
**CANADIAN BROADCAST STANDARDS COUNCIL
BRITISH COLUMBIA REGIONAL COUNCIL**

CFJC-TV re Evening News

(CBSC Decision 94/95-0212)

Decided December 18, 1996

E. Petrie (Chair), M. Becott (Vice-Chair), S. Brinton, R. Cohen (*ad hoc*),
C. Murray, G. Vizzutti

THE FACTS

As a part of its late afternoon newscast of July 13, 1995, CFJC-TV ran a four-minute story on the newly established Kamloops Anti-Racism Group, described as a new organization to fight an old problem. The news anchor introduced the subject by saying: "Its members say that you don't have to look very far to find the footprints of white supremacist activity." The spokesperson for the group was described by the reporter as a "mild-mannered grandmother [who] is taking on an ugly opponent." Using library footage, they cut to a Salmon Arm (BC) white supremacist telling a camera crew to "get the f--- off" his property and then to a former Chilliwack resident who was starting an ultra right wing church preaching hatred against Jews, Communists and others.

Two minutes into the story, the first target of the Kamloops Anti-Racism Group was reported to be a Valleyview shop which, it was alleged, catered to white supremacists. It was reported that the surplus and survival store sold outdoor gear, weapons and other related items and, for a time at least, had had a portrait of Adolf Hitler hanging on the wall. The owner had been interviewed for the story and three separate segments of the interview had been used. This portion of the report ran as follows:

Reporter: [Over a shot of the store exterior] This store sells army fatigues, first aid and hunting supplies, a variety of other things, too, that Kamloops Anti-Racist Group fears caters to white supremacists.

Owner: No, we're not.

Reporter: Who are your customers?

- Owner:* Regular people, hunters, fishermen, outdoorsmen, paintballers, some survivalists, but mostly just regular everyday people.
- Reporter:* Everyday people who buy books like these [over a shot of *Improvised Weapons of the American Underground*] - guides and manuals on how to build weapons, bombs, explosives. The Anti-Racism Group bought one just to show people what the store was selling.
- A-R Group:* As the time that we bought that, they were displaying a big poster of Adolf Hitler. White supremacists, neo-Nazi groups revere Adolf Hitler.
- Reporter:* That poster used to hang where the Turkish flag hangs now.
- Owner:* After a while, a few people complained about it so we ended up taking it down and eventually it ended up on the shooting range and was shot full of holes.

The reporter added that “Although he doesn’t cater to white supremacists, [the owner] says his store seems to attract them anyway.” He also pointed out that everything sold by the shop was legal, after which another portion of the interview with the owner was used.

- Owner:* We’ve had a few people call up asking where they can join white supremacist groups and we told them that we have nothing to do with that and do not call us again. And we have no idea where you join.

The spokesperson for the Kamloops Anti-Racist Group still did not believe that it was right.

The Complaint

On July 14, a viewer complained to the CRTC of “a violation of the code of ethics” by CFJC-TV. He said:

The subject matter was an alleged [*sic*] paranoid statement by a woman representing an anti racial society which I cannot find registered. Also, the news director made a deliberate & derogatory statements [*sic*] amounting to fear concerning a proprietor of a store in Valleyview. In my opinion the news article was in the worst taste possible.

The Broadcaster’s Response

The letter was forwarded by the CRTC to the CBSC which, in turn, forwarded it to CFJC-TV for response to the viewer. In his letter of August 8, CFJC-TV’s News Director said:

As I was away on vacation, this is the first opportunity I've had to personally investigate your concerns. I have looked at the tape of the news broadcast in question, and personally cannot find any problem with the way the story was handled. The story was very unbiased, the reporter did in fact not make any derogatory statements, and in my view, handled both the initial news release from the group and the follow-up with the store proprietor in very balanced fashion. The store owner was on camera several times during the story, discussing the issues, and offering his point of view.

As a subscriber to both the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council and the Radio-Television News Directors Association Code of Ethics, I can't find any ethical problem with the story at all. While you may not agree with the views of some of the people in the story, there is nothing in the story itself that is a problem. However, if you wish to pursue the matter further, I would be happy to discuss the matter with you at any time. Give me a call at the station.

The complainant was dissatisfied with the News Director's response and filed a Ruling Request on August 29.

THE DECISION

The B.C. Regional Council considered the complaint under the *CAB Code of Ethics*. Articles 6 and 7 of that Code read as follows:

Article 6, *CAB Code of Ethics* (News)

It shall be the responsibility of member stations to ensure that news shall be represented with accuracy and without bias. The member station shall satisfy itself that the arrangements made for obtaining news ensure this result. It shall also ensure that news broadcasts are not editorial. News shall not be selected for the purpose of furthering or hindering either side of any controversial public issue, nor shall it be designed by the beliefs or opinions or desires of the station management, the editor or others engaged in its preparation or delivery. The fundamental purpose of news dissemination in a democracy is to enable people to know what is happening, and to understand events so that they may form their own conclusions.

Therefore, nothing in the foregoing shall be understood as preventing news broadcasters from analyzing and elucidating news so long as such analysis or comment is clearly labelled as such and kept distinct from regular news presentations. Member stations will, insofar as practical, endeavour to provide editorial opinion which shall be clearly labelled as such and kept entirely distinct from regular broadcasts of news or analysis and opinion.

It is recognized that the full, fair and proper presentation of news, opinion, comment and editorial is the prime and fundamental responsibility of the broadcast publisher.

Article 7, *CAB Code of Ethics* (Controversial Public Issues)

Recognizing in a democracy the necessity of presenting all sides of a public issue, it shall be the responsibility of member stations to treat fairly, all subjects of a controversial nature. Time shall be allotted with due regard to all the other elements of balanced program schedules, and to the degree of public interest in the questions presented. Recognizing that healthy controversy is essential to the maintenance of democratic institutions, the broadcast publisher will endeavour to encourage presentation of news and opinion on any controversy which contains an element of the public interest.

The Regional Council reviewed the correspondence and viewed the tape of the newscast in question. For the reasons given below, the Regional Council does not consider that the broadcast breached the Code.

Controversy and the Public Interest

First and foremost, the B.C. Regional Council considers that the story told in the newscast falls squarely within the terms of Article 7 in that it deals with “controversy which contains an element of the public interest.” The public importance of the story is undoubted. The message of the report was to remind viewers that white supremacists were not merely a distant phenomenon, which might *still* be worthy of the station’s news department’s attention, but also a *local* phenomenon. The station emphasized that local relevance, first, by including the archival footage relating to the Salmon Arm and Chilliwack incidents in the news item. It had thus provided a setting relevant to local viewers for both the reporting of the creation of the Kamloops Anti-Racism Group and the identification of the area store which seemed to be attracting, if not encouraging, the anti-social persons being targeted by the Group. By dipping into its news footage archives, the station also helped to underscore the historical and local context for the story.

Accuracy and Bias

After determining that the story clearly contains the element of public interest and importance envisaged in Article 7, the Regional Council must consider whether the station told the story “with accuracy and without bias”. As Article 6 provides, “The fundamental purpose of news dissemination in a democracy is to enable people to know what is happening, and to understand events so that they may form their own conclusions.” The Council is of the view that the station presented a balanced news report. While it included footage of the shop’s merchandise, targeting some particularly violent and provocative book titles, and the reference to the portrait of Adolf Hitler, which was no longer on the wall, photographed, it also provided the opportunity for the store owner to give his point of view on those issues.

Some members were concerned that the order of presentation of the story might have resulted in some initial imbalance in the presentation of the story but all agreed that the owner's on-screen explanations provided the effective counterpoint required. He was given on-screen opportunities to deal with the nature of the store's clientele, the story of the poster of Hitler, and the allegation that the store catered to white supremacists. In other words, the Regional Council considers that the store owner was offered fair opportunity for comment.

In the result, the Council considers that the story was presented in an objective and balanced fashion, entirely in conformity with the requirements of the *CAB Code of Ethics*.

Broadcaster Responsiveness

The CBSC always recognizes the broadcaster's obligation, as a CBSC member, to be responsive to complainants. In this case, the Regional Council considers that the response from CFJC-TV's News Director dealt appropriately with the viewer and even invited the continuation of dialogue on the subject: "if you wish to pursue the matter further, I would be happy to discuss the matter with you at any time. Give me a call at the station." Consequently, the station did not breach the Council's standard of responsiveness.

This decision is a public document upon its release by the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council. It may be reported, announced or read by the station against which the complaint had originally been made; however, in the case of a favourable decision, the station is under no obligation to announce the result.