

Review by the French Services Ombudsman of a Complaint Regarding an ICI Radio-Canada.ca Report

THE COMPLAINT

Two readers by the name of Ms. Katherine Garven and Ms. Sawssan Kaddoura are dissatisfied with a report posted online at ICI Radio-Canada.ca on July 19, 2014. The article, entitled *Bref incident à la manifestation pro-Gaza à Montréal*¹ (“brief incident at the pro-Gaza demonstration in Montreal”), reported on the holding of a march whose participants were denouncing the offensive by the Israeli army in the Palestinian territory of the Gaza Strip.

I should specify that the complaint was written in English, as were all ensuing written communications with my office and French Services News management. All passages that I quote in the French version were therefore translated from English.

Ms. Garven and Ms. Kaddoura feel that some important facts were omitted from the article, and that the article misrepresented events occurring at the demonstration.

First, the complainants feel that Radio-Canada simplified the facts by deeming all demonstrators Gaza supporters rather than identifying the various groups and organizations taking part in the demonstration. They wrote as follows:

(It) would have demonstrated to the reader the extent to which resistance to Israeli policies is organized and growing in Montreal. Organizations that endorsed the demonstration include Palestinian and Jewish Unity (PAJU), the Middle East Solidarity Collective Tadamon!, the Coalition for Justice and Peace in the Middle East (CJPP), the Quebec Confederation of National Trade Unions (CSN), the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW-STTP), The Quebec National Teachers Federation (FNEEQ-CSN), and the Conseil Régional FTQ du Montréal Métropolitain (CRFTQ-MM), among others.

Similarly, Ms. Garven and Ms. Kaddoura added that Radio-Canada ought to have mentioned that the specific goal of the demonstration was to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the International Court of Justice’s advisory opinion on the construction by Israel of a separation barrier in the occupied West Bank. They argued as follows:

Protesters were not only demanding an end to Israel’s assault on Gaza and Canadian support for Israel but also an end to Israel’s blockade on the Gaza strip, occupation of Palestinian land, and its violations of international law. They wanted to remind Canadians that the assault on Gaza is part of a broader problem. Protesters called for people to engage in the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) campaign to end Israeli Apartheid, which was mentioned nowhere in the article.

¹ <http://ici.radio-canada.ca/regions/montreal/2014/07/19/003-palestine-gaza-montreal-israel.shtml>

The complainants also would have liked the article to mention that the giant Palestinian flag carried by demonstrators was the largest in the world and that protest organizers were attempting to break a Guinness world record by covering the flag with the highest number of signatures possible. The flag, they specify, is to be sent to Ramallah, in the West Bank, and placed on display at the monument to deceased Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

The following facts were also omitted, according to the complainants:

Radio-Canada also failed to mention that some of the organizers were marching while holding an imitation Apartheid Wall, which was a clear visual clue as to why the protest was organized in the first place.

(. . .)

The protest began and ended on the streets Saint-Laurent and Gary-Carter but the article failed to mention that this location was chosen because it is directly in front of the Montreal G4S Office. G4S is a British-Danish security company that supplies services and equipment to Israeli prisons where Palestinians are held without charge or trial in Administrative Detention and where the torture of Palestinians has been reported by human rights groups as a regular occurrence. (. . .) Protesters called on the Quebec Government, which holds shares in the company, to divest from it . . .

Lastly, Ms. Garven and Ms. Kaddoura argue that the report distorted the events covered by giving undue prominence to a violent incident involving a woman bearing a small Israeli flag, who was heckled, pushed and roughed up by some demonstrators:

“Radio-Canada chose to dedicate half of its written article; 5 out of 6 pictures; and 1 of 2 videos to this one Israeli supporter, citing that her cousins who live close to the Gaza strip are in danger every day. Not once in the article did Radio-Canada mention the hundreds of Palestinian deaths or the thousands of Gazans wounded since Israel began its assault on Gaza on July 8th nor did it interview any Palestinians who have lost family members due to Israeli attacks.

(. . .)

This article serves to create a sense of fear and tension that was not present at the rally. It also misrepresents the Israeli supporter as the victim when clearly the victims are the hundreds of Palestinians who have been killed by Israeli air strikes and ground invasions.

It’s really incredible that people who denounce Israel’s mistreatment of Palestinians can’t even be heard in an article dedicated to a Palestinian solidarity demonstration. It is disproportionate coverage of events when one Israeli protester’s story is told above the stories of the other 300 protesters.

The complainants come to the following conclusion:

How can Canadians have an informed understanding of issues related to Palestine when news outlets like Radio-Canada misinform them? It's time for the Canadian media to take its ethical responsibilities seriously and provide fair and accurate coverage of Palestine and Canada's role in allowing Israel to continue its mistreatment of the Palestinian people.

RESPONSE FROM NEWS DEPARTMENT

Mr. Pierre Champoux, News Director, ICI Radio-Canada.ca, responded to the complainants on behalf the News Department.

Straight away, Mr. Champoux indicates that balance in Radio-Canada's coverage of the conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza can only be assessed by looking at all reporting done, not just a single report.

The essence of his response is as follows:

In the case at hand, the demonstration clearly would not have attracted the same media attention were it not for what was happening at the same time in Gaza. The tenth anniversary of the advisory opinion issued by the International Court of Justice, and the attempt to set a record with the giant Palestinian flag, were not essential details in this instance. The beginning of the article summarizes well, in my opinion, the true reason for the demonstration:

Several hundred people demonstrated in Montreal on Saturday afternoon to show their support for the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and to denounce the Israeli offensive.

The demonstration organizers wanted to show their support for the residents of the Gaza Strip and their opposition to the Canadian government's position. "We feel solidarity with the people who are suffering . . . Culturally, Harper supports whatever Israel does and we are also denouncing that," explained Douglas Smith, one of the organizers.

"If I were Palestinian, I'd want people to be concerned about what's going on," said Bob Aubin, who travelled from his home in Joliette.

(Source: ICI.Radio-Canada.ca)

Immediately afterwards, we spoke to one of the most high-profile demonstrators:

Québec Solidaire MNA and spokesperson Françoise David joined the procession, which departed from Jarry Park, at the corner of Saint-Laurent and Gary Carter. "Even though we support the Palestinians, we are calling for a

negotiated settlement that will allow Israelis and Palestinians to live together in peace,” stated Ms. David, who also criticized the Canadian government’s support of Israel.

(Source: ICI.Radio-Canada.ca)

We then described the incident during which an Israel supporter tried to enter the crowd with her flag, eliciting a negative reaction from several demonstrators. In addition to the five photos taken during the altercation, we present a video allowing Internet users to better understand what happened. Towards the end of the video, we also provide images recorded later during the demonstration.

The text specifies that the rest of the demonstration unfolded peacefully. It goes on to describe a demonstration held earlier that week in Montreal and mentions another similar event that will take place at the end of July. This is followed by an image of the giant flag with numerous signatures.

The report concludes by referring to similar demonstrations in Paris, Toronto, Calgary and Winnipeg, and provides links to our articles on the topic.

We could have listed the various groups represented and the positions of each one. We could also have explained the reason for the departure and arrival in front of the offices of the company G4S, and we could have reminded readers of the 10th anniversary of the opinion issued by the International Court of Justice. I do not, however, feel that in omitting to do so, we failed in our duty and deprived Canadians of reliable and accurate information.

I invite you to review our coverage of the events in Gaza and Israel since July 8. In so doing, you will note the efforts that Radio-Canada has made to cover this conflict in a rigorous, unbiased manner. We have repeatedly shown in our articles, reports and programs the effects of this conflict on the people of Gaza. The reports filed by our correspondent Marie-Ève Bédard and cameraman Sylvain Castonguay are prime examples. I would also invite you to re-read our article of July 11, 2014, *Comprendre la crise à Gaza en 5 questions*, to better appreciate our sincere desire to explain this complex conflict to Canadians.

THE REQUEST FOR REVIEW

Ms. Garven and Ms. Kaddoura remained unconvinced by Mr. Champoux’s arguments, and asked me to review the matter. I have included below several of the remarks made in their response to Mr. Champoux:

Unfortunately, your response does not adequately address the specific criticisms outlined in our letter. We criticized Radio-Canada’s decision to omit important facts regarding the demonstration...

(. . .)

You said in your letter that you could have reported on these facts but that “I do not, however, feel that in omitting to do so, we failed in our duty and deprived Canadians of reliable and accurate information.”

We strongly disagree with you and would like to explain to you why it was important for Radio-Canada to have covered these facts.

(. . .)

The purpose of the demonstration is clearly stated in the organizers’ statement, which is entitled “Ten Years Too Many: Rally and Creative Action Against the Wall”. You said in your letter that “the beginning of the article summarizes well, in my opinion, the true reason for the demonstration”. However, it is not up to Radio-Canada to decide what was the “true reason” for the demonstration. Radio-Canada has the responsibility to report on why the organizers convened this action. (. . .) If you choose to cover an event, you have the ethical responsibility to cover it accurately and completely and not only pick and choose the most sensationalist aspects of that event.

In regards to the second factual omission, it is indeed newsworthy to report on the Quebec civil-society groups that are opposing Israel’s violations of international law, since this is a reflection of the size of the Palestinian solidarity movement within Montreal’s civil society. Many of the groups that endorsed the demonstration represent thousands of individuals, such as the Quebec Confederation of National Trade Unions (CSN), which represents over 150,000 Quebecers, and the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW-STTP), which represents over 54,000 Canadians...

(. . .)

The third factual omission was very important to mention because it highlights Canadian and Quebec complicity with Israel’s occupation of Palestine. The Quebec government invests in the company G4S, which supplies Israel with military equipment to occupy Palestinian land. (...) By choosing to omit this important information, Radio-Canada deliberately chose not to inform Quebecers about the actions of their own government and how their public funds are being spent.

(. . .)

You asked us to “review [Radio Canada’s] coverage of the events in Gaza and Israel since July 8. In doing so, you will note the efforts that Radio-Canada has made to cover this conflict in a rigorous, unbiased manner”. You cannot simply ask us to ignore the poor coverage of the demonstration on July 19th because Radio-Canada may or may not have done a better job covering other stories related to Palestine.

Not only did Radio-Canada omit facts and succumb to sensationalist coverage of the protest on July 19th, but it later distorted reality in a following article on August 4th

when it published a picture from this same July 19th protest of a Palestinian solidarity demonstrator engaged in peaceful dialogue with the Israeli supporter under the headline *Ban Ki-moon s'inquiète d'une montée de l'antisémitisme en lien avec Gaza*. The picture was later taken down and replaced with a photo of Ban Ki-moon himself but only after it became apparent to what extent this demonstration has been misrepresented by Radio-Canada.

THE REVIEW²

As always, I will conduct this review by analyzing the report that elicited the complaint in light of CBC/Radio-Canada's *Journalistic Standards and Practices*, the compendium of ethical principles that guide its journalists and other news content producers in their work.

One main principle and three values that form the foundation of the JSPs are relevant to the matter at hand.

First, the principle of independence, which establishes editorial freedom for news management and CBC/Radio-Canada journalists:

To protect our independence³

We are independent of all lobbies and of all political and economic influence. We uphold freedom of expression and freedom of the press, the touchstones of a free and democratic society.

Public interest guides all our decisions.

I've chosen to begin my review of the complaint and report by invoking this basic principle of the JSPs because I can refer to it in addressing the central issue in Ms. Garven's and Ms. Kaddoura's complaint, i.e., the report's alleged "omissions" and their opinion that the article distorted the facts about the event on which it reported, i.e., the demonstration, by presenting material that the complainants consider irrelevant.

As I've had the opportunity to explain in other reviews, the principle of independence reaffirms freedom of the press, one of the most important liberties guaranteed by the charters of rights and constitutions of democratic nations. This freedom of the press implies that the news media can choose what stories they publish or broadcast, without pressure or constraint.

For most media, this freedom is however subject to a set of ethics and rules of practice. At CBC/Radio-Canada, such rules are laid out in the JSPs. The above-mentioned principle of independence, guarantees editorial freedom for journalists, but only provided that their choices are guided by "public interest" and they remain in line with other values and principles in the JSPs.

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

³ <http://www.cbc.radio-canada.ca/en/reporting-to-canadians/acts-and-policies/programming/journalism/>

It is therefore up to journalists to choose what events they will cover, how they must be covered and from what angle, and what prominence to give the various components of the story. And it's incumbent upon news management to determine, based on their journalistic judgment and experience, what is and is not of interest to the public.

Where this review is concerned, editorial management on duty on July 19, 2014, could very well have, without breaching the JSPs, decided that the demonstration held that day wasn't worth covering in light of other news items deemed more important. But, given the war between Israel and Hamas, they instead believed the event was worthy of coverage.

The complainants would have liked the ICI Radio-Canada.ca article to mention the giant Palestinian flag and the imitation separation wall carried by demonstrators; the groups and organizations associated with the demonstration; the fact that demonstrators went to a location outside the offices of the security company G4S, and why; the demonstrator's perspective on the Gaza conflict, etc.

But the journalists assigned to the coverage in question were not the event organizers' publicists, and they were totally free to determine their treatment of the topic as they saw fit.

Moreover, the impartiality value in the JSPs states that CBC/Radio-Canada news staff must not "promote any particular point of view on matters of public debate" – in this case, that would be the point of view of the complainants.

For all these reasons, neither can I support their argument that the editorial choices of those who wrote the article demonstrate a bias on their part.

And I include in their editorial choices the decision to report on the acts of aggression committed against a counter-demonstrator. Perhaps it was an isolated fact, but the footage of the event portrays its violent character and effectively illustrates the tensions that, even here in Canada, exist when it comes to the Israel-Palestine issue. One is free to agree or disagree with the importance granted to this incident in the report, but that does not change the fact that it was an entirely legitimate editorial choice that in no way breached the JSPs.

In addition, the two readers take issue with the authors of the article for not stating the real objective of the demonstration, that although the context of the war between Israel and Hamas transformed it de facto into a demonstration supporting Palestinians in Gaza, the fact remained that it had been organized to honour the 10th anniversary of the International Court of Justice's advisory opinion on the separating barrier in occupied West Bank.

To this, Mr. Champoux responded that the "true reason" for the demonstration was to support Palestinians in Gaza; Ms. Garven and Ms. Kaddoura retorted that it is not Radio-Canada's place to determine the real objective of the protest march.

Here, I can only agree with the complainants, because, as required by the value of accuracy in the JSPs, the writers did not “invest [their] time and [their] skills to learn, understand and clearly explain the facts to [their] audience.” The article’s title, *Bref incident à la manifestation pro-Gaza à Montréal* (“brief incident at the pro-Gaza protest in Montreal”), further reinforced their inaccuracy.

In closing, given Radio-Canada’s overall coverage across all its platforms of the Israel-Palestine conflict in general, and more specifically of the latest war between Israel and Hamas, I cannot conclude, as Ms. Garven and Ms. Kaddoura do, that this coverage was unbalanced.

CONCLUSION

Apart from a slight digression from the value of accuracy, the article entitled *Bref incident à la manifestation pro-Gaza à Montréal*, which was posted on ICI Radio-Canada.ca on July 19, 2014, did not infringe upon CBC/Radio-Canada’s *Journalistic Standards and Practices*.

Pierre Tourangeau
French Services Ombudsman
CBC/Radio-Canada
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