

Review: Updating of CBC News reports

June 29, 2011

REVIEW

On January 3, 2011, CBC Radio reported that a Palestinian woman, Jawaher Abu Rahma, had died following a protest a few days earlier in the West Bank village of Bil'in. The story of her death was part of a larger item on the continuing tension in the village.

Her mother told freelance contributor Linda Gradstein the woman happened upon the protest while walking in the village, then fell sick and collapsed when tear gas was dispersed on the crowd. The mother said she had lost consciousness in the ambulance and died the following morning.

The mother said a doctor told them she had died of respiratory failure and cardiac arrest caused by tear gas inhalation. CBC noted the Israeli army was investigating the circumstances, in particular to determine if there was any pre-existing medical condition that might have contributed to her death.

The complainant, Mike Fegelman, the executive director of HonestReporting Canada, an organization that scrutinizes media coverage of Middle East issues, wrote January 5 to say CBC had relied entirely on Palestinian sources for the report (his site archived [an MP3 file](#) of the report).

"Surely Ms. Gradstein's lengthy three minute and 32 seconds-long feature report should have acknowledged the Israeli account of the matter," particularly given the Israeli army's contention with the account, Fegelman wrote.

Before CBC wrote back, Fegelman wrote again February 1 to note that an Israeli army investigation of her death had concluded January 19 that she died from medical treatment at the hospital.

According to media reports, the investigation concluded she had been given an excessive dose of a drug to combat the effects of tear gas and that she had an adverse medical reaction owing to a pre-existing condition.

Fegelman asserted that an update to the story was in order.

Esther Enkin, the executive editor of CBC News, wrote back May 24, 2011, and addressed the issue amid seven separate complaints from Fegelman.

She said that Gradstein “fairly and accurately reported the information known at the time, including the (army’s) promise to investigate.” She noted the army did not make any other official comment at the time.

“The results of the . . . investigation were not available until January 19. It concluded she had died because of poor medical treatment received at the hospital — a conclusion disputed by Palestinians,” Enkin wrote.

Fegelman said he recognized that CBC could not update all stories, but that this was a worthy exception. He asked for greater clarity on the CBC policy about when stories should be updated.

He wrote: “I would like to contend that when such a report indicates that future information (the Israeli investigation) may help shed a light on the matter when it comes out, shouldn’t the CBC update the file on this incident in the interests of best informing their audiences?”

Otherwise, Fegelman argued, CBC would be susceptible to carrying unproven assertions.

“With this logic in mind, all the Palestinian protagonists have to do is invent a story that casts a negative light on Israel, like the fraudulent killing of a Palestinian civilian from crowd control disbursement methods, and CBC may report it, and if the CBC does carry a report, it will do so while mentioning the Palestinian claims in attribution or at face value, and the Israelis will most typically explain that they can’t comment until an investigation happens. This cycle could go on forever and it clearly shows how such logic could be easily manipulated for propaganda purposes.”

CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices call for accurate, fair and balanced reporting. The policy addresses the issues of corrections and updates: *“We do not hesitate to correct any mistake when necessary nor to follow-up a story when a situation changes significantly.”*

CONCLUSION

There was no violation of CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices in the story. The most accurate information available was fairly portrayed.

Decision-making must be vested in a news organization to the greatest degree possible. Policy must guide but not be so stern as to direct or bind an organization or usurp its

spontaneous, independent discretion on what to cover, what not to cover, and how to pursue the news.

Existing policy language about updating stories “when a situation changes significantly” is broad enough to guide CBC News’ practices and permit CBC News independence in its decision-making. Given that CBC News creates hundreds of stories daily, it is impractical to update all but the few most significantly changed and it is impossible to draw a boundary that would codify such practice. In asking for precision on the policy, the complainant is asking for more than can be reasonably provided.

In this instance, another significant viewpoint emerged when the Israeli army investigated the death and drew a different conclusion than the deceased woman’s mother. That conclusion, like the original conclusion, was disputed.

It was not unreasonable for there to be an acknowledgment of this new development in some subsequent respect, mainly because the deceased woman was the focal point of the original, full-fledged story of more than three minutes.

There was no violation of Journalistic Standards and Practices, in part because there is a flexible guideline to interpret on what constitutes a significant change, but I believe there was room for improvement that would not have compromised the effectiveness of programming.

Kirk LaPointe
CBC Ombudsman