

Review: Headlines on two CBC.ca stories

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December 1, 2011

## **REVIEW**

Summary: This review concerns a public complaint about two headlines on CBC.ca stories October 18 and October 30, 2011. The complainant asserts the headlines betray bias. The finding is that there was no violation of CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices.

On October 18, CBC.ca [carried a story](#) on proposals to augment the number of MPs in the House of Commons. Its headline read: "Ontario to get fewer new seats in redrawn House."

The story, which depended on anonymous sources, noted that the 13 additional seats Ontario would get under the proposal were fewer than the 18 proposed under legislation that died when Parliament was dissolved earlier in 2011.

On October 30, it [carried a story](#) on a statement by Prime Minister Stephen Harper about the Canadian military mission in Afghanistan. Its headline read: "Harper retreats on Afghan mission risks."

The story noted that the prime minister's statement on the "significant risks" of the mission differed from, and was stronger than, one he made earlier. A Canadian soldier had just been killed in Afghanistan, the first to die since the combat mission had ended in July.

The complainant, Robert Scarborough, said the two headlines betrayed a left-wing bias. He compared the headlines to those of a rival broadcaster's website.

In the October 18 instance, CBC.ca's headline: "Ontario to get fewer new seats in redrawn House." The CTV.ca headline: "Ontario to get 13 more seats in House of Commons."

In the October 30 instance, CBC.ca's headline: "Harper retreats on Afghan mission risks." The CTV.ca headline: "Harper warns of risks in new Afghanistan mission."

"How can the CBC continue to deny left wing bias when this type of blatant twisting of the message goes on and on and on at the CBC day after day after day?" he wrote.

The executive editor of CBC News, Esther Enkin, wrote back November 17 to assure him of “the integrity of the news service.” She said the headlines were justifiably written in the context of new developments.

In the case of the Commons seats, she noted that it was already known Ontario would gain additional seats, but that the news was that it was getting fewer than had been previously announced.

In the case of the prime minister’s statement, she noted his assessment of “significant risks” had changed since the government announced a year earlier that troops would stay on after the combat mission concluded in order to train Afghanistan personnel. She noted: “Then he said a smaller mission that just involves training ‘presents minimal risks.’ Has the situation on the ground changed? Has the threat level changed? Have the mission tasks changed? All good questions implied by his changed assessment and, since they involve the lives of Canadian soldiers, important ones.”

Scarborough wrote again November 25 to say he was not reassured by the correspondence from Enkin. “On the contrary, it further convinced me that CBC News is not a news service but rather an advocacy group, with a left-of-centre political agenda,” he wrote.

Scarborough noted the importance of headlines in setting an impression and embedding memory of a story. He asserted that some people do not read much further into the body of a story.

He expressed doubt that the Office of the Ombudsman could impartially assess his complaint, so he was also forwarding it to his MP.

[CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices](#) call for accuracy and fairness, a reflection of the “*range of experiences and points of view of all citizens*,” and that its news and information content “*not promote any particular point of view on matters of public debate*.”

## **CONCLUSION**

With the arrival of CBC’s online presence nearly a decade ago, the traditional broadcaster had to shift some attention to what was once a print-only technique of headline writing. It did not create separate standards or guidelines for its online journalism; instead, all of its journalism properly bears the same standards and practices.

It is a peculiarity of journalism that headlines are frequently the most-to-be-read element and the last-to-be-created element. An inaccurate headline creates misinformation and a biased headline creates mistrust, and many newsrooms would concede that a disproportionate effort is applied to them considering their impact.

I concluded in this review that the headlines were journalistically sound and supportable.

The news in the Commons story was not that Ontario was gaining seats, but that it was gaining fewer new seats than had been proposed in earlier legislation. The headline simply reflected that.

The news in the Afghanistan mission story was not that the prime minister was outlining risks — he had earlier done so — but now was warning of more significant ones and was retreating from an earlier, milder position.

Neither of these headlines betrayed a bias. Indeed, they did well to provide context in a few words, a quality of meaning much needed in an age of massive information. The stories themselves were clearly and impartially written, as well.

The assertion that bias is pervasive at CBC News has not been borne out in more than a decade-and-a-half of work by the independent Office of the Ombudsman reviewing public complaints. In this instance, I concluded that assertion was unfounded and that there was no violation of CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices.

Kirk LaPointe  
CBC Ombudsman