

**Management's Response  
to the 2002-2003 Annual Reports  
of the Offices of the Ombudsman  
for the English and French Networks  
of CBC/Radio-Canada**

**January 2004**

## Introduction

Having 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 large increase in the number of complaints received by the Ombudsman of English Services. He received 1,273 complaints, communications or expressions of concern involving information programming, the most ever in a single year. That is an increase of 118% in communications received when compared to 582 complaints in 2001-2002. Approximately 25% of the complaints involved coverage of the Middle East conflict. Similarly, the Office of the Ombudsman, French Services also reports that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was the subject of the greatest number of complaints received by that office.

On a number of occasions, as the Ombudsman noted, ETV has been the target of write-in campaigns, often – but not exclusively – concerning Middle East coverage. At least one originated outside Canada, most were organized by several people with strong views on the conflict urging their friends to write. While it is immediately clear that we are being targeted, the campaigns are disruptive and can quickly overwhelm our capacity to reply. Perhaps of most concern, they inhibit our ability to reply in a timely manner to individual complaints.

The Ombudsman of French Services received 932 complaints relating to Information programming, compared to 802 last year. Programmers dealt with most of the complaints related to Information programs, while the Ombudsman reviewed nine. However, of the 932 complaints, 639 were related to the labour dispute. As the Heads of information noted, given the considerable viewer frustration created by the labour dispute, this should lead us to reflect on the appropriateness of producing newscasts without adequate resources.

## Recommendations

The majority of the ombudsmen's recommendations (the list of which is attached) will be followed up by the Information departments. In most cases, the recommendations will not require any changes to the *Journalistic Standards and Practices*; rather, they will require more thorough application of those standards and practices.

## Standards of service

On the English side, we are pleased that the Ombudsman has seen "some progress" in this area, despite a more than doubled volume of complaints.

The Ombudsman found "significant improvement" in the time taken for ETV to respond to complaints, noting that the response time was now less than three weeks, compared to over six weeks during the previous year.

Regrettably there was no similar improvement in English Radio, which continued to take an average five and a half weeks to respond. Due to an internal personnel issue, Radio's response time was lagging. That situation has recently changed and English Radio's response time is now three weeks.

On the French side, having an assistant in French Television Information to gather the basic material required to draft replies has greatly improved the situation. Any remaining delays are due entirely to the summer vacation period when the people involved were not reachable.

The lack of an appointed supervisor during 2002–2003 explains the mention in the Ombudsman's report that three complaints against French Radio were still outstanding. French Radio has now appointed an editor-in-chief to oversee complaints processing, which has improved the situation.

Senior Management remains committed to the standard of service set last year of 20 working days unless the review required extensive research, in which case an acknowledgement would be sent within 10 days. Media Vice-Presidents will take the necessary steps to ensure that the standard is upheld in their respective area.

## **Acquisitions and documentaries**

As far as acquisitions and documentaries are concerned, the existing policies are part of the corporate policies (Program Policy – Guidelines for documentaries and point of view productions) originally published in 1993. They have never been incorporated into the *Journalistic Standards and Practices*, and were originally used on a trial basis for one year, following their approval by the Board. Since no production was undertaken during the following year that could have been used to truly put the guidelines to the test, they were automatically renewed, and have been ever since.

We have therefore decided to set up a small working group to revisit these policies. Several of the examples cited are obsolete, and some aspects of the policies appear to be out of touch with reality. They must therefore be reviewed before any decision is made as to whether they should be incorporated into the *Journalistic Standards and Practices*. The working group, which will be made up of one representative from each media line, will submit its findings to Senior Management in the Spring.

## **Corrections and clarifications**

We have set-up a special committee to look into the issue of on-air rectifications. More specifically, the committee is tasked with the following:

- To develop a mechanism for corrections and clarifications that applies across all three media lines – TV, Radio and Internet.
- To find a way to respond quickly both on air and on line.
- To create space on air and on line to explain to our audiences the thinking behind our editorial decisions.
- To do this, we must also acknowledge that not only do our viewers/listeners/onliners want us to acknowledge our mistakes, they want us to do so in a timely manner.

The committee has identified four types of mistakes:

1. Mistakes in fact – non debatable
2. Mistakes in Policy or Practice – debatable
3. Mistakes in language – linked to #2 in that our use of language is often dictated by our journalistic policy or practices.
4. Apologies and retractions

Recommendations on how to correct each of these will be included in a report submitted to Senior Management in the Spring. The committee has already recommended that a 'branded' vehicle be created, common to all media lines that can shrink or expand depending on the severity of the issue. It should have a title that would become immediately recognizable and ultimately familiar to the audience.

Needless to say, the Information departments will not be waiting for the coming reports; rather, they will be acting immediately to improve the situation, while at the same time trusting that a certain consistency will be achieved within the TV and Radio services of both networks.

## **Archives**

A new wording will be suggested for the guidelines on use of archival sound clips and video footage: *"The use of archival footage and sound clips requires prudence and proper judgment. Use of archival material that adulterates the context of its original airing should be avoided."* At first glance it may seem superfluous to have to include this type of statement in our standards, but given the errors that have cropped up, year in and year out, this matter merits our serious attention.

## **Language quality and sound clips**

This joint French Radio and Television initiative could not have come at a better time, since we still receive a high volume of complaints about on-air language quality. The team of linguists recently set up, on top of what French Radio is already doing, should help French Television make significant progress in this area.

The use of untranslated English-language clips in reports is unacceptable, and we will not only remind our staff of this, but also closely monitor compliance. Reports must paraphrase the content of English-language clips before running them, or provide voice-over or subtitled translations.

The Ombudsman also asks that the standard concerning the use of sound clips in a language other than French (usually English) be expanded or reviewed. French Radio Information has adopted a newscast production policy that sets out guidelines for the use of sound clips in a language other than French. French Television intends to adapt it for French Television news programming.

## Voice-over reports

In recent years, and especially since the creation of the Centre de l'information (CDI), a number of new methods have been introduced to help us cover the news in a more thorough, complete manner. Voice-over reports are one such method. These allow journalists from the international module to produce reports (for RDI in particular) on foreign events using news-agency copy and video—sources that are essential to our operations and, for that matter, those of most television networks around the world. As a rule, reporters are required to sign off these reports with “*(name of journalist) reporting from Montreal,*” for example. This sign-off clearly indicates that the reporter was not on the scene and merely packaged the available material for viewers' benefit. We do not believe that any change of procedure is warranted at this time.

As far as identifying video footage is concerned, it is virtually impossible to run supers providing the source of all video in a report, except in exceptional circumstances. We have, however, improved our track record with regard to identifying potentially confusing archive footage. In the same vein, it is important that we indicate during live RDI specials whether the video is truly live or taped. It is also worthwhile to be able to mention the time of day and location. For rapidly breaking events, it is highly useful to be able to provide the time the various footage was shot.

## Conclusion

The Kelly Affair in Great Britain clearly demonstrates that CBC/Radio-Canada has a much better structure and sounder mechanisms to ensure and preserve its journalistic integrity and accountability to the public. We should be proud of and thank our predecessors for setting up the Office of the Ombudsman years ago. We have nevertheless asked the Committee of Journalistic Standards and Practices, under the leadership of Claude Saint-Laurent, to follow the Hutton Inquiry and to review our policies based on the BBC experience. An initial presentation to the Board will be made at the January meeting.

Senior Management once again reiterates its full support to institution of 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 thank them for their work, integrity and dedication. We also thank our dedicated journalists and programmers for their cooperation in this very important process.