

**FRENCH SERVICES OMBUDSMAN**

**2016–2017 MID-YEAR REPORT SUBMITTED TO BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

**November 23, 2016**

From the date I took over as ombudsman, April 1, through October 31, 2016, my office received 658 complaints, of which 402 were directly related to News and Current Affairs. Of that number, I referred 147 to the news department for response. In 19 cases, the complainants said they were not satisfied with the response and asked me to review their complaints. I deemed 5 of them to be either wholly or partly justified.

No one issue emerged that would point to a consistent or meaningful trend in any particular Radio-Canada team or unit producing news and information content.

Nearly half of the complaints dealt wholly or partially with the concept of accuracy. But after reviewing the cases, I found only one where the concern was justified. This attests to the outstanding work done by Radio-Canada journalists to produce serious, reliable and credible news content. The second most recurring theme in the complaints was the issue of impartiality – when listeners, viewers or web users felt that Radio-Canada or its hosts and reporters showed bias in reporting on topics or people. Once again, with the exception of a single report, I did not find any of the criticisms to be warranted, despite the often vehement nature of the complaints. In fact, much like my colleague Esther Enkin, I was stunned in many instances by complainants' lack of civility.

That was the case in a good number of complaints following journalist Anne-Marie Dussault's interview with Front National leader Marine Le Pen. Over 40 people condemned the acerbic tone of the exchange, saying they felt that the antagonistic nature of the interview was unfair to the French politician, even though many of them opposed her views. In this case, I concluded that the host had indeed violated the value of Respect for People, which Radio-Canada news personnel are expected to apply under the Journalistic Standards and Practices.

At the other end of the spectrum regarding the number of complaints, I should point out that, over the past seven months, the Office of the Ombudsman has not had to review a single complaint about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, easily one of the most recurring themes in my predecessors' reports.

The past few months were spent getting up to speed on my new duties. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Pierre Tourangeau for actively supporting me in this transition, as well as my colleague Esther Enkin for her valuable advice and Hubert T. Lacroix for helping me adjust to my

role. Thanks are owed as well to my assistant Laure Simonet, who worked with my three predecessors, making her the living memory of this office. Lastly, I would like to acknowledge News and Current Affairs management for accepting my recommendation to change the wording of responses to complaints, making it clearer to unsatisfied complainants that they can refer their cases to the ombudsman. I noted right away that this point was not always well understood, so I moved quickly to adopt wording closer to that used by English Services, which I felt was more explicit as to the options available to complainants.

Among other noteworthy developments, I am pleased to report that, heeding the calls of both my predecessor and my counterpart at CBC, English and French Services management initiated a review of the Journalistic Standards and Practices. I was particularly delighted that the review was conducted via an expanded consultation process involving journalists from both CBC and Radio-Canada – an approach most conducive to the success of this initiative, whose final product is expected sometime next year.

I also commend the work being done to address how online users' comments should be moderated on Radio-Canada sites. All major media organizations around the world face the same problem and all are attempting, with varying degrees of success, to resolve what appears to be a serious dilemma – namely, striking the right balance between, on one hand, the quality of content, and on the other, the desire to allow the free expression of public opinion within acceptable limits. Although the ombudsman does not consider user comments to be “journalistic content,” and therefore refuses to review complaints from people unhappy with moderators' decisions, I observe on a daily basis that this has become a major point of friction in Radio-Canada's relationship with audiences, at least in terms of the number of complaints it generates.

A final word on the activities of this office, which were somewhat disrupted this summer by our having to relocate to accommodate another department's space needs. The exercise of having to move and re-file the work of several generations of ombudsmen convinced me that we needed to overhaul our method of indexing all ombudsman decisions, from the oldest to the most recent. Soon, the database of past decisions will be searchable by topic, standard or journalistic principle, creating a form of “jurisprudence” that can be easily referenced. This enormous task has been undertaken with patience and diligence by my assistant Laure Simonet.

Guy Gendron  
French Services Ombudsman