

## FRENCH SERVICES OMBUDSMAN

### MID-YEAR UPDATE REPORT | NOVEMBER 2022

#### INTRODUCTION

I am pleased to present my second mid-year update report, covering the period April 1 to September 30, 2022. I take this opportunity to thank my assistant, Laure Simonet, whose thoroughness and dedication are very much appreciated.

My office received a total of 846 complaints and comments from members of the public, a decrease of 22% compared with the 1,086 messages received during the first six months of 2021-22.

Of that number, 642 complaints and comments (76% of the total) pertained to news content presented on Radio-Canada, whether produced by News & Current Affairs, Regional Services, ICI PREMIÈRE or other media lines. I asked the relevant departments to respond to 146 complaints that concerned the Journalistic Standards and Practices (JSP), which was an increase of 33% compared with the same period last year. In turn, 126 of those complaints included a right of review, to which the complainant was entitled should they not be satisfied with the response.

During the first six months of 2022-23, I was asked to conduct 10 reviews, which is six fewer than in the first half of 2021-22. In eight of my reviews, I concluded that there was no violation of the JSP; in one case I found that the complaint was justified, and in another I found that it was partly justified. The reviews published during the six-month period are posted to my website.

As for the other 204 messages, they contained comments, requests or suggestions that I deemed to be outside my purview. I nevertheless thought it best to forward them to the people concerned, for their information, and in some cases directed the authors to the appropriate resources.

#### MAIN ISSUES

The Quebec election campaign was the topic that prompted the most complaints during the first half of 2022-23. Of the 90 complaints received, 45 criticized what the complainants felt was unfair treatment of the Conservative Party of Quebec, notably during the program Cinq chefs, une élection (16 complaints). I issued two reviews in relation to Quebec election campaign coverage, Quand l'analyse politique s'aventure en territoire climatique (Téléjournal) and Ces questions qui dérangent (Cinq chefs, une élection).

A sensitive topic was the source of some 60 emails received in mid-July. The complainants took the broadcaster to task for the use of the expression *personnes avec un utérus* (“people with uteruses”) in the article [COVID-19 : l’impact du vaccin sur le cycle menstruel mieux cerné](#). Many of them saw this as an insult to women after so many years of struggling to have their rights — and even their very existence — recognized. The issue comes under the editorial freedom of the News department, which nevertheless took the comments under advisement and amended the story.

The war in Ukraine also generated a spate of complaints (52 in all), notably with regard to the transliteration of the name of the country’s capital city: Radio-Canada uses “Kiev,” rather than “Kyiv,” the complainants’ preference. Here again, I determined that the decision came under editorial freedom and that it was not my place to intercede in the debate, other than by notifying the News department of the complaints. Note that I issued two reviews about coverage of the war in Ukraine: in one case I found the complaint to be unjustified, and in the other I found it to be partly justified.

Coverage of Pope Francis’s visit to Canada in July resulted in 33 complaints. Some of these criticized the fact that reporters alluded to the harm done to Indigenous children sent to residential schools or to the discovery of unmarked graves near some of those schools. It seemed to me that some of these complainants were forgetting, voluntarily or not, the reason why the papal visit was organized in the first place, and expected their public broadcaster to be content with covering the trip without saying anything that might reflect negatively on the pontiff. At any rate, none of these complaints led to a request for a review.

The question of language continues to be a favourite topic for a great many Canadians who, as is to be expected, demand nothing short of perfection from the public broadcaster. As someone with a deeply felt attachment to the French language, which is as beautiful as it is fragile, I feel compelled to devote a few words to these recurring complaints, which condemn the decline in the quality of French in broadcasts because of the use of anglicisms, swear words and other expressions of dubious taste, especially in prime-time programming. Some complainants are language purists — and that is a good thing — but the majority are viewers and listeners justifiably irked by a typographical error, an improper pronunciation of the liaison between two words or simply an expletive heard by younger ears.

I also received a dozen or so complaints about English advertising on the streaming platform ICI TOU.TV. Once again, this issue did not fall within my mandate, but I felt the need to raise it with the people involved. Given that the source of these ads is not Radio-Canada but an external ad server, I understand that the issue is difficult to remedy, but I am nonetheless concerned. That said, as of this writing it has been several weeks since I received any email about this subject, which gives me hope that a solution has been found.

## THE WORLD, AND THE TIMES, ARE CHANGING

There was a time when Radio-Canada’s TV journalists worked for TV, its radio teams produced radio material, and the digital teams delivered — you guessed it — digital content. Everyone worked mostly in silos, generating content for their platform, for audiences that remained loyal to it. The Office of the Ombudsman therefore hewed to that structure in examining complaints and comments, for the purposes of producing its annual report. Today, with media consumption habits having changed radically, everyone is called upon to do a bit of everything: a TV journalist might also package a story for radio, a radio staffer may write an online story, and the *Décodeurs* team is equally active on Radio-Canada.ca, social platforms and ICI RDI. News & Current Affairs and Regional Services, to cite only their example, are also “everywhere all at once.” In my next annual report I will therefore endeavour to reflect this shift, considering the sources of content and their delivery platforms in the hopes of providing a more representative picture of the situation.

## CONCLUSION

While the number of complaints and comments fielded by my office declined during the first half of this year, each of them remained a valuable opportunity to engage with Canadians through dialogue that is constructive — and yes, at times more heated, which reflects the atmosphere in which the country has been immersed in recent years. Opinions are divided, and often fiercely defended by their proponents, but I always welcome the opportunity to engage in discussion, to better understand the reasons why people adopt certain positions, be they for or against, to the left or to the right, etc. It is in this context that a mediating approach is helpful and relevant in building trust, so that Canadians know that the Office of the Ombudsman provides a channel through which they can easily contact their public broadcaster.

I take this opportunity to acknowledge the collaboration of the News & Current Affairs department and the management of ICI PREMIÈRE, who are frequently called upon to reply to complaints and comments. Their availability and open-mindedness help ensure that our exchanges are fruitful and cordial.

I also wish to thank the members of the CBC/Radio-Canada Board of Directors and its Chair, Michael Goldbloom, along with the President and CEO of CBC/Radio-Canada, Catherine Tait, for their continued trust in me and their respect of the necessary distance that allows Jack Nagler and me to exercise our role as Ombudsman effectively.

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