

August 26, 2011

Review: Six-Day War segment

REVIEW

On June 1, 2011, CBC News Network carried a segment on its CBC News Now program referring to the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, commonly called the Six-Day War. Host Carole MacNeil said Israel had been “attacked by its neighbours” initially in that war.

The complainant, Wondu Rida, wrote June 4, 2011 to say that this characterization of the conflict’s start was a “distinctly Israeli version of events” and in dispute. He indicated CBC should be conscious of the differing interpretations.

The executive editor of CBC News, Esther Enkin, wrote July 15, 2011 that the war opened with “large-scale surprise attacks by Israel against Egypt, Jordan and Syria (then the United Arab Republic). The Israeli attacks followed a period of high tensions between Israel and its neighbours, including Egypt’s closure days earlier of the Straits of Tiran to Israeli ships, which Israel had long said it would regard as an act of war. In the days before the air attacks, Egyptian, Jordanian, Syrian and Iraqi troops and armour were massing on the borders. As you pointed out, whether it was a defensive pre-emptive strike, as Israel maintains, or an act of aggression, as the Arab countries maintain, is a matter of contention.”

Enkin added: “In any event, it is at least misleading to say Israel was attacked by its neighbours. We regret the error. “

Rida wrote Enkin on July 24, 2011, asked where the mistake emanated, and argued that unless that person were corrected there remained the possibility of a repeated error.

He asked August 21, 2011 for a review by this Office. In response, he was told that the review would not repeat CBC’s review of the journalistic particulars already acknowledged in error.

[CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices](#) strive for accuracy and state: *“We do not hesitate to correct any mistake when necessary nor to follow-up a story when a situation changes significantly.”*

CONCLUSION

The CBC News response to the complainant fairly reflected historical interpretation of the Six-Day War as one that could have started either with acts of aggression or preemptive defensive measures, depending on one’s perspective.

CBC acknowledged it was misleading for the program to assert that neighbouring countries attacked Israel. It expressed to the complainant regret for the error.

In correspondence the complainant reminded CBC News of an earlier Ombudsman’s review about the need to communicate to journalists about their mistakes in order to help avert repeated errors.

There should be no doubt of the importance of acknowledging and correcting errors when they are identified and on the value of discussing them with journalists. After all, decades of academic studies have consistently identified the presence of factual errors in roughly half of all stories, so mistakes are not uncommon and their presence not worth denying.

What often distinguishes news organizations is the way in which they handle errors to avoid their repetition and to retain public trust.

In an organization’s covenant with its audience, credibility is reinforced and maturity displayed when the public record is set straight. An uncorrected error unnecessarily frustrates a complainant and denies the audience valuable information.

The challenge in this case is to understand how CBC News applies a policy which states it does not “hesitate to correct any mistake when necessary.” I am concerned that leaves open the door for CBC News to determine “when necessary” without identifying criteria by which it defines necessity. It also ensures it is not in violation of policy even when it has erred and acknowledged so.

It is important that CBC News remain independent in its decision-making and it is impractical to correct every mistake in a broadcast or online.

Still, a complainant is offering a public service by identifying a mistake, and that public service is only fulfilled if a news organization acts on the matter by reaching the audience with the correct content.

In the absence of a policy of absolute correction, at the very least I would encourage CBC News to formally correct agreed-upon errors identified by the public. Such effort beyond the correspondence with complainants would better fulfill the spirit of its policy.

Kirk LaPointe
CBC Ombudsman