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DISPUTED LAND, FAILED COVERAGE

WHEN CONFLICT OVER A FIRST NATIONS' LAND CLAIM ERUPTED IN CALEDONIA, IT DIVIDED A COMMUNITY AND, SADLY, THE LOCAL PAPERS, TOO

BY EMERALD AUSTERBERRY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY NEIL DRING

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Protestors lit a tire fire across Caledonia's main drag the morning after a botched nighttime OPP raid

When local media fail to cover important issues, or cover only one side of them, readers inevitably have to look elsewhere. In Caledonia, many go to Caledoniawakeupcall.com, created by Gary McHale. He has taken it upon himself to fight a perceived lack of law and order, subjecting himself to hatred, ridicule and near bankruptcy in a debate he can't tear himself away from. Though he sold the site to someone he describes as "like-minded" late last year, he still contributes to it. And even some reporters are impressed. "I think he's done a really, really good job of putting any information that he can get his hands on out there for people to read," says Dawson. "Really, if people didn't have that they'd be in the dark even more than they are."

McHale and his friend Mark Vandermaas, who runs a site called Voiceofcanada.ca, don't live in Caledonia, but are well-known figures in the community. Both sites link to hundreds of stories about the conflict, and they are opposed to the way protesters behave and how the dispute is policed. One of the images on Caledoniawakeupcall.com calls the protestors "terrorists," another accuses protestors of "extortion" and a third shows a banner that reads, "KKKANADA." Below, it links to videos that, the web page suggests, "could be seen as proof for a Native Supremacy Movement." It's not clear whether these are McHale's own editorial comments or simply gathered from other sources. The site is an aggregate: it takes content from everything from Aboriginal papers to the *National Post* to blogs. The site has attracted about 22,000 visitors a month since its creation in June 2006. "I'm only involved because the media failed. That's my fundamental statement I have made to the public many times," says McHale. "I would not exist if the media had done their job. In a democracy, it's the media that finally puts the pressure on governments—and it's not happening in Caledonia."

But McHale is not just a citizen journalist. He has organized a number of protests, including the Remember Us March two days before the provincial election in October 2007. He and Vandermaas say they are fighting two-tier

justice, not the Six Nations residents themselves, although some people have a hard time believing it. They also believe the OPP are treating the actions of First Nations and locals differently. At a resident-organized rally in December, police arrested and charged McHale with counselling to commit mischief, following an altercation between him and an Aboriginal man. At press time, he is currently restricted from entering Caledonia and surrounding areas, though he is appealing the order. This March, he failed in his attempt to subpoena nine OPP officers, including Commissioner Julian Fantino, to testify at his bail review, during which the courts will examine the conditions of his restrictions.

At the annual Caledonia Fair, in both 2006 and 2007, the absence of people from the reserve was hard to ignore, especially since the event has traditionally been a time for everyone to celebrate; it generally attracts 30,000 visitors over its three-and-a-half-day run.

The conflict has given the area a poor reputation and Pearson says his out-of-town colleagues shudder when he mentions Caledonia. Living and working in such a small community, where families have stayed for generations and reporters risk alienating everyone around them, makes it hard to decide how to cover such a divisive story. But when journalists choose not to report it, or to report only one side, they fail not just their readers, but their neighbours as well. "It's sad to see the rift that's between the two communities now," says Pearson, who lived in the county from the age of eight to 18 and who still follows the story closely from his home in Hamilton. "There's a real split. People look at each other differently."

An ugly standoff is not what Caledonians want to be famous for. They were much happier with their previous claim to fame. "What we were known for is our bridge," says Dawson. "I hope that's what we're still known for." ■■■