

CBC NEWS RESPONSE TO THE CBC OMBUD 2024-2025 REPORT

TO: **Broadcasting and Innovation Committees**

MEETING: **June 18-19, 2025**

FROM: Brodie Fenlon, General Manager & Editor in Chief

PURPOSE: Response from CBC News management to Ombud Maxime Bertrand's 2024-2025 annual report

1. INTRODUCTION

CBC News appreciates the opportunity to respond to CBC Ombud Maxime Bertrand's annual report for 2024-2025. We would like to publicly welcome Ms. Bertrand to her critically important role and wish her the best of luck. We are also pleased to use her preferred new title of Ombud.

The past year has been one of transformation and growth for CBC News. The importance of an independent public broadcaster with journalists from coast to coast to coast has never been more clear. A robust public broadcaster can serve as an antidote to a media ecosystem increasingly populated with misinformation and bad-faith actors, and the resultant mistrust in institutions, including traditional media.

It's also been a year of intense scrutiny and heightened challenges as the national public broadcaster has had to navigate an array of complex and polarizing matters — up to and including debates over its own mandate and funding.

As always, CBC News welcomes examination and criticism of its journalism. We are accountable to Canadians through the Office of the Ombud and we endeavour to produce rigorous and essential journalism that lives up to our Journalistic Standards and Practices (JSP).

Much of the feedback and critiques we receive from audience members are thoughtful, constructive and lead to important conversations within CBC News that allow us to constantly improve our journalism. However, it must be acknowledged that the past year has also brought with it increasingly corrosive dialogue and the burgeoning use of organized campaigns that aim to influence our editorial choices by targeting our journalists, management and the Ombud office

with an unprecedented volume of similarly worded messages and complaints. I'll talk more about this phenomenon below.

We navigated many challenges this past year, which were amplified by the ongoing war in Gaza and a particularly polarizing federal election campaign — the campaign had only just started during the period covered by this year's Ombud report.

2. KEY ELEMENTS

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

The past year has seen CBC News accelerate its efforts to transform and innovate. We completed the successful launch of our FAST (free ad-supported television) channels throughout the country, and those channels are now featured on major TV platforms such as Samsung, LG and Roku. These channels provide audiences who don't access traditional TV channels with a robust, regularly updated mix of local and national news programming, which will only grow, develop and include more live elements in the months ahead. We have expanded our journalistic efforts on YouTube and TikTok, where we see significant reach, especially among young and diverse audiences for whom these platforms are essential sources of news and information. (Our journalism remains blocked on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram due to Meta's rejection of the Online News Act). We have also expanded our live coverage on digital and streaming platforms.

While the platforms and formats may change, our journalistic standards are the same everywhere we serve the public. A one-minute TikTok explainer and a one-hour documentary on *The Fifth Estate* are held to the very same expectations of fairness, accuracy, balance, impartiality and integrity. Because of regular staff turnover and a significant hiring effort underway for local reporters (see below), we continue to offer an extensive JSP training program and ensure anyone new to our organization is enrolled.

Finally, CBC News, like many other media outlets — and society as a whole — has had to manage the rapid growth of generative artificial intelligence and grapple with the immense and growing power of the technology, as well as the associated risks that come with it. As an organization, we have developed and instituted rigorous and thoughtful guidelines for the use of AI in our work, balancing its undeniable utility with the need for human oversight to ensure that our work remains rigorously accurate. As the technology develops and evolves, our approach to AI will as well.

CONNECTING WITH OUR COMMUNITIES

In January of this year, CBC News announced — following the CRTC's approval of Google's plan to compensate Canadian news organizations for use of their content — that it would be using that funding to significantly expand its reporting in underserved communities across Canada. As I wrote at the time: "These additional roles will ensure that more Canadians have access to crucial information about their community and the world around them, and share significant stories from these communities with national audiences."

I'm pleased to report that we are in the hiring phase, and expect to employ up to 30 additional reporters in 24 communities, most of which previously did not have CBC bureaus. The stories that these journalists will tell and the connections they will make with Canadians across the country are among the most important priorities I have set for CBC News and its journalists: to be out in our communities, hearing from, engaging with and telling the local stories that resonate with all Canadians, regardless of their social, cultural or political backgrounds.

These new community reporters will be standard bearers for this essential part of the public broadcaster's mandate. I'm excited to see the work they will accomplish this year and you can be sure I'll be telling you more about that the next time we present this report.

ACCOUNTABILITY

We were pleased to note that while the Ombud reported a record number of complaints made to her office — more than 10,000, of which some 1,700 were processed — CBC News managed to maintain our average response time to processed complaints at 9 days. That impressive achievement is due in large part to the diligence and dedication of the Journalistic Standards and Public Trust team, which has made it a priority to respond to audience complaints, defend our journalism when warranted, or apply the appropriate corrective measures on those rare occasions when we fail to live up to our Journalistic Standards and Practices.

Even more impressive is the fact that we were able to efficiently triage the growing number of complaints in the face of a phenomenon that the Ombud rightly and accurately calls out in her report: organized pressure campaigns led by advocacy groups, by email or, most often, on social media. These campaigns are fueled by new tools that allow people to take part by copying and pasting text provided by campaign organizers, or by simply clicking on a single button to send in a complaint. We suspect some complaints may even be AI-generated. We are most concerned about the targeting of specific journalists by these campaigns, which can include the use of a reporter's name, photo and email address. Some of our journalists have told me these types of "name and shame" campaigns have made them feel less safe doing their jobs. In some cases, we've had to implement tools that prevent doxxing of our employees.

While these campaigns might yield a significant number of complaints, they are not effective. As I mentioned before, CBC News welcomes thoughtful, reasonable and specific complaints. Campaigns such as the ones to which I am referring are none of those things. In fact, all they really accomplish is to risk drowning out the constructive feedback of the kind that regularly helps us improve our journalism.

We will devote our energy to the legitimate and thoughtful feedback that Canadians take the time and care to share with us, while always safeguarding our independence from special interest groups.

POLITICAL COVERAGE

If complaints about CBC News coverage were any barometer, the single subject that most polarized Canadians this past year was politics — and not necessarily in the way many of us might have anticipated.

As Ms. Bertrand noted in her report, the return of Donald Trump as president of the United States did more than just upend political conventions — it had a material impact on the state of public discourse.

Unfortunately, one of the hallmarks of the era that Trump ushered in — attacking the credibility of mainstream media, disseminating misinformation, personalizing attacks on individual journalists seen as “the enemy” — resonated with a number of Canadians.

That was evident in the attacks not just on CBC journalism, but on our journalists themselves, especially the ones with the most public profile. Insults, name-calling and bad-faith characterizations of our work have always been at least part of the equation. But this past year they reached new heights in terms of volume, intensity and tenor.

At the same time, we are mindful that a number of Canadians don’t always see their views or perspectives in our coverage and we must work ever harder to engage them. Our federal election coverage strategy sought to elevate far more voices of regular Canadians from all parts of the country and I believe we were successful in this endeavour. The work will continue this year. We have made as one of our key objectives for 2025-2026 the following:

We will broaden the diversity of viewpoints and representation in our coverage, embracing opportunities to showcase different political, ideological and cultural perspectives — while strongly demonstrating our own journalistic impartiality.

In terms of our political coverage itself, far and away the number one complaint we received, and continue to receive, is that we are biased towards some political parties and viewpoints and against some others. So I would like to take this opportunity to say this as clearly as I can: impartiality is the bedrock of CBC News journalism. As required by our JSP, we provide coverage that is fair and balanced, and we do so by including voices from across the political spectrum in our coverage. Our hosts and our journalists do not favour any given party, politician or ideology.

We were heartened to see banner (and in some cases, record-breaking) audiences across all of our platforms in the last quarter of the year as the Trump tariff threats, Liberal leadership race and federal election made headlines. That large audience response indicates to me a continued desire among a majority of Canadians for independent, fact-based and impartial news.

COVERAGE OF THE WAR IN GAZA

The ongoing war in Gaza continues to elicit much passionate, hurt, angry, resentful and suspicious feedback from CBC News audiences. Some audience members staunchly believe that CBC News is minimizing or mis-framing the impacts that the war has had on Palestinians,

suggesting we have not sufficiently or accurately ascribed blame for the bloodshed in Gaza. Others feel that CBC News has been too open to allowing voices they perceive to be anti-Israel or antisemitic to dominate the discussion about the war in our programming.

We regret that a number of these critics feel that their views on the war in Gaza are not sufficiently reflected in our coverage. And it is understandable that many may wish that we would take a different approach to our stories, interview different people, ask different questions, or perhaps not do certain stories at all.

But it's important to understand that CBC is mandated to carry information on topical events and the different principal points of view on controversial matters in a balanced, fair and accurate fashion. CBC News cannot support or advocate for any particular view, but must rather present differing views fairly and accurately, affording Canadians the opportunity to assess the information they need to make up their own minds about the nature of the event or quality of the views expressed.

That is the approach that has governed, and will continue to govern, our coverage of this exceptionally polarizing conflict.

COVERING OURSELVES

As happens from time to time, the CBC found itself in the awkward position of becoming a news story over the past year. More specifically, the topic of the CBC's mandate and its funding made headlines, the latter even finding itself becoming a source of political back-and-forth during the recent federal election.

I have long maintained that debates over CBC's funding model and mandate are fair game and worthy of coverage like that of any other publicly funded institution. What I dispute is what some complainants asserted over the past year: that because CBC funding had become a matter of public debate, that we had too much of a conflict of interest to cover the story ourselves. In some cases, critics went as far as to suggest that we should not cover the federal election at all due to that perceived conflict.

We believe it is incumbent upon the CBC, as the national public broadcaster, to provide Canadians with coverage of matters of significant public interest, regardless of the journalistic challenges they present.

On the cusp of the federal election, I wrote a blog post laying out what Canadians could expect from the CBC in terms of how we would cover ourselves should we become part of the story. I am including particularly relevant passages here:

Our journalistic principles will apply to every story we cover, including the story of the CBC, should the future of the public broadcaster become an election issue.

There is an obvious challenge and inherent conflict of interest in covering ourselves and our public funding, but we have plenty of past experience doing journalism about the CBC. I promise our standards won't waver on this story and we will treat it like we would



the coverage of any other Crown corporation — always with the public interest and our journalistic principles first in our minds.

I firmly believe that our work on this subject lived up to that standard, which will continue to guide our journalism whenever CBC finds itself being part of the story.

CONCLUSION

I've dedicated a significant amount of this response to addressing the remarkable challenges that CBC News has faced over the past year. I believe it's important to do so in order to provide a complete, 360-degree view of what the public broadcaster navigates in its service to Canadians.

However, I want to close this response by acknowledging the flip side of that reality, which is the astonishing amount of exceptional work by our teams — national and local, and on all our platforms, traditional and emerging.

Ambitious journalism. Consequential journalism. Journalism that gets at the heart of what matters to Canadians, who rightly expect no less from their public broadcaster.

Award-winning journalism. (As I write this response, CBC News is nominated for 290 journalism awards for work over the previous year.)

Powered by our exceptional journalists and leaders, inspired by our commitment to public service, and guided by our rigorous Journalistic Standards and Practices, CBC News will continue to deliver fair, balanced, accurate, impartial journalism with integrity and rigour. We will not be deterred in our mission. That is our promise to Canadians.

Sincerely,

Brodie Fenlon
General Manager and Editor in Chief CBC News

