

Review by the Radio-Canada Ombudsman of a complaint about the alleged “censorship” of the word “noires” (“black”) spoken by a person interviewed by reporter Jean-Loup Doudard for a story that aired May 20, 2018, on *Le téléjournal Ontario*.

COMPLAINT

On June 29, 2018, Mr. Grant Starko filed a complaint against what he considered to be a case of “censorship” and “fake news” in a story that aired May 20, 2018¹, on *Le téléjournal Ontario*. He wrote the following:

In a discussion with a friend we discovered on a French CBC newscast your director edited a clip of a homeowner at the French River prior to the May long weekend 2018. [...] Can you tell me why CBC would cut the word “black” / “NOIR” from the newscast? What else did you or do you cut and tamper with? Do you do this with election and other news?

Mr. Starko then went on to explain that “black flies” are common in Northern Ontario and that a reporter “must not change the content of the story or edit the story.” He concludes by asking, “Just who are you trying to protect?”

In a subsequent email exchange, Mr. Starko said that he had spoken with the person appearing in the report, providing the interviewee’s name and telephone number so that the Ombudsman could call to check what he said. Apparently, that person was also troubled by the fact that his statement had been edited to remove the word “black” from the expression “black flies.” According to Mr. Starko, “It would appear that CBC is editing a clip about black flies to appear neutral on race and skin colour.” He said that news staff need to realize that, for northern residents, the term “black fly” is in no way “related to ethnic slur or profile.”

As per usual practice, I first asked the News and Current Affairs department to respond to the complainant.

RESPONSE FROM NEWS DEPARTMENT

On July 19, 2018, George Achi, Senior News Manager for CBC/Radio-Canada French Services in Ontario, replied that after checking the segment in question and consulting with the reporter involved, he could “confirm that the word ‘black’ had not been edited out.” He added, “If this had been the case, there would have been a noticeable jump cut in the video after the word “mouches” (“flies”); however, it’s clear that the next word follows smoothly without interruption.”

¹ <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/tele/le-telejournal-ontario/site/episodes/407641/episode-du-20-mai-2018>

REQUEST FOR REVIEW

Mr. Starko was not satisfied with the above response from Radio-Canada and, on August 29, 2018, asked the Ombudsman to investigate his complaint, requesting once again that the homeowner interviewed in the report be contacted to get the facts. He found it “troubling” that Radio-Canada was attempting to cover up its improper conduct in the matter. He also added a detail that he considered relevant to the review – the fact that the camera operator who filmed the interview was a person of colour.

REVIEW²

This review will be short and simple. I requested and obtained the original recording of the interview with the homeowner in question. There were a total of 14 minutes of video footage, including shots of him performing maintenance work on his property. In the final minutes of the recording, he can be seen and heard on camera talking about the fact that he had to do the work in May, because there would be too many bugs the following month. He mentions this on three occasions in these terms:

1. “[...] it’s because the flies haven’t come out yet, or the mosquitoes.”
2. “The flies are all over you, so you have to cover yourself up [...].”
3. “The idea is that there aren’t any flies. It’s a big reason everyone gets all their work done over the long weekend.”

So, he makes three references to “flies” during his interview, but not once does he talk about “black flies.” I see no point in calling the man to ask him whether he remembers the exact words he used over three months ago. What matters is not what he remembers saying, but what he actually said. The proof is irrefutable.

CONCLUSION

The word “noires” (“black”) was not censored in the story by reporter Jean-Loup Doudard that aired May 20, 2018, on *Le téléjournal Ontario* and there was no violation of CBC/Radio-Canada’s Journalistic Standards and Practices.

Guy Gendron
Ombudsman, French Services
CBC/Radio-Canada
September 11, 2018

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