

FAIRNESS IN THE NEWS: A study of perceptions of fairness in political news

Origin of the study: Role of Fairness in News

By Renaud Gilbert

It is an axiom that there can be no true democracy without freedom of the press. And there can no trustworthy press without concern for accuracy and the public interest. Is there a place today for fairness in the behaviour of the press?

In their bestseller *The Elements of Journalism*¹, which is fast becoming the bible for the news industry, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel outline what they consider to be the basic tenets of journalism; but fairness isn't among them. In fact, the authors make only two references to fairness in the entire book: first, to say that “fairness is too abstract and, in the end, more subjective than truth” (p. 46); and, second, that “fairness should mean the journalist is being fair to the facts...” (p.77) — which sounds a lot like accuracy.

The Ethics handbook of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), *Journalistic Standards and Practices* (www.cbc.ca/ombudsman) outlines principles, standards and practices on more than 300 subjects or situations through its 200 pages. Yet, more than 50% of citizens' complaints about news and information or journalistic behaviour put forward one and the same principle: fairness. One can note this clearly reviewing complaints filed with the CBC/Radio-Canada French Services Ombudsman over the past five years. This principle is raised more frequently than any other to justify a complaint, with its absence being perceived as a breach of journalism ethics. The CBC handbook defines fairness as follows:

The information reports or reflects equitably the relevant facts and significant points of view; it deals fairly and ethically with persons, institutions, issues and events. (*Journalistic Standards and Practices*, III, 2)

However, the Supreme Court of Canada has ruled that accuracy and public interest are not sufficient in themselves to justify a piece of news being disseminated. It was a failure to uphold the fairness principle that led the Court to award substantial damages against

¹ B. Kovach and T. Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001).

CBC/Radio-Canada in the Néron (*Le téléjournal/Le point*) and Leenen (*Fifth Estate*) cases. Some experts now claim that, faced with the threat of crippling lawsuits, a large number of media organizations have started engaging in self-censorship.

The general perception that the media treats public figures or situations unfairly is nothing new: the newsmakers themselves often bemoan their unfair treatment at the hands of journalists. That's why the time is ripe to tackle the important question of whether journalists do in fact acknowledge fairness as a key value in their profession and, if so, how they incorporate it into their work. A study of this kind could fuel debate among journalists and news executives alike, as well as suggest potential courses of action.

The first objective of this study is to determine how journalists define and interpret the concept of fairness, and to what extent they incorporate or disregard it in their work in relation to accuracy and public interest. The second objective is to survey members of Parliament to find out how they perceive fairness and whether they think they are treated fairly.

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This study was suggested to the Canadian Media Research Consortium by Renaud Gilbert, Ombudsman, French Services, Radio Canada, 2000-2007 and a member of the CMRC Advisory Council. The goal was to examine the perceptions of journalists and MPs in a real-life situation regarding the role that the fairness principle plays in the coverage of the federal Parliament elected on January 23, 2006 and its minority government in a fixed period of time. This study will, it is hoped, provide insights to guide further research.