

DICTIONARY.COM REMOVES OFFENSIVE GYPSY DEFINITION IN RESPONSE TO GRASSROOTS CAMPAIGN

AdvocacyNet
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An offensive, racist definition of “gypsy” listed on one of the most popular online dictionaries has been removed, thanks to an international campaign by Roma rights groups and the Advocacy Project’s “Friends of Roma” initiative.

After an online petition elicited hundreds of responses from outraged human rights advocates around the world, Dictionary.com removed a definition which included “one of a vagabond race... living by theft, fortune telling, horse jockeying, tinkering, etc.”

Many signatories saw this issue as much more than an outdated definition. “It never ceases to amaze me,” wrote one petition signer. “Any such comments regarding any other ethnic group would result in lawsuits and human rights groups out for blood but the stereotypes and slurs regarding our people remain intact.” Another said, “British newspapers are currently being sued for using this kind of language about ‘Gypsies’ - it is very outdated. Today, it's just plain racist.”

The campaign attracted the attention of several prominent international Roma rights groups and the media. The Czech edition of the BBC picked up the story and ran article about it on the front page of their web site. Romea.cz, a prominent Roma web site, also featured the campaign.

The 207 signatories included the Roma Information Project (RIP), an AP partner, and members of The National Association of Gypsy Women (UK), the American Romani Alliance, the international All Gypsies Group, as well as the Honorable Ian F. Hancock, of the University of Texas' Romani Archives and Documentation Center.

Dictionary.com did not respond to initial requests from the Advocacy Project and other signatories to remove the definition, but after AP presented the petition and publicity to them in August, a representative of Lexico Group, Dictionary.com’s owner, eventually replied to AP.

The representative said that Dictionary.com had removed the offensive entry and thanked AP for pointing out the oversight. She said that Dictionary.com did not intend to offend any minority but had simply automatically uploaded computerized dictionary databases, some of which are rather outdated. In this case, the definition dated from an electronic database, created in 1998, of Webster’s Dictionary’s 1913 edition.

The petition drive was the first campaign initiated by AP’s “Friends of Roma” outreach group, a listserv for individuals and organizations concerned about Roma issues.

“This accomplishment was an example of ALL of us working together. Rom of many different

nations and clans, with our non-Rom friends, all standing together to be counted,” cheered an organizer of the All Gypsies Group.