Arab Defamation In
The Media: Its Consequences
And Solutions

By Casey Kasem

How—and why—are our entertainment media defaming and dehumanizing the Arabs as an entire people? And how does this damage not only Americans of Arab descent but all Americans of every descent?

To begin with, let’s get a sense of what information about Arab-bashing you already have. Here are eight questions for you.

1. How many Arabs have you seen portrayed as bad guys on the screen?
2. How many Arabs have you seen portrayed as good guys on the screen?
3. How many Arab terrorists have you seen portrayed?
4. How many Arabs have you seen portrayed as victims of terrorists?
5. Have you heard of the murder of Leon Klinghoffer?
6. Have you heard of the murder of Alex Odeh?
7. If you are of non-Arab descent, is most of what you know about Arabs taken from the media?
8. If you are of non-Arab descent, have you ever gotten to know an Arab or someone of Arab heritage?

As we go along, I’ll be referring to motion pictures and television shows you may have seen. Please ask yourself how you’d feel if your ethnic group were portrayed this way day after day, year after year.

Here are some of the things we “know” about Arabs from films and TV.

Most of them are rich, right? Not in the real world. Except for a handful of

Casey Kasem, radio and television personality, is heard weekly on “Casey’s Top 40” and “America’s Top 10.”
About This Issue

“Appalling acts of hatred,” was President Bush’s description of the rash of incidents against Arab-Americans in the wake of Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait.

In Boston’s Charlestown district, for example, Ahmad Taha, 41, heard a voice at midnight outside his apartment telling him to “move out or you’ll die.” That morning his landlady said she had received several calls from neighbors with friends and relatives in the armed forces demanding his ouster. Taha, a Palestinian American, moved.

The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) reports three to four such threats each day, as opposed to one a week prior to the invasion.

The image of the ugly Arab has been manufactured, in large part, by the entertainment industry. NBC’s soap opera “Santa Barbara” recently built a story line around a mythical Arab oil-producing kingdom whose inhabitants were depicted as backward, irrational, lustful, deceitful and violent. Following the Iraqi invasion, radio station WDFX in Detroit asked listeners to phone in “bad Arab jokes,” some of which the station’s own general manager acknowledged “crossed the line.” And some disc jockeys have been playing pop songs dubbed over with blatant Arab stereotyping.

Which brings us to “Arab scandal,” himself a former disc jockey, now celebrating his 21st year on radio as the cracking voice that is synonymous with radio’s musical countdowns. If you don’t know him, ask any teenager.

Over the past few years, Casey has done TV spots and specials aimed at combatting alcohol abuse, drunken driving and hunger, as well as a major campaign against smoking for the National Cancer Institute. Several times he has been arrested for his stand against nuclear weapons and homelessness in America. He is a board director of FAIR (Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting) and has helped the Foundation for Middle East Communication hold workshops that bring Arabs, Jews and others together to discuss conflict resolution.

When the anti-Arab incidents broke out in August and September, Casey went on The MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour, CNN, and the Phil Donahue Program to help correct the negative Arab perceptions. When we asked him to do this issue on his personal feelings about the subject, the man who is known as “America’s DJ,” who was born Kemal Amran Kasem, the son of Lebanese Druze parents, said “Yes” without missing a beat.

Our special holiday gift selections are offered on pages 10-15 under four categories: Middle East Culture, Religion in the Middle East, the Palestine Conflict and U.S.-Israel Relations.

John F. Mahoney, Executive Director

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good old American blood-and-guts mayhem can deal with them. As in movies like Iron Eagle and The Delta Force.

Another thing that Hollywood taught us is that Arab men are womanizers! Isn't that how Italian actor Rudolf Valentino got his big break in 1921? He played The Sheik, a fierce Arab chief who kidnaps and seduces a young English girl. However, that "Arab sheik" that our leading lady eventually falls in love with turns out to be no Arab at all, but a Scotsman—because what Anglo-Saxon woman could fall in love with an Arab?

By the way, during the 1920s, there were 86 other films in which Arabs were the heavies!

In 1921, a hit song came out with a lyric that goes:

I'm the Sheik of Araby.
Your heart belongs to me.
At night when you're asleep, into your tent I'll creep...

Ever since the '20s, American filmmakers have given us the same image of Arabs. Besides creeping into ladies' boudoirs, they're reckless, disorganized, foolish, inconsistent and untrustworthy.

How about cartoons? For decades, from childhood on, we've watched animated Arabs: buffoons, with big swords, chasing cartoon heroes like Bugs Bunny, Porky Pig, Woody Woodpecker and Popeye. And then we've watched live actors, dressed as Arabs with big swords, chase Laurel and Hardy or Abbott and Costello. Bob Hope and Bing Crosby ran from Arabs in The Robot to Morocco, and 40 years later Dustin Hoffman and Warren Beatty ran from them in Ishtar.

As for television, we've seen private eyes and police from "Cannon" and "Charlie's Angels" to "Cagney and Lacey" and "Mancuso" — and too many others to count—who have all heroically foiled bestial, bloodthirsty Arab terrorists and white slavers. Even Michael Landon, as an angel on Highway To Heaven, foiled a white slavery ring sending its victims to an Arab country.

A lot of bad Arabs on our screens!

But wait a minute: where are the good Arabs? The answer—according to Hollywood—is there are none. If Jews or blacks, Hispanics or Asians were constantly depicted this way today...would we stand for it? Are you kidding? In this day and age, it would be called "racism" and "bigotry"—and rightly so! But seldom do we hear such criticism of the media when it's Arabs who are being bashed—and that's been going on for 70 years.

We see it in the rest of our media as well: books, magazines, newspapers, comic books and advertising. And what is it doing to America? What purpose does it serve? Who benefits? What happens when these images are distorted?

When Prejudice Hits Home

Let's begin on a personal level. A few years ago, when my son, Mike, was around 12, became home one day and said to me, "Dad, I hate Arabs."

I said, "What?" I was shocked. I mean, I'm Arab-American. I was born in Detroit, of Lebanese descent—and that makes my son Arab-American, too!

And he knew that, even though it didn't have a lot of meaning for him. Like a lot of second- and third-generation youngsters, he probably just thinks of himself as plain, unflavored "American."

I asked him why he said he hates Arabs. He said he sees what terrible people they are from movies and television.

And that's the point. It all builds up, until it becomes our conditioned reaction. Ugly scenes like this have happened in thousands of other Arab-American homes.

You know, this is the sort of thing the Nazis did to the Jews in the 1930s and '40s. Hitler commissioned a propaganda film called The Wandering Jew—and one scholar said, "even a Jew, after seeing this picture, would become anti-Semitic."

Imagine the pain Jews felt then. Imagine the pain Arab-Americans feel now including some Arab-Americans that you may know! Like consumer advocate Ralph Nader; heart surgeon, Dr. Michael DeBakey; the founder of MADD—Mothers Against Drunk Driving—Candy Lightner; the football Heisman Trophy winner from Boston College, Doug Flutie; and the race-car winner of the Indy 500 in 1986, Bobby Rahal. Performers like pop stars Paula Abdul and Paul Anka, or actor and Oscar-winner for Amadeus, F. Murray Abraham, actress Marlo Thomas and her father, Danny Thomas, comedian, humanitarian and founder of St. Jude's Children's Hospital. Authors like Khalil Gibran of The Prophet and William Peter Blatty who wrote The Exorcist. Political figures like Senator Majority Leader George Mitchell and White House Chief of Staff John Sununu. And let's not forget the family of the courageous teacher and astronaut who died aboard the Challenger—Christa McAuliffe.

I remember very well a man who was born in Lebanon and at the age of 14 worked his way to America. He didn't learn a word of English and he couldn't even read or write Arabic. He worked as a peddler in Mexico, then in the railroad freight yards in Pennsylvania, before moving to Detroit to open a small grocery store. He married another Arab-American. They raised two boys, put them through school and taught them responsibility. They set an example for their children by being the hardest-working grocers and most enthusiastic Americans I've ever known: my mother and father.

All these people and many others...
Arab-Americans You May Know

Writers:
Poet/Philosopher: “The Prophet”
Novelist: “The Exorcist”
Playwright: “Finnian’s Rainbow,” “Bloomer Girl”

Humanitarians:
Consumer advocate
Founder of Mothers Against Drunk Driving
Founder of St. Jude’s Children’s Hospital,
(star of radio, film, TV)

Members of U.S. Congress:
Senate Majority Leader (D-Maine)
Former Senator from South Dakota
Former Senator from South Dakota
Congressman from West Virginia
Congresswoman from Ohio
Former Congressman from California
Former Congressman from Texas

Professional People:
Pioneer heart surgeon
Credited with eradicating venereal disease in China
Lawyer; won record judgment of $1 billion for Texas Journalist

Entertainers:
Top recording star and choreographer
Opera star
One of first teen idols, singer-songwriter
Speciality pop star Herbert Khaury, a.k.a.,
Mel of TV’s “Alice”,
Cpl. Klinger of “M*A*S*H”
Oscar for Best Actor, “Annie Get Your Gun”
Producer: “Golden Girls” (Emmy Award), “Driving Miss Daisy” (Oscar)

Entertainers (continued):
Star of “That Girl” and multi-Empire winner
Teenage pop star with two No. 1 records
TV and movie actor, star of “Cochise”
Producer of “Halloween” horror film series
Radio host of “American Dance Trax” and program director of L.A.’s KFW
Director: “Who’s the Boss?,” “WKRP,” “Married People”
Director: “Facts of Life,” “Full House,” et al
Actor, starred in TV’s “Mad Squad”
Actor, starring in “Head of the Class”
One of radio’s most “American” institutions, “American Top 40,” was created by,

White House Officials:
Chief of Staff, former Governor of New Hampshire
Special Presidential envoy
Former Chief of Protocol

Athletes:
NFL Hall of Fame linebacker for Chicago Bears
Heisman Trophy winner and NFL quarterback
Indy 500 winner and National Race Car Champion
Syracuse University basketball star
University of Illinois football star and Indianapolis Colts quarterback
UCLA basketball coach
Baseball outfielder: Red Sox, Braves, Angels, Rangers
World featherweight boxing champ, 1996-97

Marlo Thomas
Tiffany
Michael Arsen
Moustapha Akkad
Jeff Wyatt
Asaad Kelada
John Bowab
Tighe Andrews
Khristyna Hauge
Casey Kasem & Don Bustany
John Sununu
Phillip C. Habib, Ph.D.
Selma Roosevelt
Bill George
Doug Flutie
Bobby Rahal
Ron Seikaly
Jeff George
Jim Harrick
Joe Lebou
Petey Sarron

are proud to be Americans—but they also have a right to be proud of their heritage like everyone else.

And what about that heritage, that heritage that goes back thousands of years? Let me take a minute to tell you about it. The Arab civilization gave the world a religion, a language, an alphabet—and advances in science and medicine that inspired great European thinkers like Leonardo da Vinci.
In mathematics, Arabs invented algebra and the use of the zero. In astronomy, they used astrolabes for navigation, star maps and celestial globes, and the concept of the center of gravity. In geography, they pioneered the use of latitude and longitude. Arabs invented the water clock, and in music, the lute and the guitar.

Their architecture inspired the Gothic style in Europe. And in agriculture, they introduced oranges, dates, sugar, and cotton, and pioneered sophisticated water works and irrigation systems.

Their contributions to medicine
were especially outstanding. They developed the first teaching hospitals and traveling medical clinics. They performed the first caesarean section—a procedure by which my youngest daughter was delivered recently! The Arabs also discovered the contagious nature of tuberculosis and how disease can be transmitted by clothing, utensils and personal contact. They diagnosed stomach cancer, measles, smallpox, cholera and bubonic plague—all of this 300 years or more before Louis Pasteur taught us to destroy harmful bacteria by pasteurization! And this wealth of knowledge and civilization pulled the Europeans out of the Dark Ages when the Arabs came into southern Europe, beginning a Golden Age in Spain that lasted for centuries.

But enough about Arab contributions to civilization. Let’s get back to the contemporary Arabs we’ve been taught to hate.
How Distorted Images Get There

How do these distorted images get onto our TV and movie screens?

Well, everything starts with a writer, who's probably fighting a deadline. Most writers are. The producers who hire them want the script yesterday. Under this pressure, it's tempting to save time with a shortcut—using an old stereotype.

Even though it may have nothing to do with the main plot, they drag in a nasty Arab villain or two. They did it in Oh God! Number 3, St. Elmo's Fire, and many, many more.

Remember The Black Stallion? That film was a tremendous hit. My kids loved it, and my daughter, Kerri, dragged us to see it time after time. She's said more than once when she grows up, she wants to marry a horse! In the opening sequence, aboard the ship, we see a nasty Arab cruelly whipping the horse—and later stealing the little boy's life jacket when the ship begins to sink. In novelist Walter Farley's original, that nasty Arab character did not exist. He was added to the film.

Come to think of it, my son, Mike, must have seen that picture—and that scene—at least six times.

That's just one example of gratuitous Arab-bashing in a movie. Now let me give you one from television.

Irwin Shaw's novel, Evening In Byzantium, was made into a four-hour special. The original, touching story—about an older man in love with a younger woman—suddenly included an Arab group of nuclear terrorists, plus three rich oil sheiks asking the hero to make an anti-Israeli movie. The novel had made no mention of Arabs at all.

Finally, let me give you three more quick examples of stereotyping: the notion of American cities and neighborhoods under attack by Arab terrorists.

Take Back To The Future—the original Libyan terrorists come out of nowhere and are suddenly driving around the parking lot of an American shopping center at night, shooting at the heroes, and still dressed as though they were in the Middle East!

Black Sunday: more terrorists. This time they're planning to murder spectators at the Super Bowl in Miami— including the President of the United States —by hijacking and arming the Goodyear blimp.

Or NBC-TV's Under Siege. Anyone who's seen it won't forget the image of the terrorist's rockets striking the dome of our Capitol Building and exploding. Pure, unadulterated fiction. They confused Iranians with Arabs—making people watching the film think those were Arab terrorists. Also, there has never been a square inch of America attacked by Arabs, or Americans of Arab heritage, ever—except on our films.

Where do writers, producers and directors get this stuff?

You know, there are foreign films—some made by Israelis—that show Arabs in a better light.

But now, some say that the many Jewish-Americans who work in Hollywood promote the negative image of Arabs on screen. Well, I have Jewish friends in the business—many are executives—and if anyone is sensitive about stereotyping, they certainly are. Still, we're all products of our upbringing. If you're raised in a family where attitudes about Arabs are very negative, reinforced with what we've been talking about, you tend to have such attitudes. But such attitudes can change.

Veteran filmmaker Ted Flicker, who is Jewish and a lifelong Zionist, is the co-creator of the hit TV comedy series "Barney Miller." He participated in one of our Arab-Jewish dialogue workshops in conflict resolution.

And after discovering that Arabs were no different than anyone else, and that they were now being de-famed and de-humanized as Jews had been for hundreds of years, he did something about it.

He spoke out against it, before the Board of Directors of both the Writers Guild and the Directors Guild, and his speech—titled, "Billionaires, Bombers and Belly Dancers"—was published in the newsletters of both guilds for the general memberships.

Here's part of what he said. Quote: "For those of us who remember what it was like to be Jewish in the '30s and '40s, stereotypes were part of the process that separated us from the rest of the American community. They were the cause of schoolyard fights and psychological scars that many of us carry today.

"I think that's part of what the makers of our nation's myths, consider the plight of these people..."


Thanks to Ted Flicker, that action inspired me to give a similar speech before the Boards of the Screen Actors Guild and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists. And it, too, was published for the memberships.

Now, let me make a point here: Hollywood didn't start the whole idea of Arabs as the bad guy. That was born from a long tradition of competition between European and Middle Eastern societies over trade routes, colonies and religious differences—from the days of the Greeks and Romans, through the Crusades, to modern times. So we inherited those Arab stereotypes from Europe.

Some stereotypes have small grains of truth in them somewhere, but then they get blown out of proportion and are slapped on everybody.

We've come a long way since the days when American films commonly depicted: black people as stupid, cowardly or shiftless; American Indians as bloodthirsty savages; Latinos as lazy, untrustworthy, or as evil, wild-eyed bandits; and Asians as sinister and treacherous. Today the image of those groups has been balanced by good guys and heroes among them. But not yet for the Arabs.

There are those who will say, "But,
Casey, if you’ve followed the news for the past 40 years, how could you not have a roén view of Arabs? Example: OPEC raises oil prices, and we’re lined up at the gas stations.” I remember that, but I also know that, at the time of that oil crisis, we were importing only 5 percent of our oil from Arab countries. And that price hike was initiated by a non-Arab country, Iran, when America’s friend, the Shah, was in power. But the stereotype remains alive today.

Acts of ugly Arab terrorism have been dramatized again and again. But where’s the balance? Arabs have also been victims of terrorism. In the history of man’s inhumanity to man, few nations are without blood on their hands: Turks killed Armenians; the U.S. Army shot down Sioux men, women and children at Wounded Knee; the Germans gassed the Jews; the Romans threw Christians to the lions; and the Khmer Rouge marched fellow Cambodians to the “killing fields.” The leaders who set those policies and ordered those actions were obviously bad guys. But that doesn’t mean all their fellow countrymen are bad guys, too. Every nation, every religion, every ethnic group has a mixture of good and bad.

But, when it comes to Arabs in the Arab-Israeli conflict, for example, in the make-believe world of Hollywood—even in Technicolor—everything is black or white; the Arab side always has the bad guys, the other side always has the good guys. No balance.

In the real world, in their ignorance, frustration, fear, anger, hate and thirst for vengeance on each other, misguided individuals on all sides have done horrible things—and innocent individuals on all sides have been victims.

But that’s not the story Hollywood tells.

And to compound things, filmmakers who keep presenting a negative, dehumanizing image of all Arabs in fiction are subtly encouraging not only hate but real-life acts of violence against Arabs. And there’s been a lot of it—from beatings to rape—to murder.

Let me give you a not-very-publicized example—the murder of Alex Odeh in 1985, caused by a pipe bomb planted in his office. He was an Arab-American from Palestine, a poet and the local head of a branch of the ADC, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee.

You want to make movies about violence in America? Here was violence in America. But the Arab was the victim, not the killer. There hadn’t been a movie about the killing of Alex Odeh. Of course, it was overshadowed by the tragic event on the Italian cruise ship, the Achille Lauro, a few days earlier. And I don’t have to tell you about the shocking murder of Leon Klinghoffer, a Jewish-American tourist in a wheelchair, that occurred there. There have already been hundreds of column inches in newspapers and magazines about it, as well as two TV movies. It was dramatic, yes. But Alex Odeh was an American citizen, too, murdered here in America.

Is it less a tragedy when an Arab is murdered than when anyone else is murdered?

Now, let’s take a 60-second look at how this one-sided coverage translates into our political policy. Some Americans exposed to Arab-bashing grow up to be our leaders—leaders who turn their learned prejudices into foreign policy that can be costly in terms of American lives, our tax dollars, and our reputation as an ethical people.

We want lawmakers and diplomats to be mature, and fair-minded, addressing all sides of an issue before committing our country to a course of action. How likely is it that if they react automatically every time the word “Arab” comes up? I suspect that Ronald Reagan may have thought of the Arabs as “those guys” that tried to kill Paul Newman in Exodus, and Kirk Douglas in Cast a Giant Shadow, and Jimmy Stewart in Flight of the Phoenix.

If a legislator is uninformed when it comes time to vote on an issue, he probably falls back on a special-interest lobby or a lifetime of impressions he’s picked up from the media. For example, on August 30th this year, in the Omaha World-Herald, Senator J.J. Exon, Democrat of Nebraska, said, “In the Arab world, life is not as important as in the non-Arab world.”

**Stereotyping Remedies**

Now that we know what the problem is, what’s the answer? What can we do about negative stereotyping? First, let’s talk about what the industry can do—and then what you can do.

The producers who hire the writers, the actors who read the lines, and the directors who shoot the pictures can stop it in its tracks before it gets started. All it takes is one of those people, somewhere along the line, to have the courage to say, “No, I won’t do it. It’s wrong. What can we do to make it right?”

A few years ago, I was doing one of the voices in the TV cartoon series, “Transformers.” One week, the script featured an evil character named Abdul, King of Carbombya. He was like all the other cartoon Arabs. I asked the director, “Are there any good Arabs in this script for balance?” We looked. There was one other—but he was no different than Abdul. So, I told the show’s director that, in good conscience, I couldn’t be a part of that show. And I wrote a letter to the President and Chief Executive Officer of Marvel Productions, Margaret Ann Loesch.
Here is her reply, in part: "Dear Casey: I received your letter regarding the negative stereotyping that has been occurring on television in the portrayal of Arabs and Arab-Americans. I share your concerns.

"Your letter has been distributed to our writing staff and our voice directors in the hopes that they can be more sensitive to this issue and therefore more responsive to the problem."

Writing letters really works! And when broadcasters call our attention to stereotyping, it’s important to show our appreciation. This note was from Arthur Lord, director of Special News Operations at NBC News:

"Dear Casey: Thanks for your kind letter concerning our ‘Today’ (show) report on Arab-bashing in the movies... The report generated quite a lot of mail—some of it quite positive. This response is gratifying, because perhaps people are beginning to be sensitized to the stereotyping of Arabs in the media and the lengthy process of ending that kind of abuse will have begun."

"There’s an example of someone in the industry initiating a positive action. Mail encourages more of the same.

"Now what can the people who make those films do?"

"For starters, it means giving us some Arab men or women as central characters, heroes and heroines for balance. Some Arab-American families raising their children and helping their neighbors. Some stories with Arab sidekicks. Or, here’s an easy suggestion—even the simple use of ordinary characters with Arab first names and surnames: doctors, lawyers, grocers and schoolteachers. How about some characters modeled after real-life Arab-Americans, like those I mentioned earlier, like a Ralph Nader type or a Dr. DeBakey, just to mention a couple?"

"And what about balance? When an Arab is the villain, how about seeing some other Arabs in the same story who are good guys? Remember, for every Abu Nidal—who’s a renegade terrorist even to his own people—there are millions and millions of other Arabs, as decent as anybody in this room."

"A few films—unfortunately, only a very few—have given us examples of a more even-handed approach to Arabs on screen."

"Now, you’re saying, ‘Casey, I don’t write movies, or direct them, or act in them, and I’m not a television executive.’ Okay! But what if you catch an instance of Arab-bashing or any other ethnic-bashing in the media? You can still have a tremendous impact on the industry."

"If it’s a film, write that letter—even a postcard—to the filmmakers and the stars of the film, expressing your anger, disappointment and concern."

"If the offense is on radio or television, phone or write the station manager or program director, or the production company that made the show—and especially the advertisers! Remind them there are viewers out there for whom attacks on heritage are painful and offensive."

"Please, don’t underestimate the power of your letter!

"At the network level, each piece of mail is taken to represent a thousand people who didn’t bother to write. Can you imagine the impact you and some of your friends could have? And take advantage of word-of-mouth talking to just one person plants a seed. And a seed becomes a forest!"

"It was anthropologist Margaret Mead who said: ‘Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. In fact, that’s the only way it ever happened.’"

"As you know, these abuses are not confined just to Hollywood. If a news item or any printed material seems biased or inaccurate to you...question it! Challenge it!

"Talk about an article, here’s one—and I’ll make it my last example. In Omni Magazine, in a piece titled ‘The Importance of Hugging,’ Howard Bloom asserted that Arabs never show affection openly toward their children. He took one survey of primitive cultures, applied it to the entire Islamic cultures, and concluded that they, quote, ‘treat their children harshly. They despise open displays of affection. The result—violent adults.’"

"Further in the article, Bloom wrote: ‘Could the denial of warmth lie behind Arab brutality? Could these keepers of the Islamic flame be suffering from a lack of hugging? Could that deprivation help explain their thirst for blood?’ Notice? He never comes right out and says, ‘It does this.’ He just asks ‘Could it...?’ and leaves it unanswered.

"His closing lines? ‘The Arabadult, stripped of intimacy and thrust into a life of cold isolation, has become a walking time bomb. An entire people may have turned barbaric for the simple lack of a hug.’ By the way, all this is from his book, The Lucifer Principle: A Scientific Expedition Into the Forces of History.

"As an Arab-American who has discussed this with other Arab-Americans, I can tell you that Arab parents—mothers and fathers alike—are at least as affectionate with our kids as any people anywhere, sometimes too much—no different than you are with your kids."

"When you catch something like that article, send a letter to the editor of the newspaper or magazine, and to the author. Do that regularly—and I send copies to my friends to keep them posted. And they send letters, too. That’s the idea. The important thing is to speak up. It’s been said that to ignore a wrong is to condone it.

"In conclusion, I want to say please—join me. Join me in working for the day when the attitudes created by Hollywood never again will cause any child to despise his or her heritage.

"The time for ignorance, fear and hate—for throwing names and throwing bombs—is long over.

"The time for equal respect for all people everywhere is now. Call it ‘democracy,’ ‘perestroika,’” whatever. Ron Kovic, the author of Born on the Fourth of July, said it best: ‘Let’s all step into a new age—the Age of Reason.’"

"He’s right. We are in a new age, and it’s our responsibility to make it work. If not me, who? If not now, when?"
Tips On Writing To The Media

By Jay Goldsworthy

1. Write not only when you see something wrong but also (hopefully) when you see something right about ethnic portrayals. The idea is to encourage people to do the right thing.

2. Call. In the musical-chairs world of the entertainment industry, people change positions frequently. Call the TV network, production company, news bureau or whatever; ask for “Information,” “Publicity” or the specific person’s office you want. Ask the secretary who answers for the correct name, spelling, title and mailing address. Taking a little extra time to get these details right can make a difference in how seriously the recipient takes your message.

3. Be civilized. Most people in the industry are under pressure to deliver the goods, and much stereotyping occurs out of laziness or thoughtlessness. Still, that’s no excuse for letting it continue. Be firm in your criticism; you have every right to be. Take the high road; show yourself, by your language, to be an understanding but justifiably outraged viewer, standing up for a morally and socially acceptable ideal.

4. The targets are the old, simplistic stereotypes, as well as newer, more vicious caricatures based on current politics and headlines. Describe the offensive material clearly, and what’s wrong with it, in your view. Specify more weight than generalities.

5. The goals are fairness, justice and balance. No one ethnic group has to be portrayed as good guys all the time, to right the wrong of stereotyping. But the offense is portraying them as bad guys all the time. That practice should end—now.

6. Sometimes you’ll receive an apology from the other party about the offensive material. Sometimes the reply will offer an excuse or excuses in defense of it. And sometimes you may not get a reply at all. It doesn’t matter. Write! Let the executives and others in charge of making the shows know how you feel. The letters do get read, and enough of them can make a difference.

7. Get others to write, too. Let each writer express his or her feelings in their own words. A lot of letters all looking and sounding the same seem too “engineered.” The media people want to hear from the general public, not just one lobby group. Viewers represent ratings, and ratings mean profits—or losses.

8. Be realistic. Some things won’t change overnight. It takes continued, persistent effort to change long-standing attitudes, especially when news headlines and current events don’t help matters any. But that’s just the time to dig in and persist! If other ethnic groups have seen improvement in their treatment by the media, so can yours. Stick with it!

Whom To Write To?

A storyline involving Arabs ran earlier this year on the NBC-TV daytime series, “Santa Barbara.” Its portrayals of Arabs left a lot to be desired, sparking numerous letters of complaint.

Letters went out not only to the Chairman of NBC Entertainment, but also to the President of NBC Entertainment, the Vice President of Program Standards and Community Relations, the Executive Producer of “Santa Barbara” at NBC-TV in Burbank, California, the President of New World Productions (the production company), and even the two writers for the show at NBC-TV in Burbank who had scripted that storyline. And that was just Casey’s correspondence.

By the time a theatrical movie hits the screens, it’s too late to change what’s in it. But you can still complain to a TV network that runs it if it offends you.

As for news programs, both radio and TV news shows have producers and directors, besides the newscasters who write and deliver the news. The local stations that air them have their executives, too.

Performers (actors, radio disc jockeys, TV personalities, etc.) have more power than you think. No one wants to be unpopular or be seen as immoral. They can’t take back what was said in an insulting remark or unfair ethnic portrayal—but they can certainly feel uncomfortable about saying it again, after reading your letter.

Most important, do a little research and write to the sponsor(s) of an offending show! You could write to the ad agency representing the sponsor, or the sponsor’s own marketing department—but bypass the middlemen and go straight to the top. Write to the President of the sponsoring firm(s). Viewers not only represent ratings, they represent customers—and that means you.

Jay Goldsworthy, a colleague of Casey Kasem, is President of Ideas & Imagination, North Hollywood, CA.
Casey Kasem: A Case Study In Sensitivity

On his weekly radio and TV shows, Casey takes great care in choosing his words, because words can hurt. He learned this for himself at an early age.

The first stage show he ever did was at the Annex Theatre in Detroit at the age of 16. It was a talent show, and Casey felt he was a sure winner. But one of his routines, though meant to be comic, included an imitation of actor Peter Lorre committing a gruesome act. Kids loved it, adults thought differently. He came in last.

"That taught me a lesson," he recalls even now. "Never do anything onstage you wouldn't do in front of your mother."

In later years, his ethical standards were tested when he began doing commercials. Certain his voice could sell, he had quit smoking in 1964 after the Surgeon General's warning came out. And his first commercial audition in 1969—was for a cigarette spot! He went back to his agent and told him never to send him out for any more cigarette spots.

When Casey turned vegetarian, it meant giving up lucrative fast-food commercials. This carried over to his voice work in TV cartoon shows. Today, as Shaggy on "Scooby-Doo," he asks that his character eat veggies, not hot dogs—and the production company, Hanna-Barbera, respects his wishes.

As the voice of NBC promos for upcoming programs, he called attention to any copy he thought might be offensive or in poor taste. And the writers changed it.

In his acting career, he remembers one episode of the successful TV series, "Police Story," with some regret. It was created by Los Angeles police officer and author Joseph Wambaugh. Wambaugh had gone into partnership with a Lebanese haberdasher—after nearly arresting him. The haberdasher had been selling fine suits from his car, telling customers they were stolen. Naturally, the police, suspicions aroused, raided the man's apartment. "They're not stolen," the haberdasher explained. "I just tell people that to make them buy." Wambaugh, the investigating officer, later used the event on "Police Story." And Casey got the role of the haberdasher.

When asked if the clothes were stolen, Casey's character's explanation ("I just tell people they're stolen to make them buy") included the remark, "It's an old Lebanese custom."

"It's an old American custom, too," replied the cop.

If it was meant as a joke, it failed—with Casey. As a Lebanese-American, his conscience was telling him not to say the line, but he followed the script. "And in doing that, I branded a whole ethnic group," he sighs. Of course, the cop's line branded Americans, too, but that's beside the point.

There may be people who buy more eagerly if they think an item was stolen—and is therefore going at a cheaper price. But that line could have been said without throwing in the remark about the Lebanese—or the Americans, for that matter.

Something to think about when future dialogue is written.

And a reminder why Casey Kasem looks over his scripts very carefully these days to see if anyone might be hurt by what he's about to say.

By Jay Goldsworthy

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