

Review: CBC Radio reports on Israeli air raid on ships bound for Gaza

March 4, 2011

I am writing with regard to your complaint May 31, 2010, and request December 5, 2010, for a review by this Office concerning CBC Radio reports on the Israeli air raid on a flotilla of six ships bound for Gaza.

Thank you for your patience in this matter.

A new policy is in effect to identify complainants, but because your correspondence preceded that policy's implementation, you will not be identified in this review.

REVIEW

Last May 31, Israel raided ships bound for Gaza carrying humanitarian aid, construction materials, money, night goggles, ballistic vests and gas masks, among other things. The aim of the flotilla was to break up Israel's blockade of the Gaza. The flotilla had earlier resisted inspection requests.

Nine activists (eight Turks and one Turkish-American) were killed on one ship, activists on three other ships were injured (but none seriously), and two others ships were taken without incident. Passengers were detained for several days.

CBC Radio carried several reports May 31 and in the weeks following. The initial reports reflected the basic challenge of conflict reporting, in that it was difficult for all parties in the incident to be heard. As part of its military tactic, Israeli officials restricted communication from the vessels after placing activists in detention.

The complainant asserted there was an imbalance in the reports because of this blackout. He said attackers were given an advantage in the CBC reporting that violated journalistic principles. He said CBC didn't inform listeners of a "de facto censorship."

The complainant was written twice: on June 18, 2010, by CBC News executive editor, Esther Enkin, and on October 13, 2010, by the executive producer of CBC Radio's *As It Happens*, Lynda Shorten.

In her letter, Enkin noted that CBC stories indicated both that the activists aboard the ships were detained, unable to communicate and subjected to an Israeli news blackout.

She noted that on the World At Six program, contributor Iris Makler reported that “little has been heard from the activists since the Israeli military disabled live broadcasts from the boat.” Enkin also noted the interview that first night with the Turkish deputy under-secretary of the foreign affairs ministry, who called Israel’s actions unacceptable. CBC Radio’s As It Happens also interviewed a friend of a detained Canadian activist.

In her letter, Shorten noted the several interviews on May 31 and beyond that were critical of the Israeli actions. While it was not possible to interview activists initially, she said CBC Radio gave them voice as soon as it could.

The complainant asked for a review, saying CBC didn’t provide a clear statement that aid workers were being held incommunicado.

CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices in effect at the time intersected with the complaint about balance. *“When an appropriate representative of one side of the story cannot be reached, the journalist or producer should make every effort to find someone who can represent that point of view and, if unable to do so, should announce the fact in a simple and direct manner.”*

The policy indicated that balance should be achieved, *“where appropriate, within a single program or otherwise within an identifiable series of programs.”*

A revised CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices policy did not materially change the approach on matters of balance. *“On issues of controversy, we ensure that divergent views are reflected respectfully, taking into account their relevance to the debate and how widely held these views are. We also ensure that they are represented over a period of time.”*

CONCLUSION

The flotilla attacks represented a significant challenge for all news organizations. Without journalists on the scene, they were dependent on remote communications. When the Israelis employed a common military tactic in suppressing communications from the flotilla, news organizations had to find proxies to tell the story of the activists aboard the ships.

The complaint raises an important question about the impact of urgent reporting from conflict zones and the value of balance even in difficult journalistic circumstances. An important element in my assessment of CBC News’ journalism in this period is whether CBC made efforts to tell all elements of the story. There may have been logistical barriers, but I have to determine if it fulfilled its policy of pursuing “every effort to find someone who can represent” sides of the story.

I found that CBC did very well under the initial circumstances to be clear about the problematic journalistic conditions. It promptly said the Israeli military had detained activists and had “disabled” communications from the ships. In the absence of first-hand

accounts from those under attack, it interviewed those familiar with the activists and their activities to form the reports as the story developed. Other news organizations employed similar language and techniques in their reports.

While it is true that the presence of Israeli spokesmen and silence of the activists could have given rise to problems with journalistic balance, I do not agree that uneven access to other parties in this instance conferred an advantage that distorted the journalism and thus violated standards and practices. Initial international reaction was critical and CBC and others gave voice to those who viewed the Israeli actions as excessive. Indeed, much of the initial Israeli perspective was to defend itself against criticism of an outcome of such consequential loss of life.

Moreover, I found several examples in the early going of the story of interviews and news clips to provide elements of the perspectives of those under attack, then effort to provide their own perspective directly as soon as it was available. It easily satisfied provisions for balance over a series of programs in the days following the initial reports.

I concluded there was no violation of the CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices.

Kirk LaPointe
CBC Ombudsman