

Review by the Ombudsman, CBC/Radio-Canada French Services, of a complaint regarding an article by Bouchra Ouatik published on ICI Radio-Canada.ca on September 9, 2016, entitled *Pitbulls : des données non scientifiques fréquemment citées par les médias*

THE COMPLAINT

On September 12, 2016, Mr. Merritt Clifton filed a complaint regarding the story by journalist Bouchra Ouatik, posted online at ICI Radio-Canada.ca on Friday, September 9, 2016, entitled *Pitbulls : des données non scientifiques fréquemment citées par les médias*¹.

I begin by noting that the complainant is the author of the U.S.-based website Animals 24-7, to which Ms. Ouatik's story refers, among other things. She describes Animals 24-7 as a group that publishes yearly data on the number of dog bites in Canada and the United States, and that openly campaigns for a ban on pit bulls, but whose statistics "are quite far from the truth" [*sont très loin de la réalité*], because they represent "only a tiny portion of severe attacks" [*qu'une infime portion des attaques graves*] and "contain many errors" [*comportent plusieurs erreurs*].

I should also mention that the complaint was written in English, that the reply from French Services News and Current Affairs management was in that language, and that the correspondence between Mr. Clifton—who resides in the United States—and journalist Bouchra Ouatik was also entirely in English. In the original version of this review, which I wrote in French, I included my own translations of these elements of the file. In this English translation of the review, the original English texts are quoted. In case of doubt regarding statements attributable to me, my French text prevails. Whenever the complainant, the reply from French Services News and Current Affairs management, or the correspondence between the complainant and the journalist are quoted, the original English versions prevail.

I now turn to the contents of the complaint, which includes a series of email exchanges between Mr. Clifton and Ms. Ouatik, all dated Thursday, September 8, 2016, the day before her article was posted on ICI Radio-Canada.ca.

The complainant asserts that "[m]any of her [Ms. Ouatik's] errors and distortions should be self-evident just by comparing the correspondence to her published report." "For example," he writes, "I track fatalities and disfigurements, not just ordinary dog bites which may receive stitches, a matter Bouchra Ouatik completely conflates."

"Also very significant," he continues, "is that Bouchra Ouatik did not even ask for the annual totals of dog attack deaths I have compiled, but purports to deny the accuracy of my data by comparing the AVERAGE I have compiled from 1982 to present to data from another source for the single year 2008!"

¹ <http://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/802064/donnes-non-scientifiques-anti-pitbulls>

“If Bouchra Ouatik had asked for the annual totals, she would have seen that the numbers I have recorded have tracked steadily upward from about 10 per year in the 1980s to more than 40 per year over the past decade.”

Mr. Clifton finds that “[o]ther significant errors are evident in the questions Bouchra Ouatik did not ask. For instance, despite the claims of breeders, which Bouchra Ouatik unquestioningly amplified, the Cane Corso is NOT ‘an Italian dog that has existed since ancient Roman times’ [. . .]” In his opinion, it is “rather a mastiff variant absent from the historical record until breeders began advertising it for sale in 1995.”

Lastly, Mr. Clifton asserts “Bouchra Ouatic [sic] did not acknowledge, if she even bothered to research the matter, that much of the information she cites from the pro-pit bull side of the issue was funded by the pro-pit bull organization Animal Farm Foundation and/or its several subsidiaries.”

THE REPLY FROM FRENCH SERVICES NEWS AND CURRENT AFFAIRS MANAGEMENT

On October 12, 2016, Ms. Hélène Leroux, Chief Editor of the program *Découverte*, replied to the complainant in a long email message accompanied by nearly 25 references to studies of dog attacks. She began by describing the purpose of the written article that led to the complaint:

“It says that you are publishing annual data on severe dog bites based on media reports. The journalist asserts that these figures ‘comportent des erreurs’ and ‘ne représentent qu’une infime portion des attaques graves’ by comparing the number of cases that you listed in 34 years with the number of hospitalizations caused by dog attacks in a year. Ms. Ouatik also reports that your data underrepresents [sic] dog attacks by breeds other than pit bulls. She also noted that the categories under which you group some breeds are inaccurate, and that deaths in which dogs were indirectly involved end up in your total. The article ends with the observations of Karen Overall, a Veterinary Medicine Researcher at the University of Pennsylvania, who is critical of the methodology used by groups whose data is mainly derived from media sources. She stated the following: ‘*Les rapports par les médias et par la police sont presque toujours incomplets et il n’y a aucune confirmation indépendante de la race impliquée. Ces publications utilisent ces rapports comme s’ils étaient infaillibles.*’” (“Media and police reports are almost always incomplete and there is no independent verification of the breed involved. These publications use those reports as if they were infallible.”)

The *Découverte* Chief Editor then proceeded to address, one by one, the four criticisms contained in Mr. Clifton’s complaint. I will summarize their main points.

1. “I track fatalities and disfigurements, not just ordinary dog bites which may receive stitches, a matter Bouchra Ouatik completely conflates.”

Ms. Ouatik's article states that the most recent report produced by Mr. Clifton, entitled *Dog Attack Deaths and Maimings, US & Canada* and dated 2016, defines "severe attacks as those in which the victim was killed, maimed or required extensive medical treatment" [*les attaques graves comme étant celles où la victime a été tuée, mutilée ou requérant des soins médicaux poussés*], which, the response from Radio-Canada asserts, is consistent with reality. The article even provides detailed statistics on the various categories, reporting that Mr. Clifton's study identified "7,045 dog attacks resulting in severe injuries, 4,424 attacks in which the victim was mutilated or disfigured, and 675 fatalities" [*7045 attaques de chiens causant des blessures graves, 4424 attaques ayant mutilé ou défiguré la victime, et 675 morts*] over a period of 34 years.

The *Découverte* Chief Editor adds that the statistics presented in Bouchra Ouatik's article do not consider emergency room visits "for a few stitches," contrary to what the complainant implied. In fact, the number of hospitalizations reported in the article represents only 2.5% of all ER visits for dog bites. The data cited, Radio-Canada maintains, are the most recent from the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), namely those from the study conducted in 2008 for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

In addition, because the statistics compiled by *Animals 24-7* include the number of cases of disfigurement due to dog bites, Ms. Ouatik's article sought to compare them against the number of reconstructive surgeries following dog bites, obtained from the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS).

Both the AHRQ and the ASPS statistics show that the numbers of hospitalizations and plastic surgeries due to dog bites in a single year in the United States are significantly higher than those compiled over 34 years by *Animals 24-7*, taken together.

2. "Bouchra Ouatik did not even ask for the annual totals of dog attack deaths I have compiled, but purports to deny the accuracy of my data by comparing the AVERAGE I have compiled from 1982 to present to data from another source for the single year 2008!"

Radio-Canada responded that Ms. Ouatik's article sought to demonstrate that the number of severe attacks compiled by *Animals 24-7* over a period of 34 years (7,045) was lower than the number of hospitalizations for dog bites in a single year. Yes, Radio-Canada acknowledges, the journalist could have asked the complainant for his statistics for the year 2008 so as to compare them to the corresponding AHRQ data, "[b]ut the conclusion drawn would [have] remain unchanged"; i.e., the total number of cases listed in the U.S. and Canada from 1982 to 2016 was less than the number of cases requiring hospitalization in a single year in the U.S.

"This huge gap is sufficient to note that your website reports only a small numbers [sic] of serious attacks," Radio-Canada concluded.

3. "The Cane Corso is not 'an Italian dog that has existed since ancient Roman times,' but rather a mastiff variant absent from the historical record until breeders began advertising it for sale in 1995."

In its response, Radio-Canada reiterated that the article describes the Cane Corso not as a pit bull / mastiff cross, contrary to the description given on the Animals 24-7 site, but “[r]ather [. . .] an Italian dog of Roman origin, according to books and websites such as the American (AKC) and the Canadian (CKC) Kennel Clubs, national benchmarks for dog breeds.”

“Furthermore,” the response continues, “the pit bull and the Cane Corso do not belong to the same group as classified by the Federation cynologique internationale (FCI), the global benchmark for dog breeds.” The Cane Corso is classified in the FCI’s Group 2 (molosser dogs), while pit bull–type dogs are in Group 3 (terriers).

Lastly, the response from Radio-Canada says, “according to several specialists, the Cane Corso was already mentioned in canine books half a century ago.”

4. “Bouchra Ouatic [sic] did not acknowledge, if she even bothered to research the matter, that much of the information she cites from the pro-pit bull side of the issue was funded by the pro-pit bull organization Animal Farm Foundation and/or its several subsidiaries [. . .].”

In its response, Radio-Canada denied ever using research results “from the Animal Farm Foundation or pro–pit bull groups.” The data quoted in Bouchra Ouatic’s story came from independent scientific studies, Ms. Leroux notes, before concluding by inviting Mr. Clifton to consult the 24 references appended to her response.

THE REQUEST FOR REVIEW

The response was not satisfactory to the complainant, who believed that it “commit[ted] the same misrepresentations of data” as did the report in question. He therefore asked me to adjudicate the dispute. Following, in summary form, are his arguments regarding each of the four points under dispute.

1. The statistics from Animals 24-7

Mr. Clifton claims that Radio-Canada’s response, like Bouchra Ouatic’s report, conflates the data on severe dog bites from studies by Animals 24-7 with those on cases of ordinary bites that required only a few stitches, because any stitches are categorized as “plastic surgery.” Yet, he asserts, “[n]o one has claimed that any dog attack fatalities have been missed or omitted from” Animals 24-7’s log of data.

2. Faulty comparison

Radio-Canada, in its response, considers that it is acceptable to compare the average of annual fatalities attributable to dog attacks gathered by Animals 24-7 over a period of more than 30 years with other results from a single year, 2008. Yet, the complainant says, “[o]ne of the most significant of my findings is that dog attack fatalities have soared from fewer than 10 per year to more than 40 per year.”

3. The origins of the Cane Corso and the definition of a pit bull

In her response, the complainant writes, Ms. Leroux “repeats the [. . .] assertion that the Cane Corso ‘is an Italian dog of Roman origin,’ based on the claims of breeders and dog breed fanciers’ associations, without [. . .] searching for any historical record of any dog of that name being advertised for sale before 1995.” The explanation that “‘according to several specialists, the Cane Corso was already mentioned in canine books half a century ago,’ without providing any reference” is insufficient, Mr. Clifton argues, adding that even if this were true, 50 years is hardly sufficient to prove that this type of dog originated in Ancient Rome.

Mr. Clifton adds that Radio-Canada’s response “further misrepresents the origins of pit bulls by arguing that they are ‘terriers’ rather than a molosser breed.” In his opinion, “pit bulls are [. . .] a [. . .] mix of terrier and molosser (mastiff), with the fighting behavior tending to come from the terrier side, the size and strength from the molosser side. Some experts [. . .] argue that the terrier ancestry has become negligible in the configuration of the modern pit bull.”

4. Regarding studies with links to the Animal Farm Foundation

The complainant challenges Ms. Leroux’s assertion that Bouchra Ouatik’s report was based entirely on scientific studies and did not rely on any research from Animal Farm Foundation or its subsidiaries. He writes that he consulted several of the studies that Radio-Canada listed in the appendix to its response and found that six of them were authored by “individuals who [. . .] have long been prominently associated with the Animal Farm Foundation [. . .] and other pro-pit bull advocacy organizations.”

THE REVIEW²

Introduction

It is important to begin by contextualizing the news report in question. In the months preceding its production, the death of Christiane Vadnais, a Montrealer aged 55 who was savagely attacked by a neighbour’s dog on June 8, 2016, had sparked a heated debate over whether pit bulls should be banned. It should be noted that the dog involved in the attack was portrayed in media reports as a pit bull, though it had been registered as a boxer. To my knowledge, no expert report has yet officially determined the dog’s breed. Identifying the breed is a delicate operation in and of itself, since many people believe the pit bull is not a clearly defined breed of dog. Nevertheless, in the days following that tragic incident, the Government of Quebec raised the possibility of banning pit bulls across the entire province, and first Quebec City and then Montreal announced their decisions to proceed with such a ban. The debate around this issue was and remains extremely polarized, and has been accompanied by threats of legal action and arguments that are so contradictory that it is difficult for the average citizen to grasp all of the nuances.

² <http://www.ombudsman.cbc.radio-canada.ca/en/about/mandate/>

The producers of the program *Découverte* therefore set out to comprehensively explore the issue, investigating what scientific studies have to say about the origins of the pit bull, its behaviour, and how dangerous it is. Given the acrimonious nature of the debate, it was obvious that the exercise of separating truth from falsehood and conjecture would result in discontent on one side or the other, and probably both.

The journalist, Bouchra Ouatik, spent several weeks producing a lengthy story on the subject for the TV program *Découverte*. She also wrote a series of complementary articles for the Radio-Canada website, one of which is the subject of the dispute that concerns us. The title of the article, incidentally, refers to the overall approach taken for the story and the articles; i.e., distinguishing between scientific and anecdotal evidence. It was entitled *Pitbulls : des données non scientifiques fréquemment citées par les médias*³ [“Pit bulls: non-scientific data frequently cited in the media”].

The article is about “two anti-pit bull groups” [“groupes anti-pitbulls”] whose data are often referred to by Canadian and U.S. media outlets, which present them “as being reliable sources” [“comme étant des sources fiables”]. They are Animals 24-7—which is headed by the complainant, Merritt Clifton—and DogsBite.org. The two organizations, Ouatik’s article says, present dog bite statistics that “are quite far from the truth” [“très loin de la réalité”]. In the lead paragraph, the journalist explains the criteria she used to reach that conclusion, stating that “their data account for only a tiny portion of severe attacks, and [. . .] contain many errors” [“leurs données ne représentent qu’une infime portion des attaques graves et [. . .] contiennent plusieurs erreurs”].

The values at issue

Each party in this matter, in other words, doubts the accuracy of the facts put forward by the other. The CBC/Radio-Canada *Journalistic Standards and Practices* (JSPs) define the value of accuracy⁴ as follows:

“We seek out the truth in all matters of public interest. We invest our time and our skills to learn, understand and clearly explain the facts to our audience. The production techniques we use serve to present the content in a clear and accessible manner.”

The complainant also seems to question the journalist’s impartiality when he criticizes her for not admitting that many of the sources that she cites from defenders of pit bulls were funded, he says, by the pro-pit bull organization Animal Farm Foundation. The value of impartiality⁵ is defined in the JSPs as follows:

“We provide professional judgment based on facts and expertise. We do not promote any particular point of view on matters of public debate.”

³ <http://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/802064/donnees-non-scientifiques-anti-pitbulls>

⁴ <http://www.cbc.radio-canada.ca/en/reporting-to-canadians/acts-and-policies/programming/journalism/>

⁵ <http://www.cbc.radio-canada.ca/en/reporting-to-canadians/acts-and-policies/programming/journalism/>

Study of the complaint

1. The statistics from Animals 24-7

This, in my opinion, is the key component of Mr. Clifton's complaint: having himself been bitten by a pit bull more than 30 years ago, he has spent decades amassing data on severe dog-attack incidents, using newspaper articles from all over North America. No doubt this is a demanding task that requires much dedication. It is therefore understandable that he did not appreciate the ICI Radio-Canada.ca article questioning his methodology and his conclusions. The article begins:

"Dog bite statistics taken from anti-bit bull groups are often cited by Canadian and U.S. media outlets as being reliable sources. These data, however, are far from the truth. The two groups in question, Animals 24-7 and DogsBite.org, openly campaign to have pit bulls banned. They regularly publish statistics on deaths and injuries from dog bites. However, their data account for only a tiny portion of severe attacks, and those of Animals 24-7 contain many errors."

["Des statistiques sur les morsures de chiens, provenant de groupes anti-pitbulls, sont fréquemment citées dans les médias canadiens et américains comme étant des sources fiables. Ces données sont cependant loin de la réalité. Les deux groupes en question, Animals 24-7 et DogsBite.org, militent ouvertement pour l'interdiction des pitbulls. Ils publient régulièrement des statistiques sur les morts et les morsures causées par des chiens. Cependant, leurs données ne représentent qu'une infime portion des attaques graves, et celles d'Animals 24-7 comportent plusieurs erreurs."]

The complainant believes that the journalist misrepresented the purpose of his research by claiming that it addresses "dog bites" when, in fact, he admits to compiling a log of barely one in 10,000 dog bite incidents; that is, only the most severe attacks (those requiring lengthy hospital stays and resulting in mutilation, disfigurement or death). The day before publication of the article, in reply to the journalist's request that he comment on the fact that the Animals 24-7 "data seems to include a very small fraction of all serious dog bite datas [sic]," Mr. Clifton wrote:

"The purpose is not to track 'dog bites'; the purpose is to track fatal and disfiguring incidents, including all sources of dog-related mortality."

For example, his site might document a case where a person was fleeing an aggressive dog but was not bitten by it, and was then hit by a car and died.

In mentioning only "dog bites"—and on this point the complainant is right—the lead paragraph of the story can be said to be misleading in that it immediately suggests to the reader that this is the article's focus. I note that the same confusion is evident in the response from Radio-Canada, which describes Bouchra Ouatik's article as follows:

"It says that you are publishing annual data on severe dog bites based on media reports."

The lead paragraph would have been more accurate had it referred to “dog attacks” or, more precisely still, “the most severe of dog attacks.” That being said, it goes without saying that the vast majority of severe dog attacks involve bites.

It must be acknowledged, however, that the subsequent paragraphs in the story correct that initial imprecision, in successive layers. The next sentence tells us that Merritt Clifton “publishes data annually on the number of dog attacks in Canada and the United States” [*“publie chaque année des données sur le nombre d’attaques par des chiens au Canada et aux États-Unis”*]. One sentence farther on, the article states that Animals 24-7 “claims to account for nearly all severe attacks that occurred between September 1982 and September 2016” [*“prétend comptabiliser presque toutes les attaques graves survenues entre septembre 1982 et septembre 2016”*], and then that it “states that it paints a comprehensive picture of the situation” [*“affirme avoir un portrait exhaustif de la situation”*]. The original version of the article reported that Animals 24-7 had, over a 34-year period, identified 7,045 dog attacks resulting in severe injuries, 4,424 attacks in which the victim was mutilated or disfigured, and 675 fatalities, for which pit bull–type dogs were responsible in 64%, 66% and 51% of cases respectively. The text was amended on October 28, 2016, to reflect the fact that the numbers cited above refer to the numbers of dogs involved, not the numbers people injured or killed. The article now states 5,756 attacks resulting in severe injuries, 4,194 in which the victim was mutilated or disfigured, and 652 fatalities. Pit bull–type dogs were involved in 78%, 70% and 53% of these cases respectively.

It is therefore quite clear from this point in the article onward that the data from Animals 24-7 are being presented for what they are: a log of the most serious dog attacks. For this reason, I cannot side with the complainant when he claims that:

“I track fatalities and disfigurements, not just ordinary dog bites which may receive stitches, a matter Bouchra Ouatik completely conflates.”

I grant to Mr. Clifton that another section of Ms. Ouatik’s article may have led him to that conclusion: that in which she reports the number of hospitalizations resulting from dog bites in the United States in 2008, compiled by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) as part of a study conducted for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. That number, 9,500 for the single year 2008 and in the U.S. only, is far superior to the 5,756 cases in both the U.S. and Canada logged by Animals 24-7 over 34 years. This significant discrepancy, one effect of which is to illustrate the degree to which his own data are fragmentary, may have led Mr. Clifton to conclude that the numbers quoted by the journalist referred to simple emergency room visits for a few stitches. This is not the case. The AHRQ shows that less than 3% of ER visits subsequent to dog bites resulted in hospital stays. Another study by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services⁶ backs up these data, showing that in 2001 alone, U.S. hospitals reported 1,386 fractures, 2,854 amputations and 5,921 hospitalizations resulting from dog attacks.

⁶ “Nonfatal Dog Bite–Related Injuries Treated in Hospital Emergency Departments – United States, 2001,” in *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, July 4, 2003.

It is true that these data from hospitals and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services are of no use to anyone interested in what types of dogs are responsible for these attacks. This is where Mr. Clifton's work tries to be useful. As mentioned above, he compiles his logs of severe injuries based on newspaper articles, which he considers to be good indicators of injury severity and dog breed because, generally speaking, journalists gather their information from multiple sources: e.g., witnesses, police, victims, parents or neighbours. While his method does not enable a listing of all cases, because not all are the subject of newspaper articles, Mr. Clifton believes that it does allow him to obtain a representative sample of the most severe dog attacks, and that it provides a near-complete portrait of the situation as concerns fatalities subsequent to such attacks. Which brings us to the second point of his complaint.

2. Faulty comparison

In his exchanges with journalist Bouchra Ouatik, Mr. Clifton writes that "only one person has ever found a fatality [attributable to a dog attack] that I had not already recorded." He therefore claims to have accounted for nearly 100% of fatal dog attacks in the past 34 years, and thus finds it particularly unfair that the journalist implied otherwise, writing:

"Bouchra Ouatik [. . .] purports to deny the accuracy of my data by comparing the average I have compiled from 1982 to present to data from another source for the single year 2008!"

The journalist did indeed perform that comparison, using a table listing the annual average number of deaths due to dog attacks recorded by Animals 24-7 (i.e., 20 in the original version of the article and 19 in its amended version); she then contrasted that number with the number of deaths attributable to dog attacks reported by hospitals in the U.S. for 2008, i.e., 40. I acknowledge that the methodology of that comparison is not perfect, but I believe it to be an honest attempt to compare apples to apples. For one thing, there are no official year-over-year government statistics on the phenomenon that encompass deaths in both the U.S. and Canada. The journalist therefore used the most recent official study, that covering the year 2008 in the U.S. Since the number, 40, was for one year only, it had to be compared with another number representing an annual number of deaths. Ms. Ouatik chose the average yearly deaths reported by Animals 24-7, i.e., 20 (or 19). The end result is that the reader grasps that even in the case of the most severe dog attacks—those resulting in death—the Animals 24-7 data account at best for half the total.

In his complaint, Mr. Clifton states that the number of deaths has "tracked steadily upward" over time, from around 10 per year 30 years ago to "more than 40 per year over the past decade," and takes the journalist to task for masking this fact in neglecting to ask him for his own statistics for 2008 so as to truly compare apples with apples. I therefore asked him to isolate the number of deaths logged by Animals 24-7 for 2008 in the U.S. and Canada. After checking, he wrote that there were 16, a figure lower than the average referred to in Bouchra Ouatik's article, which reinforces even more strongly the fact that Mr. Clifton's database cannot claim to account for all cases of deaths attributable to dog attacks.

Again, this does not mean that the work done by Animals 24-7 has no purpose. It is unquestionably a laudable initiative, but not one that can claim to be exhaustive or scientific, because the methodology raises important questions and contains several inconsistencies. This is what Ms. Ouatik's article sought to demonstrate, and the third element in Mr. Clifton's complaint further illustrates this.

3. The origins of the Cane Corso and the definition of a pit bull

The article under dispute gives examples of "inconsistencies" [*incohérences*] where Animals 24-7 underestimated the number of attacks by dogs of breeds other than pit bulls, by incorrectly associating certain breeds with pit bulls. Bouchra Ouatik's article states: "Merritt Clifton says [. . .] on his site that the Cane Corso is a pit bull / mastiff cross, which is impossible because the Cane Corso is an Italian dog that has existed since Ancient Rome, whereas the pit bull originated in 19th-century England." [*"Merritt Clifton affirme [. . .] sur son site que le cane corso est un croisement de pitbull et de mastiff, ce qui est impossible puisque le cane corso est un chien italien qui existe depuis l'Antiquité romaine, tandis que le pit bull a vu le jour en Angleterre au 19^e siècle."*] Yet, according to Mr. Clifton, the Cane Corso is a very recent breed of which no trace exists prior to 1995.

The website of the Fédération cynologique internationale (FCI), which I consulted, states that the *cane corso italiano*, also called Italian Cane Corso or Italian Corso Dog in English and *chien de cour italien* in French, belongs in Group 2, namely, mastiff-type Molossoid and Swiss Mountain and Cattle Dogs. The breed is described as follows:

"Its direct ancestor is the old Roman Molossian. Formerly scattered all over Italy, in the recent past, the breed was only prevalent in the province of Apulia and in the adjacent regions of Southern Italy. His name derives from the Latin 'cohors', which means 'protector, guardian of the farmyard'."

No mention is made of crosses with bull, terrier or pit bull type dogs.

It may well be the case that American breeders have only taken an interest in this type of dog within the past few decades, but this is not to deny its more ancient origins—which, naturally, are described in more depth in Italian literature. The book *300 razze di cani* ("*300 Dog Breeds*"), written by Piero Scanziani and published in 1952 by Edizioni Pan (Rome), describes the Cane Corso and ranks it in the same category of molossers as the *Cane da Presa* and *Mastino Napoletano*. Scanziani traces the breed's origins to the 15th century, in the Neapolitan region. Another document, dated February 28, 1965, and published by the *Societa amatori del mastino napoletano* (Neapolitan Mastiff Club), ascribes a "scientific classification" to the breed, under the name "Cane Corso," designating it as a member of the molossoid group and of Italian origin. None of these documents makes any mention of the Cane Corso being a mastiff / pit bull cross, the pit bull being itself a mastiff / terrier cross created in 19th-century England.

I acknowledge that the origins of species date back to time immemorial, and that it is difficult to determine with any accuracy the precise moment at which a specific breed appeared, or which components entered into its “make-up”. If there is a “truth” about the Cane Corso that differs from that described by Ms. Ouatik, I believe that the complainant has not provided demonstration of such, and that the documentation shown to me by the journalist in support of her statements appears to quite sufficiently support her version.

4. Regarding studies with links to the Animal Farm Foundation

The final point in Mr. Clifton’s complaint seeks to link journalist Bouchra Ouatik’s research with “pro-pit bull organizations.” In his initial complaint, he asserts that “much of the information she cites [. . .] was funded by the pro-pit bull organization Animal Farm Foundation and/or its several subsidiaries [. . .].”

After obtaining from *Découverte* Chief Editor Hélène Leroux a list of the 24 independent scientific studies that the journalist employed in her research, the complainant subsequently argued that some of the authors “have long been prominently associated with the Animal Farm Foundation [. . .] and other pro-pit bull advocacy organizations,” without specifying which studies or which researchers, or what he means by “associated with.”

During my telephone conversation with Mr. Clifton, he mentioned the name of Karen Overall, who was indeed one of the sources that Ms. Ouatik cited, and with good reason: she is a researcher with the Department of Clinical Studies at the University of Pennsylvania Veterinary School who conducted a meta-analysis of all scientific studies of dog attacks on humans produced in the United States over a 50-year span. The journalist first ascertained that Dr. Overall had no connections, whether direct or indirect, with either of the opposing sides of the issue (pro- or anti-pit bull). She specifically asked her whether she had ever collaborated with, received funding from, or co-published studies with the SPCA, the Humane Society or the Animal Farm Foundation, and received assurances that she had not.

In view of all of the foregoing information in this review, it is my opinion that the burden of proof on this issue resides with the complainant.

CONCLUSION

Bouchra Ouatik’s story *Pitbulls : des données non scientifiques fréquemment citées par les médias*, published September 9, 2016, on the ICI Radio-Canada.ca website, was compliant with CBC/Radio-Canada’s Journalistic Standards and Practices. Although the wording of her lead paragraph, in referring to “dog bites” rather than “severe dog attacks,” may have been somewhat misleading with regard to the data gathered by the complainant and his Animals 24-7 website, this does not appear to me to result from a deliberate desire to twist the truth, because the ensuing paragraphs employ the wording used by the complainant himself: “*attaques causant des blessures graves*,” “*attaques ayant mutilé ou défiguré la victime*” and “*attaques ayant causé la mort*” [“attacks doing bodily harm,” “permanent disfigurement or loss of a limb,” “fatal attacks”].

I would add, if there were any need to prove absence of bad faith on the part of the journalist, that the quantity of studies and research that she amassed for her series of reports on pit bulls appears to me to be quite exceptional. She went so far as to search databases of North American newspapers for the numbers of deaths attributable to two dog breeds other than pit bulls, i.e., German Shepherds and Malamutes, since 1982. In theory, since she used the same source as Animals 24-7, she should have arrived at the same results. Yet she discovered twice as many deaths attributable to German Shepherds and four times as many attributable to Malamutes than what Animals 24-7 had logged. Although Ms. Ouatik made no mention of that undertaking in her article, in my opinion, that additional fact checking is evidence of unusual diligence in seeking the truth, as opposed to a desire to twist the reality for argument's sake.

Guy Gendron
French Services Ombudsman
CBC/Radio-Canada
November 22, 2016