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Beyond the Color Line: Asian American Representations in the Media

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**BEYOND THE COLOR LINE:
ASIAN AMERICAN REPRESENTATIONS IN THE MEDIA**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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Introduction

In today's mainstream media, there exists a visible lack of Asian American representation. When they *are* given roles in film and television, those roles often maintain the stereotypical ideology which has been dominant for decades. Asian American stereotypes in these media range from hard-working and servile to masters of the martial arts and often put forth a misguided or exaggerated impression of what Asian Americans are like as a group. I argue that these stereotypical representations of Asian Americans manifest themselves in viewers' minds and affect the way they view the minority group far after they power off their television sets. These stereotypes are challenged when individual Asian Americans emerge and do not fit the mold that Hollywood has created for them. This thesis will illustrate the shifting paradigm within the media from producer-created to consumer-created media by way of the Internet and social media. I argue that it takes other channels besides the mainstream outlets of film and television to purvey race in a complex and accurate way. Instead of placing blame on Hollywood, consumers should educate themselves on alternative forms of independent media and not limit their perspective to the stereotypical ideology that mainstream television upholds.

Chapter one will analyze three case studies of the contemporary television shows *All-American Girl* (ABC, 1994), *Gilmore Girls* (The WB and The CW, 2000-2007) and *Glee* (FOX, 2009-Present) and the way in which they continue to paint caricatures of Asian Americans in stereotypical manners. All three shows present characters who strive to meet their parents' exceedingly high expectations of going to college and becoming

doctors or lawyers. These shows were selected because they represent a very common way in which Asian Americans are depicted onscreen and span over the course of eighteen years. By looking at shows which have aired over two decades, a lack of progression can be observed as their treatment of Asian American characters are very similar. This chapter will also cite several psychological studies which suggest that viewers of these shows may believe the tropes they see on television and apply that ideology to real-life situations. This is problematic because they impose a limit to how Asian Americans can be viewed.

Every so often something occurs with the potential to shatter dominant Asian American archetypes such as the phenomenon which has come to be known as ‘Linsanity.’ ‘Linsanity’ refers to the meteoric rise and prominence of NBA basketball player Jeremy Lin. He is the only current Asian American playing at the professional level in America and has displayed his immense athletic talent by helping the New York Knicks to a seven-game winning streak in February of 2012. Chapter two will outline how Lin not only breaks stereotypes by excelling in sports but demonstrates the shifting paradigm in the media from producer-created to consumer-created media. With one click, a Facebook user can share last night’s Jeremy Lin highlight reel with their 1500 friends. Like a chain reaction the clip has nearly four million views¹, *#Linsanity* is trending on Twitter and his Jersey is on sale at Madison Square Garden for Knicks fans to purchase. It is clear that the Internet and the social media have changed the way people learn and share information. It has also emerged as a platform for resistance which was not available two decades ago.

¹ Jeremy Lin’s Highlight Reel against the Los Angeles Lakers has 3,771,271 views on YouTube as of April 18, 2012.

There is a common idiom which states, “if you want it done right, you have to do it yourself.” Perhaps this is what the producers of Asian American independent media had in mind when envisioning documentaries, creating comedy acts, starting up blogs or uploading YouTube videos. Ono and Pham’s book *Asian Americans in the Media* argues that “the strength of this independence is embodied in self-aware producers working within the interstices of the independent and the mainstream and challenging traditional representations.”² These independent artists work outside of Hollywood’s white picket fence which means freedom from the dominant stereotypical framework but also comes with the burden of financial responsibility. New technologies alleviate some of this burden with media such as blogs and YouTube channels costing little to maintain. Chapter three looks at the examples of Margaret Cho’s stand-up comedy acts, Phil Yu’s online blog *Angry Asian Man* and YouTube sensations Ryan Higa and Kevin Wu to understand how popular Asian American independent media can be. I argue that the increase in popularity of these Asian American artists indicates the growing audience and demand for media diversification.

An important question to be asked is what prevents Asian Americans from being an integral of the mainstream media. Does the entertainment industry underestimate the general public’s tolerance and demand for more complex representations of minority groups onscreen? This thesis will first call attention the stereotypical portrayals of Asian Americans on television for the past two decades. It will then show the ways in which these stereotypes are challenged with the example of Jeremy Lin. His story showcases the ways in which the social media has both fueled his prominence and acted as a way for

² Ono, Kent A., and Vincent N. Pham. *Asian Americans and the Media*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2009. 139. Print.

people to push back against news outlets' coverage of his story. While Lin may not have been in search of the spotlight, 'Linsanity' holds promise that new media, like the mainstream media of film and television, has the potential to cultivate positive ideas in consumers' minds. By seeing an Asian American figure find success in an endeavor not typically associated with Asian Americans, progress can be made toward unraveling stereotypes. Lastly, focus will be shifted toward the fast-growing industry of independent media. What the independent media brings to its consumers is a broad spectrum of ideas and voices. I argue that access to information is the key to truth and that society will benefit from media that emphasizes ideas and themes not currently available on television or in theatres.

Chapter One:

Asian American Representations in Contemporary Television

If people perceived the world in the way that situations are presented on television, survivors of a plane crash could sustain life on a mysterious island somewhere in the south pacific for six years as on *Lost*. Vigilante serial killers could live a life in plain view and get away with their crimes despite being employed as a blood-spatter analyst by the Miami Police Department like *Dexter*. A New Jersey-based doctor could have a near-perfect success rate at diagnosing unprecedented illnesses for he is an unmatched medical genius as on *House M.D.* However, many viewers understand that these are fictional occurrences developed by television producers for dramatic effect, and that if they have a kernel of truth that it is just that—a kernel. So why is it that when audiences watch television shows which depict Asian Americans in a stereotypical manner, they view their situations as plausible, entertaining and sometimes humorous?

Although Asian Americans are underrepresented in the media in comparison to their percentage of the U.S. population (3.8% and 5%, respectively)³, Asian American presence in the media is far from new. While a constant presence is progressive, without more accurate or diverse representations of Asian Americans on television, the repeated delivery of stereotypes is further manifested in viewers' perceptions of the minority group. Thus it is a continuous cycle of stereotypical portrayals of Asian Americans that has viewers believing what they are being shown on television.

Asian Americans have long had a presence in the American media. Figures like Anna May Wong, an American-born Chinese film actress, got her start in Hollywood in

³ "Shattering Asian American Stereotypes." *Screen Actors Guild*. Web. 01 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.sag.org>>.

the 1920s. She was often cast in stereotypical supporting roles in films such as *Picadilly* (1929) and *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924) depicting a deceitful, domineering and tyrannical woman, an Asian stereotype which is often referred to as a “dragon lady.” Other historical representations of Asian Americans in the media include the fictional characters of Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan. Both of these characters were created by American authors and were depicted as an evil villain and a submissive detective, respectively. Other films such as *The World of Suzie Wong* (1957) cast an Asian American actress, Nancy Kwan as the lead. Despite being the title character and her subsequent nomination for the Golden Globe award for Best Actress, she plays the role of a seductive and overly sexualized prostitute, thus again propagating stereotypes of Asian Americans in the media.

Kent Ono and Vincent Pham suggest in *Asian Americans and the Media* that “in viewing Asians and Asian Americans through the same tired stereotypes and representations across a wide variety of media, these peculiar views become part of the archive of representations available for use” because people are used to seeing them in television and film. When viewers see the same images onscreen enough times, they begin to internalize the message, and “media representations produce a mass psychological effect on both Asians and Asian Americans and non-Asians and non-Asian Americans.”⁴ This psychological effect is one that George Gerbner developed in the 1960s called Cultivation Theory, and provides a useful foundation for thinking about the dynamics of media stereotypes.

⁴ Ono, Kent A., and Vincent N. Pham. *Asian Americans and the Media*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2009. 172. Print.

Gerbner's theory proposes that television cultivates viewers who are likely to see the world in ways that reflect the messages television sends to its viewers.⁵ In the 2003 article "Television Exposure and the Public's Perception of Physicians" by Chory-Assad and Tamborini, a study is detailed based on Cultivation Theory which is outside the realm of race but may offer a point of comparison. Like Gerbner, the article maintains cultivation logic, stating that television's patterns of programming "impact the development, maintenance, or exploitation of society's needs, values, and beliefs."⁶ Their study examines the relationship between viewer exposure to prime-time doctor programs such as *E.R.* and *Chicago Hope* and the perceptions of physicians' ethical character, competence and power. In a study of 290 undergraduates, it revealed that students who watched more medical dramas overestimated patient survival rate, a statistic highly exaggerated in medical television and that they had high regard for physical competence. Thus the results support cultivation theory in that television can influence viewers' conceptions of reality, attitudes and standards of judgment.

Studies of Cultivation Theory support the contention that television as a medium has the potential to play a powerful role in creating, perpetuating and even eliminating racial stereotypes. This is due in part to the fact that it reaches large and diverse audiences. However, many contemporary television shows continue to maintain stereotypes, particularly of Asian Americans, by casting actors in roles that depict them as sidekicks of the central protagonist or as having strict, overbearing parents with lofty

⁵ Dalisay, Francis, and Alexis Tan. "Assimilation and Contrast Effects in the Priming of Asian American and African American Stereotypes Through TV Exposure." *J&MC Quarterly* 86.1 (2009): 7-22. Print.

⁶ Chory-Assad, R.M., & Tamborini, R. (2003). "Television Exposure and the Public's Perceptions of Physicians." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 47(2), 197-215.

expectations. Examples of these include *All-American Girl*, *Gilmore Girls* and *Glee*. These three television series serve as contemporary examples of prime-time television which feature representations of Asian Americans over a period of seventeen years. Considering that television media can affect viewers' attitudes and beliefs toward subjects, this tendency of the mass media to generalize is problematic in making progress toward presenting diverse representations of Asian Americans on television. If, as Gerbner's studies suggest, the viewing public tends to subconsciously rely on characterizations in the media to formulate opinions about groups with whom they are less familiar, then televisual representations of Asian Americans will affect the treatment and perceptions of Asian Americans in society.

In the 1999 book *Television and its Viewers*, Michael Morgan and James Shanahan analyze the state of cultivation theory and research since Gerbner's studies. They note:

We all learn the values, norms, and stereotypes disseminated by television primarily by growing up and living in this specific culture; heavy viewing, then, does not involve any "new learning" of these beliefs and outlooks, but instead provides "the repeated instantiation of some stereotypes by their exemplars."⁷

Thus it is problematic when television perpetuates the same ideas about Asian American families that have been established by past media because it further cements the attitudes viewers may already have.

The term 'stereotype' was coined by American journalist Walter Lippman to refer to the "pictures" individuals hold and reference as the truth. In his book *Public Opinion*,

⁷ Shanahan, James, and Michael Morgan. *Television and Its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1999. Print.

Lippman suggests that a stereotype's "hallmark is that it precedes the use of reason; is a form of perception, imposes a certain character on the data of our senses before the data reach the intelligence."⁸ Despite being often seen as negative, stereotypes can also be positive. What Lippman argues is that stereotyping is not rooted in reason and rationale but produced by outside stimuli which occupies one's consciousness. Although Lippman's text was published in 1922, the psychological term of stereotyping supports Gerbner's argument of Cultivation Theory and can be applied to the influence that television has in producing and maintaining stereotypes.

Three prominent Asian American stereotypes will be addressed in this paper. A case study of *All-American Girl* serves as an example of an Asian American family sitcom of the 1990s in which plotlines are mainly focused on old world versus new world values in reference to the main character's strict immigrant parents. A case study of *Gilmore Girls* illustrates the Asian American character as a sidekick to the central protagonist's character who also has a strict mother. *Glee* is a currently airing prime time show whose case study will examine the 'model minority' stereotype—the idea that all Asian Americans must be smart, wealthy, hard-working and living 'the American dream.' The following case studies will provide examples of media stereotyping, and when applied to cultivation theory may bring to light the problematic caricatures of Asian Americans that are presented in contemporary television.

⁸ Lippmann, Walter. *Public Opinion*. New York: Free Paperbacks, 1997. Print.

A New Generasian: Stereotypes of the Immigrant family in *All-American Girl*

If positive change in the form of more Asian American actors as main characters presented with multi-dimensional storylines focused not solely on their race is the goal, then it is important to ask who has the power in the television industry to inspire it. Should an Asian American actor turn down a stereotypical role in hopes of providing resistance to the system, or will a casting director simply find another Asian American actor eager to comply? If this is the case, then perhaps it is less about actors and more about the producers, directors and writers who hold the influence. This was the case in *All-American Girl*. Although the series was presented as a realistic depiction of a “typical” Asian American family, only three of the eleven writers on the ABC sitcom were Asian American.

All-American Girl was an ABC sitcom which ran from 1994-1995. The show was based on the stand-up comedy of Margaret Cho, a Korean American comedian, which provided resistance by mocking stereotypical situations of Asian American families such as traditional values or overbearing parents. It was only the second American sitcom since *Mr. T and Tina* in 1976 to center on an Asian American protagonist, however both shows were cancelled after their first season due to poor ratings and mixed reviews.

The sitcom focuses on The Kim family who resides in San Francisco and consists of a paternal grandmother, two parents, Margaret Kim, the main protagonist of the show, her older brother Stuart who is completing his residency as a doctor, and her younger brother Eric. Margaret’s parents wish for her to have a “professional” career as a lawyer, yet she envisions a different life for herself perhaps as an artist or a club promoter.

Margaret is witty, crass, defiant and by all means marches to the beat of her own drum. She is often the butt of her family's jokes but continues to carve her own path despite constant parental pressure to do just the opposite.

Three out of eleven writers on *All-American Girl* is a low percentage because the show focuses on strict values as well as many cultural and historically Korean references. After the completion of the pilot, test audiences were confused by the Korean references that were made. The grandmother makes references to 'the old country' meaning Korea, to traditional Korean foods like Kim Chee and the episode's main plotline is focused on Margaret's mother not wanting her to date her new boyfriend Kyle. When Margaret asks, "why he is wrong for me?" her mother replies "he's American." However Margaret is also American but not thought of in that way by her own mother, perhaps a larger comment on the misconceptions some viewers may have of Asian Americans. Even the very title of the sitcom begs the question: are Asian Americans less than "All-American?"

In the second episode the show brought in a character named Casey, cast as Margaret's younger brother Eric's friend who lives in the building. Casey appeared in twelve of the nineteen episodes, and her character was developed to clarify cultural questions so the audience would be in the loop, and as a point of identification. Her character was eleven years old, therefore her questions came off in a very innocent and unassuming manner. In the third episode, "Who's The Boss," members are having bad luck when it comes to car trouble, low sales at their family-run bookstore and a C on a math test. The grandmother claims that they have bad Feng Shui. Casey asks if Feng Shui is the seaweed soup she had last week to which the mother explains that it is an

ancient Chinese belief which suggests that their lives are directly influenced by the way things are arranged in their home. The father asks if she understands, and she shrugs her shoulders as if to say ‘no.’ However it doesn’t matter in the narrative progression if Casey understands the concept because now the audience does, thus Casey’s character has served its purpose.

The show is based in comedy and addresses Asian American issues with a common episodic structure. Many episodes begin with Margaret defying her parents’ strict values, to which her parents get very upset and her and her mother often have an argument that serves as the climactic point of the narrative. At the end of an episode one of them usually realizes they are in the wrong and apologizes or makes things right with the other. The fifth episode of the series, entitled “Redesigning Women” serves as an example of this. Stuart’s fiancé Amy comes over to the house and helps Mrs. Kim prepare a traditional Korean dinner while Margaret sits at the table and watches. In essence, she serves as a strong contrast to Margaret. Amy is her Mrs. Kim’s ideal daughter-in-law wearing extremely conservative clothing, she laughs at all of her jokes, enjoys going to the opera over a club and prefers white wine spritzers to hard liquor. When Mrs. Kim suggests that Margaret throw her a girls-night-out bachelorette party, Margaret politely declines but her mother insists. Margaret takes Amy to a club called ‘Skank’ complete with a live rock band and mosh pit. Amy’s initial resistance to the environment is shown as she cannot stop talking about Stuart, however Margaret encourages her to dance and shows her that she can be a strong, independent woman should not let herself be controlled by a man. She completely changes Amy, who breaks off her engagement with Stuart and now dresses in head-to-toe leather. Mrs. Kim cries

over Amy's departure and immediately blames Margaret. In the end Margaret convinces Amy to go back to Stuart, and they reunite but promise to have a more equal relationship which is the resolution of the this episode's narrative. The following week, the same structure is followed and no references are made to the values in "Redesigning Women."

The cyclical nature of television causes resolved issues to be forgotten come the next episode. It is difficult to make any progress in terms of presenting a less stereotypical representation of Asian Americans when its premise, strict parents with a rebellious daughter, and structure, one character making things right with the other, are rooted in stereotype and compromise. With the cycle of episodes and repeated episodic structure, it is as if the clocks are reset each week and stifles the progress of debunking stereotypes.

All-American Girl's premise of showing an Asian American family as 'the other' "served as a barricade to the white audience; they could not possibly understand this "Orientalist mimicry made up as Asian authenticity" thus the show "was not marketable to any community."⁹ Although the premise of All-American Girl remains consistent throughout the first eighteen episodes of the short-lived series, the final episode featured Margaret and brief appearances by her grandmother, however the rest of the cast was fired. Instead of a finale to the season, the episode was a proposed pilot for an unrealized follow-up series called *The Young Americans* in which, with virtually no explanation, Margaret was suddenly living in an apartment with three Caucasian males and becomes best friends with a bartender played by Mariska Hargitay. This formula was much more

⁹ Ono, Kent A., and Vincent N. Pham. *Asian Americans and the Media*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2009. 176. Print.

common in television and the producers hoped to gain a larger viewing audience, but to no avail.

In an interview with Asia Society, Margaret Cho speaks about her reasoning for why the show was cancelled. She explains that because ABC advertised the show as being “The First Asian American Family on Television,’ there were expectations from the Asian American community that the show would present them in a positive light and as multi-dimensional characters. Instead, she says, “ because of that incredible focus on race, we never really had the chance to find out who we were as characters. We weren't allowed to develop as a real show would have because it was an exercise in race relations.” Cho maintains that the show was unsuccessful because of the way it was marketed and its inability to live up to the expectation of carrying the burden of racial identity. Cho continues,

...there was this intense paranoia that was carried along with that racial identity which was--"Are they Asian enough? Are they the right kind of Asian? Are they authentically Asian?" The idea of something having to display it's own authenticity is racist in itself because you are asked to prove that you are in fact different from everyone else. That we are in fact, needing to display that difference in this cultural comedy.

Perhaps this exaggeration of being authentically Asian and dealing mostly with Asian themes caused audiences not to tune into the show. The idea of Cultivation Theory applies here, because when a show is being marketed as depicting a shared Asian American experience, audiences may interpret the themes on the show as truth.

However, *All-American Girl* was unsuccessful in being picked up for a second season, thus losing the ability to develop its characters and progress as a television series. At present, there has been no show to focus on an Asian American family since *All-American Girl* in 1994.

You've Been Gilmored: Parental Pressure and the Sidekick Stereotype

Gilmore Girls is a sitcom that ran on The WB and later The CW from 2000-2007. The show followed Rory and Lorelai Gilmore, the two central protagonists, for seven seasons documenting their romantic relationships, family drama often caused by Lorelai's mother Emily and everyday small-town life in Stars Hollow, Connecticut. The mother and daughter duo have a very tight bond, perhaps because they are only sixteen years apart in age. Lorelai is supportive of her daughter's relationships, lets her eat junk food like pop tarts and tater tots, and takes Rory's advice when it comes to both men and fashion. The sitcom also featured the supporting character of Lane Kim, who appeared in every episode of the series, and her mother Mrs. Kim. Lane is portrayed as a rock music-loving, boy-crazy teen whose desires are often rebuffed by her strict and protective Korean mother. Later in the series, Mrs. Kim encourages Lane to attend Seventh-day Adventist college, which she does, until she drops out and takes control of her own life, touring with a rock band and marrying the lead singer.

The parental pressure placed on Lane by her mother is a running theme throughout each of the seven seasons of *Gilmore Girls*. Mrs. Kim forces Lane to work in her family-owned antiques shop, and would not only like for Lane to find a job as a "professional," but would like for Lane marry a Korean boy with plans to become a doctor, as she has stated in the show on multiple occasions. Nazli Kibria's ethnographic research explains this behavior of "doctor-in-law" hunting, suggesting that Asian American immigrant parents want their families to "compensate for the disadvantages of their racial identity by being 'twice as good,' outshining their peers in their

achievements.”¹⁰ This is a stereotype presented in many television shows, and is certainly upheld in *Gilmore Girls*.

In an episode of the second season entitled “A-Tisket, A-Tasket” the town of Stars hollow holds a date auction. Lane wants to go on her first official date with a boy she has been talking to, Henry, but she knows her mother would not approve. Instead, she pays her cousin twenty dollars to attend the auction and win her date, which he does on the first bid. Although another bid was placed, it was rescinded quickly after a glare from Mrs. Kim. Afraid that her mother will oppose their date, Lane calls Henry to confirm that they will meet up, and tell him “drive by, honk twice, go around the block then the second time you pass I’ll jump in the car.” As it turns out, Henry does not want to jump through hoops for this relationship, and Lane is heartbroken. Mrs. Kim checks on Lane in her bedroom that night and Lane confesses that she was talking to a boy, but he was Korean, had plans of becoming a doctor and was a counselor at bible camp to which Mrs. Kim replies “are you sure he’s Korean?” three times in a row for emphasis. Mrs. Kim realizes that Henry exactly what she has envisioned for Lane, and a viewer hopes that perhaps Mrs. Kim will allow them to date, however she does not because Lane lied to her. It is clear that although Lane just wants a normal life, she is a teenager who struggles to get it right with her mother, and walks on eggshells everyday. This plotline mirrors that of Lorelai and Rory when a “troubled” boy wins Rory’s basket. Lorelai is upset, and at the dinner table that night warns Rory to be careful when spending time with him. When Rory gets upset, tells her mother that she is no longer hungry and leaves. At the end of the episode they reach a resolution, with Lorelai telling Rory, “if

¹⁰ Kibria, Nazli. 2002. *Becoming Asian American: Second-Generation Chinese and Korean American Identities*. Baltimore: John Hopkins Univ. Press. Print.

you think he's a decent guy, I have to respect your judgement." Although these plotlines are similar in terms of mothers being protective of their daughters from teenage boys, they differ in how they are dealt with. Rory has the support of her mother, however Lane has been sentenced "the mother of all groundings" in which she has two weeks of homeschooling and 5 minutes of phone time per day, with the exception of the psalm-a-day line to which she has unlimited time.

As Hye Seung Chung suggests, the show "establish(es) the harmonious tone, egalitarian values, and reciprocally nurturing relationship between Rory and Lorelai" and notes that "Lane's relationship with her Korean mother is not mutually enriching in the least; indeed, it is presented as the exact opposite of the connection between our two heroines."¹¹ Thus the tension between Lane and her mother is enhanced by the show's comparison of them to Lorelai and Rory. In season one of the series, Lorelai transfers Rory to a private prep school called Chilton in hopes that her daughter will be able to attend Harvard upon graduation. This again provides a parallel between the two mother-daughter pairs, however is different in that attending Harvard is clearly a dream of Rory's, as apparent by the Harvard posters on the walls of her bedroom and her incessant talk of it as she is applying to colleges. Rory is clearly in control of her future, and after getting into both Harvard and Yale, she chooses the later to be closer to home. The bottom line is that she chose her school, contrasted with Lane whose college was chosen by her mother.

The other Asian American stereotype *Gilmore Girls* upholds is that of the sidekick. This is when a character is the best friend to one of the main characters, is often

¹¹ Diffrient, David Scott, and David Lavery. *Screwball Television: Critical Perspectives on Gilmore Girls*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2010. 170. Print.

shown listening to the main character's problems and helps her to solve them. While the sidekick gets screen time, many aspects of her life are unknown. Throughout the seven seasons of the series, viewers follow Rory through each boyfriend, heartbreak and family debacle and watch her make pro-con lists for all of her big life decisions. While Lane appears in every episode of the show, big questions go unanswered. For example, the whereabouts of her father are a complete mystery to the viewer. He is absent from their lives as well as Lane's wedding but he is never acknowledged thus assumptions are made that he has left them. This question could be answered if all aspects of Lane's daily life were covered as Rory and Lorelai's are, however she is a supporting character and most of the plotlines involving her character are shaped by her strict mother and how that informs her life. With the characters of Rory and Lorelai, everyday aspects of their lives are captured—getting coffee before school, walking through the town square, their car breaking down. Viewers only enter Lane's house when there is a family wedding taking place, on Thanksgiving or when there is a problem.

An episode of season three titled "A Deep-Fried Korean Thanksgiving" may serve as an example of how Lane is presented in the show. Rory and Lorelai walk into the Kim house for Thanksgiving dinner when they are abruptly met by Lane who ushers them into another room and informs them they must pretend that her boyfriend Dave is actually David, a local Christian musician who she tricked her mother into hiring by placing a fake add on their church bulletin board. They continue into the main room and pretend to meet Dave for the first time. Scenes like this are not uncommon in *Gilmore Girls*, as Mrs. Kim's strict parenting has defined Lane's actions and role in the show. While Lane's character breaks stereotypes—she does not complete college and in the last

few seasons follows her own path—her mother does not change. Lane is kicked out of their house and they hardly speak, showing that even if Lane doesn't abide by Mrs. Kim's rules, she still faces the consequences of not having a relationship with her mother. Assuming there are calm and even pleasant exchanges between Lane and Mrs. Kim, they are not seen in the show. In not exploring all dimensions of Lane's character, as is standard with supporting characters in most shows, Lane is presented as a sidekick to Rory. Keiko Agena, the actress who played Lane, was even nominated for the Teen Choice Award for "TV Choice Sidekick" each year from 2001-2003 demonstrating that although she did not win, her character was recognized as a sidekick by many.

Stereotypical performances of Asian Americans did not go by unnoticed by viewers and critics of *Gilmore Girls*. The producers of the show held a panel during the show's first season and received many questions regarding the stereotypes. Co-producer Helen Pai defended their show claiming, "these are real stories. They're based on a real person."¹² However, a portrayal can act as a stereotype even if its creator does not intend it as such. An article by Francis Dalisay and Alexis Tan draws on Cultivation Theory and states, "existing cognitions play important roles in influencing race-based judgments they make after exposure to TV-mediated messages."¹³ Therefore *Gilmore Girls* may activate previous racial cues viewers have received from other media, and leads a viewer to believe that these messages must have some truth to them if the representations are consistent.

¹² Diffrient, David Scott, and David Lavery. *Screwball Television: Critical Perspectives on Gilmore Girls*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2010. 170. Print.

¹³ Dalisay, Francis, and Alexis Tan. "Assimilation and Contrast Effects in the Priming of Asian American and African American Stereotypes Through TV Exposure." *J&MC Quarterly* 86.1 (2009): 7-22. Print.

Two Changs Forward, Three Steps Back: The Model Minority Stereotype in *Glee*

Glee is a current musical comedy-drama that focuses on the students of William McKinley High School's Glee Club in Lima, Ohio. The show follows the students as they face the typical ups and downs of high school life including bullying, peer pressure and romantic relationships. Each season is shaped around the club competing in sectionals, and hopefully making it to the national competition. The show is racially, religiously and socially diverse. In addition to casting two Asian American characters, there are African American characters, Latin American characters, gay and lesbian characters, and Jewish and Christian characters. The show is doing something very progressive by having such a diverse cast, and in a sense the show is based in stereotyping. Each person usually comes into the show as a broad caricature--the jock, the slut, the cheerleader, the gay guy, the drama queen, the ditz, the foreign exchange student, the sassy Black girl and the token Asian—and eventually develops a multi-dimensional personality in which we see them as far more than just their original stereotype. This way of introducing characters becomes problematic when a character's personality is not fully developed, or continues to be developed according to their caricature. This is not only be seen with the Asian American characters on the show, but also a few others. For example, in a season three episode titled "Pot o' Gold" we meet Rory, and Irish exchange student dressed in head-to-toe green who glee club member Brittany thinks is a leprechaun. He goes along with the false assumption, even trying to grant her three wishes as, according to a myth, leprechauns have the power to do. It is later revealed to Brittany that Rory isn't magical, however he still continue to dress in all

green, has a heavy Irish accent and will likely be seen as ‘the Irish kid’ throughout his stint on *Glee*. In season two and three of *Glee*, most storylines are based around the two Asian characters are rooted in references to their race.

Introducing Mike Chang and Tina Cohen-Chang. No, they are not married, they have merely been given the same last name. They met as counselors at what the show calls “Asian Camp.” In the premiere of season two, their status as a couple is revealed when the episode cuts to a flashback of Mike and Tina kissing at camp in front of Asian children who, although they look around five years old, were all proficient in the usage of camera-enabled cell phones and sat in a room whose walls were decorated with Chinese calligraphy. Incorporating these kids into the storyline is playing on the stereotype that Asian Americans are tech-savvy individuals, and from a very young age. Later in the season in an episode entitled “Special Education,” Tina suspected that Mike was cheating on her with another Glee club member. When she realized that she was overreacting and they were simply putting in extra time working on their latest dance routine, the couple make up and share an “Asian kiss.” Putting a cultural or racial identity on an action suggests that it is an inherently different way of doing something, however the show credits it *does* show a different kind of kiss. The characters open their mouths widely, lean in and press their mouths together in an awkward exchange one might imagine taking place between two never-been-kissed kids. In a similar vein, Mike and Tina get into an argument in the episode titled “Duets.” Tina says to Mike, “all we ever do is eat dim sum with your mom! All I want is a salad that doesn’t have chicken feet in it” to which Mike suggests they go to “Asian couples therapy.” To what end is putting the word “Asian” before something common serving? It is likely for comedic effect. Asian

stereotypes are funny to some in the same way that stock characters are funny—assumptions can instantly be made without a long explanation of a joke because the reference is familiar. These references have come before through other television shows and films and based on Cultivation theory, may lead viewers to read the Asian American stereotypes in *Glee* as truth.

Dalisay and Tan published a study in 2009 which hypothesized that exposure to TV-mediated messages reinforcing Asian American ‘model minority’ stereotypes would result in positive stereotyping, and counter-messages which depicted Asian Americans as violent or ‘the enemy’ would produce negative feelings about Asian Americans.¹⁴ Their hypothesis proved correct. A group of 28 individuals were shown a thirteen-minute video of Asian Americans demonstrating a strong work ethic at their jobs and school as well as interviews with prominent Asian Americans who have found success titled *The Asianization of America*. When later asked to list the first two adjectives that came to mind about how Asian Americans were portrayed in the video, they listed “smart, hard-working, intelligent and disciplined.” The counter-group was shown a clip from the film *Better Luck Tomorrow* which included scenes of fighting and a robbery conducted by Asian Americans. Participants used the adjectives “violent, immoral, greedy, rebellious, angry and crazy” as their descriptors of the depiction of Asian Americans. This study suggests that messages presented in the media are recognized by viewers and when internalized, can have an effect on how they view the racial group as a whole. Thus the study concludes by suggesting that the media “provide representations of racial

¹⁴ Dalisay, Francis, and Alexis Tan. "Assimilation and Contrast Effects in the Priming of Asian American and African American Stereotypes Through TV Exposure." *J&MC Quarterly* 86.1 (2009): 7-22. Print.

minorities that attempt to capture the full range of human experience.” It is difficult for a show like *Glee* to do this when a character like Mike Chang’s storylines are intentionally written around the ‘model minority’ stereotype.

The model minority is a stereotype is one which pegs the Asian American population as all being highly intelligent and living ‘the American dream’ which is often thought of as beginning with little and finding much success in terms of career and wealth. Some form of this stereotype can be found in each of the three case studies in this paper, however *Glee* references it most directly. The very first scene in season three is of a student reporter, Jacob, walking around with his video camera recording interviews of what the McKinley High seniors plan to do upon graduation. When asked “what do you wanna do when you grow up?” Mike replies that his mother hasn’t decided yet if he will attend Harvard or Stanford. Thus the show is implying that like the model minority stereotype, he will go to one of the top colleges in the country, and also that his parents make decisions for him. This theme is carried on through the season, and is most exemplified in the episode titled “Asian F.” As Mike Chang’s father states in the episode, “An A- is an Asian F,” and is seen by Mike Chang’s father as completely unacceptable. It is getting a part in the school’s rendition of *West Side Story* that has Mike distracted, however Mike’s love for dance is not accepted by his father. It is, however, accepted by his mother when she walks in on him performing in an empty studio and she tells him, “don’t give up on your dreams like I did” and that she will deal with his father, implying that although she is supportive, he may still not be. Thus the episode ends on a positive note and acknowledges that the show is conscious of its Asian American tropes but is debunking them by giving the characters a happy ending. *Glee* is

a television series, thus like *All-American Girl*, even if a plotline may seem resolved, it is usually reworked a few more times for emphasis. In a season three episode titled “Hold on to Sixteen,” five episodes after “Asian F,” Mike reveals that neither of his parents have spoken to him since his performance in *West Side Story*. Therefore the episodic structure of a television show undermines the happy ending used as a means of closure in the “Asian F” episode.

Glee’s increased television exposure for minority groups is commendable, however there seems to be a direct relationship between airtime and stereotyping. Glee’s representation of Asian American characters walks a fine line between presenting positive role models and propagating dangerous clichés. Perhaps if the show’s focus shifted toward the issues of these characters not having to do with race such as having Mike and Tina meet at an all-inclusive summer camp, shared a regular kiss, and the issue was not eating too much dim sum but simply not having his mom chaperone their dates would suffice as an interesting storyline for the popular series. While the show may be using irony to make humor of Asian American stereotypes and possibly attempting to send the message that they are problematic, the situations such as toddlers being able to use camera phones, only eating dim sum and parents being upset over an A- are presented as real. Despite having a positive twist at the end of each storyline, through Cultivation Theory *Glee* may manifest stereotypical beliefs in the minds of viewers.

Where Do We Go From Here? Ideal Representations of Asian Americans

All-American Girl, *Gilmore Girls* and *Glee* are all shows that air or have aired on major networks, and the latter two have found much success in terms of ratings and longevity. There are racial stereotypes at work in all three television series, however it is important to ask how they are being received. Are viewers literate of stereotypes, or do they perceive them as true? Stereotypical representations could be going unnoticed, perhaps certain aspects of their characters are being internalized by viewers who believe that having strict parents or going to a top-tier university is simply a part of the Asian American experience. They could also be progressive, seen as an exaggeration of a specific character's experience for comedic effect and in a self-reflexive manner point out the idea that an "Asian Kiss" is unheard of, and stereotypes are untrue. Cultivation studies support the former, however that does not mean that representations cannot change. Television can certainly include Asian American characters whose storylines are not rooted in their race.

Asian American stereotypes will continue to present themselves in the media until their damaging effects on public perception of the racial group is understood. As suggested by Ono and Pham, "vigilant efforts to analyze, critique, and publicly comment upon media events as they occur also continue to be needed today."¹⁵ Margaret Cho, star of *All-American Girl*, echoes this sentiment in her comedy act *I'm the One that I Want* in which she calls for Asian Americans to recognize their own agency and join the

¹⁵ Ono, Kent A., and Vincent N. Pham. *Asian Americans and the Media*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2009. 172. Print.

conversation through online forums, blogs and independent media. Television is a powerful media, as indicated by studies of Cultivation Theory, and has great potential to change the landscape for Asian Americans. With the aid of scholarship and criticism against Asian American stereotyping, a changed future for media is certainly possible.

Chapter Two:

Uncharted Territory: The Jeremy Lin Effect

Upon Googling the name “Jeremy Lin” one can find over one hundred million results comprised of news articles, blog posts and video clips which have captivated viewers worldwide. In putting that figure into perspective a search of “Kobe Bryant,” a 14-time NBA All-Star and 5-time NBA champion, yields millions fewer results.¹⁶ This juxtaposition is not meant to compare their athletic skill or even the size of their celebrity. It is meant rather to demonstrate that when Bryant reached worldwide stardom over ten years ago, the internet was far less utilized and now-popular social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter were virtually non-existent, as were article-sharing sites like Reddit and Digg and the video sharing site YouTube. Jeremy Lin’s surge into the national consciousness demonstrates the media’s power to create phenomena and to shape the way in which people view public figures. In chapter one, focus was placed on television series of the past twenty years and their capacity to create and perpetuate Asian American stereotypes. Lin’s journey thus far serves as a prime example of the media’s power to influence consumers’ ideas of Asian Americans with specific focus on television news, online news articles and social media platforms. This chapter will also examine the power of the social media and its potential as a vehicle for resistance and the shattering of Asian American stereotypes.

Jeremy Lin’s story has been told from many angles—he has been painted by different media outlets as an underdog, a testament to hard work and just plain lucky. Articles have surfaced proclaiming Lin’s potential to both expose and discredit

¹⁶ Statistic recorded on February 28 at the peak of ‘Linsanity’

stereotypes of Asian Americans, and others have placed him in the category of simply reaffirming them. What separates Lin from the Hollywood-created characters discussed in chapter one is that he is a real living person, thus his backstory is far more complex and his future cannot be written into a script—it is entirely unknown. Kent Ono and Vincent Pham note in their book *Asian Americans and the Media* that “because of a lack of systematic power within mainstream media production, [Asian Americans] typically appear in ways that...do not represent a true lived experience.” They add, “within the media, Asian Americans are often at the sidelines, feeling the effects of dominant media representation but hardly ever appearing in the spotlight.”¹⁷ Jeremy Lin is an example of someone who has broken out of this trap and represents both a true lived experience and an Asian American in the spotlight.

The facts are that Lin is a first-generation Asian American of Taiwanese decent. He was born in Palo Alto, California in 1988 where he was raised and attended Palo Alto High School. Despite leading his team to a state championship in 2006, his athletic talents were not heavily pursued by college recruiters, many of whom have gone on to admit that not recruiting Lin was an oversight.¹⁸ After receiving no athletic scholarships out of high school he eventually landed on Harvard’s roster where, throughout his four years, set numerous program records. Despite an outstanding four seasons at Harvard, Lin went undrafted in the 2010 NBA Draft and it was not until a stellar performance in the NBA Summer League that he received a partially guaranteed contract from his home

¹⁷ Ono, Kent A., and Vincent N. Pham. *Asian Americans and the Media*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2009. 5. Print.

¹⁸ Kroner, Steve. "Playing Hard and Smart Goes a Long Way for Lin." *SF Gate*. 27 June 2011. Web. 4 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2010/01/02/SPA31BCKUC.DTL>>.

team the Golden State Warriors. Over the next two years he was dropped by the Warriors and the Houston Rockets before being picked up by the New York Knicks on December 27, 2011.

Lin struggled to find his niche on the Knicks lineup and was assigned on January 17, 2012 to the Erie BayHawks, a team in the NBA Development League for players to raise their level of play.¹⁹ Three days later, the Knicks recalled Lin back to the team. Despite sitting at the end of the bench with the possibility of being released looming overhead, he was given the chance to shine in a February 4, 2012 game against the New Jersey Nets after three starters were unable to play due to injury and a family emergency. Lin gave his breakthrough performance against the Nets, scoring 25 points and 7 assists. ‘Linsanity’ had begun. The excitement was further fueled by the Knicks’ victory over the Utah Jazz two nights later in which Lin scored 28 points with 8 assists and peaked when Lin shot a career-high 38 points and 7 assists against the Los Angeles Lakers, outscoring Lakers team captain Kobe Bryant. Lin became the only NBA player to post over 20 points in each of his first five games as a starting player.²⁰ Lin’s outstanding play resulted in round-the-clock ESPN coverage and thousands of articles written about the overnight star. #Linsanity was trending on Twitter and more Lin-based puns and plays on words were emerging than of any other sports star in recent memory.

¹⁹ Beck, Howard. "Knicks Send Two Bench Warmers to D-League." *The New York Times*. 17 Jan. 2012. Web. 18 Mar. 2012.
<<http://offthedribble.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/01/17/knicks-demote-two-bench-warmers/>>.

²⁰ Kercheval, Nancy. *Bloomberg*. 16 Feb. 2012. Web. 18 Mar. 2012.
<<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-02-16/jeremy-lin-s-career-high-13-assists-lead-knicks-to-seventh-consecutive-win.html>>.

While fans and sports commentators alike may claim that Lin rode a streak of good luck into stardom, it is clear that players who make it to the NBA level are truly elite. As exceptional as it is to sign onto an NCAA Division I basketball team out of high school, it is far more rare to be drafted to the professional level out of college. Out of approximately 1,500 NCAA Division I basketball players, fewer than 60 are drafted to the NBA each year.²¹ Although Jeremy Lin possesses the skill to play on basketball's largest stage, it is important to ask *why* out of so many exceptional NBA players Lin is receiving this extraordinary amount of attention.

Why Jeremy? Linsanity Sweeps the Nation

Basketball players have had stellar performances before, even consecutive runs like Jeremy Lin. Lin has not been voted into the NBA All-Star Game or chosen for the Olympic team. He is not the first player to hit a buzzer beating shot or to show up an NBA great—so why has Linsanity swept the nation? What is different about Jeremy Lin's story that may account for his meteoric rise? The media and its audience love an “underdog story,” and having gone undrafted out of both high school and college and being nearly cut from the Knicks roster, his achievements equate to a feel-good story for many consumers who are watching, listening and/or reading. He also seems to be a likeable and accessible person. Lin has an official Facebook, Twitter and YouTube account and has remained fairly level-headed throughout the Linsanity. In an All-Star

²¹ Brokke, Nathan. "NCAA Mania: Why NBA Is Much Better Basketball Than College Hoops." *Bleacher Report*. 20 Mar. 2011. Web. 20 Mar. 2012.
<<http://bleacherreport.com/articles/636365-ncaa-mania-why-nba-is-much-better-basketball-than-college-hoops>>.

weekend press conference in which he attended as a “Rising Star,” Lin said of his recent popularity, “it's been unbelievable, and I'm just trying to take it all in and embrace it and enjoy it every step of the way.”²² He is also the only Asian American basketball player currently shooting hoops on the NBA stage, a statistic which undoubtedly plays a role in the interest and conversation surrounding Lin.

The media certainly has the power to hype a potential star before he or she really makes it big. This can come in the form of featuring them on the cover of magazines or the home page of websites, or even by a team commissioning their jersey before anyone recognizes their last name. Major companies can offer them line or product endorsement deals or commentators can talk them up on the national news. For Lin, the hype came *after* he proved his skills on the court. This further laments his underdog status and Jason Gay of the *The Wall Street Journal* agrees: “I like that this pop culture phenomenon didn’t get cooked up by someone sitting atop a beanbag chair in an advertising agency. I like that Nike can’t take credit for it.” He adds, “I like that I heard about Jeremy Lin from a friend before I saw him in a commercial.”²³ Linsanity feels organic and unorchestrated because the sensation is backed by real talent, not simply hype created by sports industry giants.

Although ‘Linsanity’ came after Lin showed off his talent, it came very soon after. The speed at which “Jeremy Lin” became a highly recognizable name can be

²² Zillgitt, Jeff. "Jeremy Lin Humbled, Humorous during All-Star Weekend." *USA Today*. 25 Feb. 2012. Web. 20 Mar. 2012.
<<http://www.usatoday.com/sports/basketball/nba/knicks/story/2012-02-25/jermey-lin-all-star-weekend/53244342/1>>.

²³ Gay, Jason. "Not Yet Sick of the Linsanity." *The Wall Street Journal*. 21 Feb. 2012. Web. 20 Mar. 2012.<<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204909104577235601005718374.html>>.

attributed to the power of the social media. "Ideas and trends move faster and more meaningfully when delivered by people we know," Gay writes. "A cultural moment does not need a publisher or campaign or gimmick to blossom anymore."²⁴ Linsanity may not be the sole phenomena that the social media can take credit for, however it certainly highlights a shifting paradigm in the way people consume and share information. While the narrative surrounding Lin continues to shift and be re-shaped by blog owners and Twitter users everywhere, the stories of Margaret Kim and Lane Kim remain stagnant as they were conceived, developed and ended in the offices of Hollywood production companies.

The difference between Lin's story and contemporary televisual representations of Asian Americans is that (aside from Lin being a living person) the articles and social networking users who created Linsanity have a comments section. Anyone with internet access can hashtag keywords and put their message in motion with a click of a mouse. When their messages gain enough momentum their voice can be heard, establishing the social media as a powerful means for resistance against inaccurate or stereotypical representations.

Lessons Learned: The Role of Race in Jeremy Lin's Popularity

It is clear that 'Linsanity' caught the world off-guard. We live in a society in which Superbowl Champions t-shirts are printed for both teams days before the game

²⁴ Gay, Jason. "Not Yet Sick of the Linsanity." *The Wall Street Journal*. 21 Feb. 2012. Web. 20 Mar. 2012. <<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204909104577235601005718374.html>>.

even starts, just to be sure the NFL can cash in on souvenir-desiring fans leaving the stadium. Despite this, Jeremy Lin's #17 jersey was not even in commission when he stepped onto the court on February 4, but was the number one selling jersey in the league the following week.²⁵ Lin burst onto the sports scene leaving anchors, reporters and companies everywhere scrambling for the perfectly clever way to reflect what was happening in the sports world.

Many news outlets reverted back to racial stereotypes to discuss Lin's style of play. The morning after the Knicks' February 17, 2012 loss to the New Orleans Hornets, ESPN aired a headline on its mobile site which read "Chink in the Armor," a double entendre referring to Lin's propensity for turnovers and derogatorily commenting on his race. The network took the headline down after 35 minutes and fired its writer, Anthony Federico. The same phrase was used three days earlier on ESPNNews by anchor Max Bretos who in an interview asked, "If there is a chink in the armor, where can Lin improve his game?"²⁶ Both employees issued apologies, with Federico stating that "ESPN did what they had to do," adding that the headline was not intended as a racial slur, having used it "at least 100 times" in headlines over the years.²⁷ We live in the

²⁵ Levinson, Mason, and Eben Novy-Williams. "Jeremy Lin Propels Knicks' Sales as MSG Shares Climb to Record." *Business Week*. 13 Feb. 2012. Web. 20 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.businessweek.com/news/2012-02-13/jeremy-lin-propels-knicks-sales-as-msg-shares-climb-to-record.html>>.

²⁶ CNN Wire Staff. "ESPN Fires Writer of Offensive Headline about Jeremy Lin." *CNN*. 19 Feb. 2012. Web. 20 Mar. 2012. <http://articles.cnn.com/2012-02-19/worldsport/sport_espn-lin-slur_1_espn-employee-ethnic-slur-headline?_s=PM:WORLDSPORT>.

²⁷ Dejohn, Irving, and Helen Kennedy. "Jeremy Lin Slur Was 'honest Mistake'" *New York Daily News*. 20 Feb. 2012. Web. 22 Mar. 2012. <http://articles.nydailynews.com/2012-02-20/news/31081058_1_lin-story-jeremy-lin-racial-slur>.

digital age where screenshots go viral with one click and articles and blog posts blasting ESPN are live within minutes. The damage had been done.

Federico's apology seemed honest, and was accepted by Lin who told reporters that "you have to learn to forgive, and I don't even think that was intentional."²⁸ Words do not need to be ill-intentioned to be damaging. The fact that a news writer working at the national level had used a racial slur over 100 times without awareness of its alternate meaning raises a red flag. While it is unfortunate that Federico's mistake was made on as large a scale as ESPN, the positive takeaway is the amount of media attention it brought to the meaning of the word as a derogatory way to describe those of Chinese descent, hopefully lessening its use in the future.

ESPN was not the only company that found itself issuing an apology to Jeremy Lin. The famous ice cream brand Ben & Jerry's created a limited edition flavor called "Taste the Lin-Sanity" boasting "Vanilla Bean Frozen Yogurt w/Lychee Honey Swirls & Fortune Cookie Pieces." The flavor was clearly not a top seller as the company issued an apology stating, "we offer a heartfelt apology if anyone was offended by our handmade Linsanity flavor that we offered...we were swept up in the nationwide Linsanity momentum."²⁹

"Jeremy Lin has dribbled America into the previously quiet corner of its casual prejudice and lazy stereotypes of Asian Americans," writes As Bill Plaschke in an article

²⁸ Skaar, Ole, and Helen Kennedy. "ESPN Fires Writer for Racist Headline." *New York Daily News*. 19 Feb. 2012. Web. 22 Mar. 2012.
<http://articles.nydailynews.com/2012-02-19/news/31078173_1_headline-knicks-phenom-jeremy-lin-sportscenter>.

²⁹ Torrisi, Lauren. "Ben & Jerry's Apologizes for Jeremy Lin Inspired Ice Cream Flavor." *ABC News*. ABC News Network, 27 Feb. 2012. Web. 22 Mar. 2012.
<<http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/lifestyle/2012/02/ben-jerrys-apologizes-for-jeremy-lin-inspired-ice-cream-flavor/>>.

for the L.A. Times. Plaschke is recognizing that sometimes it takes controversial events such as these for the public to confront their approach to thinking and talking about race. That is the positive. He continues, “the true beauty of his story is in awareness of the ugliness that has been found there.”³⁰ The ugliness to which he refers has been uncovered by op-ed writers, bloggers, Facebook and Twitter users who have used the internet to vocalize their opinions and spark a worldwide dialogue on Asian Americans and what types of rhetoric should and should not be tolerated. So what is the lesson to be learned from ESPN and Ben & Jerry’s mistakes? As ESPN columnist J.A. Andade accurately points out, “the lesson is to exercise greater caution, to consider all the ramifications of what we say.” He writes that “it’s not too much to ask. It will lead to smarter conversations. And if that’s the place to which Jeremy Lin has brought us, it’s another way his impact resonates far beyond Madison Square Garden.”³¹

There have been many other far more subtle ways that Jeremy Lin has been discussed in the media which call attention to racial stereotyping. Soon after the Knicks defeated the Lakers, Kobe Bryant gave an interview with ESPN in which he said of Lin’s newfound prominence, “It just means that we probably haven’t been playing attention. Players playing that well don’t usually come out of nowhere. It seems like they come out of nowhere, but if you can go back and take a look, his skill level was probably there

³⁰ Plaschke, Bill. “Knicks’ Jeremy Lin Holds Mirror up to America.” *Los Angeles Times*. 20 Feb. 2012. Web. 22 Mar. 2012. <<http://articles.latimes.com/2012/feb/20/sports/la-sp-plaschke-jeremy-lin-20120221>>.

³¹ Adande, J.A. “Jeremy Lin, Race and Lessons learned.” *ESPN*. 22 Feb. 2012. Web. 24 Mar. 2012. <http://espn.go.com/nba/story/_/id/7595841/nba-jeremy-lin-race-lessons-learned>.

from the beginning. It probably just went unnoticed."³² The question to be asked is *why* Lin went unnoticed by college coaches, NBA scouts and fans.

At the beginning of Linsanity, sports reporters often described Lin as “deceptively quick” and “deceptively athletic.” This seems more of a commentary on how the reporters were deceived by their own racial preconceptions than by Lin’s game. Jeremy himself addresses the commentary telling CBS Sports in a press conference, “I’m not sure what’s deceptive” about his physique or style of play but that “it could be the fact I’m Asian-American.” At 6 foot 3 and muscular, Lin fits the build for a basketball star and while the phrase “deceptively athletic” may seem a compliment when first heard, it can be harmful to the ongoing stereotype of Asian Americans as sub-par athletes. Lin notes, “when you look at me, I’m going to have to prove myself more so again and again and again” he said. Proving himself again and again is exactly what Lin did during the Knicks’ 7-game winning streak in February, and the hype surrounding Linsanity has given him a platform to address the topic of race and Asian American stereotypes.

It is yet to be seen what Lin will do with his platform, but whether Jeremy Lin continues his trajectory as an NBA star or falls off the map, ‘Linsanity’ has given way to a national dialogue on Asian-Americans which is beneficial. As Oliver Wang argues in his article *Jeremy Lin puts the ball in Asian Americans' court*, “Lin is helping reshape the popular imagination around Asian Americans in sports, partially by normalizing their presence.”³³

³² Hunt, Christopher. "Lin Makes Lakers Believe the Hype." *ESPN*. 11 Feb. 2012. Web. 24 Mar. 2012.

³³ Wang, Oliver. "Jeremy Lin Puts the Ball in Asian Americans' Court." *Los Angeles Times*. 21 Feb. 2012. Web. 24 Mar. 2012.

Asian American men are often viewed through the lens of stereotypes. This is due to the fact that, as discussed in chapter one, scripted media often depicts them as a little more ‘geek’ than ‘jock’ and far more ‘perpetual foreigner’ than ‘All-American.’ The concept of Cultivation Theory certainly applies here. Lin was athletically underestimated by many likely because of his race, thus his story reveals one way in which media-promoted stereotypes that obscure the reality of the Asian American experience can be challenged. Timothy Yu of CNN writes that “American culture tells us, in short, that Lin shouldn't exist. Every time he drives to the basket, he upends stereotypes of Asians as short, weak and nerdy. Every time he talks to the media, he dispels the idea that all Asian-Americans are like foreigners speaking broken English.” In a sport which has been dominated by African Americans for decades and has come to be synonymous with masculinity, Lin’s emergence was out of the ordinary thus gripping the public’s attention. While companies and reporters may not have approached the Jeremy Lin story with utmost political correctness, their public stumbles have opened doors to productive discourse regarding Asian Americans which is ultimately beneficial to public awareness of racial stereotyping and inequality.

Will Lin’s Success Shatter Stereotypes? The Staying Power of ‘Linsanity’

Not all stereotypes depict groups of people in a negative light, such as the ‘model minority’ stereotype which characterizes Asian Americans as shy, hard-working and smart. While there are other less well-known Asian American stereotypes such as the ‘overbearing parent’ as discussed in chapter one, the stereotypes go hand in hand (pushy

parents lead to an overachieving child). It is possible that people do not view Asian American stereotypes as harmful because they are based on positive values. With that being said, there is no such thing as a “good” stereotype. Stereotypes limit people and impair their ability to see reality. They become problematic when the public has preconceived notions of them as nothing more and nothing less as they may have had in the case of Jeremy Lin. By undermining stereotypes Lin is changing the social conscience by forcing the public to acknowledge that they have become too comfortable compartmentalizing Asian Americans with misguided ideology.

Jeremy Lin may be an overnight basketball star, but his story is far more transcendent to be confined to the court. The media attention on Lin may die down and Lin’s days of trending on Twitter may become less often, however what Lin has done is sparked an international dialogue about Asian Americans which, with the prominence and wide-spread use of social media, has the potential to both shed light on Asian American stereotypes and place resistance upon them. ‘Linsanity’ is extraordinary as it has highlighted the social media’s ability to act as a medium through which discrepancies between commercial projections and the reality of the Asian American experience can gain momentum. The promise of Jeremy Lin’s story and new technology is that any one person has the potential to affect a wide audience of people much in the same way.

Chapter Three:

Who Owns the Media?

Asian American Independent Media On the Rise

There are currently six major corporations that collectively control most of the media in the United States.³⁴ This means that a select few companies dictate what American consumers watch, hear and read every day with ownership of movie studios, television networks, newspapers, magazines, radio stations and many popular websites. Although consumers may be unaware of it, this monopolization of media has a large influence over their attitudes and beliefs toward social issues. The media can be a very powerful medium for propaganda, however with the advent of new and independent media, it has just as much agency to counteract the misleading portrayals in mainstream media. Although the “big six” still have a tight grip on mainstream media, there has been an explosion of independent media in film, television, blogs, YouTube and independent news outlets such as examiner.com. Examiner selects articles from journalists around the country that cover a wide spectrum of American culture from politics to reality television with the aim of presenting news with an accurate and unbiased approach. Alternative media like these promote media literacy which is fundamental in resisting dominant representations in the media of Asian Americans. With an overwhelming amount of media currently at our fingertips, it is essential to choose wisely. This chapter will address images created independently by Asian Americans themselves using the examples of Margaret Cho’s post-*All-American Girl* stand-up comedy, Phil Yu’s popular blog *Angry Asian Man* and Asian American YouTube sensations NigaHiga and

³⁴ "Who Owns the Media? Media Ownership Charts | Free Press." *Free Press*. Web. 18 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.freepress.net/ownership/chart>>.

KevJumba. These examples were chosen to highlight the idea that there is a market for Asian American artists and that they can play a role successfully that is completely outside the parameters of mainstream media stereotypes. Now that chapters one and two have established that representations of Asian Americans in the media play an influential role in how people perceive the racial group, this chapter seeks to showcase those media that place pressure against them. It will outline the criteria for media to be considered independent and use the aforementioned examples to answer the question of how Asian American independent media has created a subculture within society which, by definition, challenges dominant ideology and hegemony.

Independent media are non-mainstream media that provide resistance against dominant discourse. The concept of ‘independent’ refers to a ‘do it yourself’ attitude and ethic and thus are often conceived, written directed, produced and funded by the same person or group of people allowing for artistic freedom and control.³⁵ One reason for the small amount of independent media is that it is not lucrative. Being free of corporate constraints often means that producers must find funding or go into debt to create independent media. However with the recent developments of new media—inexpensive domain names, video sharing websites and online promotional tools—creating media independently is more accessible than it has ever been. With those tools now at the fingertips of many, Hollywood-developed depictions in film and television are now only one way in which Asian Americans can be represented. Ono and Pham’s book *Asian Americans in the Media* suggests that one way to look at Asian American media is

³⁵ Ono, Kent A., and Vincent N. Pham. *Asian Americans and the Media*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2009. 114. Print.

through the lens of pastiche—works of art constructed from bits and pieces of a dominant other culture.³⁶ This is to say that Asian American independent media only exists due to the presence of the mainstream. Independent and mainstream media are certainly related. Independent media borrows elements from mainstream representations and, especially in the case of Angry Asian Man, critiques dominant ideas to make progress in the issue of equality.

Through independent and alternative media, Asian Americans have created a subculture within society. Dick Hebdidge’s notion of subculture implies that just as punk, mod and teddy movements challenged dominant discourse in the seventies, Asian American subculture can take an oppositional stance to the stereotypes and controlling images that the mainstream media puts forth.³⁷ Ono and Pham argue that subculture movements act as “noise and disruptive presence in the process of mediating events through representation.”³⁸ This chapter will analyze examples of independent media produced by Asian Americans, how they contribute to Asian American subculture and their potential to reconfigure problematic images.

³⁶ Ono, Kent A., and Vincent N. Pham. *Asian Americans and the Media*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2009. 118. Print.

³⁷ Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Routledge, 1991. Print.

³⁸ Ono, Kent A., and Vincent N. Pham. *Asian Americans and the Media*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2009. 172. Print.

Margaret Cho:
I'm the One that I Want

As discussed in chapter one, *All-American Girl* contained limiting stereotypes and problematic images of Asian Americans such as the model minority and overbearing parent stereotypes. Margaret Cho herself noticed them, and makes comical reflections on her experience acting in the sitcom in her 1999 one woman stand-up comedy act *I'm the One that I Want*, her 2003 act *Revolution* and her 2005 act *Assassin*. By reflecting and commentating on her *All-American Girl* character in her comedy act, Cho makes it clear that her real-life persona and the character that the network and producers wanted to create were very different. She also suggests that despite hiring “Asian consultants,” it was the show’s failure to bridge the gap between the dominant media landscape and a real Asian American experience that made the show unsuccessful.

While Cho’s stand-up act is primarily comedic, she reveals personal moments about the period of time after finding out that her show had been cancelled by ABC. She admits, “I was so tied up in the idea of that acceptance that when the show was over I fell apart, and I didn’t know who I was at all. I was...made up of bits and pieces of my old stand up act mixed with focus groups’ opinions about what Asian Americans should be, mixed with the Asian consultant. I didn’t know who I was.”³⁹ Cho struggled to find another leading role playing a character that did not take away her voice. Cho reveals in *Revolution* that she “get[s] offered movie roles all the time, but I say no, I don’t want to play a manicurist. I don’t want to play a really pissed off liquor store owner. I don’t want to play an exceptionally good student, and I do not want to get off a tour bus and

³⁹ *I'm the One That I Want*. Perf. Margaret Cho. 2000. DVD.

take numerous photographs.”⁴⁰ Cho also remarks in *Assassin*, “I don’t want to do what’s expected of me. I don’t want to do the obvious thing.”⁴¹ It is Cho’s refusal to conform that has made her independently created media of the past fifteen years so influential and resistant to dominant ideology. It is also important that Cho has recognized the marginalization of Asian Americans in her own television show, *All-American Girl*, thereby recognizing her agency as a public figure and allowing others to see the flaws in certain media portrayals of Asian Americans.

The Angry Asian Man: A Platform For Resistance

Type in the address angryasianman.com and you will quickly be met with the sole image of Quick Kick, a fictional Asian American action figure from Hasbro’s line of G.I. Joe comic books, cartoons and toys. The site’s founder, Phil Yu, has never gone on the record with why this screen cannot be bypassed. To enter the site and access Yu’s posts, the image of the site’s unofficial mascot must be clicked and it can only be speculated as to why this is. Whether or not Quick Kick was seen as a stereotype when introduced in 1985, the image of a sword-wielding martial arts black belt has been confirmed as such by actors such as Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan. Perhaps Yu wants his reader to confront this stereotype head-on each time they visit, or maybe Quick Kick simply looks like an angry Asian man. Far less ambiguous is the site’s tagline, ‘*that’s racist*,’ which he uses as commentary on instances in news, pop culture and personal experiences that depict Asian Americans in a damaging or stereotypical manner. In an interview with *KoreAm*

⁴⁰ *Revolution*. Perf. Margaret Cho. 2004. DVD.

⁴¹ *Assassin*. Perf. Margaret Cho. 2005. DVD.

Magazine, Yu recollects an instance when he a waiter asked him personally if he wanted to substitute rice for a meal that was regularly served with potatoes⁴². He says that he thought to himself, “that’s racist” yet had no outlet to vent his grievances. That was before 2001, the year in which Yu created *Angry Asian Man* as a space to talk about the discrimination that had become all too pervasive in society. Today, Yu’s website receives an average of 250,000 unique visitors per month and has become a one stop shop for those seeking relevant commentary on all things Asian American.⁴³

Phil Yu explains to *KoreAm* that “people who know me know I’m not really that angry.” He explains the reasoning behind his blog’s name--“the whole Angry persona is just a way of pushing back on the idea that Asians are the ones who always sit there and take it.”⁴⁴ Like Jeremy Lin and Margaret Cho, Yu does *not* ‘sit there an take it.’ He proves the stereotype wrong by posting commentary on news articles, promoting Asian American actors, authors and musicians, advertising internships with Asian American organizations and putting out calls for submissions to art shows, conferences and film festivals. His blog serves as a meeting place for people to become more familiar with Asian American issues and inspire activism. In an interview with the Yale Daily News Yu says, “a large part of what I try to convince people of is that there is no one American experience, as much as some people would like to force that upon somebody. There’s no

⁴² "Mad Man: Meet Blogger Phil Yu." *KoreAm*. 1 Nov. 2010. Web. 26 Mar. 2012.
<<http://iamkoream.com/angry-asian-man/>>.

⁴³ "Philip Yu: Angry Asian Man." *Northwestern Magazine*. Web. 4 Apr. 2012.
<<http://www.northwestern.edu/magazine/winter2011/alumni/close-ups/philip-yu-angry-asian-man.html>>.

⁴⁴ "Mad Man: Meet Blogger Phil Yu." *KoreAm*. 1 Nov. 2010. Web. 26 Mar. 2012.
<<http://iamkoream.com/angry-asian-man/>>.

one kind of Asian American.”⁴⁵ By compiling diverse experiences of Asian Americans, *Angry Asian Man* puts pressure on racial stereotypes. While the title of his blog sounds aggressive, Yu makes his objective clear—Asian Americans are a growing community that deserves to be heard as much as any other group in America. Yu’s blog has and continues to contribute to the Asian American subculture by providing what Hebdidge refers to as the “presence of difference” to dominant culture.

Yu’s stance on popular culture may be humorous at times, but it is clear that the most powerful tool he has is agency. In the spring of 2002, nationwide clothing retailer Abercrombie & Fitch stocked its shelves with a t-shirt featuring a faux-ad for Wong Brothers Laundry Service. Two smiling Asian men wearing conical Asian hats were depicted on the front next to the slogan, “Two Wongs Can Make it White.” An Asian American student group at Stanford University started a boycott of the shirt and Yu posted a photo of it on his blog along with corporate contact information prompting thousands to act fast. Abercrombie & Fitch apologized and removed the product from their sales floor. Incidents of racism happen often, and are frequently dismissed as light ethnic humor or unintentional. As discussed in chapter two, such instances further manifest Asian American stereotypes regardless of intent. On February 28, 2012, *Angry Asian Man* called the public’s attention to a new pop-up restaurant in Philadelphia which had been garnering buzz not for its food but rather for its name: Roundeye Noodle Bar. The restaurant was self-described as a “hip noodle spot” started by two “white boys from the suburbs,” its name referring to themselves. Advocacy group Asian Americans United

⁴⁵ Shin, Ah Joo. “'Angry Asian Man' Blogger Talks Stereotypes.” *Yale Daily News*. 21 Mar. 2011. Web. 4 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.yaledailynews.com/news/2011/mar/21/angry-asian-man-blogger-talks-stereotypes/>>.

took issue with the restaurant's name, calling it racist. Executive director Ellen Somekowa wrote, "if you grow up Asian in America, there is no more common put down than ridicule of the shape of our eyes. There is no way to hear the name, 'Roundeye,' without at the same time hearing what it is being contrasted to...a very hurtful racist slur—slanteyes."⁴⁶ Organizer Helen Gym added, "I don't think the owners of 'Roundeye' had specific intent, but that's exactly the problem with racial stereotypes—they're so deeply ingrained people don't even question it."⁴⁷ There is a poll on the side of this online article on the Philadelphia Inquirer website which asks, "Is the name 'Roundeye Noodle Bar' racist?" Out of 1606 total votes, sixty-two percent of poll-takers voted 'No.'⁴⁸ It is likely that at least a few times an Asian American read the article, viewed it as racist and voted 'Yes' in the poll only to see that one thousand people thought otherwise. Perhaps they found solace in the restaurant later changing its name and the promise of progress that blogs such as *Angry Asian Man* carry by having created a successful platform for resistance that was not available two decades ago.

Yu also recognizes that these positive changes are only made possible by new technologies and spaces. He tells KoreAm, "in real life, I'm the last guy in the room to raise my hand. But technology has allowed people like me to have a voice." He continues, "if what I'm doing has helped create the confidence and sense of connection

⁴⁶ Klein, Michael. "Flap over 'Roundeye Noodle Bar'" *Philly.com*. 27 Feb. 2012. Web. 4 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.philly.com/philly/blogs/the-insider/Flap-over-Roundeye-Noodle.html>>.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ Poll taken on April 18, 2012.

that's allowed this next generation to be more comfortable in their own skin...it's all worth it."⁴⁹

Self-Broadcasting and the Media's New Paradigm: YouTube's Asian American Stars

The growing popularity of the Internet and YouTube specifically has enabled a new generation of Asian Americans to become the producers of their own representations within the social landscape. Hollywood utilizes formulas that have worked in the past for guaranteed viewership and profit maximization, but for how long will these stereotypical portrayals prevail? Often left out of mainstream film and television roles, many Asian Americans have taken advantage of new media outlets such as YouTube to exhibit their talents and provide a refreshing alternative to the media's narrow portrayals. As YouTube becomes a prominent platform for expression, a new paradigm is emerging in the way that information is being created and distributed.

Not every Asian American who produces media independently means to be culture-conscious or resistant to mainstream media's stereotypical representations. Ono and Pham argue that "Asian American independent media work might oppose and resist stereotypical representations of gender, beauty, sexuality, and identity, but may also reify, amplify, comply with, and reinforce other stereotypical and traditional notions of identity and racial essentialism, while also serving self-representational and self-affirmation purposes."⁵⁰ These artists still offer resistance by presenting a more diverse and complex

⁴⁹ "Mad Man: Meet Blogger Phil Yu." *KoreAm*. 1 Nov. 2010. Web. 26 Mar. 2012.

<<http://iamkoream.com/angry-asian-man/>>.

⁵⁰ Ono, Kent A., and Vincent N. Pham. *Asian Americans and the Media*. Cambridge, UK:

presence of Asian Americans than is currently visible in dominant culture.⁵¹ The case studies of Margaret Cho's stand-up comedy acts, Phil Yu's blog *Angry Asian Man* and YouTube stars Ryan Higa and Kevin Wu have proven their assertion true. The Internet and new media serve as a powerful vehicle for Asian American voices to be heard and as a space in which their presence can be effectively normalized.

Ryan Higa and Kevin Wu are two popular YouTube users who have gone from complete obscurity to internet superstardom with help from YouTube and their talent as comedians, singers and video producers. Higa, whose channel is called "NigaHiga," is YouTube's number two most-subscribed channel with over five million subscribers and over one billion overall video views.⁵² Wu's channel is called "KevJumba" has over two million subscribers and nearly three-hundred million overall video views.⁵³ Higa and Wu often collaborate on videos together ranging from original songs to rant videos such as Wu's "I Have to Deal with Stereotypes" in which the Taiwanese-American insists to his audience that is not cheap, nerdy or socially inept. Individually, both have made videos for Jeremy Lin's official YouTube page such as "How to Get into Harvard" which features Higa and jokingly suggests that one should get glasses and learn how to play the piano to become an ideal Ivy-League candidate. Often featured in Higa and Wu's videos are their parents and their friends, and videos are filmed in their actual homes. In many of their videos the Higa and Wu speak directly to the camera making eye contact and speaking to their viewer and thus presenting themselves in a relatable atmosphere. Their

Polity, 2009. 121. Print.

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² [youtube.com/nigahiga](https://www.youtube.com/nigahiga)

⁵³ [youtube.com/kevjumba](https://www.youtube.com/kevjumba)

videos serve as proof positive of how online video is changing the way Asian Americans are being acknowledged.

Mainstream media and Hollywood-produced representations of Asian Americans may or may not ever break free of the stereotypes deeply rooted in American culture, however it takes other channels and outlets to purvey race in the way that is most progressive toward racial equality. The internet is working to level the playing field for independent artists with YouTube as a useful medium for Asian Americans to increase their media presence without the barrier of a Hollywood casting director.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis I have argued that stereotypes of Asian Americans continue to pervade society by means of television using the examples of *All-American Girl*, *Gilmore Girls* and *Glee*. It is my belief that these stereotypes only tell part of the interesting and complex story that is the Asian American experience. Socialization of trivializing cultural beliefs such as the ‘model minority’ stereotype or that of overbearing parents arise in part due to Gerbner’s Cultivation Theory. While there is no singular shared experience amongst Asian Americans, the small percentage of lead and supporting acting roles in mainstream television suggests there is still progress to be made toward representing more diverse portrayals onscreen of the nation’s fastest growing racial group.⁵⁴

The goal of this thesis is not only to increase literacy of such Asian American archetypes but to encourage support for independent media that resist them and present examples of Asian Americans who defy them. These prejudices are disproved by stories that contradict those caricatures such as Jeremy Lin. It is clear that issues of Asian American identity are being recognized and progress is being made as evidenced by Lin’s inclusion in TIME Magazine’s 2012 list of the ‘100 Most Influential People in the World.’⁵⁵ The shifting paradigm in the media from producer-dominated to consumer-infiltrated allows nearly everyone with Internet access the opportunity to push back on

⁵⁴ "2010 Census Shows Asians Are Fastest-Growing Race Group." *United State Census*. 21 Mar. 2012. Web. 4 Apr. 2012. <<http://2010.census.gov/news/releases/operations/cb12-cn22.html>>.

⁵⁵ Duncan, Arne. "Jeremy Lin." *Time*. 18 Apr. 2012. Web. 18 Apr. 2012. <http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2111975_2111976_2111945,00.html>.

issues they feel are harmful to racial equality. This can cultivate a more aware and tolerant society.

Along with new media such as Facebook and Twitter which acted as a driving force behind 'Linsanity,' sites like YouTube and blogging platforms have opened up new means for resistance against dominant ideology of Asian Americans. The popularity of Asian American independent artists, especially in the case of Ryan Higa and Kevin Wu, should be used as an example of how popular Asian American artists can be. Becoming the number two and number seven most-subscribed channel on YouTube is no small achievement. The large following that each has accumulated demonstrates that there *is* a market for Asian Americans.

Stereotypes may always exist, however viewers should champion programming that does not manifest itself in tired archetypes of racial groups and speak out against those that do. The Internet, social media and independent media have provided a space to do so, and with its growing popularity has the potential to change America's media landscape.