

Management's Response to the Ombudsman's Annual Report

First of all on behalf of the entire CBC News team I would like to congratulate Jack Nagler, again, on his well-deserved appointment as our new Ombudsman. Even in the short time he has been in the role, it's clear he continues in the legacy of his predecessor Esther Enkin, bringing his sharp independent eye to our journalism. We commit to collaborating with his office with our mutual goal of ensuring our journalism is of the highest standards.

As Mr. Nagler observed in his inaugural Annual Report, it's become almost cliché to describe public discourse as polarized. We might even observe that this polarization, at times, has become entrenched, as points of view and the exhortations from our audience to do better, arrive as fully formed arguments about how we have failed to present a particular story the way they would have liked.

Beyond the criticism or disappointment that some of our audience feels, we acknowledge there is also a sense of urgency inside many of the emails we received from the Ombudsman's office this past year. People urging us to seek balance or challenging our work from a deep seated concern that the media in general, and the CBC particularly, has lost its way journalistically, or is being corrupted by special interests. That urgency is rooted, we believe, in a rising concern among many Canadians that truth is harder to determine, let alone agree upon.

Increasingly, people look no further than news that affirms their point of view, rather than to use media to challenge or explain. In some cases they seek out information inside a walled garden of news sources that only frame stories from a certain point of view. Our important job is to provide journalism that speaks to people from a wide range of perspectives so we can facilitate a nuanced and sophisticated discourse, that is accessible and personally relevant.

The distance now between an event and the opinions that form around it is shorter than it ever was. For CBC News, this is our fundamental challenge. In this telescoping time frame in which our audience draws their conclusion, our basic principles of accuracy, fairness, impartiality, balance and integrity must be applied properly and also quickly. As we are guided by our principles, we can also do more to educate our audience about how we do our jobs, with increased transparency around the decisions we make. We have taken steps in this regard. There is more to do.

Fake News has quickly moved from being fringe insult or a joke meme to a phrase freely and carelessly thrown about as a righteous declaration that something is wrong

because it isn't what someone believes it to be. It's part of our language now, and part of the news cycle, whether we like it or not.

We believe that as the Federal Election takes shape over the coming months, we will see even more deliberate attempts by various interested parties to disrupt the political discourse to suit their own narratives. CBC News is engaging in this new reality aggressively, with the creation of a special unit focussed on identifying, and explaining "dis-information". We will work to recognize dis-information and spin for what it is. We will endeavour to expose it, and explain it.

By taking it seriously, we can dispel the misconceptions through active journalistic investigations. It is aimed specifically at our election coverage, but disinformation tactics are creeping into just about every issue from climate change to immigration.

Trust in the news - and CBC News in particular - is both a concern and priority for us. While the Edelman Global Trust Barometer for 2019 found that trust indicators for CBC News are up across the board, this is not something we can take for granted. Our integrity is being challenged by organized campaigns, and individuals who seek to denigrate our reputation to further their own objectives, whether it be an interest group or politically motivated individuals. Our content lives in environments, even within CBC, where commercial initiatives and journalism get connected as never before. We recognize that revenue generation is an important part of the future of CBC and we at CBC News have a part to play, the caveat being that it is extremely important to protect the integrity of our journalism and the perceptions around it. Audience trust is built on the promise of our JSP.

This is also why we are committed to an international push around an important trust initiative called the Trust Project. We are implementing a series of trust indicators on our digital properties. This includes being open about our best practices, labelling our work, publishing author bylines. We do this to be more transparent with the public about how we work and be in line with many other trusted news organizations world wide. This in turn fosters a growing awareness of the value and importance of trust among our own news staff, as we expand and develop new ways of reaching our audiences. Being transparent with our audience about our decisions and our mistakes is part of this work.

OUR OVERALL PERFORMANCE

This interaction with our audience through the Ombudsman's office facilitates a very important meeting spot for our programmers and senior leaders at CBC News. The meticulous process we have in place to respond to these complaints ensures that the feedback we hear from each day gets circulated. We are continuing to push the accountability for these complaints deeper into the organization so our floor staff better understand this aspect of the responsibility we have to Canadians. We are continuing to offer training in JSP to staff, and developing new modules that focus more deeply on relevant issues as they emerge.

Here are the numbers from this year: of the more than three thousand complaints, 825 of those required formal replies from our programmers. There were 88 requests for reviews by the Ombudsman. Of those 88, the Ombudsman's office only found a policy violation in 10 cases - none of which were major transgressions. Another 7 were flagged as issues where we could have done better. The remaining 71 reviews found no issues with our journalism. As noted, this is in line with the previous year. While of course we strive for perfection, we are very pleased with this past year's performance

FRAMING

Given this polarized news environment, the Ombudsman cautions us to take greater care in how we frame our stories overall. As noted in the report, we heard from our audience loud and clear when we mistakenly presented an analysis piece, designed to analyze the results of the election in Brazil, as a regular news story. Some of our readers felt we had taken a position in our news coverage. Despite our rapid response, it is instructive to see how difficult it can be to correct any perception of bias that might be created by such a seemingly simple mistake in a headline.

We are reinforcing with our journalistic leaders that headlines on news articles and introductions to our broadcast stories on TV and Radio need to sell the story, not position it in a particular way. These headlines and introductions must frame an angle for the audience, but not pre-position a message for the audience to take-away. They must invite the audience in, but not tell them what to expect. We let the facts set the tone, we let the facts drive the analysis. We let the audience form and express their own opinions and conclusions.

We are only months away from the next Federal Election in October. The complexities of political coverage, unpacking spin from policy, will demand a high degree of rigour

from our editors. With that in mind, we have put in place a robust team of journalists from all corners of CBC News to develop election coverage that will bring a new level of transparency to our audience. We will do this in a variety of ways, including: new digital tools to receive feedback and questions from Canadians; the launch of a fact-checking team that will provide detailed background and sourcing; and a renewed commitment to media literacy by explaining why we use the language and methods that we do on particularly complex stories.

The framing of political issues and controversies is particularly important. Therefore we will institute extra layers of oversight, which includes a detailed tracking system where programmers monitor and capture the amount of coverage we give each party, and leader and even issues for every newscast. This enables us to see trends and make adjustments if we feel we are out of balance for any reason. We have also hired an outside firm to independently track and assess the balance and tone of our Federal Election coverage overall.

BALANCE OVER TIME

The Ombudsman reminds us that our obligation to ensure balanced coverage over time requires conscious decision-making and an awareness that this is not something that happens naturally. As noted in his report, this was highlighted by our coverage of the turmoil in Venezuela. We were challenged repeatedly by some in our audience that we had become advocates for “regime change”, and we were deliberately undermining the President Maduro’s legitimacy. While the Ombudsman found no fault with our coverage, we took note of the feedback we received and challenged our teams to find other representative points of view. We continually remind our editors and programmers to think strategically when covering an issue, and make a transparent commitment to impartiality, fairness and “balance over time”.

The Ombudsman noted as well the skepticism with which many lawful gun-owners in this country feel towards the CBC; that we do not represent their views adequately. There was an orchestrated campaign through that office arguing a lack of balance in our coverage of any stories in which guns, gun laws, and gun control came up.

This provoked a useful reflection on our part about whether we live up to that promise of equitable expression of different points of view on controversial matters such as the regulation of firearms. Did we present those different views, upon which listeners, readers or viewers can evaluate them, test them against each other and the facts, and

decide whose “truth” to believe? Yes, we believe we did, but we also believe we can do better.

Part of the mandate of our Director of Journalistic Standards is to assess broadly the merits of any criticisms against our overall coverage of a particular story, which was the case with both the Venezuela and gun control examples. This analysis and feedback was then taken to the senior editorial leaders for consideration, and in both cases resulted in beneficial course corrections.

We agree with the Ombudsman that a more transparent and deliberate approach to balance over time will not only impose a stricter discipline on our story choices, but also reassure the audience who can’t possibly consume everything we do, that we will in fact touch on particular points of view important to them. We are asking our programmers to point to coverage on other platforms and shows that point to our overall breadth of coverage; link to other stories, and tell our audience how we plan to explore a complex issue over a series of days, being transparent that balance is an imperative for us.

STORY SELECTION

The Ombudsman also challenges us to consider more carefully what we choose to focus our attention on. US politics and the Donald Trump Presidency has consumed a fair bit of our journalistic attention. Rightly so in most cases, but our audience did let us know when it noticed a preoccupation with the incremental developments south of the border. We must guard against our newsroom enthusiasm for the American story, and our natural inclination to fill in the gaps, when a more thoughtful, patient and more intentional approach is warranted.

With that in mind, I have asked our Director of Journalistic Standards and Practices to do regular briefings with programming teams to surface specific themes that we have noticed through audience mail and to provoke more frank conversations based on feedback from our audiences. We are challenging our leaders and programmers to take some of this feedback into consideration, along with other inputs, to help guide decisions for on-going stories and to help us understand important considerations as we set about exploring the more controversial themes emerging as important flashpoints in the public discourse.

The rise in extremism, for example - from both the left and right side of the social spectrum - that is redefining the boundaries of the so-called mainstream, is of particular

interest. Framed against immigration or national security, or even the question of abortion, we are seeing more frank points of view expressed. This surfacing of opinions that have sat unexpressed to the degree that they have is both refreshing, and, a challenge as we work to reflect these conversations with appropriate context and perspective.

SOCIAL MEDIA

The Ombudsman also offers counsel when it comes to social media, not only in its use by CBC journalists, or as a newsgathering source, but also in how it is used by the pundits and contributors we seek out for comment who are not CBC employees, as that behaviour can reflect on the integrity of CBC News.

We remind our staff that our social platforms are also a matter of public record for our employees and CBC News. We encourage journalists that their posts should reflect the same discipline they bring to all of their more structured journalism, and that we must avoid actions that look like partisanship or advocacy for a cause. Anyone scanning a journalist's public profile should recognize a fair-minded journalist, just as anyone scanning the totality of CBC News should find a fair-minded news organization. Appropriate conduct on social media is an ongoing conversation, and where necessary, we do discipline staff for violations.

We also agree with the Ombudsman that a more active critical assessment of a non-CBC guest's social media footprint should be taken before engaging them as panellists or commentators.

Finally, we would like to thank once again our new Ombudsman Jack Nagler, for stepping into the role seamlessly, bringing his sharp eye and insightful mind to the task of ensuring we honour our commitment to Canadians. We appreciate the guidance and recommendations put forward in his Annual Report.

As we move into the heart of this Federal Election campaign, we know that Canadians always turn to CBC News in large numbers seeking fair and balanced coverage of our politicians. Elections are often defining moments in our journalism and they showcase the quality, range and scope of coverage that we are capable of, and that our audiences deserve. Our Journalistics Standards will be scrutinized and challenged like never before, and we are confident that we will meet that challenge.