



Management's Response
to the 2010-2011 Annual Reports
of the Offices of the Ombudsmen
for the English Services and French Services
of CBC/Radio-Canada

November 2011

Reply from English Services

Comments from Jennifer McGuire, General Manager and Editor in Chief, CBC News

We thank the Ombudsman for his recognition of our excellent working relationship. We value his insights on our journalism and will continue to co-operate in the goal of producing, as he says, “best in class journalism.” We welcome this opportunity to respond to several of his comments in this year’s annual report.

DOCUMENTARIES:

We agree that the changing realities of funding documentary production should be reflected in our Journalistic Standards and Practices. While CBC/Radio Canada will maintain the spirit of the existing policy –that there is room for point of view documentaries, but that our role is not to provide a platform for advocates on one side or another of contentious issues – we will tweak one of our policies on funding so that we can continue to feature such high quality and journalistically sound documentaries that may be funded in part by special interest groups. We will ensure safeguards that the work meets our standards for point of view journalism in every way. We are working with our Radio Canada colleagues, and will be bringing an amendment of existing policy to the Board in the near future. And while there is a place for point of view documentaries in our programming mix, CBC News will continue to ensure over –all balance is achieved across platforms and programs on matters of controversy.

ONLINE COMMENTS:

The comments section on CBCNews.ca articles is a separate space that belongs to our audience –for them to express their opinions and experiences, and to engage with one another. It is not journalism. There are published terms of use that govern these comments as well as user behavior across all of CBC’s digital properties. There are no editorial decisions involved. CBC News is continually evolving its approach to its digital products. And that includes evaluating and developing our approach to audience engagement overall, of which comments are a component. The sheer volume of comments our users submit is staggering and is expected to continue to grow as more Canadians use digital news and information services. As of October 2011, all of CBC’s websites are generating an average of 300,000 comments per month. Unfortunately we are unable to break down the news only numbers, but the news site does generate the vast majority of comments. The rejection rate is 15-20%. When users do complain to the Ombudsman about a comment, they receive a reply from the CBC moderation team. We will be looking at how we might make that process more effective as well. But to do more than that is simply untenable. Our practices around online audience comments and complaints about those comments are consistent, if not more robust, than those of many other mainstream media organizations.

CONTRACTUAL EMPLOYEES:

A clarification here –hosts and commentators involved in news and information programming, no matter what their employment status, are bound by our journalistic standards and practices. Hosts can be staff or on contract. Commentators, since they are engaged for their point of view and therefore have more latitude, are mostly contract employees. But they too would be bound by the policy on expression of opinion. We will continue to monitor the range and diversity of opinion expressed by CBC commentators and make sure they, and the program producers responsible for the output, understand the policies and how they are applied.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST:

Our conflict of interest policies were reviewed by Human Resources before being submitted to the Board for approval in November 2010. No inconsistencies were noted. If JSP is narrower than the corporate employees, that is because journalists bear an even greater burden to ensure no conflict of interest exists or appears to exist.

And finally we take seriously the exhortation to reply in a timely fashion. We acknowledge there is a backlog and we are taking active steps to reduce it (we have devoted a half more FTE to dealing with it) but we are managing to respond to current complaints in the 20 working day time frame.

Reply from French Services

Comments from Alain Saulnier, Executive Director, News and Current Affairs, French Services

The Annual Report by Julie Miville-Dechêne, her last, once again contains much food for thought on the evolution of the journalism profession.

This year, the number of complaints received by the Office of the Ombudsman, French Services, stood at 760, an increase of 25% compared to the previous year, but roughly the same number as the year before that. This is normal, as there are always more complaints in election years. One highlight of the year gone by was the 1,632 complaints received in the wake of the decision by the consortium of television broadcasters to exclude the Green Party from the 2011 leaders' debate.

Here at News & Current Affairs, we responded to 352 complaints regarding Radio, TV and Internet & Digital Services content that requested the involvement of the Ombudsman. Our average response time was 11 days, enabling us to maintain a close relationship with complainants.

There were 41 requests for review, compared with 40 last year. Of that number, 18 complaints were found by the Ombudsman to have been wholly or in part justified. In 2009–10, 20 complaints had been forwarded to the Office of the Ombudsman.

In other words, there is a certain "stability" in the requests for review, and we can conclude that the majority of complainants are satisfied with the responses they receive from us.

We received another 740 comments or requests for information via the Audience Relations department and followed them up.

It bears mentioning that CBC/Radio-Canada's French-language news programs enjoy significant support, as attested by the many awards won by the public broadcaster during 2010–11. Our reports and programs were singled out for nearly thirty major distinctions. These included prizes for the Multimedia Day devoted to Charles Darwin, the prestigious awards received by the program *Enquête* and our news bulletins for investigative reporting on collusion in the construction industry, and international honours bestowed on our cross-cultural series *Amour, Haine et Propagande* (*Love, Hate and Propaganda*) and *Krach* (*Meltdown*), about the world economy. That's not to mention the nomination for an International Emmy Award in the Current Affairs category for the *Enquête* segment entitled "*L'Ultime Pardon*" ("*The Ultimate Forgiveness*").

REACTIONS TO THE OMBUDSMAN'S DECISIONS

Every complaint received was discussed with the teams involved and their managers. In some cases they lead to specific training initiatives.

We note, in addition, that teams are now more open to acknowledging their errors, and to doing so publicly. In the past, journalists often found having to admit they had made a mistake to be a humiliating experience. This is increasingly rare nowadays. The culture we have nurtured encourages such openness, and the guidance instilled by the ensuing discussions provides a valuable learning exercise for all.

The same is true in all areas of News & Current Affairs, including corrections to *Radio-Canada.ca*, now made with greater transparency and visibility. In that sense, congratulations are due the Ombudsman for having contributed, through her decisions, to holding Radio-Canada journalists to a higher standard.

DISAGREEMENTS ARE POSSIBLE WITH THE OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSMAN

The Ombudsman and the News & Current Affairs had discussions that resulted in some disagreements during the year. One example was the criticism in regard to the coverage of the trial of Colonel Russell Williams; the Ombudsman took us to task for the use, during RDI newscasts, of photos introduced as evidence—images which, we agree, were quite disturbing. With all due respect to the Ombudsman, we expressed our disagreement over the interpretation of that coverage.

ELECTION CAMPAIGN COVERAGE

The same was true of the criticisms made by the citizens' committee created by the Ombudsman to evaluate election coverage, specifically with regard to the use of the "Boussole électorale" tool by Radio-Canada during the federal campaign.

This brand new tool (called Vote Compass in English) was being used for the first time by CBC/Radio-Canada. Certainly it had its strengths and its weaknesses. Indeed, adjustments were made during the course of the campaign, and in the end the tool proved remarkably successful. It is important to note that, in this regard, we were congratulated by the Centre d'étude sur les médias, the independent organization that Radio-Canada commissions to conduct thorough evaluations of its electoral coverage after every election campaign.

On that score, we must add that the conclusions of the Centre d'étude sur les médias regarding our overall election coverage are positive:

"Radio-Canada employs a team of competent journalists who, when covering election campaigns, must work rapidly and in sometimes difficult conditions. The panel noted some errors and missteps, and concluded that on occasion a better job might have been done. The panel's criticisms, however, concern only a small portion of the extensive production resources deployed by CBC/Radio-Canada French Services for its federal election campaign coverage. The panel considers, in light of the units submitted to it for review, that the outcome of the journalists was in general entirely compliant with industry best practices. In response to the vagaries of the campaign and the events covered, some units reflected a positive or negative character regarding one party or another, but in no case was the panel able to conclude there was any partisan bias. It is the events themselves that positively or negatively affect a party, not the coverage of them."

TYPES OF PROGRAMS AND DIGITAL SPACES

One of the reviews last year concerned a program on the main Télévision de Radio-Canada network. "Complainants said they were outraged at the manner in which the program *Six dans la cité* dealt with the theatre director André Brassard's relationship with a 14-year-old boy," the Ombudsman wrote, and recommended that a clarification be issued during the last program of the season. The management team concerned did not follow that recommendation. That incident raises significant questions regarding the grey area in which certain types of programming dwell. Are they news or entertainment programs? Cultural journalism? Cultural commentary? We are having that conversation, and it was triggered by the Ombudsman's decision. The current ongoing process aimed at clarifying the Ombudsman's mandate should include this issue.

The Ombudsman also noted the ever-increasing growth in the number of complaints about moderated forums on radio-canada.ca. The main reason for that increase is the growing popularity of those forums, but another factor is the code of conduct governing citizen participation in our digital spaces. While taking very seriously these complaints and the need to take the necessary corrective actions, we believe that the code of conduct, called "Nétiquette," is a prerogative of the French Services Internet & Digital Services department.

CONCLUSION

All in all, the Ombudsman acknowledges that management at News & Current Affairs acted with due diligence in repairing the errors it recognized. She rightly points to the importance of remaining vigilant so as to maintain journalist impartiality. We fully embrace that obligation: the great strength of the public broadcaster is its impartiality and independence from pressure groups of all stripes.

Lastly, as the Ombudsman points out, we must continue to seriously examine the impact of social media on the profession of journalism. The flood tide of social media in the world of journalism compels us to uphold, more firmly than ever, the relevance of our journalistic standards and extend their application to these new fields of practice.