

Defending our children from attacks in media

By Michael Doxtater

Believe it or not, media shapes our perceptions and influences our opinions. Television, cinema, radio, newspapers, and magazines pump out information, mostly mirroring what modern society thinks is right and good. Sometimes what media says harbours society's deeply imbedded beliefs, as well as prejudices which are used to protect society's interests.

Most times media is fair. In media, and especially in news reporting, fairness is attempted by getting both sides of the story. When it comes to the depiction of our People, however, we usually don't get to tell our side of the story.

In July a complaint was filed with the Indian Defense League of America (IDLA), protesting the

depiction of Indians in the CBS network program "The Simple Life". The complaint, which was lodged with IDLA president Joseph Rickard, drew attention to what was termed a "stereotype" depiction of Injuns. The network program appeared on Buffalo's CBS affiliate WIVB TV (channel four).

"The Simple Life" stars former "Who's the Boss" lead Judith Light. The sitcom "The Simple Life" is loosely based on a Martha Stewart-like character, living with her mother and daughter. In the July 8 episode of "The Simple Life" the matronly character "grandmother" was helping her granddaughter with the neighbourhood girl's club, whose main activity was to dress-up like Injuns.

When asked by the little girls what her made-up Injun name was, the older woman said "squaw Lipschitz". While being depicted as Injun hobbyists, the girls said they wanted to learn "Indian craft", in particular "casino gambling". Near the end of the program the tired grandmother, with a pastel coloured feathered war bonnet in hand, sighed that the "gaming commissioner" turned down their license application because he didn't believe the little girls were really Injun "midgets".

(Even though "The Simple Life" used politically correct phrases to call our People, they wanted to say Indian, but really meant "Injun". It says here, don't say Indian if you really mean "Injun".)

Obviously, this depiction of our People is a stereotype, based on popular conceptions of what outside society thinks of Indians. In fact, the accusation is that programs like "The Simple Life" have implicitly "highly offensive racist overtones". While it may be a gamble and expensive being Indian in the late 20th century, depicting Indian culture as casino gambling is insulting if not just plain silly. This depiction is a stereotype because of the assumption that all 5,000 Indian reserves, reservations, rancheries, and settlements north of the Rio Grande have a casino.

The use of the word "squaw" in 1998 network television was a shock as well. It was, we all thought, entirely old-fashioned and crude to use the word "squaw". Mostly, when a character uses the word "squaw" it suggests the character is sexist and racist. This was not the case with the matronly character on "The Simple Life", a character endowed with authority and wisdom. The term "squaw" has been used to

denigrate and debase our women, and its use is entirely unacceptable.

The complaint came about from one simple, yet eloquently charged question asked by a nine-year-old girl: "Why are they making fun of us?" The discomfort and anguish caused by careless depictions of our People tears down the hard work our families do to promote a self-image which values our noble heritage. The power of media and its carelessness makes that work harder.

It's one thing when the disrespect comes from outside the Nation. When the disrespect comes from inside the Nation, it is another entirely different matter. As reported in Six Nation's local scandal sheet, "The Turtle Island News", the Mohawks were attacked at the Hotinosionni Confederacy meeting. Mohawks were depicted as cold, spiritless people, who were "holding the (confederacy) council back from working".

Mohawks were told by one of our most respected Elders, that not having a longhouse, not performing the ceremonies, and not having the Handsome Lake fire, meant Mohawks "have no voice". "You have no fire. You have no voice...you don't even have a Longhouse," to quote the report on the meeting. The sum total of the attack: Mohawks have no rights.

It is fair to table remarks which address issues like those raised at the Confederacy. But to lower mean-spirited criticism at all 50,000 Mohawks is not fair. Especially when many of those 50,000 Mohawks are children. Especially when Mohawks were not asked by the reporter how they wished to respond to the criticism.

Here is why the criticism lev-

elled at the Mohawks is unfair. Firstly, Mohawk Elders say their mission is to provide a nice place for all Children to live with clean water and good food. Elders teach us to be thankful for all we're given. Elders also ask that we respect each other's rights, and not to fight over all we're given. The Old Ones say "that where the sun rises is the eastern door, where it sets is the western door, and the blue sky over our heads is the roof of One Long House, where all our relations have a voice." To tell Mohawk Children they have no voice, no rights, and no soul, is not fair.

The other Nations only have the right to ask if Mohawks need help. And a newspaper which doesn't ask for the other side of the story is only a political scribble sheet. Careless words tears down all the hard work our families do to nurture the gifts each of us possess. Careless and thoughtless attacks aimed at an entire Nation, including their defenseless Children, is the climate we find ourselves in 1998.

At the Confederacy meeting where the Mohawks were attacked it was pointed out that this community has changed. It was pointed out by the Cayugas that people, including their own families, increasingly won't help others unless there's something in it for them. Would those 400 or 500 people working in Community Services still help their clients if they weren't getting paid? Or are we telling our People, what gives them value is what's wrong with them? Do those defective People turn into commodities which need fixing?

It's hard to tell someone what's good about them, when what's noticed is what's wrong with them. It's hard work to find out someone's gift. It takes time. It takes patience and courage to provide encouragement and nurture. We, as a Nation, seem to have forgotten how.

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