

A considerable number of viewers wrote to complain about an item broadcast on The National on August 4th, 2006. The item concerned events in Cornwall, Ontario during a Conservative Party caucus meeting.

They argued that the selection of a segment in which Mr. Harper is heard was inaccurate and misleading.

Jonathan Whitten, the Executive Producer of The National, replied saying, in part, that while he agreed with concerns about the structure of the report, he felt that the segment selected was not a misrepresentation of Mr. Harper's position. He wrote that he regretted not taking the time to make it clear what prompted the Prime Minister's response.

Several sections in the CBC's Journalistic Standards and Practices come into play on this item. One would be the general statement in the preamble to the policy book which states: "The broadcast media in particular have an obligation to be fair, accurate, thorough, comprehensive and balanced in their presentation of information." And later, "...those principles must govern daily practice so the Corporation's journalism will meet the highest standards of excellence and integrity."

Those principles are given more specific treatment in the section on Principles. Under "Accuracy" it states: "The information conforms with reality and is not in any way misleading or false. This demands not only careful and thorough research but a disciplined use of language and production techniques, including visuals." And this under "Fairness": "The information reports or reflects equitably the relevant facts and significant points of view, it deals fairly and ethically with persons, institutions, issues and events."

Also, a couple of points from the section on "Editing Interviews" (Section iv, Production Standards B, 2.1 b and c): "Answers to a question given in one context must not be edited into another (b)" and "An answer to a question must not be placed in a program so that it purports to be an answer to a question other than that actually posed.(c)"

With that as background I can turn to the report.

It began with a somewhat confusing introduction which said that the Prime Minister's policy toward the fighting in the Middle East had led to "questions and criticism at the Conservative caucus retreat" in Cornwall, Ontario. The implication that members of Mr. Harper's caucus might be criticizing him was dispelled in the first paragraph of the report which situated the "questions and criticism" not at the caucus but at a demonstration nearby. The report showed one of the protestors making an emotional plea to stop the "burning of children and the killing of innocent people by each side." The reporter then notes that the protester, Elsaadi Daad, was brought to meet a member of the government: "While Elsaadi was invited inside to deliver her message directly to Canada's Foreign Affairs Minister, Stephen Harper clearly wasn't swayed." I will leave aside the awkwardness of the phrasing. The implication is that her message was given to Stephen

Harper and that he responded that he is “not preoccupied in any way with reaction within individual communities.”

That phrase was part of an answer to a question at a press conference concerning the apparent rise in support for the Conservatives among members of the Jewish community and a fall in support among members of the Muslim community. It accurately captured his answer to that question. Unfortunately, anyone watching The National would have thought that it was in response to the emotional plea to stop the killing of children. This clearly is contrary to the direct implications of the policies quoted above. (As they often say on the US program, Law and Order, “it’s black letter law”.) Not only did it give the appearance of being an answer to an apparent question on that subject, coming immediately after Ms. Elsaadi’s statements it makes a strong impression on viewers.

At the press conference that Mr. Harper held later in the day, during which he made these statements, he was actually asked a question about the demonstrators. His answer was that the government had “a responsibility to understand all perspectives,” that various groups had views that were “unique and intensely held” and that those views “can’t and shouldn’t be ignored.” He also restated the government still had to use its best judgment on the issues.

So, the reporter had available a question and answer directly on the subject of the demonstrators but chose a “clip” from a different question to follow the set-up of the demonstrators. I would suggest that it’s just not a “structural” problem, but a misleading use of editing. Very simply, that wasn’t the question he was asked and answered. And when asked directly about the protestors, he gave a more nuanced answer that The National did not broadcast.

Other parts of the report would be considered unexceptional as coverage of any government facing an issue like the Mid-East crisis: an apparent drop in support in Quebec and the presence of some prominent Liberals among those supporting Mr. Harper.

Ms. Lawand concluded her piece by reporting that the Prime Minister said that his views, when properly understood, represent the views of most Canadians.

Conclusions:

Every government, in dealing with a crisis as acute and emotional as the current one in the Middle East, will endure criticism from many sides, as well as support. Partisans often see bias in the reporting of criticism, even though it is a news organization’s obligation to report all sides of a controversy. My normal viewing and listening has not turned up a concerted effort to mischaracterize the Prime Minister’s views.

However, while reporting on such important and emotional issues, it is vital that care be taken to capture the reality of any government’s views and place them in a fair and intelligible context. Broadcasting is such a powerful medium that the CBC has seen fit to

write specific and careful policies about how its journalists should use that power—in using images, sound and script.

In this case, the most dramatic element of the item was just unfair and, as I said above, violated the direct prohibition on using an answer from one question as if it were an answer to another. The producer argues that Mr. Harper's views were fairly stated, but the context and structure were such as to mislead the viewer.

I note that The National has attempted, on-air, to clarify the matter for the audience. It would have been useful if it had done so as soon as the “structural” problem was noted but I applaud the willingness to revisit the issue.

Vince Carlin, Ombudsman
CBC