

**Management's Response
to the 2001-2002 Annual Reports
of the Offices of the Ombudsman
for the English and French Networks
of CBC/Radio-Canada**

September 2002

Introduction

We have received the annual reports of the Offices of the Ombudsman for the English and the French Networks of CBC/Radio-Canada. Senior Management has reviewed the reports as well as the Ombudsmen's recommendations.

This year, there has been a slight decrease in the number of complaints received by the Ombudsman of English Services and a slight increase on the French side, if we exclude a high volume of complaints (584) related to the departure of a Radio-Canada journalist after the publication of his controversial book.

Again this year, most complainants were satisfied with the response they received from programmers. The statistics confirm the overall quality and integrity of our journalistic programming. This is an admirable track record, given the high volume and rapid turnaround of activity on CBC/Radio-Canada's television, radio and Internet services, in both official languages, and given the controversial events that dominated the news this past year, September 11, Afghanistan and the Middle East. The Corporation's Chief Journalists remain committed to maintaining program quality and ensuring compliance with the Corporation's journalistic policies.

Ombudsmen's recommendations

Having reviewed and discussed the recommendations made by the Ombudsmen, our comments on each of the recommendations are as follows.

Response time

This issue is common to both Ombudsmen's reports this year, as it was last year. In its response last year, Senior Management had undertaken to take measures to ensure that complainants received a response within 20 working days unless the review required extensive research, in which case an acknowledgement would be sent within 10 days.

Both Ombudsmen note that programmers have been doing much better in this regard. CBC News Online even won praise for their five-day response time. However, we agree with the Ombudsman that there is "still considerable room for improvement". We also remain committed to our standards of service and are confident that by continuing the pace of improvement shown over the last year, the targeted commitment will be achieved in the course of the current year. We also believe that the quality and thoughtfulness of replies has been significantly improved. This often takes time. As well, a flood of mail on a single topic can slow down the process. Therefore, from now on, an acknowledgement will be sent immediately upon receiving a complaint so that viewers and listeners will at least have the confirmation that their letters have been received and read. The Media Vice-Presidents will continue their efforts to reinforce the importance of these measures and will monitor the situation to ensure compliance with this standard of service.

On-air corrections / Comments from viewers and listeners

The main recommendation of the Ombudsman for English Services relates to on-air corrections of mistakes in news and information programs. He notes “that there are fewer corrections on-air than there are admissions of fault in communications with complainants”. He goes on to state that open and clear admission of errors would benefit everyone, including CBC/Radio-Canada journalists and their credibility. He recommends that all news and information programs develop a distinctive format for handling corrections and that these corrections be archived on our website. Again, CBC News Online seems to have taken the lead in this area by developing its own corrections page.

Management agrees that the process for broadcasting on-air corrections should be improved, and that such corrections should appear more frequently, consistently and effectively. Also, senior Information programmers agree that the same journalistic rigour used in programs should be brought to make decisions about on-air corrections. The Editor in Chief and the Ombudsman have already discussed this matter.

CBC Radio has relied heavily on *Talkback* and listener mail to address some type of corrections. This will continue on top of new measures. As well, CBC Television believes that another appropriate vehicle for such corrections will be the new media accountability program that launches this November on CBC Newsworld. Given the range and tone of CBC/Radio-Canada information programs, a one-size approach will not fit all. Therefore, templates for handling on-air corrections will be developed for each program, with a decision-making process that goes beyond individual programs to include oversight by senior news management.

As for French Services, correcting erroneous facts is not usually a problem, and such rectifications are carried out promptly. The Ombudsman for English Services’ recommendation that computer graphics be used for handling comments, rather than these being read out by a host, is an excellent one, and will be implemented. At present, however, there is no specific avenue for presenting complaints of greater import or even simple comments from television viewers, whether these are positive or negative. This year, French Television plans to bring together some of the more pertinent interventions, in brief summaries, during a single program segment. Television viewers’ opinions will be the focus of several minutes of airtime during the show *5/5*, which is broadcast Sundays at 5:00 p.m. on Radio-Canada, and then rebroadcast on RDI. Hosted by Bernard Derome, the program is produced with the close cooperation of New Media, which makes it possible for comments to be broadcast both on the air and on the Web. This interactive initiative will take place as part of the “*L’information pour tous*” project, one of the goals of which is to create links between Internet users and all of our information programs. It is critical that this initiative be developed as quickly as possible. These measures should also respond to the Ombudsman for French Services’ recommendation that a “reader’s mail” type of program be created, to offer citizens who might feel wronged by a program an opportunity for having their views heard.

Town Halls

In his decision on the September 19 National Town Hall on CBC Television, the Ombudsman urged programmers to develop and publish guidelines governing national town hall programming to ensure the expression of a wide range of views from a broadly representative group of citizens. In his report, the Ombudsman notes however that programmers seem to have taken editorial steps to ensure a wider diversity of opinion in subsequent Town Halls.

CBC Television has already adopted a policy of providing a full explanation to viewers at the beginning of each Town Hall, including the process for selecting audience members and soliciting input. Once the development and review process is complete, these guidelines will be formally published and posted on the website. CBC Radio has also developed a set of guidelines and toolkit for programmers undertaking town halls.

Transparency of financing of information programs

As a result of his review of the financing of *Le Canada du Millénaire*, the Ombudsman of English Services made several recommendations on the development of a journalism policy to deal with the increasingly commercial environment in which CBC/Radio-Canada now operates. The main recommendation was to enshrine the principle of transparency of financing of information programs in the Corporation's journalistic policies, to ensure that all sources of funding are disclosed to the audience.

Given the importance of this issue for the public broadcaster's credibility and independence, our Chief Journalists reacted immediately to the Ombudsman's decision and undertook to review the issue. We are pleased to be able to submit to the Board a proposal on Program Funding and Transparency, to be incorporated into CBC/Radio-Canada's *Journalistic Standards and Practices*.

Fairness

It would appear that fairness was once again the issue most often raised by the public, and this for French and English Services alike, in particular, with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Coverage of the conflict in the Middle East is one of the most controversial topics facing media from Western countries. During the annual meeting of the *Organization of News Ombudsmen* (ONO), group chaired by David Bazay, all of the world's major news organizations indicated that they had been inundated with complaints in this regard. Chief Journalists are aware of this issue's complexity, and of the subsequent difficulties inherent in covering such events. The two Ombudsmen deem that overall, CBC/Radio-Canada's coverage complies with the Corporation's journalistic policy. They do, however, intimate that journalists may wish to exercise a greater degree of care and seek to offer more context when reporting on such events. The Chief Journalists recognize the Ombudsmen's comments as being appropriate and will continue making every effort to ensure coverage that meets the three main principles underlying our journalistic policies, namely **accuracy**, **integrity** and **fairness**.

Use of specialists and commentators

The notion of fairness is also the driving force behind a recommendation from the Ombudsman for French Services with regard to “the repeated use of the same analyst (or commentator) on the same program about the same topic.” According to the Ombudsman, this tendency would “be contrary to the spirit of the journalistic policy, which stipulates that ‘the air waves must not fall under the control of any individuals’,” and that the public broadcaster must ensure a plurality in the opinions and voices broadcast on its airwaves. Chief Journalists concur with the Ombudsman’s assessment that we too often call upon the same analysts for a given topic. Measures will be implemented to correct this situation, particularly in the case of sensitive topics such as the Middle East crisis or the feared war in Iraq. RDI has already taken steps to renew its pool of analysts. French Television News has also asked regional news managers to prepare a list of specialists in various fields so that we can invite guests more representative of the various regions we cover. All have agreed to pay special attention to this issue, and to actively seek to increase the number of guest commentators in order to ensure that a greater range of viewpoints is broadcast.

Quality of French

This year, the Ombudsman once again noted a number of complaints regarding the quality of French, with the audience’s concerns being similar to those expressed in previous years. He adds that the Conseil de la langue française of Quebec is preparing to conduct research on the language of radio bulletins, including those of Radio-Canada. Chief Journalists have acknowledged this recommendation. They have, in fact, noted a drop in quality, specifically due to an increase in live broadcasts that more often than not call for journalists to improvise, with the result being varying degrees of linguistic style. Consequently, French Radio has decided to create a committee to monitor these occurrences, complementing the activities of the linguistic consultant already in place. French Television plans to create a linguistic consultant position to be filled immediately. A significant portion of the work involved will consist of monitoring the various programs (especially news) and advising journalists and announcers of any errors made, as well as the appropriate rectifications. A short weekly communication on common mistakes could also be useful in bringing about improvements to the situation.

Conclusion

Last year in our response, we had indicated that we would come back to the Board with a formal proposal following the recommendation made two years ago by the Ombudsman of English Services on the issue of expression of personal opinion on air by CBC/Radio-Canada journalists and hosts. We are pleased to be able to submit to the Board our recommendation on this issue. This proposal, as well as our proposal on transparency of financing of information programs, demonstrates that Senior Management and Chief Journalists take recommendations from the Ombudsmen very seriously. Also, last year, we had agreed to develop and publish a policy dealing with the availability of our programs on the Web, following a recommendation from the Ombudsman. This policy is now published on our Web sites and is attached to this report.

In closing, we wish to reiterate our full support to the Ombudsman. As a public broadcaster, we believe CBC/Radio-Canada is, and should be, held to higher standards with respect to accountability to the public and to the cause of public interest. The Ombudsman plays a pivotal role in ensuring that our listeners and viewers can and will be heard if they do not agree with our programs. We must ensure that the institution of the Ombudsman is respected inside and outside the Corporation and that our programmers fully cooperate with them during reviews.