

Review: An anonymous letter that was read aloud on CBC Radio's Mainstreet

September 21, 2011

REVIEW

On July 26, 2011, the Halifax-based CBC Radio afternoon program, Mainstreet, read aloud an anonymously written letter sent to the show. An earlier edition of the program had discussed dog owners and what they did about their pet's droppings, and the program had received several correspondences since.

Host Stephanie Domet noted that a hand-delivered letter had arrived at the station, unusual in this era of email. She read it aloud: "Greetings. When Stevie Hopper offends me, I send him dog poop, packaged in a plastic poop bag and sent OMHS in a plain package to him in Ottawa with my protest. We could get rid of a lot of dog poop and fertilize new ideas within our leadership, which is only there by default because of a public that failed to get out and vote."

Domet said it hadn't been signed by name.

The complainants, Michael Patrick and Anne Tulloch Patrick, wrote July 28 that the letter was disrespectful of the prime minister and his office and not in accordance with CBC standards. They asked for an apology.

Kathy Large, the program manager for CBC Radio in Nova Scotia, wrote back that the letter was not treated as journalism but as a "sarcastic take" on a topic that had been threading through the program in recent days.

She continued: "As such, it was delivered as a tongue-in-cheek contribution from an audience member and not portrayed as serious discussion." Large noted that the program changes its tone a few times during the course of the three-hour broadcast.

Large added: "Perhaps we weren't as clear as we should have been about the reason for reading the letter."

Large also noted that CBC is "serious in protecting our credibility when it comes to our journalism." For instance, CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices "only allow anonymous contributions to our stories under very specific circumstances and with prior approval" from a senior manager.

She wrote: “We know our audience expects us to tell them who is commenting and how they are connected when we are telling a story.”

No disrespect to the prime minister or his office was intended, Large said.

Michael Patrick and Anne Tulloch Patrick wrote back September 12 to say they did not accept this explanation. They wondered how an anonymous letter like this could have been judged suitable for broadcast. They took issue with the assertion that the letter was a sarcastic take and that no disrespect was intended.

They wrote: “Given the current well-publicized discussions about the loss of civility in public discourse and the increasing vitriol of political comment, we feel that even had this writer the courage to take ownership of his or her opinions, it would be difficult to justify their broadcast.”

They asserted CBC runs the risk of discrediting itself when it broadcasts anonymous material of this sort. The complainants added: “We have to ask for whom an insult is acceptable and for whom it is not.” They wondered if CBC would have read aloud such a letter if it were directed at “an environmental activist, a religious leader, an outspoken feminist (or) a pro-choice spokesperson.”

[CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices](#) broadly discuss issues related to this complaint.

One principle of the policy is that CBC treats individuals and organizations “*with openness and respect . . . We treat them even-handedly.*”

Production techniques should be “*consistent with factual accuracy and fairness in our reporting,*” the policy says.

Moreover, CBC avoids “*degrading or offensive words or images that could feed prejudice or expose people to hatred or contempt. Criminal matters require special care and precision.*”

Before text, audio or video can be published, “*its provenance and accuracy is verified.*”

The policy permits publication of unauthenticated material “*in exceptional circumstances . . . because of timeliness or (when) it is in the public interest.*” A decision to broadcast the material needs to be approved by a senior manager.

CONCLUSION

Mainstreet is a regional current affairs program deserving of more latitude than a news show to engage in a wider range of discussions, many of them light-hearted. Like shows of its kind across Canada, it switches gears throughout to be solemn at times and sassy at others, as it did in this case in a series of segments to discuss the traits of dog owners. Still, standards need to apply at all times.

The complainants' central concerns are well taken. It would be a mistake to make a major case of this matter, but it would also be a mistake to treat it lightly or indifferently.

Even though the letter refers to "Stevie Hopper," it is easy to infer that it's about Prime Minister Stephen Harper. It describes sending dog feces regularly to him in Ottawa in protest and encourages others to do so to "fertilize" leadership ideas. If it was the product of wit, it was certainly not the stuff of a public broadcaster.

I concluded that CBC should have discarded the letter as junk mail in poor taste. At best it was a failed attempt at humour and at worst it was a snide boast targeting the prime minister. That boast, not incidentally, constituted an admission of criminality. It was contempt posing as frolic.

Compounding the problem was the cowardly format of an anonymous contribution of commentary, an increasingly troubling presence in media but something CBC has done well generally to resist.

Anonymously provided information has its place in journalism, most properly when journalists shield the source of content that cannot be obtained in any other way. Even then, accountable managers should know sources and the information itself should be confirmed in some way.

Anonymous attacks, on the other hand, are free shots that run counter to the principles of fair-mindedness, transparency and accountability. Furnishing such rein weakens the credibility of any organization steeped in standards of rigorous information-gathering techniques that include the discipline of verification, the right of response, minimal harm, and the golden rule. It is true that public figures can expect to face tough attacks, but they should always know the attackers.

It is doubtful a letter like this was contemplated for the "exceptional circumstances" under which CBC policy says anonymous material can be published. In this instance, CBC did not even know the identity of the author and treated the letter's handling far too casually. In form and in intent, it was no laughing matter.

The program violated CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices.

Kirk LaPointe
CBC Ombudsman