

Commentary

Fairness and Balance in CBC Radio News: Chronicle of a Complaint

Alan O'Connor
Trent University

I grew up listening to the radio. My mother had the radio on in her kitchen, and I remember listening to the BBC Radio 2 soap opera *Waggoners' Walk* (1968–1980) as a young boy. I still remember a storyline in which two teens went skinny-dipping in the sea, and adults doubted them when they protested that it was just innocent fun. I continue the habit. The soundtrack to my day is CBC Radio 1 at 99.1 FM in Toronto. I wake up to Matt Galloway and *Metro Morning*, often pay special attention to *The Current* with Anna Maria Tremonti, listen carefully to the news at 6:00 p.m., and usually continue listening into the news magazine *As It Happens*. For the past 30 years, I have also taught media studies in the university, and the core argument of my courses on radio and television is that public service media is better than commercial media. Raymond Williams (1974) made the case for public television in 1974, and since then the evidence supports his position. I have both a personal and a professional investment in public radio.

On March 28, 2017, on CBC Radio 1 in Toronto, the lead item in the early morning news was a report that Councillor John Campbell was proposing a motion to Toronto City Council to cut funding to Pride Toronto because of a decision at the organization's annual general meeting to exclude an official Toronto police float from its annual parade. It was a fairly long item for radio news. Campbell was permitted to describe Black Lives Matter as bullying the gay parade into taking this position. He made a great deal of the value of "inclusivity" in Pride Toronto, a value that the City of Toronto upholds. He is not a member of the LGBTQ movement, but he was permitted to define its core value as "inclusivity" rather than (say) social justice. He spoke at length and in a calm voice that signalled that he was being quite reasonable about all this. No other point of view was included in the news item. Campbell's opinions and perspectives were not balanced by other standpoints. No other voice was heard.

I was absolutely stunned. It took me a while to unravel my responses to what I had heard. I participated in Toronto's gay pride marches in the early eighties, when the fairly small annual protest ended up at the University of Toronto, where 20 organizations had tables set up. There was a small stage on which the Parachute Club performed its anthem "Rise Up" and the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence swished around on in-

Alan O'Connor is Professor of Cultural Studies at Trent University. Email: aconnor@trentu.ca.

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line skates. I still remember the image of a boy I liked, wearing only Adidas shorts (with the little pocket on the back), running in and out of a water sprinkler. Since the nineties, the annual parade has grown and changed. I recognize its importance, but I mostly feel quite alienated from it. The alternative stage located beside the Buddies in Bad Times Theatre was at least a refuge for punks, goths, misfits, and anarchists. Last year it was cancelled. But this attack by Campbell on Toronto Pride stunned me. It seemed completely in tune with the rightwing populist rhetoric of Donald Trump. Things that were previously censored can now be openly said. There might even be a political career to be advanced by expressing outrage that homosexuals are being rude to the Toronto police. (Later Mr Campbell said that Pride Toronto needed to come to its senses.)

I was actually at the parade last year and witnessed the protest by Black Lives Matter that brought the procession to a halt on Yonge Street. I saw ten or twelve Black queer women (women like this have played an extraordinary role in grassroots organizing in Toronto for years) and a few of their young Black gay friends. Many wore leather and looked like they were having fun, though it must have taken extraordinary courage to do this direct action: bring the whole parade to a stop as a protest of systematic police violence against Black people in Canada and the United States. I remembered how, in the early years of gay liberation, the police always tried to prevent gay marches from taking place on Yonge Street. I vividly remembered a large march that the police blocked from moving north on the street. Individual police officers started to grab people at random from the edges of the march, beating them up and arresting them. Bob Gallagher, the marshal of the march, gave instructions on the sound system for everyone to sit down on the street. This made the police violence instantly visible to press photographers and it immediately stopped. There was a long delay while Gallagher negotiated with senior police officers, and then the march continued. I was never comfortable with the police float in the parade, or with the recruiting booths for various police services and the prison service (which hands out hundreds of small rainbow flags with the badge of the prison service at the centre).

But now Black Lives Matters members are bullies. I wondered if perhaps Martin Luther King was also a bully. Or maybe Rosa Parks was bullying the driver of the bus. And Pride Toronto is not living up to its own goals of inclusivity. And the CBC Radio News will permit Campbell to say all this, with no other perspective included. In the days that followed, I stopped listening to the CBC. Instead I played CDs of *The Shape of Punk to Come* (1998) by hardcore punk band Refused, which actually has a song about radio, and a boxed set of Beethoven's late string quartets. I started to understand why some of my women students could not bear to listen to the CBC Radio after the Jian Ghomeshi scandal broke. I did not want to listen to the CBC anymore. And I wondered what I would tell my students in the fall. "The historical research shows that public service broadcasting is much better than commercial radio and television, but I actually don't listen to the CBC anymore." My students sometimes have difficulties with writing academic essays, but they are smart kids. "You cannot bear to listen to the CBC but you are telling us it is better than commercial broadcasting."

The idea of fairness and balance in news reporting is not as simple as it seems. One of the best accounts I know is Mark Pedelty's (1995) ethnographic study of war

correspondents in El Salvador. In his introductory chapter he contrasts a report for a North American newspaper with a report by the same correspondent for a European newspaper. The North American report follows the strict protocol for balanced and quote-based reporting. The reporter is not permitted to have a point of view, but includes basic information (who, what, where, when) and then quotes statements from different parties in the conflict: the government of El Salvador, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) rebels, and the U.S. Embassy in El Salvador. Pedely describes this as a form of disciplining reporters, because editors require a quote from the U.S. Embassy, which carefully controls what is said on deep background (the source may not be revealed), on background (“according to a Western diplomat”), and what is attributed to a source. Reporters are not permitted to question the sources they quote, but may balance their statements with a quote from another point of view. By comparison, a European newspaper does not require this “balance” and permits reporters to put themselves in the story. Jean Chalaby (1996) also points out that “balanced” and quote-based journalism is a North American phenomenon, and that European newspapers allow a more committed, essayistic style of journalism.

The history of broadcast standards is somewhat different in Canada than the United States. The CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices is written in fairly general language:

Fairness: In our information gathering and reporting, we treat individuals and organizations with openness and respect. We are mindful of their rights. We treat them even-handedly.

Balance: We contribute to informed debate on issues that matter to Canadians by reflecting a diversity of opinion. Our content on all platforms presents a wide range of subject matter and views. On issues of controversy, we ensure that divergent views are reflected respectfully, taking into account their relevance to the debate and how widely held these views are. We also ensure that they are represented over a reasonable period of time.¹

Impartiality: We provide professional judgment based on facts and expertise. We do not promote any particular point of view on matters of public debate. (CBC/Radio-Canada, 2019).

The more difficult question is how these values translate into journalistic practices. Was CBC Radio News justified in permitting Campbell to express his opinions and point of view on Pride Toronto and not giving any other point of view? For me the issue is fairly clear. The CBC Radio News drove the car through a red light and got caught. The most basic rule of journalism, to give both sides of the story, was broken. The more debatable issue is whether this was even news at all. What exactly is the story? A city councillor says he has five or six votes against funding Toronto Pride out of a city council of 44 members. That was the “news” CBC Radio News led with in Toronto on March 28, 2017.

The Canadian Press (CP) “covered” the CBC Radio News story. The *Toronto Star* (Bundale, 2017a) printed the CP report the following day, and it was also posted on the *Maclean's* magazine website. This piece by Brett Bundale (2017a) follows standard

journalistic practices by balancing Campbell's statements with quotes from Black Lives Matter. The councillor does not understand race relations in Toronto (a fairly damning statement about a politician in a multicultural city like Toronto). In an email to the author, Bundale (2017b) confirms that the CBC News initiated the news story. He says that he had no problem contacting Janaya Khan, co-founder of Black Lives Matters, but it was more difficult to get a hold of Pride Toronto (which was not quoted in his story). Bundale (2017b) says that normally he would have quotes from three different sources in a news story. "There was no question that if I chatted with Campbell I also needed to get someone from BLM." *Now* magazine, a staple of the Toronto news landscape, did not cover this story. In an email to the author, *NOW* Senior News Editor Enzo DiMatteo (2017) says, "There is not much more to say at this point that hasn't already been said." City funding of Toronto Pride has been an ongoing issue for years. *NOW*, he explains, would only cover the story if there were a new development or angle.

As a professor of media studies, I attempt to use my knowledge of changes in broadcasting to understand what may have happened at the CBC. We know about cut-backs to the CBC budget and complaints about the CBC from former Prime Minister Stephen Harper. Perhaps the problem is understaffing? A reporter without the sufficient time or resources to do her job properly? Not enough senior staff to mentor a younger generation of reporters? Not enough editors to stop an unbalanced report from getting to the air? I had noticed a tendency of CBC News to "break" stories rather than mostly following newspaper and news agency reports. One heard more stories with the boast "first brought to you by CBC News." But if you are going to do this, you need professional reporters, and experienced editors to work with them. Journalists at the CBC are now expected to work across all platforms: radio news, television news, and the CBC News website. Perhaps this led to the problem? The reporter who filed the story, Makda Ghebresslassie, is described online as a "video journalist." But I was also concerned that the CBC may now measure a successful story by the amount of activity it generates on Twitter. The story actually seems to have little substantial content. It is "news" because it creates controversy. And controversy generates tweets.

It turns out that Olivia Nuamah, the executive director of Pride Toronto, was not immediately available for comment. In an email to the author (Nuamah, 2017), she explains that she was "door stopped" that day, and if the CBC reporter had actually turned up at the offices of Pride Toronto she would probably have gotten her interview. For me, this raises a whole series of disturbing issues. (Bundale, the CP reporter, had no difficulty in contacting Black Lives Matter.) Does the CBC not have LGBTQ reporters? Or reporters with good contacts in the gay community? Or a list of contacts in the gay community? (I remember when this used to be a Rolodex on the reporter's desk.) I can easily list a dozen, including Tim McCaskell, a longtime gay activist and the author of *Queer Progress: From Homophobia to Homonationalism* (2016), on the gay movement in Toronto, and Bob Gallagher, the marshal of the demo on Yonge Street, who was stopped by the cops and is now easily accessible in the offices of the Steelworkers Union. I then started to wonder if CBC News actually knows very much about the history of the LGBTQ movement. After all, this is not the Santa Claus Parade.

It is, at least in part, a commemoration of the Stonewall riots of late June 1969, which were a protest against police violence in New York City.

Ghebreslassie's report was repeated on CBC Television the evening of March 28, 2017. (I did not see it.) But this time, a statement from Councillor Kristyn Wong-Tam, who does not support defunding Pride Toronto, balanced Campbell's position. This is also the position of Mayor John Tory and Toronto Police Chief Mark Saunders. But the damage was already done. Campbell was allowed to describe a protest by Black Lives Matter as "bullying." And the issue was framed as one of "inclusivity." (The news item on the CBC News website was repeatedly updated. The reasonably balanced report archived on the website was originally quite different.)

I have for years taught the work of the Bad News research group at Glasgow University. For example Greg Philo and Mike Berry (2011), in *More Bad News from Israel*, do a thematic analysis of how the media frames the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The idea of "inclusivity" in the gay movement has to do with its origin among mostly White, middle-class activists. (Though photos of the Stonewall riots show a more diverse group of people.) Inclusivity as a goal in the gay movement means the (sometimes painful) process of broadening its scope to include the lives, perspectives, and forms of organizing of a much more diverse movement. Inclusivity in this sense means exactly *including* Black Lives Matter, a separate organization from Pride Toronto, some members of which are part of the LGBTQ community. By erasing this background, CBC News gives centre stage to Campbell, to whom inclusion means involving an official Toronto police float in the parade. (Pride Toronto clarified that individual police officers are welcome to participate in the parade but without uniforms, guns, or police cars. Gay police officers in T-shirts with a police logo may participate as a group.) The thematic frame for the story has become this empty and ahistorical concept of "inclusivity." Galloway, host of *Metro Morning*, said the program received many emails on both sides of the issue. But he included that the main issue boils down to whether you are inclusive or not.

In response to my complaint to the CBC, I received an email from Rita Tonelli, acting executive producer of CBC Toronto. Having reviewed the script, she agrees that it is reasonable to expect a voice countering Councillor Campbell's views to be included in the story. However, Pride Toronto did not respond to the reporter's request and another city councillor was not readily available. (What do these vague phrases mean?) Faced with a looming deadline (the story was that urgent?), the editor made a decision considering: Campbell is an elected official and he has the backing of other council members; Pride Toronto has been given sufficient time to formulate a policy on this issue; and the story has "legs" i.e., the ability to spawn reaction and develop over the course of the day. She concludes that the story was somewhat lacking in balance but argues that it does not contravene the CBC's journalistic standards and practices.

The CBC Ombudsman is Esther Enkin. In an interview with UNESCO World Radio Day (2017), she says that she sees her job as *listening* to people who have issues with the CBC and *advocating* on their behalf to the organization. I would like to say that this has not been my experience. The process has been similar to making a complaint within any large bureaucratic organization. (Readers who have come up against the

inertia of university administrators might know what I mean.) The process has been opaque from the beginning. I was told that senior CBC staff had 20 days to respond to a complaint, but when I contacted the Ombudsman after 20 days, I was told this means 20 *working* days (almost a month). I then consulted the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Canada (CRTC) website and it says that complaints must be submitted within 30 days of the broadcast (on the rather old-fashioned assumption that radio stations record “tracker tapes” of all broadcasts and reuse the tapes after 30 days). So it seems that following the CBC protocol for complaints might result in losing the right to file a complaint with the CRTC. The CBC Ombudsman also sets out the rules for the process, including her right to post a summary of the complaint to her public webpage. This might be intimidating to some people and deter them from filing a complaint. And what if I find her summary unfair? To whom do I appeal? Is there not a contradiction in the ombudsman of a media organization herself creating content on the CBC website? My emails to the ombudsman were all signed Dr. Alan O’Connor, Professor of Media Studies, Trent University. Responses from Enkin started: “Dear Mr. O’Connor;” until I pointed out her mistake (there was no apology).

I received a report from the ombudsman (Enkin, 2017). Her letter adds very little to what has been presented above, but does confirm that this was a CBC “exclusive” and the reason for rushing it on to air was “the fear that one would lose exclusivity.” In response to issues raised by Enkin: I heard earlier newscasts, but listened especially carefully and took notes on the news at 10:00 a.m. I do not remember there being any differences but I do not have access to transcripts. I focused on the CBC News because I think the journalistic norms are clearer for an official newscast than for a morning show such as *Metro Morning*. Campbell was given exclusive time on *Metro Morning* on March 28. I did not include this in my complaint because I detected a certain skepticism, a raised eyebrow perhaps, on the part of host Matt Galloway. Nonetheless Campbell was allowed to reinforce the message, carried over from the newscast, building up the story, giving it “legs” perhaps, throughout the day on CBC News. And Galloway did accept Campbell’s framing of the issue as one of “inclusivity” (discussed above). The executive director of Pride Toronto was eventually interviewed on *Metro Morning* and she was really great. It is completely unclear why the whole story could not have waited a day (the meeting of the committee to approve the budget was more than a month away) so that Campbell and a representative of Pride Toronto could give their different perspectives one after the other on the same edition of *Metro Morning*. This is the usual way of handling controversial issues in radio journalism. The CBC insists that it was reporting a breaking news story (an “exclusive”), when it might be better described as lending its prestige to the start of a campaign by Campbell to discredit Pride Toronto and have the event’s funding cancelled. When the economic development committee met on May 8, 2017, it voted unanimously in favour of renewing the city’s annual \$260,000 grant for Pride Toronto.

Back to my original complaint: as far as I’m concerned, CBC Radio News drove through a red light. So take responsibility and find out why it happened. Make sure it will not happen again. But that is not the CBC response.² As a university professor, I have argued for public service broadcasting all my life. I have (sometimes reluctantly)

signed petitions as a “friend of Canadian Broadcasting.” But the CBC cannot take me (or any other listener) for granted. Christina Dunbar-Hester (2014) gives an inspiring description of the struggle for low-power FM broadcasting in the United States. After years of struggle, including civil disobedience, former President Obama signed the Local Community Radio Act into law in January 2011. (National Public Radio opposed it, arguing that these community groups should use the internet and not radio waves.) So there is an alternative to CBC Radio: a campaign in Canada for similar low-power FM radio stations. I am listening, as I write this, to Beethoven’s String Quartet no. 13, op. 130.

Notes

1. My interpretation of this clause is that balance must be continued over a reasonable time; the CBC Ombudsman, however, interprets it as meaning that fairness and balance may be achieved by having one perspective on day one and a second perspective within a reasonable time (perhaps as much as a week later). This makes nonsense of the principle of balanced reporting.
2. Enkin summarily dismissed a second similar complaint about a news item involving the Toronto police union. Although she told me that I have the right to appeal her decisions to the CRTC, an email from the CRTC (2017) states: “Programming concerns regarding the internal journalistic practices of CBC radio and television are internal matters for the CBC, and may be directed to the CBC Ombudsman.”

Emails

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