



**CBCnews**

**Management Response  
to the Ombudsman's  
2022-2023 Report**

*Dear Chair Goldbloom, President Tait and members of CBC's Board of Directors:*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Among the many ways in which CBC News benefits from the work of the Ombudsman's office, his annual report is a much-anticipated opportunity for our management team to take a step back and reflect on the work we do as news professionals. From specific issues and helpful recommendations, to the higher grounds of journalistic philosophy, the Ombudsman's independent perspective helps us refocus our efforts time and again on our audience as we continue building the future of public broadcasting.

We take the good and the bad. It is gratifying to hear from the many Canadians who engage with our content on any of our platforms, emphasizing the relevance, timeliness and high quality of the journalism we produce every day. We also learn, and reflect, and evolve every time a member of the audience reaches out to criticize an editorial choice or point out a mistake. Corrections are rarely needed, but we process them quickly and transparently. If we're told our content is confusing, we do our best to clarify it. And regardless of the situation, we make sure our audience always knows they've been heard, as we take all feedback into account.



## **STORY SELECTION**

A main trend of that feedback, as highlighted in this year's Ombudsman report, is concern from some members of the audience about the way we pick our topics – including of course questions about the stories we choose not to cover. Those questions are particularly important to us as we make every effort to be as relevant as we can to everyone in Canada.

We are three years into a focused strategy to broaden and deepen our journalism and the range of stories and perspectives found in our coverage. That strategy starts at the story meetings and editorial tables, where we have worked hard to bring in more voices, to challenge unconscious bias and “gatekeeping,” and to daily ask ourselves whose voices and viewpoints are missing in our coverage.

Being relevant means, on one level, carefully curating a selection of stories for every program and every landing page across our network and online platforms, giving viewers, listeners and readers a general picture of the world they live in at any given moment.

It also means, however, that we strive to be available “on demand” for those who are looking to understand a specific issue, or get access to trusted, verified information about a story they heard elsewhere. Our goal is that they should be able to look it up on our website, or on one of our apps, or on their smart TV, and find a story or a program that gives them a 360-degree view

of that issue. This can include fact-checking rumours and laying out different voices that shape the public debate.

We achieve those two goals every day, albeit with certain challenges. The first one is the ever-frustrating contrast between an infinite number of possible stories and our finite resources. Every time I get a chance to drop by one of our production meetings where journalists pitch stories to their producers, I am reminded of the incredible wealth of ideas that emerge every day in each of CBC's newsrooms across the country and in our world bureaus. I am also reminded of the limitations they immediately face, as with most other outlets: there's only so much content that one group of people can create, no matter how many different angles they would like to add to it. Of course our journalists are experts in the art of containing a multitude of perspectives within a tight report, but some less urgent ideas are inevitably left behind. We continue to work creatively, within our budget, to find new ways to tell even more stories on an even wider range of topics.

Another challenge in this area is the inevitable comparison audience members can draw between our coverage and that of any other media outlet. Any discrepancy in editorial choices may be used to highlight the angle chosen for a story, or the fact that a story wasn't covered on a certain platform – which might then be interpreted as a “choice” not to cover it. And it is easy to forget all the other files that we have covered and that were “ignored” by our colleagues in other media.

As Editor in Chief, I have the privilege of seeing the totality of our coverage across multiple hours, programs, platforms and regions. I appreciate that most people do not have the same vantage point as I do; it's not unusual for a member of the audience to complain about the absence of a story we have actually covered, just not on the program or time of their choice.

Nevertheless, we acknowledge every occasion in the past year when citizens have expressed concern that we missed a story, as highlighted in the Ombudsman's report. It would be simplistic to find a blanket explanation that would cover all those instances, and I would much rather consider each within its own circumstances. Was it deemed less relevant or urgent than stories already assigned to the available reporters? Did we lack a sufficient amount of verified documents and sources to build a solid narrative? And most importantly, if we're being criticized for skipping over a certain story, what efforts can we make to start covering it? Asking ourselves those questions at every opportunity helps us inch closer to our ideal of full relevancy for all of our audience.

And we work to constantly remind our audience that a choice to cover (or not cover) a certain angle has nothing to do with pressure from political or economic powers. It never does. I have on several occasions this year publicly reaffirmed our editorial independence from all outside interests. But of course Canadians have every right to double-check, to ask those questions and obtain clear answers – and we will double down on our efforts to transparently explain every editorial decision we make.



## **INDIGENOUS COVERAGE**

We are pleased to acknowledge the Ombudsman’s encouraging findings on our coverage of issues related to Indigenous people. As he notes, the number of Indigenous reporters working with CBC News keeps growing – we believe that is the only way any news institution can tell the true story of what it means to be Indigenous today in this country. According to the Canadian Association of Journalists, more Indigenous journalists work at CBC than at any news outlet in Canada other than APTN. But instead of setting ourselves as an example, we pledge to take this as a starting point and to keep growing.

We do hope that complainants “who assert that CBC pays disproportionately high levels of attention to the perspectives of Indigenous people,” as pointed out in the report, will continue to follow our coverage and grow to appreciate the immeasurable richness and relevance of those perspectives.

As the public broadcaster, we believe the onus is on us to be a Canadian leader in the coverage of First Nations, Métis and Inuit stories, and we are developing a new CBC News strategy to broaden and deepen our journalism about these communities. We have certainly heard from those in Indigenous communities who appreciate our efforts and tell us that Indigenous perspectives have not been as valued or well represented by news media in the past.

Moreover, CBC News leadership benefits greatly from the journalistic expertise and lived experience of its members who are part of Indigenous communities. It goes without saying that senior managers and advisors often take part in conversations about difficult stories – such as the ones around Indigenous identity mentioned in the report. We are grateful to the Ombudsman for his advice on the great care that should be applied when setting the bar for those stories.

It is worth noting that CBC News doesn’t intend to “lead the way” in covering stories specifically about Indigeneity. That topic is just one among the many political questions that garner attention within Indigenous communities across the continent, and we have covered it as such. Reporters aren’t mandated to research examples of questionable identity claims, but they may cover them when they are made aware of such occurrences. Of course, while those stories are rare, they tend to ignite widespread conversations about the specific person involved, about the question of Indigeneity, and about a news outlet’s choice to cover that question.

We are confident in the public interest of covering a topic that is already the subject of debate within various communities. Our role, as always, is to help the audience identify facts and place them into relevant context, without casting judgement on the subject of the story. We note that two of our most prominent stories on this subject, by reporter Geoff Leo, have been nominated for one of Canada’s top journalism honours — the Michener Award for public service journalism — in each of the last two years. We remain conscious of the immense impact a CBC story can

have on someone's personal life, and as always, we carefully weigh that impact against the level of influence they already have in the public sphere.

We are grateful for the Ombudsman's recommendations on this file and we look forward to more feedback from his office and from the audience as our coverage evolves.



## **ACCOUNTABILITY**

I was pleased to learn that the annual number of received complaints has decreased, this year, by 60 percent – and I would like to believe this decline reflects a strengthening in the transparency and overall quality of our journalism. Moreover, we have successfully improved the internal support system that allows us to process those complaints, reducing our average response time by four working days. We plan to continue on that path in an effort to bring the average time down significantly before the end of this year.

While most of the audience members who correspond with us clearly do so in good faith, with a genuine desire to ensure our work is fair to the reality they know, we have also noticed an increase in complaints that are part of political projects, orchestrated one way or another by lobby groups. Those complaints generally aren't based on concerns around our standards. Instead, they use our journalistic accountability process to advocate for narratives that would help them advance their special interests.

It is still possible for a political group to point out journalistic shortcomings while simultaneously advocating for a cause. We will continue to examine each complaint for its merits as it is brought to our attention, but we are mindful of not getting bogged down in repetitive and sterile debates designed to distract us from fact-based journalism.

I wholeheartedly agree with the Ombudsman's comments on the importance of publishing a transparent correction on the rare occasion when an error is made. If it is true that corrections are a hit to our credibility, the way to safeguard that credibility is not to skip posting corrections – but to avoid mistakes in the first place.

I acknowledge the Ombudsman's criticism of the "Report Error" link at the bottom of our stories, and of the lack of accountability features on the CBC News app. I pledge to address those concerns in collaboration with our digital development team.

I have also carefully noted the Ombudsman's recommendation "to explore ways to offer proof of performance on the promise of balance over time." While I absolutely agree that our audience should have easy access to multiple perspectives on any controversial topic, I am not convinced that this goal can be achieved by compiling reports under thematic banners. Such a collection of stories would be reminiscent of chapters in a book, and would give the audience a false

impression that our coverage can be read like an academic paper. In fact, each story lives a life of its own, tied to the extent of our coverage during a given period, within a context that includes parallel pieces, updates, and follow-ups in separate reports.

Our commitment to balance includes a promise, when a story can't include every perspective, to never make it sound like those missing perspectives don't exist. Nevertheless, my team and I pledge to carefully examine the Ombudsman's concerns and to consider new, creative avenues to address them.



## **ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE**

Perhaps AI might help with that endeavour. The Ombudsman accurately suggests in his report that artificial intelligence is likely to become an even more prominent area of discussion by this time next year.

I would even add that a multitude of projects are already underway to tackle the challenges and opportunities presented by a wide array of new technology. As an example, we partnered with the BBC, The New York Times, Microsoft and others to develop Project Origin, a standard for confirming the authenticity of content from trusted sources – as a counter to the rise of “deep fake” and altered content generated by AI.

When it comes to newsgathering and production methods, we are already confronted with an endless list of new available techniques that could upend traditional journalism rules. Our standards are based on decades of practice and precedent, and while the internet dramatically accelerated our work and made it easier, technology had not yet proven capable of independently generating content. The question now is: should we let it do that at all?

One example is automatic text generation, which other news institutions such as The Associated Press or The Wall Street Journal have been using in pilot projects to produce short business or market stories. A software collects data and automatically writes human-style sentences which are then published, with or without systematic human oversight, depending on the outlet. For transparency, that content is generally labeled as AI-generated. CBC News is observing those public-facing experiments with great interest but we have no short-term plans to take part in them.

Similarly, we have been very cautious around the use of AI in our investigative content. As an example, it might be tempting for producers to use artificial video technology to protect the identity of a vulnerable source in an interview – as opposed to the traditional pixelated face and distorted voice. An artificially generated face might be more pleasant to watch and could recreate the interviewee's facial expressions for a more “authentic” testimony. However, we are not yet convinced that there is enough societal awareness of the benefits and shortcomings of

synthetic content to safely alternate between real and fake faces in CBC News videos – as our priority remains to consolidate the audience’s trust in the integrity of our content.

That is not to say we will not take such steps in the future, and we continue to monitor industry trends. Earlier this year, we entered a partnership with other leading media and tech companies such as BBC, Adobe and OpenAI – through the Media Integrity Program of an organization named Partnership for AI – to create a set of best practices on how to responsibly create and deliver AI-generated content.

Internally, we recently reached out to our Radio-Canada colleagues and started a working group to reflect together on those challenges and opportunities as they relate to journalism. Our goal is to provide our staff with clear guidelines around the use of AI – in the coming months but also as an evolving framework for the long term. We will also endeavour to explain these guidelines to the public we serve in the interest of total transparency.

I am therefore pleased to note the Ombudsman’s suggestion, among others, to consider ways “to educate and empower the audience.” Those two objectives perfectly summarize the public interest that will guide us on the road head.



## **OTHER INITIATIVES**

I am happy to report that we are continuing our internal work on the inclusive interpretation of our Journalistic Standards and Practices (JSP). As an example the recently established, employee-led Language Advisory Group delivered its first recommendation earlier this year, which resulted in an update to our Language Guide.

Meanwhile, we regularly communicate with our audience about our editorial decisions in an effort to reinforce the transparency of CBC journalism – chiefly through my Editor’s Blog.

Finally, I am very proud to report that nearly 1,000 CBC News employees have participated in our new full-day JSP training program. The course, which we designed with support from CBC’s Learning and Development department, is among the best-reviewed training programs on offer. Our staff has welcomed the opportunity to step out of their day-to-day work to dive deeply into these core principles that guide our work, and to workshop the countless vagaries of journalism ethics and principles we face each day. Our intention is to have all CBC News employees take the course by year’s end.



## **CONCLUSION**

I am personally grateful to Jack Nagler for his tireless work and sound advice. My team and I have recently congratulated him for the extension of his mandate until December 2024 and we look forward to another year of thoughtful insight into our standards and practices.

As we learn from audience feedback and monitor industry trends, we also continue to work hand in hand with our French services counterparts. We are lucky to share that path with such accomplished, trustworthy journalists as Luce Julien and her team.

CBC generally updates its JSP every few years, the last review dating back to 2018. When the next formal one takes place, the many questions discussed in the Ombudsman's report and in this response will take centre stage as we draft recommendations for the board's attention. Perhaps most importantly, we pledge to undertake that task in the same spirit of collaboration, transparency and openness that defines our work, every day, at the service of Canadian democracy.

Brodie Fenlon,  
Editor in Chief

— On behalf of Susan Marjetti, General Manager, and the leadership team of CBC News

