

Review: Correction of error about Conservative Party bloggers

April 26, 2011

REVIEW

The complainant wrote CBC News shortly after he heard commentator Scott Reid on the CBC News Network program, *Power & Politics*, on April 1, 2010.

Reid, a former senior Liberal Party aide who appeared with Conservative Jaime Watt on the regular Point of Order panel in the program, was discussing the ability of Conservative Party supporters to mobilize support. In an animated exchange, he indicated those bloggers were paid.

“He (Kory Teneckye), along with that, sort of, you know, paid professional brigand of ah, bloggers, that work for the Conservative Party — they can mobilize support in the snap of a finger,” Reid said in the taped segment. He wasn’t challenged by Watt in their debate.

The complainant wrote CBC News to dispute the assertion that the bloggers were paid by the Conservatives. The managing editor of CBC’s Parliamentary Bureau, Paul Hambleton, wrote back April 13, 2010 to acknowledge the error and to thank the complainant for setting the record straight.

The complainant pursued his concerns, indicating that the remark violated CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices in effect at the time.

The executive editor for CBC News, Esther Enkin, wrote the complainant April 21, 2010, to note Hambleton’s email. She said that CBC regretted the error. She also said she did not expect Reid to apologize but that he would correct his remarks when the subject of partisan blogs next came up in the segment of the program “at an early opportunity.”

CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices policy in effect at the time of the complaint included provisions relevant to correcting errors. It said CBC would not *“hesitate to admit and correct an error when it is established that one has been made. To do*

otherwise or to defend a program exhibiting poor taste or unacceptable ethics or containing errors would lead inevitably to loss of credibility by the CBC.”

The policy noted that the senior officer in news and information, or his or her delegate, should be consulted to determine the nature and time of any correction.

The complainant said it was possible that the subject of partisan blogs might not come up “until 2015” and asked if it “would be reasonable to wait that long for the correction to be made.”

Reid has since corrected his statement on the program. He said April 21, 2011, that he had looked into the matter and found no evidence the bloggers were ever paid. He retracted his remarks and apologized. Host Evan Solomon also apologized on the program for taking this long.

CONCLUSION

Mistakes are made regularly in journalism. Academic studies indicate roughly one in two stories contain a factual error, a rate that hasn’t changed much over the decades despite better educated journalists and more sophisticated and familiar guest commentators.

Live television debate — even when it is taped without editing — often leads to spontaneous hyperbole or overstatement to try to make a point or to respond.

What has changed, and for the better, have been processes to identify and correct the record for the public. CBC has a rigorous policy of scrutinizing its work, accepting public review of it, and holding itself accountable through transparent mechanisms to demonstrate its will to be accurate and fair-minded.

Even when contracted commentators make an error, CBC’s approach has been to acknowledge that wrong was wrong and for the program in which they appeared to address the mistake promptly. Its policy of acknowledgment is a virtue in contributing to overall integrity and often a distinguishing and differentiating feature in broadcast news.

In this instance, the statement didn’t receive a quick fix. Obviously, any error left untended only becomes more problematic to correct. Even when efforts are made by programmers to address the initial mistake, some of its viewers will never know it was corrected.

In correspondence with the complainant, CBC acknowledged the error and indicated it would make mention of the issue when the subject next arose on the program. Rather than wait indefinitely for the next discussion on partisan blogs, the program could have

more quickly fulfilled its standards and practices with a correction at the earliest opportunity.

I am satisfied there was no intent to avoid addressing the matter. There was an expectation the opportunity would arise soon, and when it didn't, the correction slipped into the cracks. It is noteworthy that host Evan Solomon apologized on the air for the time it took to address the matter. The correction was made amid an election campaign, when attention on politics is high and the correction's impact might be greatest.

Kirk LaPointe
CBC Ombudsman