

Detecting Truth

By Judith Costello

For the past year my daughter, Brigit, has been studying “The Mustang Debate” for a National History Day project. Although she is only 12, the project required extensive primary source research. She created a 10-minute documentary that has been heralded as “balanced” by many horse lovers.

What she discovered, but didn't really understand, is that there are “propaganda wars” going on. It's hard to explain to someone her age. But this war is expensive. This war costs taxpayers thousands of dollars.

The two sides in the debate are The Website Activists versus the Bureau of Land Management. Several times during the past year, the Website folks have encouraged viewers to participate in call-in campaigns to Stop Horse Roundups.

Many of us already know--wild horse roundups are necessary for the health of the horse herds and the health of the land. It's a fact. We thin the herds (or manage) all wild and domestic animals grazing on open rangelands. With deer and elk, our society allows seasonal hunting. With livestock, we practice rotational grazing so the animals don't overgraze. In the case of mustangs, they are protected, so they are gathered and made available for adoption by the BLM. Those horses that aren't adoptable go to large pasture areas.

There are lots of experts who have demonstrated the importance of management.

But sometimes Facts just get pushed aside.

The Website Activists stir up emotions. We all love horses. They are good companions and hard workers. They are beautiful and inspirational. Many of the mustangs, gathered by the BLM, are being adopted. Brigit and I had an opportunity to meet some of them. I think the image we witnessed of a mustang rubbing his big head against his trainer's shoulder will stay with me for a long time. That horse was wild only 100 days ago, and there he was, clearly showing love for a human!

Another formerly wild mustang kept jumping up on a little trophy stand and freezing as if he was a statue. The horse had learned that trick and seemed to love performing it. These horses were in Ft. Worth for the Extreme Mustang Makeover competition.

Note that these meaningful encounters with mustangs are a direct result of the work of the BLM in gathering horses from public lands. That's a fact. But again, FACTS often get pushed aside.

So the Website Activists stir up emotions and ask thousands of folks to call the BLM and complain about roundups. And the BLM has a policy of answering the phones. How else

can they spread the truth except by attempting some education? So they answer the phones. That takes money. That takes time. That takes emotional energy.

And what do some of the callers have to say? “You are killing horses. You must stop these roundups. Horses own the land.” These commentators can be educated. It’s a slow process. One person at a time. But it can be done...with time, money, and facts. But other commentators can’t be educated. They yell, “You should die.”

Emotions run high. How do we help people find the truth? “How did Brigit find the truth?” asked a BLM spokesperson. Well, Brigit and I studied the Websites and felt our emotions tugged, that’s for sure. Some of the video clips out in cyberspace show lots of blood dripping. They show dying, starving animals. Our hearts break.

Then she studied the BLM Website. There is a lot of information available. There are facts. Then she interviewed people. One of the people she interviewed was Sue Cattoor. Sue and her family do some of the roundups. They are on the frontline of the propaganda war.

Sue answered Brigit’s emails immediately. She talked to Brigit on the phone and readily accepted an invitation to be interviewed by a 12 year old. She was friendly and open.

A quick search of the Internet shows that the same words she said, firsthand, to Brigit, were being taken out of context and twisted to mean other things online. She is maligned in cyberspace and yet she still keeps talking to the public and trying to share the Facts as well as her love for the mustangs.

So why are the Activists distorting facts or using isolated incidents of dying horses as typical of the big picture (without clarifying that most of these dying horses came off the range in that condition)? It’s a campaign. It’s a cause. Since the 1960s, Americans have proclaimed our heroes to be whistleblowers and crusaders. But it takes money to be a crusader. And that means people need to be convinced. And we can either convince people with facts or convince them with emotion.

Nowadays, emotional arguments win every time.

Thus we have a propaganda war underway. And sadly, it is costing a lot of taxpayer dollars. Dollars that could be spent, on mustang adoptions and mustang care.

If Website viewers really want to help mustangs, shouldn’t they be supporting the efforts of the federal program that has been set up to do that work? That’s exactly what Velma Johnston, the consummate Mustang Activist, did. After the 1971 law was passed to protect mustangs she set about helping the BLM do its work! That’s what horse lovers should be doing: promoting adoptions, helping with long-term holding pastures and working with the BLM.