

Review: Anna Maria Tremonti's interview with author/activist Alice Walker

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REVIEW

On June 27, 2011, CBC Radio's The Current featured [an interview with Alice Walker](#), the author who was scheduled to imminently participate in a flotilla aimed at breaching an Israeli maritime blockade of the Gaza Strip. (The flotilla ultimately did not sail.)

The planned flotilla followed an attempt a year earlier in which nine were killed by Israeli forces on the MV Mavi Marmara ship in international waters as it approached Gaza.

Host Anna Maria Tremonti asked Walker in an eight-minute interview about her involvement in the flotilla and the cause behind it, how she felt her activism paralleled her involvement in the U.S. civil rights movement, and how she deals with criticism about her participation.

Walker said she was "in solidarity" with the children of Palestine. She called the situation in Gaza "dire" and a "grave injustice" to deprive people of their basic human rights.

Walker, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Color Purple*, noted the "terrorist destruction" from bombing had been paid for in part by her tax dollars as an American. "I found it hard to bear," she said of her travels there.

While she had studied other conflicts, "I am drawn to this one because . . . it is so longstanding." She said Americans have a duty to act upon it because they foot a large part of the bill.

Walker talked about her involvement in the fledgling 1960s civil rights movement in smalltown America. "I see in Palestine a similar institution of segregation (and) apartheid," she said, referring in particular to the West Bank wall built by Israel. She also noted that Palestinians were not permitted to use certain roads in Gaza that "Jews" were.

Walker said it didn't matter if she had to bear criticism, given the world's large challenges.

The complainant, Ron Sloan, said Tremonti gave Walker free rein “to attack Israel without substantiating her comments.” He said the interview and others had fueled hatred toward Israel, which had endured endless attacks and been forced to build the wall as a result.

Sloan said Tremonti is selective in how she approaches interviews on this issue, that “it is always the Israeli point of view that gets heavily challenged while the Palestinian point of view is enabled by her questions.”

The result was an anti-Israeli perspective that veered into anti-Semitism, Sloan said.

Jennifer Moroz, the acting executive producer of *The Current*, wrote back July 21 to disagree with Sloan. She said it “would be abundantly evident in any reasonable listening to our coverage” that CBC was not inciting hatred or being anti-Semitic.

She said it was not the obligation of CBC to “determine what is ‘truth’ or what views are ‘acceptable’ (a truly dangerous notion for any broadcaster), but only to present differing views fairly and accurately affording Canadians the opportunity and the information they need to make up their own minds about the nature or quality of the views expressed.”

CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices provide a framework for interviews that involve guests expressing opinions. It calls for programming “*over time (that) provides a wide range of comment and opinion on significant issues.*”

When programs or segments present a single opinion or point of view, “*we ensure that a diversity of perspective is provided across a network or platform and in an appropriate time frame,*” the policy says.

Also in the standards and practices policy is language that calls for CBC to “*avoid generalizations, stereotypes and any degrading or offensive words or images that could feed prejudice or expose people to hatred or contempt.*”

CONCLUSION

Given its format, *The Current* is afforded ample opportunity to provide wide-ranging perspectives on contemporary issues. The program has made a substantial commitment to an exploration of the Middle East conflict.

It is difficult to generalize about its work by focusing on one or even a small selection of segments on a prominent subject like the Middle East because it examines the topic regularly and from many angles.

In the days following the Alice Walker interview, for instance, the program featured an interview with a spokesman for the Israeli Foreign Ministry about the international challenge to

the Gaza blockade. After another interview with an Israeli human rights group advocating freedom of movement for the Palestinians, the program gave the ministry spokesman another opportunity to respond to that group. A senior producer for the program says this drew correspondence for not challenging pro-Israeli assertions.

In the weeks and months before, it dealt with Middle East matters several times from a variety of vistas. I cannot detect an emphasis in its coverage that would betray bias. In this respect, the program fulfilled CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices by presenting a range of views over a reasonable period of time.

Even when it fulfills policy, there will be occasions in which the program appears to provide excessive latitude to some guests. In this case, I acknowledge the complainant's view that Walker was not challenged when she described conditions in the area with terms like "apartheid," "terrorist destruction" and "grave injustice." These are subjective terms about which there could be much debate; problem was, this was just not the time and place for it.

Rather than push back and ask Walker to justify those terms, host Anna Maria Tremonti repeatedly steered her to different elements of her personal story, including Walker's earlier activism and handling of public criticism.

In an important respect this was understandable: If the objective of the interview was to hear Walker's story in a relatively short segment, pushing back on her every choice of terms could have stopped the interview in its tracks. That being said, it was clear from Walker's deliberateness in her choices of terms how she well knew the power of words.

On its own the segment neither reflected the program's contextual and curious approach nor violated CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices. There was simply some room for improvement.

Kirk LaPointe
CBC Ombudsman