

CBC News response to the CBC Ombudsman's 2024 report

TO:	Broadcasting and Innovation Committees
MEETING:	June 12-13, 2024
FROM:	Brodie Fenlon, General Manager & Editor in Chief
PURPOSE:	Response from CBC News management to Ombudsman Jack Nagler's 2024 annual report


1. INTRODUCTION

News media in Canada, like in the rest of the world, faced intense scrutiny and sustained commentary this past year, particularly around coverage of war, politics, and social-cultural norms. These are complex, emotionally charged stories that easily divide Canadians. For the leadership team of CBC News, they also reaffirm the value of independent, fact-based journalism, which aims to provide clarity at times of heightened passions and political polarization.

There was, as always, a vast amount of constructive audience feedback – accompanied by intensive public campaigns to either shape or discredit stories. The words we use to describe the horrors of war were criticized, often out of the context in which they were used, for being either too neutral or too biased. The most anodyne editorial processes were questioned on suspicion of allowing opinion to overtake facts.

That level of scrutiny is not new, nor do we allow it to impede our work – although we do carefully consider every opportunity to improve our journalism, and transparently report on ourselves when relevant. Many of the findings in the Ombudsman's 2024 report give us hope that our efforts to produce powerful, revelatory content across our network continue to pay off, providing our audience with useful and thought-provoking news on open, accessible platforms. We are grateful for the Ombudsman's insight into the comments many readers, viewers and listeners send his way, offering a crucial window into our impact on Canada's society and democracy.

We take the positive feedback as a badge of honour and the criticism as a prompt to



continuously do better, or to explain our work even more. Direct communication with the audience, in part through responses to mail forwarded by the Ombudsman's office, remains a stalwart of our commitment to full accountability, along with our rigorous system of corrections and clarifications, which we continue to improve, and a deep commitment to building public trust in our journalism.

2. KEY ELEMENTS

ACCOUNTABILITY

We are pleased to note that our response time to everyday audience feedback has been cut in half over the past two years. As reported by the Ombudsman, the average period of time between the filing of a complaint and the moment the audience member receives a response from CBC News is now 9 days, down from 15 last year and 19 in 2022. We achieved this dramatic decrease by building increased awareness across our team of editorial leaders to the importance of a quick turnaround: timely acknowledgement of a concern about our journalism reflects our deep commitment to never letting a lack of clarity (let alone an inaccuracy) exist on any of our platforms. The timely response to audience complaints was articulated in my own objectives for the past year and will be included again in the 2024-25 objectives for my leadership team and me.

Our process is straightforward: editorial leaders are made aware of such concerns as soon as we receive them and are asked to respond to complainants within a few days. The Ombudsman's office has traditionally encouraged us to respond within 20 working days, but we now give ourselves a much tighter internal deadline, when possible. Most responses are expedited but some require more research and can take longer, depending on circumstances.


Our JSP Office carefully monitors and organizes those responses, sometimes directly addressing concerns that encompass multiple platforms or topics. I am especially grateful to the JSP Office administrator Laura McIsaac for her tireless efforts to keep our direct accountability process running efficiently, and to George Achi, Nancy Waugh, Bob Campbell, and Paul Moore for their diligence and good humour.

THE WAR ON WORDS

We acknowledge with great interest the Ombudsman's thoughts and advice on controversial words. His recommendation to "*keep debating language, and in particular to pay close attention to labels used in stories with political impact*" is one that we will undoubtedly follow as war rages on multiple continents and as we cover elections in India and the United States among others in the next few months – before a possible federal election in Canada.

We make every effort to help our journalists choose neutral language when describing





controversial situations – particularly in the context of breaking news when they have less time to reflect on the implications of each word or possible label. The guidance, provided by the JSP Office, is based on thorough research that aims to understand how the audience perceives well-entrenched and evolving language.

A Language Advisory Group (LAG) was created in 2022 as part of CBC’s overall commitment to reviewing its journalistic practices and related policies through an inclusive lens. The LAG feeds into some of the key decisions we make about style and language use, allowing us to be more proactive in identifying necessary language shifts, and inclusive and nimble in reacting to fast-moving changes to language in our communities and society. We remain deeply committed to facilitating their work.

Shorthand language thrives in headlines. With limited space and a need for efficient concision, our teams of thoughtful editors have no choice but to summarize complex ideas into a few simple words – headlines and banners should always be meticulously accurate and fair but are never a full account of the story itself. There is a tacit agreement with the audience that a headline in our news app, or a banner on a TV report, is no more than a reference point, and we trust that our readers, viewers and listeners invest even a few minutes to take in the essence of the story.


MIDDLE EAST COVERAGE

We appreciated reading the Ombudsman’s analysis of the many tension points that emerged around our Middle East war coverage in the past few months. As always, we will take his conclusions into account as we continue to shape guidance for our journalists to report on the conflict with accuracy and fairness.

With the advantage of hindsight, historians will use our coverage to paint a picture of how the world thought of itself today, through the stories we selected, the angles we picked, and the words we used. In the meantime, audience feedback, Ombudsman reviews, and other types of criticism – including from political actors – offer a fascinating look into how Canadians perceive national and world events, helping us in our efforts to define the elusive notion of public interest.

Pre-writing history is a daunting task, and we make every effort to ensure the big picture we’re painting is a balanced, fair, and accurate perspective on today’s world. But the right place to start is at the heart of journalism: we tell stories. From a debate at city hall to business news to a harrowing war, our goal is to give our audience a 360-degree perspective on any issue. One headline and one report will never tell the full story, and we continue to send our reporters into the field to build the most diverse collection of national and international stories in the Canadian media landscape.

As the Ombudsman has noted in his response to public feedback and in his report, our Israel-Hamas topic page has helped aggregate the numerous reports on one of this year’s most contested topics. Beyond the convenience offered to readers curious to access more of those



stories, we intended that topic page as a tool for the audience to judge our commitment to balance over time, which we are confident is achieved.

We also acknowledge the Ombudsman's suggestion that our journalism – and public trust in that work – would greatly benefit from the creation of a Middle East bureau. We of course agree that the best way to tell all those stories is to be permanently present in the field. Until our financial reality allows us to consider an expansion of international bureaus, we will continue deploying reporters strategically, ensuring we're present in the field to directly witness key moments in the story.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE


Last year at this time, in our response to the Ombudsman's 2023 report, I wrote: "artificial intelligence is likely to become an even more prominent area of discussion by this time next year." That holds true. From our phones to our cars, smartwatches, banking systems, grocery stores and much, much more, artificial intelligence has quickly become an integral part of our everyday lives.

We are closely watching the rapid advances in generative AI and the ability for anyone to create hyper-realistic "deep fake" video, audio and text. We are especially concerned about fake content that mimics our brand, our journalism or our people. CBC/Radio-Canada is actively working with industry partners to help tackle these emerging problems, including providence tracking through [Content Credentials](#).

At the same time, [a recent publication](#) from Columbia Journalism Review concludes, in part, that while artificial intelligence is increasingly used in newsrooms around the world, at this point "AI mostly constitutes a retooling of the news rather than a fundamental change in the needs and motives of news organizations. It does not impact the fundamental need to access and gather information, to process and package that information into 'news,' to reach existing and new audiences, and to make money."

At CBC news, we are, and have been for some time, using artificial intelligence as a careful aspect of our journalistic processes. For example, an internal system called Scribe is used many times every day by our journalists to convert audio from interviews or news conferences into text with related timecodes. This system is imperfect, as often the text output misunderstands words or may have other errors in terms of spelling, punctuation or otherwise. But, with proper human oversight and revision, it is a tool that allows our journalists to work much more efficiently.

Scribe is an excellent example of how some of the guidance we gave to everyone who works at CBC News last June can be put into practice. In a note to staff and in [a public Editor's Blog](#), we outlined how our use of AI and our journalism around it would maintain trust and transparency with audiences. Bottom line: we will do whatever is necessary so that audiences will never have to question whether a CBC News story, photo, audio or video is real or AI-generated.



In the past year, our JSP office has worked with journalists across the country on all sorts of programs to navigate these new technologies and, most importantly, to help our audiences understand them. In the coming year, we will carefully consider and discuss the application of AI to our work, while ensuring public trust in our journalism is never compromised. As we wrote to our journalists in our preliminary AI guidance, we are all learning as we go.

WEB AND NEWS APP IMPROVEMENT

We agree with the Ombudsman’s call for more consistency in accountability features and better ability for the audience to report potential errors on digital content. We work closely with our colleagues in Digital Strategy & Product to make such changes.

There is a commitment to have links to the JSP, Corrections and Clarifications page, and a “report error” function added to the bottom of all news stories in the News App by the end of the fiscal year, to match what’s available on news stories on the web platform.

There is also a commitment to offer an improved function for the audience to report potential errors on digital content by the end of the fiscal year. Part of the delay comes from the need to find a technical solution that balances ease of use for the audience to reach us, mitigation of harm and threats to our staff, and available resources.


We are confident these improvements will provide greater transparency and accountability to our continued commitment to improving our journalism.

JSP TRAINING

I am very proud to bring you an update on our in-house JSP training program which I raised last year. This full-day course takes employees out of their normal workday to focus intently on the core principles of JSP. The program is constantly reviewed and updated so that the lessons are relevant to the work we do every day. In each session, the learners are a mix of employees from all levels of experience, including our most senior journalists. As of early May, nearly 1,800 staff have taken the course and it continues to be immensely successful.

One of the training facilitators recently shared with me an anecdote about two journalists who had already taken the training last year and were enrolled again by mistake. When they realized it was a duplicate, they were given a choice to hop off but both decided to stay and take the course again – and stayed the full day. This says a lot about the enthusiasm that surrounds the program, which is seen more as a forum to reflect on the JSP than a top-down lecture. Few institutions offer that space and time to their employees to reflect on the philosophy and ethics of their work, and we intend to keep this flame alive, as other news outlets are starting to inquire about the program.

Other training programs have since emerged, and some include specific JSP elements. A



Climate Reporting Essentials course was launched recently, and a Middle East Coverage program is currently being developed. It will serve as a refresher and a sounding board for reporters with more or less experience being deployed to the region. We are also updating our Reporting in Indigenous Communities course and intend for it to be delivered in all newsrooms this year.

We also plan to establish our first Indigenous Editorial Advisory Circle to support our journalism and inform our JSP office, drawing on the Indigenous perspectives and lived experience we have within the organization.

COMMUNICATING WITH THE AUDIENCE

As noted by the Ombudsman, we continue to regularly publish [Editor's Blogs](#) to communicate directly with the audience about our editorial challenges and decision-making. Furthermore, we continue to find ways to build audiences and ensure our relevance with people across this country by seeking out a full range of perspectives in our content and journalism.


For example, over the past year we have heard a lot of feedback from people who live in rural Alberta thanks to a joint project between CBC Edmonton and CBC Calgary's editorial and communications teams, and in conjunction with The Alberta Library consortium. As part of the "Out Your Way" project, we visited nine towns and hamlets all across the province – some places with only a few dozen residents – holding thoughtful conversations with local leaders and influencers, large gatherings with people who live in the area, and other events.

The intent of all of these interactions was not to tell people how great the CBC is, but to sincerely listen – to hear from those who live outside of urban areas about what matters to them so that we can better reflect their realities in the stories we tell and how we tell them.

As a result, and in addition to building much stronger connections across rural Alberta, we published and broadcast many pieces of journalism and voices from these communities that might otherwise not have been heard.

3. CONCLUSION

This year marks a special step in the relationship between CBC News and the Ombudsman's Office as Jack Nagler files his last report and prepares to complete his 6-year tenure – also ending an illustrious career with the public broadcaster. We will miss his sharp reviews of our journalism and the stimulating debates that ensued. Before serving as an independent Ombudsman, Mr. Nagler worked on "our" side of the fence as a journalist and editorial leader. On behalf of our colleagues, I am grateful for his many contributions to CBC News and for upholding the journalistic standards we all hold so dear. He leaves the Ombudsman's office with



the deep respect of our journalists and many more working in our industry outside the CBC.

The next Ombudsman will have large shoes to fill and we are eager to take part in the formal hiring process, later this year, that will bring together CBC News managers, journalists, and representatives from the audience.

The past few months have also been my first as General Manager of CBC News, a role that was added in January to my position as Editor in Chief, and I am humbled by the trust Canadians put in us every hour of the day when they engage with CBC News on one of our platforms. I am indebted to my senior leadership colleagues for their tireless support and the never-ending inspiration they bring me and their teams as we work hard to make sense of our world together – while up against an unrelenting news cycle.

Above all, year after year, I am in awe of our hundreds of journalists and staff across our newsrooms in Canada and our overseas bureaus. They are the beating heart of this institution, and I continue to partake in the country's gratitude for their passion and tireless work.

Sincerely,

Brodie Fenlon
Editor in Chief and General Manager, CBC News