

Review: Guest wasn't challenged in discussion about U.K. riots

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REVIEW

On August 10, 2011, CBC Radio's [Ottawa Morning discussed the riots](#) that had been taking place in recent days in the United Kingdom, first in the outskirts of London and then in several cities across England.

The eight-and-a-half minute segment featured two British expatriates now living in Ottawa. Sam Evans had lived in Ottawa seven years and Che Smith had lived in Ottawa five years.

Host Kathleen Petty asked them to help explain what was taking place, its origins, the role of social media in the events, what the rioters were targeting, and what the guests felt about the police response.

Evans said the riots had spread from an initial demonstration about a police shooting to something more significant.

Smith agreed, noting that the riots had moved into cities across the country and that his friends in England were suggesting the situation was "a bigger problem than what we're actually seeing on the news."

He went on: "It's been boiling for years in the country."

Smith called the riot perpetrators "football hooligans" with "a juvenile mentality" that used as a flimsy excuse to riot that "one of us" had been shot. It wasn't clear what he meant by "us."

Evans explained how social media had played a positive and negative role in the rioting.

But Smith said: "This isn't how people should look at England . . . This (a rioter) isn't the average Englishman."

He said people were frustrated, just as he had been when he lived there, “with the amount of people they’re letting into the country and the amount of money they’re spending on those people. But we’re not getting anything in return. They’re just living off the country’s benefits.”

Smith added that people were frustrated because the government was almost “favouring those who are coming in, who aren’t working, who can’t work or can’t speak English to work, and then they’re forgetting about the people who live there and that they’re trying to house and feed their families.”

The discussion looked at the focus of the riots and the looting of stores, then on the police response.

The complainant, Tony Wohlfarth, wrote August 17. He said the discussion perpetuated a negative stereotype in asserting that the riots were the result of immigrants. He said Petty did not challenge those views and the program did not present any alternative views.

Rob Renaud, the managing director of CBC Ottawa, wrote back September 13, apologized for the time it had taken to respond, and acknowledged there were times in the interview when the guest should have been challenged and “in which he was treated, incorrectly, as an expert on the causes of those events.”

Petty was no longer the program’s host, but Renaud said the production team had discussed the importance of providing a balanced view and of challenging guests’ assertions.

Wohlfarth wrote back September 15 to say the second guest could have provided balance but didn’t. He wanted to know how they had been selected for their appearance and presumed a program producer had interviewed them in advance.

Wohlfarth was dissatisfied with acknowledgment of his complaint and assurance it had been discussed with the production team.

[CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices](#) note the need for accuracy, fairness and balance and the particular challenges in the coverage of riots and demonstrations, even in their discussion.

“In covering these events, the information we provide is as accurate and as timely as possible under the circumstances,” the policy states. “In such a fluid situation, there is a commitment on our part to be open about what we know and how we know it. We will sometimes receive conflicting information from credible sources.”

The policy strongly words its caution about stereotyping: *“We avoid generalizations, stereotypes and any degrading or offensive words or images that could feed prejudice or expose people to hatred or contempt. Criminal matters require special care and precision.”*

CONCLUSION

Live radio broadcasts pose a great challenge. A studio host often juggles several tasks at once and it isn't always easy to listen to the guest's answers and challenge perspectives spontaneously. That being said, standards and practices apply.

In this instance the program did well to acknowledge in correspondence with the complainant that one of the guests was not an expert in assessing the origins of the U.K. unrest and that he deserved to be challenged at times in the interview. In short, it acknowledged it could have done more to fulfill CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices, and I agree. The guests were years removed from living in England and would not have easily served as experts in understanding the conditions that gave rise to riots.

Typically I feel it is necessary for the program to do more than acknowledge in correspondence with the complainant that there was room for improvement. When it recognizes shortcoming, it can turn the page by communicating with the audience when the matter is still fresh in the regular listener's mind. In this instance this was feasible because CBC staff reviewed the interview at the program's end and agreed it had not gone according to plans. Ideally it would have communicated its misgivings on the segment the next day and reassured listeners it would aim to do better, or it could have convened another segment that presented the appropriate context.

But there was another significant factor in the mix. Host Kathleen Petty, who had earlier been announced as the new host of the Calgary radio morning show and was scheduled to end her Ottawa hosting term that week, informed listeners the day following the interview she was not going to be moving after all. Rather, she was remaining in Ottawa to receive medical treatment for an undisclosed but apparently serious condition. It would not be surprising, and it would be understandable, if the previous day her mind were occupied on matters more important than the studio situation. Nor would it have been surprising if the production team were unsettled by this information.

Petty has been a national radio and television host with a high standard of accomplishment in decades of CBC work. I concluded that this segment was in no way characteristic of her rigorous approach or ability. The characterizations of immigrants were not emblematic of the host's or the program's values and it would be wrong to infer that the views were condoned by either.

Unfortunately, misplaced correspondence within CBC Ottawa meant that by the time a complaint was fielded and handled nearly a month had passed and the issue had fallen from view. A viable window to deal with the audience on the matter had closed. In these circumstances I see no practical value in reopening the matter, but in the event of further unrest, the program would do well to revisit the topic with stronger journalism.

Kirk LaPointe
CBC Ombudsman