

Review: A look back at the police response to demonstrations during the G20 summit

September 2, 2011

REVIEW

On June 26, 2011, CBC Radio One's Sunday Edition [devoted most of its first two hours](#) in the three-hour program to a look back at events one year earlier in Toronto, in particular the police response to the demonstrations during the G20 summit of international leaders in Toronto.

On the June 26-27 weekend of the gathering, dozens of demonstrations took place. Thousands of police officers responded. More than 1,100 were arrested, the largest mass arrest in Canadian history. Of those arrests, about 300 have been charged and more than half of those charges have been withdrawn.

In the week before the program, a police services report was issued that criticized police planning and implementation of the crowd controls, including the behaviour of many officers in subduing demonstrators and detaining them in substandard conditions at a makeshift centre.

Over the course of most of the two hours, the program explored the issue of police conduct through different segments: a documentary report on siblings who participated in demonstrations and on police containment tactics; a panel discussion with a civil liberties official, an expert in police psychology, and a theatre director and writer who was detained during the demonstrations; and an interview with the head of the association representing Toronto police.

The documentary by John Chipman used the experience of the siblings to discuss with a British official how the containment tactic (commonly called kettling) is conducted. The controversial approach was criticized during the G20 gathering and since. In the week before the program, the Toronto police chief reversed an earlier stand and announced the tactic would not be again used.

Host Michael Enright noted in the broadcast that a scheduled interview with the Toronto police chief had been cancelled and that efforts to interview two provincial ministers on the issues had been turned down.

Among other things, the panel discussion included an explanation of the difference between old-style crowd control and new-style crowd containment, what Enright called the “valid undertaking” of dealing with violence in the demonstrations, the impact on police of the focus in advance of the gathering on the possible disruptions, and whether there has been a shift in society from expressions of freedom to efforts of security.

The interview with the police association chief was largely an accountability session in which Enright asked for explanations on why the police acted as they did. The official, Mike McCormick, defended his fellow officers, noted that the situation was unprecedented, and acknowledged mistakes were made.

At one point Enright argued that more than 1,000 people were arrested and “many of them haven’t done anything.” McCormick said that wasn’t the case, but that there was a big difference between not doing anything and finding grounds to convict. “Point taken,” Enright said.

The complainant, Viggo Lewis, wrote later that day that the program lacked sufficient balance due to an excessive focus on police wrongdoing. Lewis acknowledged there had been police misconduct, but he argued that the program “eroded the fine history and reputation of the police who stand for law and order in this country and encouraged the thugs.” He suggested CBC was violating the Broadcasting Act in failing to provide a balanced view.

Marjorie Nichol, the executive producer of Sunday Edition, wrote back June 26 to disagree with Lewis’ characterization of the program’s approach. She said Enright reiterated there were vandals on the streets during the G20 gathering and that he and panelists were clear about the necessity to stop their actions.

Nichol said McCormack agreed that the peaceful demonstrators had a right to be there. She noted that the panel concluded, though, that the police behaviour might dissuade some from participating in democratic demonstrations in the future.

[CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices](#) call for fairness, impartiality and balance in programming.

The policy seeks to *“ensure that divergent views are reflected respectfully. . .we also ensure that they are represented over a reasonable period of time.”*

It aims to *“treat individuals and organizations with openness and respect. . .We treat them even-handedly.”*

The policy says CBC does not *"promote any particular point of view on matters of public debate."*

The expression of opinion is permitted and balance is achieved by providing *"over time . . . a wide range of comment and opinion on significant issues."*

CONCLUSION

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

The documentary was an accurate reflection of an experience and of the thinking behind the techniques of crowd containment. The panel session further explored police thinking and the possible impact of their behaviour. The feature on a detainee accurately portrayed plight. And the interview with the police association chief gave voice to the defence of the force and acknowledged many apt forms of their behaviour in an accountable frame.

The thrust of the program was an exploration of what happened and why, not a debate on whether police could or should behave as they did. It could proceed on that basis because a review of the demonstration containment had been highly critical of the force used. The story had moved along and the program was simply leveraging that report to take the discussion to another level.

The concept of balance is not easily defined. It doesn't involve mathematical equivalence or even necessarily one supporting voice for every opposing voice. Rather it is a blend of conditions that permit a range of views to be equitably expressed and challenged. That includes a line of inquiry that is equitably challenging and permissive of guests.

When balance is not achieved in a single segment or program, the CBC policy affords the achievement of balance through other programs and platforms over an undefined period of time. This concept is often difficult for the non-journalist to comprehend or accept, and the complainant and others have expressed a strikingly similar tone of frustration in concluding that a policy that permits long-term balance is less than immediately satisfying.

Not surprisingly, they feel a particular element should reflect a wide range of perspectives at that very moment. Their expectations and disappointments often undermine their confidence in journalism, even when a conscientious programmer achieves the goal of balance over time.

Unfortunately there is no remedy for this. Not every story can contain perfect balance. A form of consolation comes in the long-term consumption of a news organization's

journalism that approaches and explores issues from different perspectives in different places.

In this instance it was regrettable that the program was unable to convince authorities of the Toronto police force or provincial government to participate. That might have gone some distance to addressing the complaint. I acknowledge the complainant's frustration that the guests were overwhelmingly critical of police and, with the exception of the police association chief and the expert in police psychology, did little to defend their general conduct or enhance their reputation. But I concluded CBC News tried to be inclusive.

That being said, I found several examples in which host Michael Enright ensured his line of questioning was fair-minded to police. He asserted the appropriateness of elements of police conduct during the demonstrations, the validity of dealing with vandals, and the historically strong relationship between the force and the community. On one occasion, when he was challenged about an assertion about the innocence of demonstrators, he immediately conceded the point. While many of his questions were tough, they were not inappropriate in the circumstance.

Kirk LaPointe
CBC Ombudsman