

Review: Identification of an interviewee as a “labour analyst”

October 27, 2011

REVIEW

On October 10, 2011, CBC Television’s The National carried [a report](#) by Hannah Thibedeau on the effort to resolve contract differences between Air Canada and the union representing its flight attendants. It led a four-minute package on the dispute featuring two elements, including Thibedeau’s report and an interview conducted by host Wendy Mesley with federal Labour Minister Lisa Raitt outside her home.

The first report noted that two earlier settlements had broken down, including a tentative settlement reached in August that had been rejected by the union. The threat of an imminent strike had brought Raitt forward to say the federal government was prepared to act if it appeared there was an economic impact. Raitt said the message to both parties was clear: It was better to get a deal now.

The government issued a statement that there had been a breakdown under the Canada Labour Code.

The report then featured Ian Lee, described as a “labour analyst” in the script and linked to Carleton University through a superimposed credit on the screen. Lee said he couldn’t ever recall a Labour Minister making such a comment. He speculated that the government would use the breakdown as the “pretext and the context” for legislative change, and “knowing where this government is coming from, that will make it more difficult to strike.”

The complainant, Kyle Mytruk, said Lee’s background was not as a labour analyst but in other fields of economic policy and practice. Mytruk said he had seen Lee referred to in other reports as an economist. He cited biographical information online that did not identify Lee’s labour expertise.

Mytruk said this amounted to a violation of CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices that call for clearly identifying interviewees to permit the audience to judge the relevance and credibility of their statements. CBC’s identification gave Lee more

credibility than if he had been called a financial analyst or business professor, Mytruk asserted.

Mytruk also said it was unclear where Lee worked because he had been identified at times from Carleton University and at times from the Sprott School of Business.

Mark Harrison, the executive producer of The National, wrote back October 17, 2011, to say that the university website description of Lee was incomplete. His doctoral dissertation, for instance, had dealt with the labour history of Canada Post. He had been a frequent commentator, including on CBC, on private and public sector labour issues.

He had told CBC he was comfortable with being identified as a labour analyst.

As for his place of work, Harrison noted that the Sprott School of Business was at Carleton University and it was not wrong to use either descriptor.

Mytruk wrote back October 19 and noted that Lee had been described as an economist or public policy expert, depending on the story. He felt CBC was “changing his title and field of study to fit the story.” He also noted the [CBC.ca story](#) on the matter referred to Lee as a “labour expert.”

Mytruk asked for a review. “I think it is important for the CBC to set guidelines for how they define commentators.”

The [CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices](#) policy intersects with the complaint with language addressing the issue of how interviewees are identified.

It states: “*We make every effort . . . to give the context and explanations necessary for the audience to judge the relevance and credibility of their statements.*”

CONCLUSION

I take the point from the complainant that it can be confusing to refer to interviewees variously. But in Lee’s case, his curriculum vitae and work experience suggest a versatile expertise in business, public policy, economics and the workplace over a quarter-century academic career. He has been a frequent commentator in recent weeks on international debt crises, for instance, but his commentary on labour issues dates back two decades on CBC and other media. While he would not first describe himself as a labour analyst, he believes the label is justified.

Lee has taught strategic management at Carleton University, which houses the Sprott School of Business, and at Carnegie Mellon, University of Washington, University of Pittsburgh, the State University of New York in Buffalo, University of Calgary, University

of Ottawa and Dalhousie University since 1988. That field furnishes a fundamental understanding of labour issues in the context of business practices, policies and strategies. Apart from his dissertation on Canada Post labour history, his academic publications include works on alterative (sic) work arrangements, public service downsizing, and on labour negotiations. His work in corporate governance would have also required facility in labour matters.

Moreover, he was principally called upon in this story to discuss public policy as it intersected with labour issues, and on public policy he is a scholar and authority.

Lee was featured saying the minister's statement was without precedent in his memory and speculating that it foretold an effort to reduce the right to strike. He was qualified to say this as someone with a strong background in public and private sector policy and strategy.

It is not incorrect to adapt superimposed or scripted references to interviewees for particular stories. CBC already has the guidelines sought by the complainant.

They call on CBC News to identify expertise in a way most relevant to the audience for a particular segment of programming. Provided the expertise is neither exaggerated nor distorted, such tailoring or customizing of labels is a useful practice to help the audience understand why someone has been sought for expert comment.

I do not believe those identifiers need to match titles or particular roles; in fact, they are quite helpful if they identify the competencies for which they have been selected to appear. It helps additionally if the audience can understand where someone applies this expertise, whether it's an organization or an institution or elsewhere in the community. Lee was described as a labour analyst and shown to be at Carleton University, a very satisfactory combination of accurate descriptors.

In this instance, there was no violation of CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices.

Kirk LaPointe
CBC Ombudsman