Shifting Receptions: Asian American Stereotypes and the Exploration of Comprehensive Media Literacy

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Based on focus groups conducted in both 2002 and 2011, this qualitative study found that college students from different racial groups (Asian American, White, and Black) criticized media's Asian American representations, yet also affirmed that the media corporations should and will maximize their profits—even if this mandate would end up perpetuating stereotypes. This data also revealed that although the Internet, and social media in particular, did offer alternative Asian American images, its impact was only felt by Asian Americans, who were the most motivated to search for representations of their own community. In fact, other racial groups were not aware of these images at all. This suggests that individualized new technology may not be able to resolve media misrepresentations of a particular group, and that awareness for entrenched corporate hegemony is necessary. Disagreeing with a text-based media literacy curriculum, which focuses solely

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on decoding texts, we argue instead for a comprehensive media literacy intervention. This particular approach to media education emphasizes a contextual approach that teaches students the political economy within which mainstream media are produced, yet also points students toward alternative media systems that exist beyond the purely profit-driven system that they have come to accept.

Asian Americans represent nearly 5% of the U.S. population. They are America's fastest-growing racial group, and in the past decade their numbers have increased by 43% (United States Census Bureau, 2010). However, they are nearly invisible in the mainstream media (Aoki & Takeda, 2011). According to the *Fall Colors 2003–2004: Prime Time Diversity Report*, Asian Americans play just 3% of all characters in network shows and 1% of opening-credit characters, and when compared with other racial groups, they are the least likely to play primary roles. In a more recent study, Mastro and Behm-Morawitz (2005) similarly found that Asian Americans comprised just 1.5% of the 1,488 characters tabulated during their content analysis of prime-time programming. Further, Karen Narasaki (2005) argues that network television has increasingly marginalized Asian American characters in recent years. In contrast, programs produced in Asian countries—recently available on U.S. cable, satellite television (Thussu, 2006), and the Internet, (especially YouTube)—have created more opportunities for Asian American media makers to produce programs (Balance, 2012). However, are these alternative and additional images reaching beyond the niche of Asian American youth to a more mainstream demographic?

Although media stereotypes may not have a strong, direct, causal connection with racial attitudes and behaviors, they nonetheless have a significant impact on racial perceptions of the self and others over time (Derman-Sparks, 1989; Greenberg, Mastro, & Brand, 2002; Huntemann & Morgan, 2001). Audience research on Asian American media representations and their influence has been scarce, but available studies highlight the effects of White beauty standards on Asian Americans (Mok, 1998), on perceived attractiveness and dating desirability of Asian American men (Chan, 2001), and on White college students' notions of Asian Americans based on model minority stereotypes (Lee, 2008). This study was designed to understand college students' perceptions of Asian American media images—including the construction of these images, whether the Internet has any impact on them, and in what ways the subjects believe that media representations can be improved.

In this study we compare two sets of data, one collected in 2002 and the other nearly a decade later, in 2011. Each set of data consists of focus

group interviews of male and female college students from three different racial backgrounds (Asian Americans, European Americans, and African Americans). The interviews were designed to address the following questions: (a) How do college students from different racial backgrounds perceive Asian Americans in the media? (b) Have the perceptions of Asian American media representations changed in the past decade as cable and satellite TV, the Internet, and social media have provided more diverse images of Asians and Asian Americans? (c) What did the subjects think were possible ways to improve media representations? This paper addresses these research questions and argues that although today there are more diverse images of Asians and Asian Americans available online, their impact on the general public is limited. The data also reveals that although Asian American respondents were able to locate and enjoy a limited amount of alternative representations, they were unaware of the logic of political economy, and the possibility of producing media themselves.

Two avenues of study are employed to help contextualize the findings of this study. First, we present an overview of Asian American media stereotypes, their historical roots, and their racist functions. Second, we examine the development of new media and analyze both its possibilities and limitations in terms of helping the public access alternative media.

Asian American Media Stereotypes

In the United States, media are the key political instruments and driving forces of social life, serving as cultural pedagogues to educate individuals as to how to survive and succeed in a dominant culture (Kellner, 2003). Media also play a crucial hegemonic role in justifying the status quo and perpetuating the ideology of the natural and rightful superiority of political, social, and cultural elites over subordinated groups (Hall, 1996; Lull, 2011). One particularly effective strategy that reinforces the myths of the deviance and inferiority of oppressed groups is the use of media stereotypes.

Snead (1994) theorizes that the nature of stereotypes is to resist change and ultimately live forever within the culture and the public imagination. Ideological constructs—including stereotypes—almost always reflect, shape, and are shaped by their material conditions; therefore it is important to review the historical, political, and economic circumstances that led to the development and propagation of the major Asian American stereotypes.

Historical Roots

Beginning in the late 1840s, Chinese men came to the United States in large numbers, recruited by capitalists as a cheap labor supply for West Coast gold mines and later as railroad construction workers (Chen, 1996). Fearing the permanent presence and growth in numbers of Asian Americans, U.S. legislators enacted immigration laws that treated those workers as temporary,

disposable labor, and prohibited the entry of their families and unmarried Asian American women in order to prevent them from establishing conjugal families (Espiritu, 2000).

Because the different forms of media are important "ideological state apparatuses" that validate and reinforce the ruling ideology (Althusser, 1971), it is not surprising that although Asian American men were discriminated against and exploited by both immigration policies and labor conditions, they were also portrayed as feminine and infantile in the popular media of the times—including cartoons, song sheet covers, and novels (Lee, 1999). These media stereotypes, which branded Asian American men as effeminate and sexually deviant and thus incapable of doing "real" men's jobs, helped render social and cultural oppression invisible (Hamamoto, 1994). This feminization of Asian American men in the 19th-century media was instrumental in constructing the two major Asian American male archetypes of the first half of 20th century: Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan.

The character of Dr. Fu Manchu, who endlessly carried out murderous plots, was first created by the novelist Sax Rohmer in *The Mystery of Dr. Fu Manchu* in 1913 (Chin & Chan, 1972) and was later the basis of a series of popular Hollywood films from the 1920s to the 1960s. Although Fu Manchu might be evil and powerful, he was still portrayed as an emasculated man, lacking "masculine heterosexual prowess" (Chin & Chan, 1972). Fu Manchu movies enjoyed popularity during the 1930s and 1940s but disappeared during World War II, when U.S.-Chinese diplomatic ties were strong. That same diabolical character, however, reappeared in the 1950s—when anti-Chinese communist sentiments were high—in serialized magazine stories as well as a TV series (Hamamoto, 1994). The phenomenon of Fu Manchu's disappearance and reemergence not only illustrates the highly ideological nature of media construction of Asian American men (Shim, 1998), but also underscores these images as fueled by historical context.

In contrast to Fu Manchu's evil ambition of taking over the West, Charlie Chan, a successful detective who treated White men with deference, appeared in the popular novels of Earl Derr Biggers from 1925 to 1932 and later in movies and on television as recently as 1981 (Xing, 1998). Portrayed by White actors, Chan spoke in a fortune-cookie style of English and walked with the "light, dainty step of a woman" (Chin, Chan, Inada, & Wong, 1974, p. xvi). Although both Manchu and Chan are currently out of fashion, their characteristics continue to find new expression. Fu Manchu was reinvented as a Japanese businessman taking over the financial world in *Die Hard*, or a power-hungry North Korean military man in *Die Another Day*. And Charlie Chan's character later merged with the model minority stereotype to become the nerdy and socially awkward Asian American scientist and computer programmer (Cao & Novas, 1996, p. xvi; Sun, Miezan, & Liberman, 2008).

In the 1970s, Bruce Lee, with his powerful screen presence as a muscular, strong, and proud Chinese American man, was revolutionary, but he also ushered in another stereotype: the Kung Fu master. Unlike Lee, the stars succeeding him in martial arts movies—Jet Li and Jackie Chan, for instance—were portrayed as having sex appeal or romantic. A critic sums up this phenomenon by posing the following question: "Jackie Chan is a funny martial artist, but are you going to sleep with him?" (Chihara, 2000, p. 27). Although physically powerful, Kung Fu masters paradoxically undermine Asian American male sexuality.

The tendency to be portrayed as "foreign" and thus deviant (Takaki, 1989) is also evident in the portrayal of Asian American women, but instead of asexual qualities, they are often hypersexualized, a phenomenon that traces its roots to immigration practices and policies of the United States as well. Although Asian American men were not allowed to establish conjugal families, many sought sexual outlets from prostitutes "imported" from China (Cao & Novas, 1996, p. 29). Even though the Page Law in 1875 ended the importation of Chinese prostitutes, all Chinese women were suspect to prostitution and consequently harassed (Espiritu, 2000). The hypersexualization of Asian women was also reinforced by U.S. military involvement in Asia in the 20th century. Brothels and strip bars mushroomed near U.S. military bases throughout Asia. Not surprisingly, the Asian war films of this period depicted Asian women as prostitutes, bargirls, and geishas (Villapando, 1989).

The two archetypes of Asian American women in the media that stem from this hypersexualization are the Lotus Blossom and the Dragon Lady. The Lotus Blossom caricature is "utterly feminine, delicate and sometimes perceived as a welcome respite from her often loud, independent European American counterpart, but the Dragon Lady is her dark sister who is cunning, manipulative and seductive" (Tajima, 1989, p. 309). Both flaunt their charms and fundamentally show that whether delicate or manipulative, Asian American women's hypersexuality is created to fulfill the fantasies of European American men. In contrast, on-screen romances between Asian American men and European American women are rare because they rupture European American male hegemony (Hamamoto, 1994, p. 39).

If sexuality set Asian American male and female stereotypes apart, the "model minority" myth united them. The myth sought to explain the success of Asian Americans, and in particular, the notion that they pulled themselves up by their bootstraps without governmental support was used to pit them against other minorities (Zia, 2000). In their study of U.S. magazine advertisements' depictions of Asian Americans, Paek and Shah (2003) found the subjects were frequent portrayed with financial success, technology-savvy skills, academic excellence, and superiority over other minorities. Later, Lee and Joo (2005) updated this research and concluded that the "model minority" stereotype continues to dominate the representations of Asian Americans in advertising.

It is important to note that stereotypes often merge and morph with each other to create "hybrids." In recent years, a new image of Asian American women has emerged—often in commercials for high-tech appliances—as no less sexually alluring but also book-smart, "brainy," and tech-savvy. Lucy Liu, since her portrayal in the sitcom *Ally McBeal* in the 1990s (Sun, 2003), has professionally embodied a combination of stereotypes, epitomized by her role in the *Charlie's Angels* franchise as a computer genius and a skilled martial arts secret agent in the guise a demure massage girl. This is not to say, however, that no alternative Asian American characters have appeared on screen. There have been diverse portrayals of Asian American characters, but only sporadically. Examples include: Sandra Oh playing a doctor in the television series *Grey's Anatomy*, Ken Jeong as a comical criminal in *The Hangover*, and John Cho and Kal Penn as two stoners in the *Harold and Kumar* trilogy, but overall, Asian Americans in the mainstream media have changed little in the past decade. This is a curious phenomenon for a decade in which digital and Internet technology has revolutionized how media are produced, distributed, and consumed. As scholars have theorized, however, the Internet has the potential to diversify ownership and representation, and thus mitigate the circulation of stereotypes, but digital technology cannot destroy these myths and symbols alone. In the following section, we focus on the political economy of new media.

New Media, New Limitations

In the mid-1990s, when the Internet garnered a great deal of popular attention, new media theorists projected that a new electronic terrain of democratic interaction and representation was emerging (Castells, 1996; Levy, 2001; Poster, 1995). They predicted that engaged citizens and alternative communities would gain increased control over symbolic representations (Miller, 2011; Rheingold, 1993). In particular, Mark Poster (1995) argued that new media represented a dynamic system that would usher in postmodern interests such as multiple realities, virtual communities, and personal narratives. Manuel Castells (1996) also echoed the belief that new media afforded an unprecedented degree of presumption, and argued that, "For the first time in history, the human mind is a direct productive force, not just a decisive element in the production system" (p. 32). Indeed, highly relevant to this study, we found that young Asian American media makers have produced nonviolent, nonracist, nonsexist, and highly entertaining web series.

However, alongside these optimistic views of new media, political economists and digital theorists argued that the Internet was beginning to resemble other capitalist mass media (Bagdikian, 2004; Miller, 2011; Papacharissi, 2002). As Vincent Miller (2011) states:

> However, as the Internet has become something used by the majority
> of the population in advanced economies, that population has brought
> with it all of the habits, inclinations and prejudices which are endemic
> to society as a whole. As a result, much of this early optimism that the
> Internet would radically change our culture in some sort of knowledge
> revolution has begun to fade in light of the realization that our culture
> has transformed the Internet more than vice versa. (p. 1)

Lev Manovich (2001) makes a similar argument about cultural conventions
that influence the human-computer interface, or what he calls "cultural
interfaces." He writes, ". . . a new media designer or user approaches
the computer through a number of cultural filters . . ." (p. 117). Both
Miller and Manovich remind us that although new media has the techni-
cal capacity for interaction and virtual community development, it is also
programmed and constructed within the same cultural codes, symbols, and
ideologies that design other forms of media. As Zizi Papacharissi (2002)
points out: "New technologies offer additional tools, but they cannot single-
handedly transform a political and economic structure that has thrived for
centuries" (p. 20).

Finally, it must also be recognized that new media is dominated by
mainstream media conglomerates—just like the offline sphere—who con-
trol most of the production and consumption of information. Recent reports
from the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and The Nielsen
Company show that the public is still seeking mainstream and dominant
sources for its news and information. According to a September 2012 Pew
Report, there has been little change since 2010 in the websites people go to
most for news and information. Yahoo, mentioned by 26% of online news
users, is the top destination, as it was two years ago, followed by Google or
Google News, CNN, local news sources, and MSN (Pew Research Center for
the People & the Press, 2012). In a report released by The Nielsen Company
in January 2013, the top four U.S. web parent companies (home and work)
were Google, Microsoft, Facebook, and Yahoo! (Nielsen, 2013). These trends
echo the earlier arguments of Miller and Manovich, who reminded us that
offline cultural activities and behavior have a direct connection to the prac-
tices surrounding new media. Legacy media is dominated by a handful of
media conglomerates, so it is no surprise that the Internet would be managed
in a similar fashion.

When looked at next to each other, traditional and new mainstream
media have not altered in any significantly positive ways after the Internet
revolution, underscoring how problematic Asian American representation
continues to be. Although a plethora of websites have erupted, issues of
access, awareness, and ritual act as barriers to the creation of a larger distri-
bution network for these alternative sources of information. As a result, the
same political economy issues that drive the circulation of stereotypes offline

is also the case online. New media and the opportunity for increased audience participation has not changed the field in any structural or ideological way, which illustrates a gap between the use of new media technology and the knowledge of how to harness these tools to create alternative imagery.

METHOD

Heeding Douglas Kellner's (2003) advice to have a holistic view of media—by way of texts, audiences, and media systems—this study focuses on the respondents' perceptions of Asian American media images. The questions in the research instrument were designed primarily to elicit detailed information on students' perceptions of Asian American media representations, and ways in which they might act to improve media images. To examine those questions, we drew primarily on focus group interviews with male and female college students who identified as European Americans, African Americans, and Asian Americans, divided by both gender and race.[1] The fall 2011 study is an update of and comparison to a previous study conducted by one of the authors in 2002. We found the pattern revealed in the 2002 focus group results to be very interesting: although the subjects complained about the problematic representations of Asian Americans, they nonetheless affirmed that media corporations have the right to maximize their profits—even if the profit motive results in harmful products. The Internet and social media have seen tremendous growth in the decade between 2002 and 2011, and we have also witnessed the decline of mainstream network media. Our research question was to explore whether the development of the Internet and the possibilities of alternative media would indeed change the Asian American representations and affect people's perceptions of Asian Americans. Both studies used a similar methodology: we began with respondents who belong to the gender and race group in which we are interested, and we used snowball sampling from these multiple starting points. Both studies recruited students from large northeastern universities, but in the earlier study most students attended a state school in a college town, while the later study exclusively recruited students from an urban, private university.

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[1]   This project is a comparative study between focus group interviews conducted in 2002 and 2011. The university at which the first set of interviews was conducted (2002) had a small population of Latino students; as a result of this, the methodology for this study focused on racial identities that could provide a higher degree of representative data. Of the sample of 538 people, there were White (40.9%, $N = 220$), Black (21%, $N = 113$) and Asian American groups (34.8%, $N = 187$), and Latino and other racial groups (3.3%, $N = 17$). Furthermore, since race issues in the United States have been predominantly framed as a Black and White issue even in the early 2000s, both White and Black groups were selected to contrast with Asian American students. For the comparison study in 2011, we thus followed the same methodology in 2002.

Participants

In the 2002 study, the data was collected with the purpose of answering questions on Asian American identity issues (Sun, 2002); thus, many more Asian Americans than members of other racial groups were recruited. This approach resulted in seven Asian American male groups ($N = 18$), seven Asian American female groups ($N = 27$), and a relatively smaller number of groups from other racial identities: one European American male group ($N = 3$), two European American female groups ($N = 8$), two Black male groups ($N = 4$), and two Black female groups ($N = 7$), for a total of 21 groups and 67 participants. The purpose of the 2011 study was to update and compare the respondents' perception of Asian American media representations, but not specifically Asian American identity issues as explored in the 2002 study. However, we still utilized the same number of focus groups (two groups) across different genders and races, so there were two groups per category, each with these participants: eight Asian American men, seven Asian American women, six European American men, seven European American women, six Black men, and six Black women, for a total of 12 groups and 40 participants. The focus group facilitators included one of the authors (Asian female), two female assistants (one European American and one African American), and a male assistant (European American). Each focus group session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

RESULTS

Asian American Media Representations

The decade between the two studies saw digital technology revolutionize the way in which media are produced, distributed, and consumed. However, comparing the subjects' perceptions of Asian Americans in the media in these two studies yielded remarkably similar results: Asian Americans are mostly invisible. The most well-known Asian American stars that all groups could name in 2002 were Lucy Liu, Jackie Chan, and Jet Lee; 10 years later, it was still the same three people. The respondents in the 2011 study also mentioned Sandra Oh (*Grey's Anatomy*) and Chow Yuan Fat, but less frequently than the respondents in the 2002 study. But other than these few actors, respondents tended to remember the characters but not the actors' names, for example: "the funny Asian guy in *The Hangover*" or "Harold and Kumar." Comparatively speaking, Asian Americans could name many more Asian American actors or roles than could any other group, which may be due to their hyper-awareness of the presence of their own kind on the screen. As July (Korean American, 2011),[2] said: "I get excited when I

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[2]   Each respondent is identified with his or her ethnicity and year interviewed, and both qualifications are indicated in parentheses. For example, July, who is a Korean American interviewed in 2011, is

see an Asian in a movie or TV show—just because they're Asian, I notice them."

The Asian American media characters that the respondents remembered in the two studies were almost identical in nature. The common stereotypes of Asian American men that the participants identified included: (a) karate masters, (b) nerdy and socially awkward male students or professionals in high-tech or financial fields, and (c) shop owners or food delivery men who have thick accents. In the 2011 study, Charles (Chinese American, 2011) and most other Asian American respondents said that most Asian American characters are minor, "sidekick" roles designed for "comic relief." These comments are consistent with the respondents' comments a decade earlier when Nelon (Korean American, 2002) called the Long Duk Dong character in *Sixteen Candles* a "quintessential Asian men" stereotype:

> He is basically a fresh off the boat kind of exchange student . . . and is portrayed as a geek or a nerd. He portrayed that comic relief Asian who doesn't fit in, and tries to [fit] in American society, and is very, very awkward.

Lynn (Chinese American, 2002) suspected that these unattractive Asian American male portrayals were purposefully constructed to fit certain Hollywood modes of representation.

There was also agreement across groups in both studies that an additional aspect of Asian American men's media persona is that they always lack emotion. Although they may be "wise" sages, or skilled in Kung Fu, or intelligent in high technology, Asian American men are "never vulnerable," or "sensitive to love," as Rolan (Korean American, 2011) described it. Indeed, across all focus groups, respondents noticed that Asian American men in the media rarely "get the girls" or have any love interest—the opposite of Asian American women, who are usually hypersexualized and most often paired with European American men.

Moreover, the portrayals of Asian American women's submissiveness and sexiness are often combined to suggest a deviant and manipulative sexuality, as three respondents in the 2002 study observed in *Rush Hour 2* or the Asian Bond girls. These observations were reinforced by 2011 groups when they discussed the geisha characters in *Memoirs of a Geisha*, or Lucy Liu's roles as an undercover massage girl in *Charlie's Angels* (2000), and a sexual, dominant, and manipulative character in *Kill Bill* (2003).

The respondents also acknowledged that media representations might have real-life consequences. Shana, a European American woman (2002),

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indicated as July (Korean American, 2011). Respondents are identified in this concise way in order to provide correspondence between their racial identification, the year they were interviewed, and their individual responses.

admitted that when she sees an Asian American woman in real life, the idea of this person being "submissive" just automatically "pops into" her head. Claude, an African American man (2002), assumed that Asian women in real life were quiet, but also had a "fiery kind of temper" like Lucy Liu's character Ling Woo in the TV drama *Ally McBeal* he saw. Ten years later, respondents such as Ronelle (African American, 2011) often used Asian American media representations as the main source for their knowledge of Asian Americans in real life, or even measured the real Asian Americans by a yardstick taken from media images. For instance, Ronelle said that she never thought of Asian American men as sexy until she saw the movies of Bruce Lee, who was the "sexiest" Asian man she has ever seen. She said, "I started looking at Asian men and I could never find an ideal—Bruce Lee was the standard." When asked what she thought of Asian American women, she described them as "smart, intelligent, sexy, good at math, and family-oriented." Seeking evidence to prove the validity of her statement, she immediately said, "One of my favorite movies was the *Joy Luck Club*, it was all about family and they each turn to their mother and their family for that support and that approval."

This pattern of using media images to form perceptions of Asian Americans is prevalent in both African American and European American groups. Asian Americans generally do not do that but they expressed the most intense reactions to how media representations may have affected how others perceive them. In both studies, almost all Asian American men had had people ask them if they knew how to perform Kung Fu. Some even went on to take classes and learn martial arts to fulfill that expectation.

In addition, the Asian or Asian American characters the Asian American respondents saw as children sometimes evoked memories of pain and embarrassment, as the following examples illustrate:

> *Victoria (Chinese American, 2002)*: I was five or six, and *Mr. T* used to be my favorite show. He was a Black man, had a big chain, and I remember they always went in this big school bus. Once he talked to an Asian character and . . . it was demeaning and disrespectful, and I was like "Jesus Christ, I can't believe Mr. T did that!"

Feeling angry and betrayed, Victoria did not watch *The A-Team* anymore. Some respondents were aware of certain depictions of Asian Americans but did not comprehend the meaning of them until they were adults.

> *Ed (Korean American, 2002)*: I remember the Chan Clan . . . about a really fat Asian American man who was a detective, no wife of course, and he had 12 children who were little munchkin children, who would run around with him and they solved mysteries. At the time it was made, I thought it was funny, this is really good. . . . But as I grew older I found

that less amusing because obviously that had a lot of political criticism of China at the time.

> *Robert (Chinese American, 2002)*: In elementary school, I remembered watching cartoons, like Tom and Jerry, a mouse and a cat show. When a paddle was smacked over a dog's head, the next moment, the dog is shaking and he would have a rice hat on, grew buckteeth, and there would be some Asian music on. . . . Of course I knew they were portraying me. But when I saw it, I would start laughing because it was funny when I was a kid.

When they were young, both Ed and Robert found that the "Asian" type of representations were either harmless or even positive, but when they reached adulthood and gained an awareness of stereotypes, they realized what the images meant. Robert, in particular, connected these seemingly innocent images with the racism he experienced, and implied that media representations were functioning as what scholars such as Hamamoto (1994) call "controlled images."

> *Robert (Chinese American, 2002)*: I resented more and more as I grow older. Life is harder, and society puts a stamp on you and says "You are Asian and we are going to put you in place," then you view back and see that episode now . . .

Because old cartoons and popular programs are constantly recycled and rerun on cable TV, the unflattering Asian American images would sometimes produce an "Aha!" realization for some respondents who, as children, did not "get it."

In the 2011 study, Asian American respondents did not mention the shows and the racist moments referred to above, perhaps because the shows the 2002 respondents grew up with were no longer aired. However, some respondents did mention the "injustice" they felt when a Hollywood studio hired European American actor Justin Chatwin to play the Japanese character Goku in *Dragon Ball: Evolution* (2009), after the Japanese cartoon series *Dragon Ball* had become immensely popular in the United States. Still, some Asian Americans in the 2011 study expressed much hope and confidence about Asian American media representations that were unseen in the previous study, as articulated by Adam: "If Asian Americans won't be allowed to cast leading roles in great movies like *Dragon Ball: Evolution*, we have other outlets such as YouTube, such as the Internet for us to carve out our own niche. . . . We'll innovate." His sentiment is echoed by Paul, who sees alternative images of Asian Americans that are already "here and now":

> There isn't really an impetus for more representations. ... Asian
> Americans have a solid representation already ... there's no shortage
> of talent or means to publicize that talent at all. People want to go see
> Asian Americans in media, they can go anywhere and find them in the
> Internet.

Is the enthusiasm of these young Asian Americans regarding what the
new media can do justified or erroneous? To answer that question, we need
to examine what media developments have offered potential or limitation.

Alternative Images

In the past decade, the proliferation of cable network channels, satellite
television, YouTube, and other social media into the mainstream has given
some Asian American college students access to alternative Asian and Asian
American images, as expressed in their interviews in 2011. For example,
Gloria (Chinese American) said: "If we want Asian idols, we have them
because we will go to the Internet and look at Korean dramas and Asian
pop stars ... you can like American shows but then always go back to your
Asian dramas." These respondents were not only drawn to media produced
in Asia so they could see people who "look like them" or where their parents
came from; they are also fans of Asian American youth-produced amateur
videos on YouTube by media creators such as Nigga Higga and Kev Jumba
that have drawn millions of viewers worldwide. One of the most success-
ful examples is Wong Fu Productions, where founders Philip Wang, Wesley
Chan, and Ted Fu started making videos in 2003 as students at the University
of California, San Diego. They currently work full time to create drama and
comedy shows for the web and often collaborate with other independent
producers. This new wave of Asian American filmmakers and entrepreneurs
who use YouTube and other social media to distribute their own creations
encourages and speaks to the importance of teaching production skills in
the media literacy curriculum.

Asian American producers such as Wong Fu Productions indeed pro-
vide refreshing, diverse, and holistic representations of Asian Americans
while showcasing the team members' talents in directing, writing, acting,
dancing, and singing. But in the 2011 study, when answering the question
"What Images of Asian Americans have you seen in the media?" only 4 of
15 Asian Americans (26.7%) and none of the European and African American
subjects mentioned the existence of those new alternatives. Thus, we ask
this question: How widespread are such alternative images created by Asian
Americans? Because our identities are shaped by both social identity (how
others perceive us) and self-identity (Wise, 2008), if alternative images of
Asian Americans can't be distributed widely to mainstream audiences, their
ability to counter deeply entrenched stereotypes is limited. And if one sees

media representations as a means for social change, disseminating these alternative images in the mainstream is mandatory (Jenkins, 1995).

How to Improve Our Media

In our two studies, all respondents across race and gender were dissatisfied with the U.S. mass media in general and television networks in particular; they all expressed the need for more frequent and diverse portrayals of Asian Americans and other minority groups. Some respondents distinguished media companies from other types of businesses, since the products they produce and sell are not necessary commodities (such as food products). As Alice (European American woman, 2002) put it: "Media form a lot of people's thoughts . . . playing with your mind . . . food [industry's] responsibility is just . . . safety." When respondents pointed to TV, movies, newspapers, and magazines as the major source of the general public's information and entertainment, they often articulated that the media have a responsibility for what kind of images they bring to the public. The participants, however, were very cynical about how seriously media corporations take that responsibility, suggesting that their only incentive is to make money, even if they might simultaneously cause harm.

This conundrum became apparent when the respondents reported that although media corporations should bear responsibility for what they produce, they also have every right to maximize profits—even if the profit motive results in harmful products. Furthermore, the participants often assumed that media representations were the "direct reflections" of public interests. That is, if the media images were racist, it was because such images were popular, and therefore audiences wanted to see them. Given this rationale presumes that any media production is actually the result of a democratic selection process that reflects the public's tastes and preferences. This perspective, of course, stands in contrast to the fact that media images are constructed, have historical roots, and are produced by media giants that are near-monopolies whose primary motivation is profit. None of the respondents addressed alternative ways to create public media, even though this transformation has occurred in many countries throughout the world (Benson & Powers, 2011).

In the 2002 study, Asian Americans tended to argue that the lack of diverse images of Asian Americans stemmed from Asian Americans themselves. For example, some blamed Asian American actors as well for perpetuating media stereotypes; in particular, Sandra (Chinese American, 2002) thought that the problem reflects the quality of Asian American actors. Robert (Chinese American, 2002) blamed the actors directly for their willingness to accept negative roles and felt they should be confronted and held accountable. But he also sympathized with the actors who rely on such roles as their "bread and butter."

Robert did touch on the dilemma many Asian American actors have faced for decades. Well-known actors, such as B. D. Wong and Ming-Na Wen, explained the shame and embarrassment they felt when they saw demeaning caricatures in the media growing up. When they became actors and were asked to play stereotypical roles, the internal struggles were deep and "added another layer to the trauma of having to act as a caricature of themselves" (Zia, 2000, p. 115).

Pam (Korean American, 2002) argues that the problem does not lie with the actors, but with the scripts: the roles available to Asian Americans are too few. However, when asked about increasing the opportunities for Asian American representations, she answered:

> The only way that you can motivate those companies is just through money. If they realize that they can make more money by welcoming Asians, they will probably do something more, but otherwise. . . .

Once again, all questions elicit the same dead end for respondents across a decade: if Asian American representations cannot make money for media corporations, there is no hope. It becomes an unbreakable cycle, that is, the solution (i.e., Asian Americans can help the corporations to make money) actually affirms the root of the problem (i.e., the corporations would not want to risk their profits).

In contrast, in the 2011 studies, Asian Americans predominantly expressed apathy regarding improving media representations and instead focused on how and where to find media that please them. For example:

> *Jennifer (Korean American):* "I honestly don't care. . . . It would be nice to see more minorities and there's definitely an improvement from the 1970s, but I feel like . . . it's going to take a long time until we're not minorities anymore."

> *Gloria (Chinese American):* If we want Asian idols, we have them because we will go to the Internet and look at Korean dramas and Asian pop stars . . . you can like American shows but then always go back to your Asian dramas."

What is striking about the two comments is not only the contradiction that, on the one hand, the subjects "don't care" about how the media represent them while, on the other, most Asian Americans acknowledge that media affect people's perceptions about them, but further, that they do not seem to differentiate between Asians (foreign) and Asian Americans (U.S. citizens), which is actually one of the most prevalent stereotypes that Asian Americans suffered—forever foreigners. The following two examples are even more revealing about the subjects' sense of being "foreign."

Ann (Korean American): I don't really watch television . . . I don't really care. I know that if I wanted to watch Korean things, I could just watch Korean dramas, but I think it's like in the same way that when you watch Korean dramas and White people come out. . . . [It would be strange.]

Allen (Chinese American): I don't think I have a problem with it because in China you don't see White people on their televisions or in Russia, you don't see like American people on there. I don't think it's just America that we should point our blame at.

Both subjects, participating in two different groups, came up with the same rationale that Asian Americans in mainstream media are as out of place as White people appearing in Asian TV. In other words, U.S. mainstream media should be "White," and if Asian Americans were to appear, they would be out of place and strange. Did those subjects really not care that there were insufficient media images representing them, or if they had to be satisfied with Asian images that tell nothing about their experiences as Asian Americans? Or were they offering rationales so they would not need to change the status quo? One may argue that if people do not find change possible, they may rationalize a lack of need for change as a way of resolving cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957).

DISCUSSION

The findings of the two studies on Asian American media representations in 2002 and 2011 demonstrate the urgent need for a comprehensive media literacy curriculum to help students acquire the knowledge and skills to critically examine the production, content, and consumption of media images. During a time when young people are capable of being "producers" through new media technology and social networking, comprehensive media literacy—with its emphasis on political economy—brings awareness to the importance of creating one's own stories instead of perpetuating corporate ideology through uncritically reposting mainstream mediations on YouTube or on Facebook pages.

The two studies, although a decade apart, show almost identical patterns in the respondents' analysis of Asian Americans in the mainstream media, including a lack of knowledge of the role the U.S. media system plays in shaping media representations. Although the respondents were keen to point out the common types of Asian American media stereotypes, they were generally ignorant about the historical, political, and social constructions of those images. No respondent expressed an understanding that the current U.S. commercial broadcast system is highly unusual compared to other industrialized countries, which use a public service model—albeit one that also

has been eroded by neoliberal capitalism (McChesney, 2004). No one mentioned that social responsibilities could be imposed through regulations on media corporations for the benefit of the citizenry, which was clearly stated at the inception of the early broadcast system in the United States (McChesney, 2004). No one articulated how the FCC's media policy has changed over the years to help create the media conglomeration that has had devastating effects on the quality of news and children's programming (Levin & Kilbourne, 2008; McChesney, 2004). All in all, no one imagined that media could be a potential "public space" for exchanging diverse ideas democratically instead of serving the sole function of maximizing profits. Overall, respondents believe that the media come to them "as is"; they do not possess a critical-based understanding that all media texts are constructed and that these constructions serve a particular purpose.

In short, the respondents' comments demonstrate what Lewis and Jhally (1998) call a "conceptual limitation": students inability to conceptualize alternatives is rooted not in a lack of imagination, but in a lack of education. Indeed, it is the belief that the current commercial media system is natural, neutral, ever-present, and incapable of change that feeds corporate hegemony, rendering the socially conscious and well-meaning respondents paralyzed by their "moral dilemma." Without ever having been taught that alternatives do in fact exist, few can think outside the box. Thus, young people without training in media literacy are understandably not aware that most mainstream texts are made with profit as the primary goal, which results in support for the industry through a blithe acceptance of the "way things are."

Comprehensive Media Literacy: A Case for Political Economy

There have been heated debates on what content should be included in a media literacy curriculum (Buckingham, 1998; Hobbs, 1998; Kubey, 1998; Jhally & Lewis, 1998). This study, we believe, exemplifies the importance of teaching media literacy that includes a contextual, comprehensive approach that analyzes texts, audiences, and media systems (Kellner, 2003). This approach teaches young people to analyze historical contexts and influences, hierarchies among social relations, and hegemony; they are taught theories of social production and reproduction. This learning is inherently political and subjective in its efforts (Hammer, 2009; Jhally & Earp, 2006; Kellner, 2003; Kellner & Share, 2007; Share, 2009) as it investigates how a capitalist framework "structures institutions and practices according to the logic of commodification and capital accumulation" (Kellner, 2009, p. 9). Mainstream media in the United States are organized, produced, and distributed in the service of maximizing profits, which results in "structural limits" that impose guidance on "what can and cannot be said and shown, and what sort of audience effects the text may generate" (Kellner, 2003, p. 12). Regulations

put in place to constrain media corporations from total control have rapidly eroded in the last three decades (McChesney, 2004, 2005). This is another crucial point of concern that can be addressed by critical media literacy.

In a cultural environment where five global firms own most of the media, it is important to make this fact widely known in media literacy pedagogy and prioritize the study how media industries are organized (Bagdikian, 2004; Kellner, 2009; Kellner & Share, 2007; Lewis & Jhally, 1998). Hammer (2009) asserts that when students are able to think beyond the dominant ideology and corporate system, they have the potential to seek and produce alternatives. As seen in the students' responses, or lack thereof, to improve media representations, critical media literacy, combined with an analysis of political economy, is a crucial aspect to the proposed intervention strategy for the students examined. We argue that our respondents were fairly typical college students in terms of their knowledge about media: they were equipped with the ability to recognize stereotypes but unable to critically analyze their structural implications. Comprehensive media literacy is thus crucial for students to gain a contextual understanding of the media images, to examine the power and threat posed by the increasingly monopolistic media conglomerates, and to seek alternative media as models for consumption and production.

Although the new development of social media and digital technology that emerged in the 2011 study has enabled individuals to self-publish their own versions of alternative media, these same avenues, such as YouTube and Facebook, have strong ties with conglomerates and corporate establishments. However, while they are no longer "alternative," they nonetheless provide opportunities for independent producers to reach audiences they never would have, such as Wong Fu Productions (which has attracted millions of subscribers worldwide). This new online dimension to media demonstrates the pressing importance of media literacy curriculum that demands production skills. Only then can students not only know how to "read" the underlying meanings of media images and the conditions of why and how they are produced, but also how to "write" new and alternative texts.

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