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Superman— “To Be or Not to Be...”

THERE IS A SAYING in the operational world that “Victory has a thousand fathers, while defeat is an orphan.” The checkered path of the U. S. government-sponsored DC Comics venture in mine awareness has given that old saying new relevance. It seems that at various times during the past five years the Superman and Superwoman comic books have been described variously as being the ultimate tool in influencing appropriate behavior or as totally dysfunctional.

We take the opportunity in this mine awareness issue of *The Journal* to assess the criticisms and attributes of the comic book as a successful mine awareness instrument.

First of all, there is no doubt that comic books are a very effective way to gain the attention of young people. Virtually all cultures in the world have hardcopy, storyboard adventures that have the power to rivet the attention of adolescents. Indeed, new styles and story types are proliferating. So, the answer probably is not “Should we use them?” but more properly, “How should we use them?” They offer a popular and cost-effective medium particularly attractive to the market niche to which mine awareness campaigns are targeted.

One of the criticisms of the superhero approach, however, is that by showing that Superman comes to the rescue of children at risk in the comic, it is feared that the reader will rely on being saved by a dramatic intervening event if he or she ever encounters a land-

mine. That logic seems far-fetched. Children who read about Superman in his regular venue do not expect him to appear when drugs are proffered, when banks are robbed or when other injustices are perpetrated. Comic books, like other entertainment media—most of which are more realistic than a cartoon character—are escapist fare. And escapist fare, such as Aesop’s Fables and Andersen and Grimm’s fairy tales, often convey powerful messages or morals in settings not to be taken literally.

A second criticism is that Superman is seen as a particularly American hero. Here we must concur. Although the criticisms that he is clad in “red, white and blue” are erroneous—his suit is red, *yellow* and blue, which includes colors of most national flags—he certainly exudes a sense of Yankee pride and displays a particularly white, middle-class ethos. While this is certainly nothing worth condemning, it can be seen as a subconscious effort of U.S. players to set up the American psyche in miniature as the behavioral solution to the landmine awareness problem. This is probably the furthest thing from the minds of U.S. officials, who are charged with supporting independent and indigenous mine action programs, but it is a simple fact that many nations in the world are suspicious of American intent and “footprint”—even if unintentional.

A third related concern is that the mine awareness hero comics to date have not reflected effective and cultural characteristics of the specific host nation.

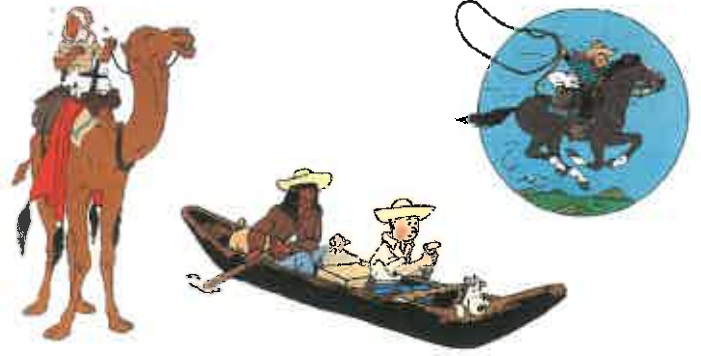
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Dennis Barlow

from the director's desk: Dennis BARLOW

Tin Tin to the Rescue!



While this is, of course, an accurate observation, the extent and the ramifications of it are debatable. The attempt to cast Wonder Woman in a Central American venue was an excellent effort to mirror and complement the cultural environment. If the attempt was not perfect, then the question has to be “How close does it have to be to be effective?” We wonder if the criticism here is not drawn too finely. It has been said that the enemy of the good is often the perfect. While further analysis is probably necessary, we might in the meantime accept a relatively good comic vehicle (assuming it has no tactical misinformation in it) versus none at all.

A more serious consequence of the lack of cultural knowledge occurs when there is a near vacuum of reliable information regarding critical social customs and mores. This makes conducting a valid assessment of the cultural needs of a mine awareness project a very complex, expensive and time-consuming process. Usually, mine action programs in needy countries cannot afford the high financial costs, the time or other resources necessary to design and implement a certified program. In these cases, it is not as easy to assume that a “good” program is close enough. However, it is entirely possible that a program based on unwarranted assumptions may do more harm than good. So there exists a vague and troubling boundary between the adages “First, do no harm” and the sometimes more compelling or passionate “Let’s do something!”

We assimilate the foregoing conclusions with a

plea for a common sense approach to the use of comic books as mine awareness materials. Comic books are an excellent media to cheaply and easily reach a broad scope of the adolescent community. It is too effective a tool to be ignored. Secondly, while highlighting superheroes probably does not inculcate a cavalier attitude in the mind of the reader, it would probably be a wise move to select a more vulnerable and realistic protagonist. However, it must be understood that the more mundane the character, the less exciting the prospect of reading the comic; hence, it will be a less effective penetration tool.

Thirdly, even though much of the world has long since accepted the literary and cinematic device of the American hero (Indiana Jones, John Wayne, Superman, et al.), the expedient of selecting a less stereotypical character is the smart choice. Combining the two recommendations above, one might opt for a figure much like the enormously popular “Tin Tin,” whose global and imaginative adventures have delighted children in Europe and around the world for years.

Finally, in a world of finite resources, which must support sometimes-draconian operations, one must assess the themes developed for the target audience, along with a sense of pragmatism sufficient to accept commonly accepted national or local themes. When no such “safe” conclusions can be made, the planners should refrain from publishing or distributing comic books—in unknown psycho-societal waters—until adequate and reliable research has been accomplished. ■