

Review: Coverage of the March for Life rally in Ottawa

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June 15, 2011

## **REVIEW**

On May 12, 2011, CBC News reported on radio, television and online about the annual March For Life gathering in Ottawa on Parliament Hill. The demonstration was primarily in opposition to measures that provide access to therapeutic abortions in Canada. It also spent time encouraging other social and spiritual support measures for young and old alike. Similar events took place in Canada and abroad.

CBC Television's [coverage on The National](#) focused on the demonstration's anti-abortion theme in the context of an election result that had provided the Conservatives with a majority government. It noted how some in the gathering might expect the prime minister to reopen the national debate on the abortion issue but how he had said in the recent election campaign that he was unwilling to do so. The National report took note of the presence of some Conservative caucus members at the rally to encourage lobbying on the issue. The report also carried views of those who supported access to abortions and who said the issue should be closed.

CBC Television reported that "police say the crowd swelled to nearly 5,000," while CBC Radio said 5,000 were in attendance. In its stories, CBC.ca reported "thousands" and "several thousand" attended.

The complainant, Kathie Hogan, disputed the crowd estimate. She asserted the crowd comprised nearly 15,000.

Hogan said she had been to several of the annual rallies and that they have grown. She said one way to determine the size of the crowd is to look at how much "green" there remains to see on the Parliament Hill lawn when the crowd is at its peak — in previous years, there was a lot of lawn to be seen, but "this year it was different."

Esther Enkin, the executive editor of CBC News, wrote back May 27, 2011. She said that the reported estimate was provided by police, who are more expert in that subject than

any reporter might be. “In this case, Ottawa police made the estimate, based on their knowledge and experience with crowds on Parliament Hill.”

Enkin added: “Reporters are our eyes and ears bringing us information about events that we did not witness ourselves. But when reporters do not witness the events they tell us about, but hear about them from others, or cannot know about something with certainty – as was the case here – we expect that they will attribute that information. That way listeners, viewers or readers know the source of the information and can make their own judgment about its reliability.”

Hogan wrote back May 30, 2011, to say that CBC journalists were there: “To say that this was a ‘police estimate’ is buck-passing at its finest.” Hogan added that the marchers on the walk stretched two hours.

[CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices](#) call for impartial, accurate, fair and balanced reporting. *“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.”*

The policy, updated late in 2010, does not specifically address the issue of how to deal with reporting crowd sizes. But the former policy called for journalists to inquire on the number of participants at demonstrations. It did not specify with whom the inquiry should be made.

## **CONCLUSION**

Reporting crowd size is an element in how media shape the public perception of an event. Large crowds matter in the court of public opinion.

At times media will report the actual against the anticipated attendance to underscore a successful or unsuccessful event — for example, that organizers either were expecting a larger crowd or were surprised by such a large crowd.

When there is a dispute between organizers and media about crowd size, it can play into public perception that media are attempting to downplay or diminish the significance of an event — and by extension, the ideals behind it.

This matter of crowd estimation is at the heart of this complaint and other emails received by this Office about the coverage; some hypothesized a deliberate understatement of the crowd and revealed a bias on the issues about which the crowd

had gathered. The emails were generally about the estimate and not the coverage itself.

There are crowd-counting methods. The most common one was developed in the 1960s by an American journalism professor whose office overlooked a plaza where students frequently protested. The plaza had grid lines permitting him to see how many grid squares were filled with students and how many on average were on each grid. After he gathered this data on numerous occasions, he produced a rough guide to crowd density still used today: a loosely gathered crowd, where each person is an arm's length from the nearest neighbour, needs 10 square feet per person; a more tightly packed crowd takes up about 4.5 square feet per person; a packed mob takes up 2.5 square feet per person. The formula measures the square feet occupied by the crowd and divides it by the appropriate assessment of the crowd's density.

In practice, though, journalists face a number of challenges at large demonstrations. They have to monitor the messages and the reactions. Even if they were expert in estimating crowds, it would be impractical to expect them to perform that function while gathering information about the event itself. Occupying a vantage point to attempt a count would typically remove the journalist from the crowd and the news-making activity in it.

In these cases, media need the best expert assistance possible. No system of estimating crowds is expedient and truly accurate, but police usually provide the simplest and most impartial counts.

CBC reported that as many as 5,000 were in attendance. A CBC producer was given the estimate by police and passed it along to a reporter for her dispatches.

I take note that Radio-Canada indicated 6,000 attended and that other media reported crowd sizes of 10,000 (including Postmedia News, with no attribution to suggest how it reached that conclusion) to 15,000 (online sites aligned with rally organizers). The national news service, The Canadian Press, said in various accounts "thousands" and (in a report redistributed by CBC.ca) "several thousand" attended.

The RCMP detachment assigned to this rally says it gave media a crowd estimate of 7,000, with another 80 to 100 gathered to oppose the demonstrators. (Ottawa Police says it has a policy of not estimating crowd size.)

CBC relied on official sources of information on crowd size, an approach far preferable to assuming the task itself. Given that police resources are in part accorded in relation

to crowd size, there are no evident reasons to disbelieve stated police estimates or to not conclude its estimates are the most accurate available.

I found that CBC understood well the importance of, and wanted to receive, accurate crowd estimates. The police estimate differed from other estimates, but I concluded CBC conducted best practices under the circumstances. While there remains a disagreement on what that actual estimate was (the RCMP asserts it said 7,000 and CBC asserts it was told 5,000), I could find no evidence that CBC did anything other than repeat what police were saying about the crowd size.

I certainly found no evidence of any underlying bias concerning the issues involved in the story that might give rise to inaccurate outcomes. The television report itself reflected the views of those in attendance and provided a fair and impartial platform. It gave voice to those opposing the demonstration, but in proportion. It also provided a contextual understanding of the issues in light of the election result.

I did not find a violation of CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices.

Kirk LaPointe  
CBC Ombudsman