

Review: Jack Layton interview
CBC News Network banner description of Opposition Leader as “Union Jack”

August 19, 2011

REVIEW

On June 23, 2011, federal Opposition Leader Jack Layton was interviewed on The Lang & O’Leary Exchange on the CBC News Network.

The interview, Layton’s first since his New Democratic Party’s strong showing in the federal election, took place in the week following the NDP annual convention. The interview focused on the Canada Post labour dispute.

Superimposed as a banner at the bottom of the screen as he was interviewed was the following line: “UNION JACK: Critics accuse Layton of being beholden to unions,” a content and presentation technique common in news and information programs.

The complainant, Kyle Mytruk, wrote June 29, 2011, to assert the so-called “super” was unfairly applied to Layton and betrayed a journalistic bias. He asked: If the program were to interview Prime Minister Stephen Harper, would it refer to him as “Corporate” Stephen? He also wondered why the program would use the general term “critics” when the proper term would have been “Tories” or “Conservatives,” those he asserted were the only clear Layton critics on this matter.

The program’s executive producer, Robert Lack, wrote back August 3, 2011, to assert that the superimposed information was fair-minded.

Lack noted that the program uses these banners to provide additional information. He noted that Layton’s appearance came five days after the convention at which he affirmed the party’s intention to continue its direct relationship to organized labour in Canada; thus, the “Union Jack” reference was not biased, he said.

Lack also said the term “critics” was accurate because not only Conservatives disagreed with Layton; indeed, he noted, academics, columnists, other politicians and even some of Layton’s own party members were encouraging distance from the labour movement.

Mytruk wrote again August 4, 2011, and said that ties to labour do not mean anyone is beholden to it. He said a double standard existed because Conservatives are not identified as corporately tied. Just as many criticize those corporate ties as do the NDP’s labour ties, he said.

[CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices](#) outline principles of coverage that intersect with the complaint.

In striving for fairness, the policy encourages CBC to *“treat individuals and organizations with openness and respect . . . We treat them even-handedly.”* Production techniques *“serve to present the content in a clear and accessible manner.”*

CONCLUSION

The play on words superimposed on the screen about the NDP leader reflected a common technique in programming to provide additional information. Indeed, the television screen today often resembles a dashboard for multitask consumption. In many instances such content is analytical and even edgy in its description, and it has to be careful not to veer into commentary.

While it would have been preferable to directly link the superimposed information with the interview content, I concluded there was a sufficient thematic undercurrent of the NDP relationship to labour in this case to not consider the technique in violation of standards and practices. It wasn’t providing extremely critical, harmful or surprising information without the interview subject’s knowledge, for example.

I also found the word “critics” fair-minded as a generalized description of those who oppose Layton’s position. Critics of the position vary in origin.

On the issue of a double standard: I accept the argument that the relationship with organized labour has been identified consistently over the years as an attribute specific to the NDP. I believe it was fair to cite the NDP-labour association, even though the party and labour positions may occasionally not align. Narrowly describing other parties as corporate would be a false balance.

Kirk LaPointe
CBC Ombudsman