

Review: Proposed reopening of asbestos mine in Quebec

November 15, 2011

REVIEW

On September 27, 2011, CBC Radio's [The Current](#) featured [two discussions](#) on the proposed reopening of the Jeffery asbestos mine in Quebec.

A deadline loomed in four days for Balcop Ltd., an import-export firm headed by company president Baljit Singh Chadha, to raise \$25 million from private investors. It offered to do so in order to qualify for a \$58-million loan guarantee by the province of a loan to Balcop from a private bank.

The project would create hundreds of Quebec jobs. The project had its critics. They argued, among other things, that it was too dangerous to handle and risked health in developing countries that would import the [chrysotile asbestos](#).

As background, it should be noted that Canada had recently prevented a United Nations body from requiring a health warning to importers of the Quebec product. (The Quebec government extended the investment-raising deadline. At this writing, it [has not decided](#) if it will provide the loan guarantee.)

Host Anna Maria Tremonti interviewed Chadha about the effort to raise money, the safety of asbestos, the concerns about how the product would be handled abroad, and why he was reaching out to critics.

The program played clips from Dr. John Haggie, president of the Canadian Medical Association, who called for a ban on the use and export of asbestos; from New Democratic Party MP Pat Martin, a former asbestos worker who said the industry's claims of safety were "just not credible;" and from Dave Laundry, a former spokesman for the Canadian tobacco industry who said he had no hesitation in defending that product against false health concern claims.

It also featured a short interview with Glenn Selig, a U.S. public relations expert, on the way asbestos could be positioned to be more acceptable to the public, in part by noting the economic benefits of employment in the mine.

The largest segment in the 25-minute package was the 12-minute interview with Chadha, who had been meeting regularly in recent weeks with critics of the project.

He was clear about the hazards of asbestos and made no attempt to claim it was without them. “No one denies it is not a hazardous material” and a carcinogen, he said. But he asserted that, like other hazardous materials, there were ways to use it safely. Mining techniques had changed over the decades and there was evidence it was no less safe today than other forms of mining.

Tremonti challenged him repeatedly on his views and used the audio clips to lead into questions. One issue raised in the discussion was the practical challenge of ensuring asbestos would not be mishandled when it reached other countries. Chadha said his company would be able to inspect the use of the exported asbestos. “We will monitor our customers . . .it can be done.”

She asked Chadha how much he had raised. Chadha would only say he was hopeful the project would proceed.

As the interview ended, Chadha wanted to make one more point. But Tremonti said they were out of time and had to end the interview there and then. She then moved on to the clip featuring Laundry and the short interview with Selig.

The complainant, Susan Kaminskyj, a biology professor at University of Saskatchewan, wrote September 28 to criticize Tremonti’s behaviour in the Chadha interview and the seemingly quick ending.

Kaminskyj said she had studied the health impact of asbestos in her undergraduate work and that it has become clear that smoking can aggravate its hazards. She felt Chadha should be interviewed again with “an open mind.”

She followed that with an email the next day. As a longtime CBC listener, she said it “is disappointing when a particular broadcast fails to meet expected standards of objectivity.”

Pam Bertrand, the executive producer of The Current, wrote back November 4 to dispute Kaminskyj’s concerns about unfairness and to assert both points of view were included.

“Mr. Chadha had an opportunity to explain his views,” Bertrand wrote. “I think it is fair to say that he is articulate and knowledgeable. He is a staunch defender of asbestos use and a strong advocate of the Jeffrey Mine proposal. He was there to sell his point of view and promote his project, which he did skillfully and persuasively.”

She added: “But Ms. Tremonti or any other CBC journalist would fail in her responsibility if she simply offered Mr. Chadha a platform to express his views. Of course, she encouraged him to

explain his point of view; we feel Canadians are interested, and it is CBC's obligation to give the opportunity to hear it. But it is also an interviewer's responsibility to test those views and that is what Ms. Tremonti did."

Bertrand noted: "A journalist who persists may be seen as rude, arrogant or disrespectful when that is certainly not his — or her — intention."

As for the interview's seemingly abrupt ending, Bertrand said Tremonti did interrupt Chadha to say time had run out. "The clock is unforgiving in a radio studio. I certainly regret if Ms. Tremonti sounded rude. I can assure you that was certainly not her intention. Nor do I believe Mr. Chadha understood it that way."

Kaminskyj wrote again November 6 to disagree. She said Tremonti was "frequently abrupt to the point of rudeness" in the interview and had neglected her responsibility "to provide an even-handed analysis of a contentious issue."

She said the two experts featured at the end of the interview placed Chadha and his efforts in the context of two people with "dubious morals at best."

She concluded: "I remain unpersuaded that Ms. Tremonti's interview in this instance was other than a knee-jerk reaction to the historical problems created 50-plus years ago by naïve asbestos mining and use practices. I do not expect that your views will change. However, in an ideal world, I still feel that Ms. Tremonti owes Mr. Chadha a public apology, in the context (of) an in-depth analysis of current practice and possibilities related to asbestos mining and use." The complainant is a scientist who has worked at times with unsafe substances. She believes hazardous material can be managed safely, either with human hands or with machinery, and benefit society under modern, controlled conditions. She felt that the program was not open to a discussion of that position, and that whenever Chadha asserted in the interview there were ways to work with asbestos, there was no acknowledgment he might have a valid argument.

[CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices](#) offer principles for such interviews:

"In our information gathering and reporting, we treat individuals and organizations with openness and respect. We are mindful of their rights. We treat them even-handedly."

"On issues of controversy, we ensure that divergent views are reflected respectfully, taking into account their relevance to the debate and how widely held these views are."

It adds: *"We do not promote any particular point of view on matters of public debate."*

Additionally: *"In matters of human health we will take particular care to avoid arousing unfounded hopes or fears in persons living with or close to those living with serious illnesses."*

CONCLUSION

I did not find a violation of CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices, but I found a few areas in which there were opportunities for improvement.

I did not share the view that host Anna Maria Tremonti was rude to or disrespectful of guest Baljit Singh Chadha. Rather, I sensed in repeated listening that there might have been too much ground to cover and too many elements in too little time, so there was a clock-watching tone throughout. In such circumstances, brisk can sound brusque.

No one disputes that asbestos is a hazardous carcinogen riskily handled, but does that necessarily forbid its mining? Many dangerous substances are mined, refined, exported, imported, used and featured. I concluded more could have been done to acknowledge this perspective, if not necessarily to agree with it.

The interview pursued a tough-minded line of questioning, within CBC policy, about the project's viability. But I did find somewhat problematic how Chadha was situated in the segment with a challenging host, two opponents of mining during the interview, and two public relations practitioners after him. By virtue of his isolation, the impression left was that he was on weak ground.

The questioning also implied it was solely the mining company's responsibility, and not the customer's, to guarantee safe use abroad. If indeed the export obligations are such a serious consideration, then the program could have done more to explore that dimension. As mentioned, there were so many seeming issues and so little time to deal with them.

I also agree with the complainant that the program did not acknowledge mining techniques might have changed in the decades since the hazards of asbestos were first chronicled. The segment did not breach policy by raising unfounded fears, but it did not thoroughly explore the available information.

In pursuit of the spirit of the journalism policy, the program might benefit from a follow-up discussion, particularly if the Quebec government approves the loan guarantee and sets in motion the reopening of the mine.

Kirk LaPointe
CBC Ombudsman