made liberal use of reported information without seeking verification, with qualifiers such as "according to people who were in the room", and suppositions such as "appeared to have looked at Tanner in a manner that was uncomfortable to her". Widely accepted journalistic standards require verification of fact, naming sources of verification when appropriate, and giving those named an opportunity to respond.

In light of the reasons stated, the NNC upholds the complaint.