English Services’ Response

to the

Ombudsman’s 2016-17 Annual Report
For journalists, the past year has been both memorable and troubling. Their industry is beset by financial challenges. Competitive pressures are greater than ever. And the credibility of their work is being challenged loudly in a way that few have experienced before.

It would be foolhardy to dismiss the seriousness of these challenges. But the landscape at CBC News is not as bleak as you might think. The corporation’s commitment to quality journalism remains strong. The CBC is the only media company among Canada’s top 10 most influential brands. A Campaign Research study portrayed CBC as one of the country’s most trusted institutions. And a new IPSOS study suggests that Canadians have more faith in traditional news organizations than many might assume.

For CBC News in particular, the Ombudsman process continues to be a signal of our commitment to Canadians. We endeavour to respond to complaints in ways which are thorough, respectful and professional. And we admire the rigor with which the Ombudsman’s office deals with reviews.

We share the Ombudsman’s observations this year about the tone and tenor of complaints. Clearly, a segment of people have taken cues from political leaders who see the media as an enemy, who see journalists as a club of the privileged who lack integrity and principle.

It would be easy to be dismissive of these types of complaints, which often misstate facts or misunderstand the nature of how reporters work. But I view these complaints differently. I see them as a reminder that we have work to do explaining to Canadians the role we play in society, and how we play it. As the public broadcaster, we have a particular onus to maintain the very highest standards – and to practice our work with as much transparency and accountability as possible.

Looking at the Ombudsman’s annual report from a broad perspective, we are pleased that the overall picture is good. In spite of the heavy volume of complaints, there were a small number of instances in which the Ombudsman felt our work was deficient. As she notes, there was no pattern to these instances,
which gives us confidence that there is no significant underlying problem which requires addressing.

We are pleased to comment on some of the key subjects touched on in the Ombudsman’s Annual Report:

**The Election of Donald Trump**

The 2016 US Presidential election was dramatic, divisive and alternately both dazzling and disconcerting. Through both the primaries and the election campaign, there were so many moments that appeared to be a turning point, but ended up being something less. And the Trump phenomenon galvanized people – including some Canadians – to express themselves passionately.

As the Ombudsman noted, there were different themes in the complaints we received. Our Journalistic Standards and Practices served us well in these instances, allowing us to explain to people why coverage of Candidate Trump’s controversies did not require an equal amount of coverage on Candidate Clinton’s controversies. And they allowed us to work with our own journalists dealing with the delicate issues around race, religion and editorial fairness and balance.

Our editorial processes on this story are demanding with their checks and balances. There remains an active conversation in our newsrooms about the volume, content and tone of stories about the U.S. administration. Our journalists understand – as they do with all contentious stories – that bias is not acceptable at the public broadcaster. And we will continue to emphasize that.

The launch of the new Opinion portal has been of great benefit to us on this story. We have been able to publish commentary which is both supportive and critical of the U.S. President. It’s interesting to note that we have had complaints accusing this section of being too anti-Trump, but the Ombudsman found otherwise, noting the variety of perspectives included in the section’s pages.
Marketplace: Use of Simulation

This was one of the most controversial programs we did in the past year, and the Ombudsman’s critique has been taken to heart. In retrospect, we agree that this program should have been handled differently.

It is our belief that we do not necessarily need to create new guidelines within the JSP around the use of simulation, but we are insisting now that a proposal to use such techniques be “red flagged” for discussion with management before approval is given.

Errors and Corrections

We intend to pay heed to the Ombudsman’s suggestion that we pay attention to the workload and length of time reporters have to gather material.

While competition in the world of news is intense, our standards have to remain high, so this is an issue of great concern.

This is an area we are exploring as we redevelop The National. And one of the possible solutions is the creation of a “central desk” in the network newsroom to move beyond simply assigning stories. Instead, they must help create content and provide editorial support. It’s the next iteration of integration which is serving us well in our local services as well as the network. By having a smart team of journalists working to support our storytelling across a wide array of programs and platforms, we believe we can lift up the quality of our work throughout the system. And, better yet, we believe we can reduce duplication and open up capacity for additional journalists to find new stories and support our programming.

As for the Ombudsman’s suggestions that we move online corrections to the top of the web page rather than the bottom? We already do this occasionally when an error is of such significance that it affects the very credibility of a story. We will consider whether to expand that practice, but are somewhat concerned that it could give minor mistakes more prominence than the stories themselves. From a
business perspective, we have concerns that it could insert additional barriers between our work and the audience.

Revision of Journalistic Standards and Practices

The review of our JSP has been a rewarding process so far. Some of the thinking and issues raised in this process have also been useful to the development of the new Code of Conduct and Conflict of Interest code.

We are in the final stages of crafting the updated document, and will be more than pleased to accept some feedback before its conclusion from the Ombudsman. We have tremendous respect for her expertise and insights.

Non-Mandate Complaints

CBC Public Affairs points out that CBC’s National Audience Services continues to pursue a number of initiatives to ensure we remain an accessible touchpoint for Canadians to connect with their public broadcaster through whatever medium they choose.

Over the same time period as the Ombudsman report (April 2016 to March 2017), National Audience Services received more than 50,000 emails through the CBC Help Centre (cbc.ca/help) and more than 35,000 telephone calls.

The new cbc.ca (The Feed) will be launched in 2017 with increased visibility for the ‘Contact Us’ links that lead audience members to the CBC Help Centre.