

**Management's Response
to the 2004-05 Annual Reports
of the Offices of the Ombudsman
for the English and French Networks
of CBC/Radio-Canada**

September 2005

INTRODUCTION

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

This past year, the Office of the Ombudsman for English Services received 2,050 complaints, communications and expressions of concern, out of which 1,809 were about information programming and fell within the Ombudsman's mandate. The Ombudsman conducted independent reviews in 69 cases, finding fault with CBC programmers in 19 cases, while programmers admitted fault themselves in 72 other cases.

Management is pleased that the Ombudsman feels there has been considerable improvement in general over the past ten years in how we deal with the public. As he says, *"Serious complaints are dealt with much more promptly, and much more seriously. programmers [are] much more willing to acknowledge fault when fault exists."*

This is especially noteworthy given the steadily increasing volume of complaints. Complaints falling within the Ombudsman's mandate have tripled over the past four years. We expect it will continue to rise with the increasing number of write-in campaigns and the growth in email usage. Despite the increase in complaints received, the number of faults either admitted by programmers or found by the Ombudsman have not increased significantly over the same period, and currently represent 5% of all complaints.

The Office of the Ombudsman for French Services received 1,608 communications from the public, of which 903 were related to information programming, a figure significantly higher than last year when 553 complaints concerned information programming. The Ombudsman conducted 21 independent reviews, almost double last year's number. He found fault with Radio-Canada programmers in 7 cases only.

The Ombudsman also notes significant progress in response time, which as gone from 35 days to 18 days over the last five years.

RECOMMENDATIONS

English Services

In this year's report, the Ombudsman applauds the plan to introduce a new format for making on-air corrections across the full range of CBC information programs on Radio, Television and the Internet. This will take place within a regular branded segment in major information programs on all three media, devoted to exploring CBC's coverage of major stories and public reaction to it. This initiative is the result of a recommendation made last year by the Ombudsman. He notes in this year's report that this is an unprecedented initiative in transparency and accountability. The recent labour disruption has temporarily interrupted development work on this format, but it will be implemented as planned later this fall.

With regard to response time, although the number of complaints is far larger, and the nature of the replies much more thorough and painstaking, the time we take to reply has improved considerably. Five years ago, half of complainants waited ten to twelve weeks for a reply, and one in ten never received an answer at all. This year, everyone who wrote received a reply, and complaints were answered comfortably within the four-week corporate standard of service. The average response time has gone from ~38 days for Radio and ~42 days for Television four years ago to 24–25 days for both media today. This year, for instance, there were several occasions when there were no outstanding complaints for Radio.

From the statistics presented in Appendix III of this year's Ombudsman's Report, it may appear that response times are trending upward, but this would be an incorrect conclusion, based on anomalous data for last year. In that year, the average reply time for Television dropped to an unusually low 12 days. This was because, as last year's report noted, many of the complaints came via "orchestrated e-mail campaigns" to which standardized responses could be sent. Realistically, we can expect to see a slight downward improvement in average response times next year, but likely not to last year's abnormally low level. Senior Management remains committed to the 20-day standard response time implemented a few years ago.

The Ombudsman ends his report with several recommendations for increasing further public awareness of, and access to, the services of the Ombudsman, especially on-line, including a link on the home page of *CBC.ca*, publication in full of all of the Ombudsman's findings on his own home page, and creation of a "complaints" page à la *BBC*. CBC News agrees with all of those recommendations, and will take action on those that are within its control. The "complaints" page idea might be effectively linked with the new on-air corrections format discussed earlier.

It's worth noting that as the profile of the Ombudsman continues to rise, we can expect an even greater volume of submissions to be made. This is not necessarily a negative reflection on the quality of CBC News, but rather simply a result of heightened public awareness and ease of access. It will, however, require additional resources within the media lines to ensure that this increasing number of complaints can be responded to with care and timeliness.

Finally, on the issue of fairness and the responsibility to reflect equitably significant points of view, the Ombudsman notes that as long as there remain contentious issues in our society there's bound to be controversy over the news media's coverage. Although he believes that CBC's information programmers do a good job weighing and reflecting the relevant points of view, he thinks "*they can afford to be more sensitive towards those who find themselves in the minority.*" Senior Management is asking the Editors-in-Chief to review the issue to ensure that all significant points of views are reflected on air as indicated in our Journalistic policy.

French Services

The report of the Ombudsman, French Services, contains the following recommendations:

- *That the corporate 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.*

Although the Ombudsman noted a marked improvement in the average response time, which has dropped from 35 days to 18 days in the past five years, Information departments need to assign sufficient resources to comply with the 20-day standard response time implemented a few years ago. The advent of the Internet has had a definite impact on the number of complaints received and has made it easier for lobby or special-interest groups to orchestrate write-in campaigns. This phenomenon has been evident in English Services for several years and is now starting to creep over to the French side. Senior Management recommends that the French Services Information departments look at how their English Services colleagues have handled these campaigns. We strongly encourage them to stay on track to achieve the corporate objective, because all complainants deserve a reply.

- *That Radio-Canada more clearly indicate to Internet users that it reserves the right not to publish their opinions, displaying a message to this effect on the page from which users post their messages to public forums.*

Senior Management agrees with this recommendation. Warning messages for online forum users will be added to our websites in the coming weeks.

- *That the Corporation look into the possibility of creating a Web page on which its French-language news and information services may publish any corrections and clarifications, where appropriate.*

The Information departments of Television and Radio accept this recommendation. A few months from now, the *Radio-Canada.ca* website will publish the corrections and clarifications aired on the networks' various programs. The two departments will also agree on the format for these corrections and who will write them.

Similar to his English Services counterpart, the Ombudsman noted that half of the communications received from the public dealt more with issues of fairness than those of accuracy. Accordingly, Senior Management recommends that news directors ensure that all significant points of view are reflected on air.

Language quality is an ongoing concern for many of our listeners and viewers. The arrival of language specialists within the news departments continues to influence on-air practices. Their valuable advice is keenly followed each day in the iNews system. On the other hand, newsroom staff were reminded of concerns surrounding the use of clips in languages other than French. The heads of Information departments would like to continue resorting to this technique in their reports if need be and with proper monitoring.

Lastly, the Ombudsman raised a relevant question regarding François Parenteau's weekly spot on the Radio de Radio-Canada program *Samedi et rien d'autre*: "*Is the public interest well served by this sort of editorial?*" This issue was discussed by the Radio programming committee and steps will be taken to clear up any ambiguity about the tongue-in-cheek nature of this segment.

CONCLUSION

This is David Bazay's tenth and final report as Ombudsman for CBC's English services. We wish to take this opportunity to thank him for a decade of outstanding service. He has performed his role with all of the integrity, sensitivity, understanding and sense of fairness that anyone could expect.

Over the years, CBC News managers and programmers have benefited greatly from the Ombudsman's recommendations and advice. Throughout his tenure, we have continued to refine and improve our journalistic policies and practices, and built on our reputation as one of the world's most trusted news services. At his urging, we also changed our procedures to significantly improve response times on complaints.

We have asked David to be available until the end of the year since his successor Vince Carlin will only take up his position on January 1, 2006. We have also asked Claude Saint-Laurent to continue to lead the Committee on Journalistic Standards and Practices 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 co-operation in this very important process.