

Is Dora the Explorer an illegal immigrant?

The Salt Lake Tribune

May 21, 2010 Friday

Copyright 2010 The Salt Lake Tribune All Rights Reserved

Section: NEWS; National; World; Local

Length: 837 words

Byline: By Sophia Tareen Associated Press Writer

Body

CHICAGO » In her police mug shot, the doe-eyed cartoon heroine with the bowl haircut has a black eye, battered lip and bloody nose.

Dora the **Explorer**'s alleged crime? "**Illegal** Border Crossing Resisting Arrest."

The doctored picture, one of several circulating widely in the aftermath of Arizona's controversial new immigration law, may seem harmless, ridiculous or even tasteless.

But experts say the pictures and the rhetoric surrounding them online, in newspapers and at public rallies, reveal some Americans' attitudes about race, **immigrants** and where the immigration reform debate may be headed.

"**Dora** is kind of like a blank screen onto which people can project their thoughts and feelings about Latinos," said Erynn Masi de Casanova, a sociology professor at the University of Cincinnati. "They feel like they can say negative things because she's only a cartoon character."

It's not the first time a children's character has been dragged into a serious debate.

In the late 1990s, Tinky Winky the Teletubby, a purple children's TV character with a triangle antenna -- was called out by Christian leaders for being gay. Sesame Street roommates Bert and Ernie are often involved in statements on same-sex marriage.

Both shows' producers say the characters aren't gay.

In **Dora**'s case, she's an easy target as discussion ramps up on how lawmakers should address the estimated 12 million **illegal immigrants** living in the United States.

For about a decade, the pint-sized Latina character has taught millions of children the English alphabet, colors and Spanish phrases on a Nickelodeon TV show and through a global empire. Her smiling cherub face is plastered on everything from backpacks to T-shirts to fruit snacks.

But since the passage of the Arizona law -- which requires authorities to question people about their immigration status if there's reason to suspect they're in the country illegally -- **Dora**'s life and immigration status have been scrutinized and mocked.

Several websites, including The Huffington Post, have narrated **Dora**'s mock capture by immigration authorities. One picture circulating on Facebook shows an ad for a TV show called "**Dora** the **Illegal Immigrant**." On the Facebook page "**Dora** the **Explorer** is soo an **Illegal Immigrant**," there are several images showing her sailing through the air over the U.S.-Mexican border.

Is Dora the Explorer an illegal immigrant?

Many of the **Dora** images assume the Latina character is an **illegal immigrant** from Mexico.

But that's where it gets complicated.

Representatives from Nickelodeon declined to comment on **Dora**'s background, and her place of birth or citizenship have never been clear." She has brown skin, dark hair and speaks Spanish with an American accent.

"She's always been ambiguously constructed," said Angharad Valdivia, who teaches media studies at the University of Illinois and has explored the issue. "In the U.S. the way we understand race is about putting people in categories and we're uncomfortable with people we can't put into categories."

Dora lives in an unidentified location with pyramids that suggest Mexico, but also tropical elements such as palm trees and her friends, Isa the iguana and Boots the monkey. Does that mean she's from South America or Florida?

Then there's oak trees and her fox nemesis Swiper, which are more common to the American Midwest.

The show often plays Salsa-like music, which has some roots in Cuba and is popular across Latin America.

Even the voice actresses behind **Dora** don't provide insight.

The original **Dora** voice belonged to Kathleen Herles, whose parents are from Peru. **Dora** is currently voiced by actress Caitlin Sanchez, a New Jersey-born teen who calls herself Cuban American; her grandparents are Cuban.

As for the mug shot, it's been around since late last year, when Debbie Groben of Sarasota, Fla. created it and entered it in a contest for the fake news site FreakingNews.com.

Since debate over the Arizona law heated up the nation's immigration debate, it's been e-mailed and texted widely and used on signs at rallies.

"My intentions were to do something funny, something and irreverent," said Groben, who said she opposes Arizona's law. "I actually like the little kid."

The issue appears to have resonated little with **Dora**'s biggest fans, the millions of parents and their children who seem mostly unaware of the discussion encircling their beloved cartoon.

Altamise Leach, who has three children, said **Dora**'s ethnicity and citizenship are irrelevant.

The stay-at-home mom credits the cartoon with helping teach her children team work. She even threw her 3-year-old daughter a **Dora** birthday party, complete with a **Dora**-like adventure, **Dora** cake and a woman who dressed up as **Dora**.

"We have so many diverse cultures, let's try to embrace everybody," Leach said. "She puts a smile on my daughter's face, that's all I want."

Erick Wyatt said he never thought about **Dora**'s origins and his three children never asked.

"I just thought she was a cartoon character that spoke Spanish," the Flint, Mich., man said. Alt Heads:

Is Dora the Explorer an illegal immigrant?

Graphic

Nickelodeon cartoon **Dora** the **Explorer** created late last year by Debbie Groben of Sarasota, Fla., for a contest for the fake news site FreakingNews.com.

Is Dora the Explorer an illegal immigrant?

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: IMMIGRATION (90%); CARTOONS & COMICS (90%); ***ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS*** (89%); HISPANIC AMERICANS (89%); CHILDREN (88%); CITIZENSHIP (78%); ANIMATED TELEVISION (78%); ARRESTS (78%); TERRITORIAL & NATIONAL BORDERS (77%); BORDER CONTROL (77%); ARIZONA IMMIGRATION LAW (77%); INTERNET SOCIAL NETWORKING (76%); GAYS & LESBIANS (71%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (69%); SOCIOLOGY (69%); MARRIAGE (67%); SAME SEX MARRIAGE & UNIONS (66%); CHRISTIANS & CHRISTIANITY (56%)

Company: FACEBOOK INC (52%)

Organization: UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI (56%)

Ticker: FB (NASDAQ) (52%)

Industry: CHILDREN'S PROGRAMMING (89%); ANIMATED TELEVISION (78%); INTERNET SOCIAL NETWORKING (76%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (69%)

Geographic: CINCINNATI, OH, USA (79%); ARIZONA, USA (92%); UNITED STATES (94%); MEXICO (92%)

Load-Date: May 21, 2010