

Review: Use of harsh language of the business world

June 13, 2011

REVIEW

On April 21, on the CBC News Network program, The Lang & O’Leary Exchange, co-host Kevin O’Leary commented on the financial performance of General Electric and turned his attention to the leadership of its chief executive officer, Jeffrey Immelt.

“The incumbent CEO has not delivered anything for shareholders,” O’Leary said. “And at some point, the institutional shareholders are going to put a bullet in his head.”

The complainant, Dick Harling, recollected a similar but not exact quote, said the imagery used was “totally unacceptable,” and asserted that O’Leary was “encouraging terrorism.”

Robert Lack, the executive producer of the program, wrote back that O’Leary was not inciting terrorism and that the remarks reflected the particular vocabulary of the business world in which O’Leary operates. “Such language should not be interpreted literally,” Lack said.

Harling said he expected better of the public broadcaster and asked for a review.

[CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices](#) call for precise language and particular approaches when using language that might shock elements of the audience.

It says it “is sometimes necessary to use expressions or quotations that may be shocking. . .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.”

That being said: “We choose a tone that will not gratuitously offend audience sensitivities. In particular we avoid swearing and coarse, vulgar, offensive or violent language except where its omission would alter the nature and meaning of the information reported.”

CONCLUSION

O'Leary is a businessman employed as a co-host on the program. He appears elsewhere on CBC. He is permitted to comment as a contracted contributor, but that does not exempt him from standards involving good taste. I have [previously reviewed](#) the framework for O'Leary's presence as a co-host and noted that he is a colourful, controversial commentator.

Many business terms carry a violent connotation: beyond the "bullet in the head" to describe a leader who must be ousted, there is the stock's "dead cat bounce," the takeover-resistant "poison pill," the board with its "knives out" and the company "bloodletting." Similar imagery can be found in sports, politics and entertainment.

I have some sympathy for those who find wanting the standards and trends of language, but in this instance I believe O'Leary was using a common term. There was no violation of CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices.

Kirk LaPointe
CBC Ombudsman