

Review: Reference to Israel in report from Libya

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June 1, 2011

**REVIEW**

On April 11, 2011, CBC Television's The National [featured a report from Libya](#) by its Senior Washington Correspondent, Neil Macdonald, on that country's civil strife. Macdonald was reporting from Ajdabiya, about 160 kilometres south of Benghazi, where there was a relative stronghold by rebels.

Macdonald's report explored the relationship between rebels and NATO forces, the futile effort to create a ceasefire, and the tactics in the region of the soldiers under Moammar Gaddafi.

One man asserted that a bloodied garment had been his uncle's, a caretaker at a local mosque he said had been killed in his own yard.

Macdonald voiced a translation of the man's words.

The man asked: "Does this look like a military uniform?"

In what Macdonald described as "the worst insult he can manage," the man added: "Gaddafi is like the Israelis. He kills whomever he likes."

Two complainants wrote to raise concerns about the inclusion of those remarks.

The first, David Schaeffer, asserted the report equated the bloodthirsty conduct of the Libyan leader with those of the Israelis. "Was this really essential to the report?" he wrote.

The second complainant was Mike Fegelman, the executive director of HonestReporting Canada, an organization that scrutinizes Middle East media coverage. He raised similar concerns and had already outlined his views in a note to HonestReporting's email distribution list that he said totaled 26,000.

The executive editor of CBC News, Esther Enkin, wrote that it was a “startling statement on several levels, for what it implies about Gadaffi, about the man’s values and, yes, about his view of Israel.”

She added: “But I want to emphasize that it is his view. It is not Mr. Macdonald’s view. It is certainly not CBC’s view.”

She wrote that it would be dishonest and biased to suppress, alter or delete those views just because some might disagree with them or find them offensive.

Schaeffer subsequently wrote that he felt the line between news and commentary had been allowed to blur. His fundamental concern was the reference to Israel in the report. He argued that Macdonald’s choices of information in the report reflected the views and priorities of CBC News. He asked for a review by the Ombudsman.

Subsequent correspondence from Fegelman said Enkin’s reply was unsatisfactory, that the two remarks from the man were not in sequence and thus not properly represented, and that Israel was introduced gratuitously into the story. He argued that the Libyan man’s views were altered by editing to link the two statements together in the report. Fegelman added several statements directed personally at Macdonald. He asked for a review by the Ombudsman.

[CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices](#) intersect with the issues raised in several ways, some to encourage reality and some to encourage restraint.

On issues of controversy, the policy says: *“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 reasonable period of time.”*

On the matter of graphic or provocative language, the policy notes: *“It is sometimes necessary to use expressions or quotations that may be shocking to part of the audience. In these circumstances, we limit ourselves to what is necessary for understanding, we attribute the statements where applicable and we take care to present them in proper context.”*

It notes: *“We avoid generalizations, stereotypes and any degrading or offensive words or images that could feed prejudice or expose people to hatred or contempt.”*

And it adds: *“Our conflict reporting should contribute to an understanding of the reality on the ground, and tell the stories of the combatants and the people affected by the fighting.”*

## CONCLUSION

Conflict reporting is most effective when stories of the combatants and those affected by the fighting illuminate the reality on the ground. Journalism in these circumstances is often uncomfortable.

I found sufficient care was taken in the script of this report to be clear that the objectionable remark by the Libyan man was characterized as “the worst insult” he could muster. It reflected one of the many layered and engrained animosities, conflicts and attitudes within the country and the wider region.

I am satisfied it in no way was presented as a journalist’s view or his organization’s.

The production technique of linking the two statements about the uncle’s death and the insult about Israel did not alter the man’s views, as one complainant suggested; indeed, the technique focused them.

There was no violation of CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices.

Kirk LaPointe  
CBC Ombudsman