

Review: Graphic audio clip of 911 call in CBC Radio news story

November 30, 2011

REVIEW

Summary: This is a public complaint about an audio clip of a 911 call in a CBC Radio story June 29, 2010. The review found no violation of CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices, but said there was room for improvement.

In the late afternoon of June 29, 2010, CBC Radio Vancouver featured a report on its BC Today newscast on the death one day earlier of a five-year-old British Columbian girl while on a family vacation in nearby Washington State. The girl bled to death when her throat was cut; her stepfather was arrested and confessed to murder. (He pleaded guilty and was sentenced later in 2010 to 55 years in jail.)

In his report Ben Hadaway said Washington State police said the crime scene was the worst they ever dealt with. The report featured a comment from the girl's biological father of the murderer: "I hope he fries, the sooner the better."

And it included a short clip from the emergency 911 call released by police of the girl's distraught mother asking for help. Shortly after screaming, when asked what was happening, she told authorities: "My daughter's throat has just been cut."

In introducing the report, announcer Susan McNamee noted: "But first a warning: This report could be disturbing to some listeners."

The complainant, Jessica Motherwell McFarlane, wrote June 30, 2010 to complain that CBC had aired the distress call at her "family's dinner hour."

"My family heard this woman's horrendous screams and before we could turn off the radio, we were audio-witnessing a gory murder," she said. "Who at CBC Radio approved this public broadcast of a death in process?"

She wondered if CBC would report other deaths as they happened. "I should hope not. How could the CBC news staff have decided it would be ethical — or even necessary — to broadcast

a recording of a five-year-old girl after being slaughtered by her stepfather and while her panicking mother called 911 for emergency help?”

She said CBC had broken its trust with her as a listener because she expected reporting with perspective and analysis, not the involvement of her family “in witnessing — in the moment — a bloody massacre.”

She added: “Yesterday’s broadcast of the 911 distress call of this mother was nothing short of the radio equivalent of showing a ‘snuff film.’”

The letter was inadvertently misfiled. Esther Enkin, the executive editor of CBC News, wrote back November 17, 2011 to offer “sincere apologies” and an explanation of the use of the 911 audio clip.

Enkin said it was never the intention to offend the complainant or other listeners.

“Certainly, we do not normally condone the depiction of vividly implied violence on CBC Radio,” Enkin wrote. “However, in this particular case, we feel it was pertinent to the theme and integrity of the report.”

Enkin said she realized the excerpt of the 911 call was “chilling, but it is important to understand that it is our responsibility to report the news, and news by its very nature is often about upsetting events.”

Enkin said it was important for CBC to reconcile the competing obligations — on the one hand, to exercise discretion and restraint, and on the other, to convey needed information about what happened.

“Reconciling these two obligations means treading a narrow path between what could be seen as gratuitous and tasteless exploitation and the forthright description of a disturbing event,” she wrote. “That said, deciding when the information is relevant and important to the story, to what extent it is appropriate to relate it, and when that line has been crossed, is often difficult. As with so many other things in journalism, this decision, too, is a matter of judgment.”

Enkin said reporters and editors carefully reviewed the story and offered differing views on what should be included. “Certainly there is no ‘right’ answer; every story is different and our editors must assess the significance of the information in relation to the story on an individual basis.”

Enkin noted the advisory that preceded the report, but she also acknowledged “in retrospect, after reviewing the report, I think that we could have better prepared our listeners had we included a more specific warning about what was to follow.”

Motherwell McFarlane wrote back that day to thank CBC for following up on the misplaced correspondence. But she remained concerned about the report, which she felt reflected an “if it bleeds, it leads” approach to the prioritization of news.

She said she had spoken about a week after the report to an editor at CBC News who had agreed with her that the use of the 911 clip added nothing to the report. But she said a more senior news executive was defending the clip and that her trust was once again in question.

“I want to be confident that (the) CBC News Editorial team knows where (the) line lies between reporting with integrity versus offering up gratuitous, violent, sensationalism before I will enter into a relationship of trust by listening to future CBC News broadcasts,” she wrote.

She asked for a review by this Office.

[CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices](#) call for sensitivity when broadcasting content that might disturb some in the audience.

“In approaching victims or witnesses of tragic events, we carefully weigh both the public interest of full reporting and the need to show compassion and restraint. In such situations we are considerate and we use judgment.”

It goes on: *“When images or audio clips could upset part of the audience, we choose them carefully. We limit their use to what is necessary for an understanding of the subject and we provide an audience advisory before use on any of our platforms.”*

CONCLUSION

I take note of CBC’s apology for the delay in responding to the complainant. Efforts are being made by CBC News and this Office to better track and answer public complaints.

The CBC policy’s language on how to deal sensitively with disturbing content reflects the journalist’s dilemma to balance competing requirements to serve the public interest while minimizing harm. In practice it means reflecting upon difficult options and striving for a consistency in judgment that retains public trust.

This is one of journalism’s most challenging and lingering issues, in that there are differences in tastes and values and one size certainly does not fit all, so there are necessary accommodations to ensure offence is mitigated.

This tragedy had been reported for more than a day when the 911 tape was released by Washington State police, by which time CBC journalists had already been weighing what available information to broadcast. The tape was an additional and complicating option.

It is relevant to note cross-border differences in journalism. The U.S. legal framework permits authorities to be particularly swift and transparent in providing information about crime, much more so than their Canadian counterparts. This is reflected in a comparably aggressive form of journalism about crime.

As a corollary, the release of relevant content about Canadians involved in crimes in the U.S. offers Canadian news organizations an occasional opportunity to disclose details that might otherwise take longer.

Even so, it is important to make prudent and not prurient use of this material, because there are different cultural norms. Even though Canadians can readily gain access to the more candid and transparent model below the border, they are largely accustomed to more restrained coverage by their media, a different legal process, and even distinct approaches to matters of privacy and the public right to know. CBC's policy reflects the Canadian norm.

In recent years, the common (if delayed) release of 911 tapes in Canada has conditioned an expectation of hearing distress, panic and high emotion. No matter, CBC policy requires an advisory about content some might find problematic.

I agree with the executive editor of CBC News that more could have been done in this instance to alert listeners to the impending clip from the tape. The warning was generic, and had CBC noted there was a 911 tape listeners were going to hear, it would have given them time to turn away if they wished.

I acknowledge that some would find the use of the tape as unnecessary to describe the crime and the effort to respond to it, but I believe its use was justifiable to provide a stronger understanding of a tragedy that intersected with issues involving mental illness. Still, my personal view is that another, less graphic element of the tape could have adequately conveyed the anguish of the moment.

I do not agree that CBC can be accused of an excessive focus on crime in its news coverage or that it can be concluded there is a worrisome CBC trend in that direction. Comparably, the public broadcaster demonstrates far greater restraint in these matters as a rule.

In this case there was no violation of CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices, but there was room for improvement within them.

Kirk LaPointe
CBC Ombudsman