

September 26, 2008

**Review of complaints about Neil Macdonald's report about Vice-Presidential candidate Sarah Palin (The National, September 2, 2008)**

About fifty people wrote to complain about a report by Washington correspondent Neil Macdonald from the Republican National Convention, on The National on September 2, 2008. It centered on rumours circulating on the floor of the convention concerning the announced nominee for Vice-President, Governor Sarah Palin.

The complainants felt that the report was not an accurate reflection of what was happening that day at the convention, that it contained unproven and, in at least one case, false information about Ms. Palin. Many writers claimed that Mr. Macdonald had a clear, anti-Republican or anti-conservative agenda.

The acting Executive Producer of The National, Mark Harrison, responded that the item accurately reflected what was circulating on the floor, with the exception of the suggestion that Ms. Palin had been a member of the Alaska Independence Party. Mr. Harrison acknowledged that this latter point was inaccurate and that it was corrected on the next night's broadcast of The National.

**REVIEW:**

The Ombudsman's role is not to pass judgment on news judgment—the selection or slotting of items in a newscast, unless there is a pattern which suggests bias. My role is to review the items broadcast against the policies contained in CBC's Journalistic Standards and Practices. So whether or not I would necessarily agree with carrying a particular item is not the standard. Whether the item, as broadcast, met the policy is the operative principle.

It might be useful to review some of the basic policies which we expect CBC's journalists to follow:

**JOURNALISTIC PRINCIPLES**

Information programs must reflect established journalistic principles:

**Accuracy**

The information conforms with reality and is not in any way misleading or false. This demands not only careful and thorough research but a disciplined use of language and production techniques, including visuals.

**Integrity**

The information is truthful, not distorted to justify a conclusion. Broadcasters do not take advantage of their power to present a personal bias.

**Fairness**

The information reports or reflects equitably the relevant facts and significant points of view; it deals fairly and ethically with persons, institutions, issues and events.

Application of these principles will achieve the optimum objectivity and balance that must characterize the CBC's information programs.

**CREDIBILITY**

In an open society, credibility is an essential attribute of a journalistic organization. The credibility of the organization and that of its journalists are interdependent, flowing one from the other. Credibility is dependent not only on qualities such as accuracy and fairness in reporting and presentation, but also upon avoidance by both the organization and its journalists of associations or contacts which could reasonably give rise to perceptions of partiality. Any situation which could cause reasonable apprehension that a journalist or the organization is biased or under the influence of any pressure group, whether ideological, political, financial, social or cultural, must be avoided. In the engagement and assignment of persons working in information programs, the organization must be sensitive to their published views, their personal involvements and their associations and backgrounds in order to avoid any perception of bias or of susceptibility to undue influence in the execution of their professional responsibilities. In order to maintain their own credibility and that of the CBC, on-air personnel, as well as those who edit, produce or manage CBC programs, must avoid publicly identifying themselves in any way with partisan statements or actions on controversial matters.

These are the principles that provide the basis for my review.

The item was a roundup of some of the questions surrounding Ms. Palin's personal life that had surfaced over the previous weekend, driven largely, but not exclusively, by bloggers, with some additional material from such outlets as the Anchorage Daily News. These questions related to the circumstances of Ms. Palin's giving birth to her youngest child and the possibility that Ms. Palin's daughter had actually been the baby's mother. There also was, as noted, a reference to her alleged membership in a party arguing for Alaska's independence. This latter was phrased in such a way as to presume its accuracy.

The item also contained reference to the extent of “vetting” carried out by John McCain’s organization.

Some writers said that rumours should not be treated at all—that broadcasting them was tantamount to a “smear.” It should be noted that rumours that circulate on the floor of major conventions often have an impact on the work of the convention. This one was no different. The notion that the child was not Ms. Palin’s—previously unreported by the CBC, prompted the party to announce that Ms. Palin’s daughter was then 5 months pregnant. In effect, this would prove that the rumour was untrue. Clearly, both the rumour and the reaction were appropriate for journalistic treatment. Of course, the way in which the matters are treated would summon up policy implications.

From the research I have been able to do, it seems clear that these stories had been “around” for some time. However, two blog sites crystallized them on the eve of the convention’s major activities. One, a video blogger, showed pictures that were presumed to show Ms. Palin looking remarkably thin for a pregnant woman. However, by Monday, this blogger admitted that the pictures shown were from a much earlier time period. In a second video blog, he admitted that the story was probably not accurate and that he would cease pursuing it.

The other blog, carried on the popular liberal site Daily Kos, covered much the same ground. By Sunday evening, though, the blogger had decided that the information was not substantive. In a note on Sunday evening, 48 hours before The National item, this blogger wrote: “Flogging this rumor in light of what seems to be pretty solid counter-evidence is just squandering whatever credibility we have. In the words of Janor Hypercleats, ‘They’s laughin’ at you, boy.’ There is so much more that we could be highlighting regarding Palin; we don’t want that to be tarred with ‘from the same people who smeared Palin’s teenage daughter.’”

It is a reality of journalism today that attention must be paid to what is being said on blogs, but the other reality is that the basic principles of professional journalism must be applied to the information found on those sites.

The item that appeared on Tuesday evening’s The National appears to have had an interesting gestation. Despite the bloggers standing down, stories were still circulating on the floor of the convention. It should be kept in mind that Ms. Palin was not the obvious choice of many of the delegates and many of them expressed their puzzlement and frustration to reporters, including Mr. Macdonald. That being said, he proposed a more general item to the editors on the “desk” in Toronto. The convention was in a rather unusual situation: its early proceedings disrupted by the attention given to the major hurricane that appeared to be threatening New Orleans. Then, the surprise choice of Ms. Palin absorbed considerable attention and attracted controversy, not least among Republicans.

Although other components of CBC News had, by Tuesday, moved on to other questions, those in charge of The National felt that the persistent rumours were still worthy of

attention since delegates on the floor were still worried about them. Although I might disagree with that notion, the editors were perfectly free to make those judgments. The question for me is whether the ensuing item met the tests of policy.

I have already noted The National's admission that at least part of the story was inaccurate. I should also note that the "correction" the next day used the passive voice in saying: "A lot has been reported about Palin in the last few days, including that she was a member of the Alaska Independence Party. That was based on information from the party itself, erroneous information, as it turns out. Palin's husband was a member, but she was not."

In my many years of watching The National, I have found that when the broadcast makes an error, it is usually corrected quickly and clearly. I was surprised by the formulation "a lot has been reported." A more direct formulation would have been: "Last night, The National reported...." The fact that others reported inaccurate information is pertinent information, but does not excuse CBC journalists from responsibility.

As to the rest of the item, Mr. Macdonald correctly noted that these were questions that were being asked on the floor of the convention. He also attributed other information to appropriate sources (The Anchorage Daily News). So it can be argued that, save the Independence Party reference, the story was "accurate." However, even "accurate" information must be reported fairly. That implies that such information be placed in appropriate context and countervailing information be given appropriate weight.

In this case, little context was given. The rumours were, more or less, strung together without solid reference either to the reliability of the sources or the currency of the material by Tuesday evening. Mr. Macdonald's reporting earlier in the day reflected a wider view of the day's events and a more nuanced handling of the rumours. However, it appears that the editors of The National that evening wanted an item narrowly concentrating on the rumours. I note that the next morning The Washington Post and the New York Times, in their coverage of the events of Tuesday, concentrated on legitimate questions raised by the surprise nomination. In the Post's case, they relegated the earlier baby rumours to the last two paragraphs of a lengthy story. The Post did return to them later in the week in the context of a lengthy analysis item.

Some writers have suggested that Mr. Macdonald was on some kind of personal vendetta against Republicans or conservatives. Any journalist who reports regularly and aggressively on sensitive matters is prone to these types of accusations. Of course, as a human being, he or she is also liable to make mistakes from time to time. I note that many (but not all) of the complaints appear to have been prompted by a columnist in the National Post. The Post, like all journalistic outlets, has made corrections from time to time for errors it commits. It is noteworthy that those complaining about Mr. Macdonald on a more general basis did not bring forward specific items to prove their points, but a more generalized condemnation ("he never reports rumours about the Democrats..." and similar comments).

However, my perusal of Mr. Macdonald's work during the long U.S. electoral process shows that all significant items that arose during the primary campaigns were reported appropriately. It should be borne in mind that Ms. Palin was a virtual unknown quantity on the national scene until that weekend. Other candidates have had their lives examined fully over long periods of time. For example, controversies surrounding Mr. Obama's relations with the Rev. Jeremiah Wright were fully reported, as were stories about his possible involvement with lobbyists.

The surprise announcement of Ms. Palin's nomination as Vice-Presidential candidate telescoped the usual reporting into a few days. Legitimate journalistic questions arise as to the process followed by Mr. McCain in vetting Ms. Palin. In fact, those questions persist.

I should also note that Mr. Macdonald did two other versions of this story that had a wider ambit than the item that ran on The National. Those stories appear to be proper journalistic treatment of the maelstrom surrounding the Palin announcements.

It is not the first time that some have suggested that Mr. Macdonald has some hidden agenda in his reporting—other than the aggressive pursuit of underlying truths. During his time in the Middle East, there were aggressive campaigns denigrating his work because he did not accept the party "line" of any of the parties to the conflicts in the Middle East. My predecessor, David Bazay, conducted a number of reviews of Mr. Macdonald's work during his time in the Middle East. He found, time and again, that Mr. Macdonald aggressively questioned all sides involved and did not show bias in his reporting.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

The item, as broadcast, failed to meet the tests of both accuracy and fairness in its treatment of the subject. The National should insure that its editorial processes, especially during critical times, are operating at the highest standard. For the reasons cited, this was not Mr. Macdonald's finest work and the one item does not meet the test of accuracy and fairness, but I find no basis for the more general assaults on his integrity.

Vince Carlin  
CBC Ombudsman