

Office of the ombudsman

English services

ombudsman

ANNUAL REPORT

2024-2025

June 5, 2025

Michael Goldbloom, Chairman of the Board
CBC/Radio-Canada

Marie-Philippe Bouchard, President & CEO
CBC/Radio-Canada

Members of the Board of Directors
CBC/Radio-Canada

Mr. Goldbloom, Ms. Bouchard and Respected Board of Directors Members,

Attached please find the Annual Report of the Office of the Ombudsman,
English Services for the period April 1, 2024 to March 31, 2025.

Sincerely,

Maxime Bertrand
CBC Ombud, English Services

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INTRODUCTION

I am pleased and honoured to present the annual report of the English Services Ombudsman — or Ombud, as I prefer to call it — for the year 2024-2025.

This is my first such report, and while some might argue it comes at a time when journalism is in crisis, I believe that every challenge also presents an opportunity for growth and for reaffirming core values.

I welcome this challenge with enthusiasm.

To say that these are difficult times for the media — and particularly for the so-called “legacy” news organizations — would be an understatement.

It’s an unsettling, even anxiety-inducing, reality.

However, the historian in me recognizes this as a defining moment, a moment of consequence, the kind that finds its way into the history books.

I look forward to honouring the legacy of my predecessor, Jack Nagler, while charting my own course.

Since I only began my appointment in January, credit for the vast majority of the work reflected in this report belongs to Jack.

My predecessors have written at length about the polarization of public discourse.

After only a few months on the job, it’s clear to me that I’ll be following in their footsteps.

If polarization has become the norm — particularly in lead-up to the federal election — so too has the behaviour that often accompanies it: a steady erosion of civility.

The typical complaint now begins with an insult before getting to the heart of the matter.

Increasingly, it would seem that complainants are less interested in articulating a constructive grievance and more inclined to simply vent.

In my view, this is a signal of a deeper distress.

As I write this report, the federal election has just come to an end. And what a campaign it’s been.

In a note sent last April, General Manager and Editor-in-Chief Brodie Fenlon had this to say about the process:

Elections are our “Olympics”

And rightly so. Election coverage is a critical measure of the CBC's journalists. However, given the fact that this was a consequential campaign, reporters and hosts were under more scrutiny than ever before.

One defining feature of the campaign was the tense relationship between certain candidates and the media. There was also, unsurprisingly, the looming presence of Donald Trump, leading some critics to accuse both politicians and the CBC for playing into his hands.

Since only the early days of the campaign fell within the timeline of this report, a full evaluation of the CBC's election coverage will feature in next year's report.

The year 2024-2025 saw a record-breaking volume of complaints.

My office received a total of 10,384 comments, complaints and expressions of concern — an increase of 117% over the previous year. Of those, 784 fell outside the scope of the Ombud's mandate.

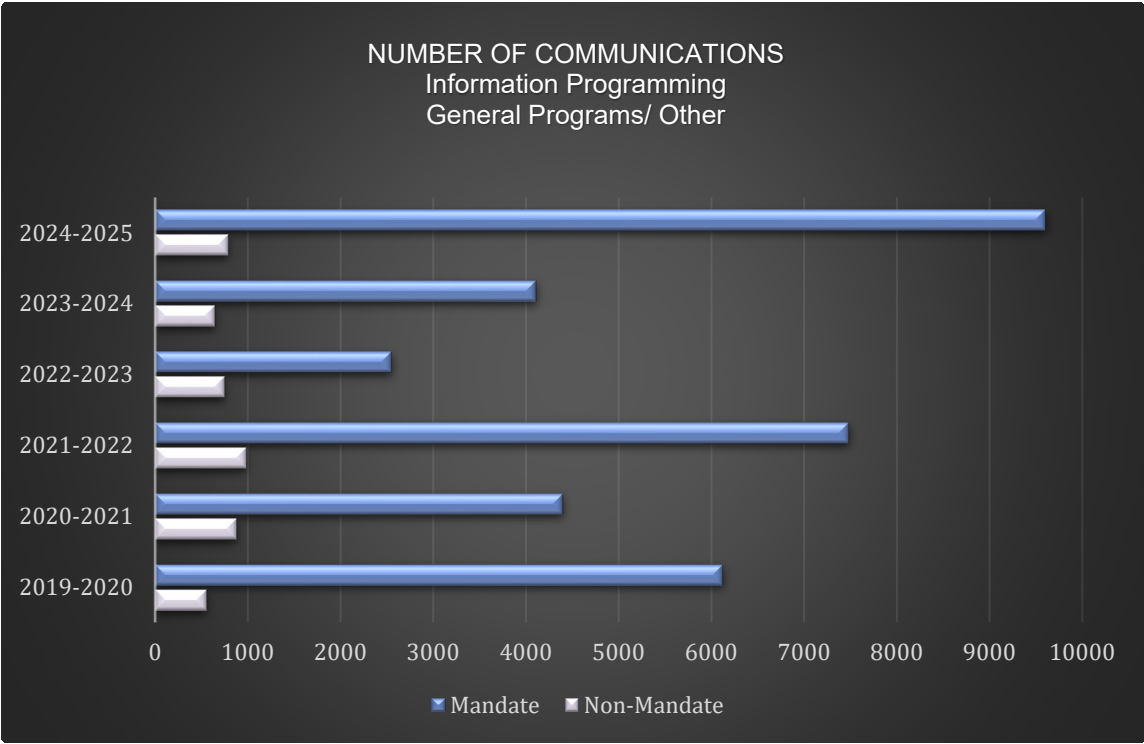
Of the 9,600 that were within our mandate, 1,735 were forwarded to programmers for a direct response. The remainder were shared with news management for their consideration.

It's worth noting that this office does not insist on a reply when a complaint is too broad or is part of an organized campaign.

As of mid-April, there are 14 complaints awaiting a response.

Of the complaints to which the CBC responded, 44 led to requests for review. During this fiscal year, my office completed 33 reviews. There are 71 more which remain to be completed in the new year.

Of the 33 reviews completed by Mr. Nagler or me, 10 identified either a breach of policy or room for improvement. This ratio appears broadly consistent with previous years. There was no easily discernable pattern as to the nature of the errors or policy breaches.



TRENDS

Looking back on the past year, a number of key themes emerge.

Some relate to specific topics, but most reflect the broader public mood.

In this report, I wish to highlight the following: Canadian politics and Donald Trump, the journalist's role, orchestrated campaigns and anger and trust.

| CANADIAN POLITICS AND DONALD TRUMP

I cannot recall any other moment in modern history when the media has provoked such profound feelings of betrayal.

It began with Donald Trump's threat to annex Canada — a statement that ignited not only a surge of patriotism, but also the firm belief that the media, especially the public broadcaster, had the duty to respond forcefully.

That may sound extreme to some. But for more than a few audience members, it was the CBC's responsibility to rise to the occasion and defend Canadian sovereignty.

So, when the CBC decided to tackle the issue during a special edition of *Cross Country Checkup*, it's safe to say it did not sit very well with hundreds of listeners.

For some, the mere mention of Canada becoming the "51st state" was enough to spark outrage: many saw it as an act of treason to entertain, let alone discuss, the notion.


For others, it wasn't the framing of the issue so much as the issue itself that was out of bounds — a topic too sensitive, too taboo, to broach. Many still feel this way: a reaction, it would appear, that's largely driven by anxiety and fear.

The CBC's changing of the episode's title from "What does Canada as the 51st state mean to you?" to "51st State: A Cross-Border Conversation" failed to quell the anger. Nor did the [blog](#) post by General Manager and Editor-in-Chief Brodie Fenlon, which endeavoured to explain the rationale behind the decision, have any success. Complainants remained adamant: the CBC should be defending Canadian values and sovereignty.

Is this an isolated incident, or are we entering an era in which legacy media, specifically the public broadcaster, is expected to take a stand on certain causes?

This raises a host of questions.

Which causes, exactly? And who decides which stories warrant such special attention? Isn't that called advocacy? Is the public broadcaster now in the business of advocacy? And if so, then what happened to impartiality?



It's an irony worth noting: those who criticize the CBC for bias often turn around and demand that it abandon impartiality, one of the core pillars of the Journalistic Standards and Practices.

| THE JOURNALIST'S ROLE

Another key issue in recent weeks has been how the audience views the journalist's role and how very quickly a reporter or a host can fall out of favour.

It might be worth noting here that complainants seem less inclined to criticize the CBC's journalism so much as to target its individual journalists, presenting their mistakes as proof of their personal, ethical or even moral failings. In such cases, complainants are not looking for corrections or improvement; instead, they demand the censure, resignation or firing of the journalist involved.

Mid-March, a Q&A session with Mark Carney triggered such a reaction when the CBC's senior political correspondent questioned the Prime Minister about his assets and potential conflicts of interest.

The way she'd pushed back after he answered, saying "That's very difficult to believe," caused indignation to surge.

CBC acknowledged that her response could have been better phrased, but the complaints rolled in all the same. Many were convinced that she had merely voiced her opinion and was showing evidence of a personal bias.

What follows is an excerpt of a blog I published at the beginning of April, tying my previous topic of the 51st State to the Carney Q&A session:

Has tackling an issue or asking a question — all of it integral to the practice of journalism — become a perilous endeavour, an offense, or even (as some had argued in the case of Cross Country Checkup) "an act of treason"?

There's no need to rehash how Ms. Barton had phrased her question: management has already done that. But I do wish to dig a little deeper.

If journalists choose to play devil's advocate, does that automatically make them biased?

Or, on the contrary, are they just trying to get to the heart of the matter and help audiences better understand the issues at hand?

Are journalists not supposed to hold public figures to account? And if they do, should they be entitled to a certain leeway?

I suspect those same considerations will arise again in the future.

| ORGANIZED CAMPAIGNS

Orchestrated campaigns are nothing new for this office. Interest groups have often used their networks— and, increasingly, their technology — to encourage high volumes of complaints to the CBC Ombud about one issue or another. It's easy enough to understand: a flood of messages will create an impression of widespread concern about a specific aspect of the CBC's coverage. However, in recent months advocacy groups have weaponized this technique with renewed zeal. This was particularly apparent in February and March, when the office was swamped with complaints from people who had been recruited through social media.

This is a case where the numbers say it all. Below are two examples:

- Prime Minister Carney's press conference: 1,223 complaints
- *Cross Country Checkup's* "51st State" program: 2,550 complaints

At time of writing, things do not seem to be easing up. I guess that means there's more of the same in store.

I described the phenomenon in my March blog:

The campaigns have also become more sophisticated. Gone are the days when hundreds of complainants would submit identical complaints, word for word. These days, each complaint is individualized.

But upon closer inspection, it's easy to spot the same telltale words or expressions in each email.

If indeed there are people pulling the strings, they've figured out that certain keywords and expressions — like "breach of the Journalistic Standards and Practices," "bias," and so on — will automatically grab my attention.

Two things before we finish with this topic:

1. I have to amend what I said above, since word-for-word identical complaints are still very much a thing, something I only discovered after posting the blog.
2. Radio-Canada Ombudsman Pierre Champoux and I are looking into tools that will not only help us speed up our complaints processing, but also let me deal with these campaigns. My intention is not to dismiss them, but simply to resist their stated aim, i.e., flooding my inbox and overwhelming the system. As I noted in my March blog:

My concern with such campaigns is that they make it all too easy for a particular group to hijack a process that was originally designed to give a voice to the entire audience.

But the show must go on, particularly for those who genuinely want to engage with the public broadcaster and hold them to account... through my office.

| ANGER AND TRUST

In my view, all the previous topics lead to this one. This isn't the kind of standalone issue that typically features in an annual report. However, given the tone of many of the complaints and phone calls received by the Ombud's office, it has regrettably earned a spot among the year's major topics.

In the past, my predecessor spoke of the "strident" tone found in much of the correspondence he received. We've long since passed that point.

Indeed, just as this year brought a record number of complaints, so too have anger levels escalated to new heights. This has become the overarching issue — the one that runs through nearly every other theme.

There's a palpable sense of betrayal and with it, a sense of loss.

Many complainants waxed nostalgic about the past, recalling the public broadcaster that had accompanied them through the years.

Without venturing too far into the collective psyche, one can't help but get a sense of grief: the mourning for a lost innocence.

It's a sentiment that extends well beyond the media, but one in which the media is very much implicated, given its role as witness and its steady presence over time.

At the heart of all of this is trust — or the lack thereof. I recognize that the CBC has taken certain steps toward earning or rebuilding the trust of Canadians.

Considering the prevailing mood, there remains much to be done. I will be interested to see what new approaches CBC Management will take, as this is an existential issue for the public broadcaster — and other media outlets as well.

OTHER ISSUES

| CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Once again, the Israel-Hamas war was among the topics that generated the highest numbers of complaints, at least during the first half of the year.

In his last review of the conflict, my predecessor dealt with the use of the phrase “ Hamas-run Gaza Health Ministry ” after hearing from a group of six complainants who were taking the CBC to task for certain aspects of its coverage of the events in Gaza.

This was his answer to them:

There is no question that it is accurate to say that the Gaza Health Ministry is run by Hamas. To suggest that using this phrase undermines the fairness and balance of an entire report gives it far more weight than it could conceivably carry.

At the same time, it would be naive for journalists to ignore the argument that you and others have put forward: the constant repetition of saying “ Hamas-run ” anytime the Health Ministry comes up risks contributing to a belief that every single Gazan is somehow linked to an organization that carried out the October 7th attacks and has been labelled by many governments — including Canada’s — as terrorists.

At the end of the day, there cannot and should not be a ban on noting that the health ministry is run by Hamas. And the statement made by Adrienne Arsenault on the episode of The National in no way violates CBC’s journalistic standards.

The point for consideration, then, is volume and frequency. I note that the phrase “ Hamas-run ” is used much less often in CBC’s reporting these days. I would encourage programmers to use it as sparingly as possible, and only when relevant to the story at hand.

| NON-MANDATE COMPLAINTS


As noted, this office received 784 complaints this year which were unrelated to its mandate. Of these, 47 were about online comments being disabled.

Grievances mainly concerned ads and promos, particularly car and gaming ads, which many found inappropriate.

Each time I click on CBC live on my android tablet I get a commercial message before I get the live program.

In my view this is unsuitable. The delivery medium is the internet, not the airwaves, but the program is not new. In some areas of the country, the internet is pretty much the only means of delivery.

I accept that new services, such as podcasts, require new sources of funding. But the original radio service should be non-commercial, no matter the means of delivery.



The Paris 2024 Summer Olympics also came in for criticism.

Some audiences panned the opening ceremony, with one complainant calling it “disgusting.”

The Paris 2024 Opening Ceremony which was broadcasted by CBC, was absolutely disgusting. This was not something that should have been broadcasted for a wide audience, and it certainly was nowhere near family friendly. The Paris 2024 Opening Ceremony was a showcase of an insulting, intolerant and completely disgusting, unacceptable depiction of the last supper of Jesus Christ that was sexualized with drag queens, and pedophiles / predators surrounding a minor child on a table, with some adults showing their private parts sticking out for viewers to see, along with many dark symbolism and satanic rituals, dark horses and golden calf, which are all very evil symbols that are most definitely not family friendly or decent.

CONCLUSION

I am deeply grateful for this opportunity to serve as Ombud. I'm also heartened to see the dedication that CBC journalists and managers bring to their role as providers of public service journalism. Their abiding belief in the Ombud process as a tool for strengthening the values of the JSP is a comfort to me.

All of these are vital elements that will help us all navigate the storms that lie ahead.

In particular, I wish to thank my dear colleague Jack Nagler, who guided me so patiently and generously as I took my first steps into this new world. Jack is a deeply principled journalist and human being, someone who holds himself to the highest standards, yet views the world with genuine kindness and compassion. I've been fortunate to have had many wonderful mentors throughout my career; Jack is at the top of that list.

Heartfelt thanks also go to General Manager and Editor-in-Chief Brodie Fenlon, as well as to the journalistic standards team of Basem Boshra, the (sadly!) now-retired Nancy Waugh, and George Achi (who has left us for the BBC) for so warmly welcoming this stranger into their midst.

Over the past year, this team managed to keep the average complaint response time to nine working days, despite the increased volume of communications.

I wish to thank Marie-Philippe Bouchard and Catherine Tait, respectively CBC/Radio-Canada's current and previous CEOs, for their trust in this office and their respect for its independence.

I would also like to thank my assistant, Teresa Batista, for her efficiency in dealing with the requirements of the Ombud's office.

Allow me to say how thrilled I am to have Radio-Canada Ombud Pierre Champoux, a former colleague from my previous life, as my "Ombuddy." His subtle and respectful guidance along with his knowledge, wisdom and sense of humour — a real asset in this position — are much appreciated.

Lastly, let me underscore that, with this new mantle, I would like to assume a new title that I feel is more in sync with today's world: Ombud instead of Ombudsman.

Maxime Bertrand
Ombud, English Services

NUMBER OF COMMUNICATIONS RECEIVED

| YEAR | INFORMATION PROGRAMMING | GENERAL PROGRAMS/ OTHER | TOTAL NO. OF COMPLAINTS | COMPLAINTS PROCESSED | AVERAGE RESPONSE TIME (DAYS) |
|-----------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------|
| 2024-2025 | 9,600 (*8,894 + 706) | 784 | 10,384 | 1,735 | 9 |
| 2023-2024 | 4,111 | 640 | 4,785 | 1,173 | 9 |
| 2022-2023 | 2,552 | 744 | 3,296 | 982 | 15 |
| 2021-2022 | 7,481 | 976 | 8,457 | 1,684 | 19 |
| 2020-2021 | 4,399 | 872 | 5,271 | 1,657 | 15 |
| 2019-2020 | 6,123 | 552 | 6,675 | 1,112 | 14 |

*PETITION: **Jewish Students Under Threat: Concordia's Failure and CBC's Complicity** 706

DISTRIBUTION OF COMPLAINTS PER PLATFORM

| YEAR | TELEVISION | RADIO | CBC NEWS NETWORK | CBC.CA | SOCIAL MEDIA | OTHER |
|-----------|------------|-------|------------------|--------|--------------|-------|
| 2024-2025 | 804 | 3,480 | 2,308 | 1,764 | 107 | 698 |

Lack of Coverage: 517

REVIEWS

| YEAR | NO. OF REVIEWS | FOR CBC | AGAINST CBC | RECOMMENDATIONS | CARRIED FORWARD |
|---------|----------------|---------|-------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 2024-25 | 33 | 23 | 7 | 3 | 71 |

OMBUD'S MANDATE

Recommendation for modification by Jennifer McGuire and Luce Julien – February 27, 2019:

| PRINCIPLES

CBC-Radio-Canada is fully committed to maintaining accuracy, fairness, balance, impartiality and integrity in its journalism, as expressed in its unique code of ethics and practice, the Journalistic Standards and Practices. Our journalistic mission is to inform, to reveal, to contribute to the understanding of issues of public interest and to encourage citizens to participate in our free and democratic society. We base our credibility on fulfilling that mission through adherence to the values, principles and practices laid out in the Journalistic Standards and Practices.

The Ombudsman is completely independent of CBC program staff and management, reporting directly to the President of CBC and, through the President, to the Corporation's Board of Directors.


| MANDATE

The Ombudsman acts as an appeal authority for complainants who are dissatisfied with responses from CBC information or program management.

The Ombudsman generally intervenes only when a correspondent deems a response from a representative of the Corporation unsatisfactory and so informs the Office of the Ombudsman. However, the Ombudsman may also intervene when the Corporation fails to respond to a complaint within a reasonable time.

The Ombudsman determines whether the journalistic process or the broadcast involved in the complaint did, in fact, violate the Corporation's Journalistic Standards and Practices. The gathering of facts is a non-judicial process and the Ombudsman does not examine the civil liability of the Corporation or its journalists. The Ombudsman informs the complainant and the staff and management concerned of the review's findings and posts such findings on the Ombudsman's website.

As necessary, the Ombudsman identifies major public concerns as gleaned from complaints received by the Office and advises CBC management and journalists accordingly. The Ombudsman and CBC management may agree that the Ombudsman undertake periodic studies on overall coverage of specific issues when it is felt there may be a problem and will advise CBC management and journalists of the results of such studies.



The Ombudsman establishes a central registry of complaints and comments regarding information content, and alerts journalists and managers on a regular basis to issues that are causing public concern.

The Ombudsman prepares and presents an annual report to the President and the Board of Directors of the Corporation summarizing how complaints were dealt with and reviewing the main issues handled by the Office of the Ombudsman in the previous year. The report includes mention of the actions, if any, taken by management as a result of the Ombudsman's findings, provided such disclosure does not contravene applicable laws, regulations or collective agreements. The annual report, or a summary thereof, is made public.

The Office of the Ombudsman reports annually on how each media component has met the CBC standard of service for the expeditious handling of complaints.

| COMPLIANCE

The Office of the Ombudsman is responsible for evaluating compliance with the Journalistic Standards and Practices in all content under its jurisdiction. It can be assisted in this role by independent advice panels.

Panel members are chosen by the Ombudsman. Their mandate is to assess content over a period of time, or the overall coverage of a particular issue by many programs, and report their findings to the Ombudsman. The Ombudsman will advise CBC management and journalists of these findings.

The evaluation measures performance in respecting the fundamental principles of CBC journalism.

All employees of CBC News, as well as the content they create, and employees of Local Services, Radio Talk information programming, or any service involved in the creation of news, current affairs and public affairs content must respect all of the principles of the Journalistic Standards and Practices namely:


- **Accuracy, fairness, balance, impartiality and integrity**

With the exception of fiction and comedy, content produced by other employees which touches on politics, social issues, economics, cultural issues, scientific issues or sports – particularly if the issues are controversial – must respect the following principles :

- **Accuracy, fairness and balance**

User-generated content, when incorporated into information programming, must conform with the principles of the Journalistic Standards and Practices.

Moreover, in an election or referendum period, the Journalistic Standards and Practices applies to all content related to the campaign, parties or candidates that is broadcast and published by the CBC, regardless of the department concerned.



The JSP applies to all news, current affairs and public affairs content commissioned by CBC and produced by third parties.

The Office reports bi-annually.

| JURISDICTION

The jurisdiction of the Office of the Ombudsman covers all content, produced for radio, television or the internet (including social media used by CBC) that falls within the scope of the Journalistic Standards and Practices.

Complaints beyond the Ombudsman's mandate should be addressed directly to the programs concerned, or Audience Relations.

| APPOINTMENT

When filling the Ombudsman's position, the CBC openly seeks candidates from outside as well as inside the Corporation.

After appropriate consultation, the President and CEO establish a selection committee of four. Two members, including the committee chair, must be from the public. People currently employed by the Corporation or employed by the Corporation within the previous three years will be excluded from nomination as public members. The other committee members are chosen, one among CBC management, the other among its working journalists. Members representing the Corporation and journalists jointly select the committee chair among the two representatives of the public.

The selection committee examines applications and selects a candidate to be recommended for appointment by the President and CEO.

The Ombudsman appointment is for a term of five years. This term may be extended for no more than five additional years. The Ombudsman's contract cannot be terminated except for gross misconduct or in instances where the Ombudsman's actions have been found to be inconsistent with the Corporation's Code of Conduct Policy.

The outgoing Ombudsman may not occupy any other position at the CBC for a period of two years following the end of his/her term but can, at the discretion of the incoming Ombudsman, be contracted to work for the Office of the Ombudsman.

Office of the ombudsman

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