

**Management's Response
to the 2003-2004 Annual Reports
of the Offices of the Ombudsman
for the English and French Networks
of CBC/Radio-Canada**

September 2004

Introduction

Senior Management has reviewed the annual reports of the Offices of the Ombudsman for the English and the French Networks of CBC/Radio-Canada and is happy to reply to their recommendations.

According to the English Services Ombudsman, the increase in the number of complaints received about CBC programming continues. Within the past year, the Ombudsman received 2,155 complaints, communications and expressions of concern, out of which 1,590 were about information programming and fell within the Ombudsman's mandate. This compares with 1,273 complaints about information programming in 2002-03 and 582 complaints in 2001-02. However, much of the increase is the result of orchestrated e-mail campaigns by interest groups using the same form letter. While these campaigns are disruptive, each complainant receives a reply.

The French Services Ombudsman received 1,103 communications from the public, of which 326 were related to information programming. In comparison, 932 complaints about information programming were received in 2002-03; 639 of these were related to the labour dispute. No single topic has generated a record number of complaints, e-mail messages or petitions this year, nor have the French networks been the target of orchestrated campaigns.

Recommendations

Although the Ombudsman for English Services does not make any specific recommendations, he focuses on a few areas of previous concerns where significant progress has been made.

Firstly, the Ombudsman acknowledges that information programmers appear more and more willing to acknowledge and address mistakes. His report now includes a new feature outlining the summary of admissions of fault. Senior Management can only commend this change in attitude and encourage programmers to continue.

Secondly, the Ombudsman reported a trend toward more timely responses to complaints, a move that Senior Management has been advocating for several years. The average response time for CBC Television and CBC.ca is now 12 days, in spite of an increased volume of correspondence and a number of orchestrated campaigns. CBC Radio managed to reduce its average response time from six weeks to 21 days. Radio will keep working at reducing the average response time to under 20 days. Senior Management encourages all media to pursue these efforts.

Thirdly, the Ombudsman notes that a group of senior journalists has been working to develop a branded vehicle for on-air acknowledgement of errors for corrections and clarifications across all three media offerings - TV, Radio and CBC.ca. He states that the next step is to involve a similar team from Radio-Canada. We are happy to report that this initiative has now become a joint English-French endeavour and that a standard formula for corrections should be on air by January 2005.

The Ombudsman for French Service includes the following specific recommendations in his report:

- *That the target of 20 working days for responding to a complainant be respected and, failing that, that an acknowledgment of receipt be issued, stating when a response can be expected.*

Management of French Radio, French Television and radio-canada.ca all report an improvement in the response time in all areas of Information programming and undertake to pursue efforts to meet this target.

- *That the Corporation study the appropriateness of encouraging discussion and dialogue about the treatment of the ‘war against terrorism’ in news and information programming, especially the use of words and images;*

The Committee on Journalistic Standards and Practices will undertake a review in the Fall.

- *That the sources of reports not produced by CBC/Radio-Canada English or French services be very clearly identified;*

The Committee on Journalistic Standards and Practices will be recommending an addition to the policy book that addresses this concern.

- *That as soon as a department receives notice of a complaint, it should keep a recording of the program in question for eventual reference.*

Senior Management agrees with this recommendation.

The quality of language remains a recurring theme for some viewers and listeners on the French side, as well as the use of un-translated English sound clips during a newscast. There has been much improvement in both areas mainly due to the integration of linguists in the news team and frequent reminders to staff on both issues. The recommendations made by the Ombudsman in previous years are being integrated daily into operations. Furthermore, a linguist dedicated to the regions for all French Services has just been appointed, consistent with the recommendations of the working group on the quality of language.

Finally, both the English and French Services Ombudsmen made reference to Internet message sites. The English Services have introduced a new policy to replace the previous system that did not provide the level of confidence required. The new system is “pre-moderated”, which means all messages are looked at before posting. This is more of a newspaper “letters to the editor” model. While this is not necessarily in the freewheeling spirit of the Internet, it is consistent with how Radio and Television handle material. The goal is to provide a venue for interesting and informed opinion and comments. The French Services will be looking into this issue more closely in the coming year, with a view to finding an adequate system.

Conclusion

As we informed the Board last year, the Committee on Journalistic Standards and Practices, under the leadership of Claude Saint-Laurent, has been following media organizations around the world. The Committee studied more specifically the development of the Kelly Affair in Great Britain, the Alain Juppé/France 2 Affair, the New York Times' Kelly Blair scandal and its subsequent, but unrelated, mea culpa over its reporting of the run-up to the Iraq War, and the Kelley Affair at USA Today, with a view to improving CBC/Radio-Canada's journalistic policies. The Committee will be making its first report to the Board and will put forward several improvements. The report also addresses issues raised by the Ombudsmen in previous years. We want to thank the Committee members for their hard work and we are very confident that the Board will welcome their suggestions. More remains to be done, which is why we have asked Claude Saint-Laurent to pursue this project for at least another year.

Senior Management once again reiterates its full support to the 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 an essential role in ensuring that our listeners, viewers and Web users can and will be heard if they do not agree with our programs. We thank David and Renaud for their work, integrity and dedication. We also thank our dedicated journalists and programmers for their cooperation in this very important process.