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The connection between the media and popular culture is inextricably linked. What we listen to, watch and consume influences our way of life and shapes the stories that content creators tell through mass media. With digitalisation, the ways in which storytellers reach their audience have evolved significantly.

Navigating Disruption: Media Relations in the Digital Age offers an insight into this digital evolution through the eyes of a working-level journalist. This book tells the story of the seismic shift in media operations in both US and Singapore newsrooms between 2011 and 2015, when the author witnessed the cascading impact of digitalisation in newsrooms across transnational borders.

His foray into public relations—post-journalism—helped him to frame the impact of digitalisation on Singapore audiences. He shares his take on changing media consumption habits and how PR tactics have adapted to the evolving media landscape.

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MEDIA RELATIONS IN
THE DIGITAL AGE

For Review Only

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NAVIGATING DISRUPTION

**MEDIA RELATIONS IN
THE DIGITAL AGE**

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INTRODUCTION

THE IMPORTANCE OF TELLING THE SINGAPORE STORY

The year 2020 will be remembered for the COVID-19 pandemic, a crisis so profound in its impact that it has disrupted industries, healthcare systems and daily life. One by-product of the virus is how it has brought to the fore the ingrained racism in some pockets of communities around the world. Since the outbreak of infections, there has been a surge of media reports of people of East Asian appearance being targeted for racially-aggravated abuse and assault. Such cases are likely perpetuated by a wave of derogatory media reports linking China to the virus.

Among the early wave of COVID-19 stories were reports driven by nativism and xenophobia. A French newspaper, *Courrier picard*, ran a 26 January cover story with the headline “Alerte Jaune”, or “Yellow Alert”, to describe the then-epidemic’s spread in racial terms, given the Western notion that East Asians are yellow-skinned. A week later, *The Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) ran a headline that read “China Is the

Real Sick Man of Asia”. The story led to the expulsion of three WSJ journalists from their Beijing office.¹ Separately, News Corporation’s Fox News used the term “Chinese Coronavirus” in a move blaming China; it is a term that US President Trump used at one point to blame China, after a Chinese official insinuated that the virus was first introduced by the US Army. And then, there are all the reports showing images of East Asian faces wearing masks² that adds to the hysteria that Asian people are likely disease spreaders.

RACIST REPORTS HURT ASIANS IN WESTERN COMMUNITIES

The treatment given to these news reports are based on implicit allegations borne out of racist stereotypes about China: authoritarian government, unhygienic practices among the people and weird eating habits. The question is: are these stereotypes and allegations true to begin with? Was it a case of the suppressing of voices that led to a wider community spread? Maybe. But, in my visits to China and talking to mainland Chinese peers, I have seen that they are more than ready to voice out against authorities when needed.

Was it poor hygiene at wet markets and eating habits? Well, there are plenty of wet markets all around Asia and the world. The wet market is not peculiar to China. And neither is eating exotic foods.

The bottomline is this: viruses have emerged from every part of the world—H1N1 in the USA, Ebola in Africa and MERS in Saudi Arabia.

The reports described above are, therefore, irresponsible, misleading and—more importantly—dangerous to Asians in Western communities. While viruses do not discriminate by skin colour, race or nationality, the news reports make an explicit association of race and/or nationality with COVID-19. By drawing this link,

¹ WSJ (2020).

² Carroll, L. (2020).

these reports can potentially cause harm to Asians living in Western communities, because it gives the impression that any Chinese person is a potential disease carrier and responsible for spreading the illness to the community.

JOURNALISM ETHICS AND INTEGRITY: ACCURACY, OBJECTIVITY AND MINIMISING HARM

In journalism school, students are taught ethical principles of accuracy, impartiality, objectivity and, more importantly, the minimising of harm.³ The purpose of journalism is virtuous in nature—it is to inform and educate readers of what is happening around them, so that they can make informed choices. These practices can be linked to theories such as Mill’s Principle of Utility and Rawl’s Veil of Ignorance. The former adopts a consequentialist frame of thinking, whereby the goal is of utility—obtaining the “greatest good for the greatest number”.⁴ Rawl’s veil of ignorance, on the other hand, is a fairness experiment—the masking of socio-cultural factors such as income status, race, and gender in decision making.⁵ This theoretically ensures unbiased reporting as the reporter is obliged to walk in the shoes of the less privileged subject.

In practice, responsible journalism is not always adhered to, even in esteemed news organisations. While inflammatory reports may not directly contribute to abuse, the stories blaming China certainly perpetuate the unfair targeting. The surge in media reports of East Asian-looking people living in Western countries being targeted with COVID-19-related physical and verbal abuse is evidence of the kind of discrimination facing Asians. Trained journalists have a duty to disabuse readers of their bias and educate them.

Reporting through a Western value lens: Cultural stereotypes

The question, then, is why would journalists from esteemed news

³ Spj.org. n.d.

⁴ Christians, C., Fackler, M., McKee, K. and Kreshel, P., 2004.

⁵ Farnam Street. n.d.

organisations write headlines and stories that inflame hatred and mislead?

I think the problem is that Western newsrooms rely on stereotypical cultural narratives and old ideas of the region, because of a lack of knowledge of Asia. I explore such biased reporting in the international newsgathering system in chapter 3, where I describe my life as a TV news producer. This is perhaps a reflection of the ingrained bias the mainstream community has of Asian people as being perpetually foreign, but it does not make the racist reports any less harmful.

Hence, with Asia-related stories of COVID-19, the tendency is to lean on the narrative trope that China is an authoritarian foreign threat. This idea was born in the Cold War era when the US-backed nationalist Kuomintang were defeated by the communists in China, and the United States led a containment strategy to curb the communist influence in Asia.

Adopting old-world views is lazy and takes the path of sensationalism. Journalism is prone to sensationalist tendencies, to pique readers' attention. To attract a mass audience, news outlets typically need to create a connection with viewers through conventional themes and cultural stereotypes. This could be in the form of over dramatising an issue, linking it with prominent persons like celebrities, and drawing on the widespread idea that China is a military and economic threat to the US.

THE LACK OF SPECIFICITY IN THE HEADLINE OF THE CNN REPORT ON JONATHAN MOK

In early March 2020, Singaporean student Jonathan Mok revealed via Facebook he was the target of a 'racially aggravated' attack in

London. The assailants had allegedly told him: “We don’t want your coronavirus in our country.”⁶ When CNN picked up Mok’s story, the news outlet described the man as a “Chinese student”, revising it later to “East Asian”.⁷ This was following reader comments and internal correction emails from employees to correctly identify him as Singaporean. The CNN editor eventually kept to the “East Asian” description in the headline to describe Jonathan, a term equally inaccurate.

The term “Chinese student” is not technically wrong, but it is very misleading—similar to calling an African American man “African”. An African American is distinct from an African, just as an Irish American is distinct from an Irishman from Dublin. There are ethnic Chinese people all over the world. Many of these communities have lived in their respective countries for centuries. The responsible way would be to state the nationality for accuracy.

“East Asian” is even more inaccurate. Singapore is not in East Asia. It is in Southeast Asia. In the US, however, the term “East Asian” is used to describe people of Chinese, Japanese and Korean descent; likewise, “South Asian” is used to describe people from the Indian subcontinent. Nevertheless, the term “East Asian student” is wrong because Jonathan is not from East Asia. Based on Jonathan’s CNA938 interview, he speaks with a Singaporean accent and was raised in Singapore.

This CNN story provides yet again another example of little care with accuracy for Asian-related subject matter. At least to me, it is important that the world see what a Singaporean face looks like, and I highly doubt if other Singaporeans think of ourselves as “East Asian”. I could argue that the CNN editor retained “East Asian student” possibly to make the headline understandable to an American readership. But this

⁶ BBC News (2020).

⁷ Guy, C. (2020).

is still inaccurate. A quick fix would be to say that Jonathan is of “East Asian descent” or “Asian”, but a better solution would be to educate Americans about the diversity of Asia, and especially Southeast Asia.

The lesson for me is that we need more storytelling about Singapore. This CNN report proves my point. In my opening chapter, I share how American society in general does not know much about Southeast Asia and Singapore. Many Singaporeans who venture outside of Asia will find that their part of the world is little known. Singapore needs to keep telling stories about itself to the world.

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PART I

HOW DIGITALISATION TRANSFORMED THE NEWSROOM

CHAPTER I

THE GLOBAL DOMINANCE OF US MEDIA

*A broad picture of my time as a journalism major
in the USA and how that experience
opened my eyes to America's influence in the world.*

It was the July of 2007 when I departed Singapore for Chicago. The night before, I laid awake in bed in my very familiar bedroom, covered in familiar sheets, mired in feelings of intense trepidation. I was afraid that the alarm would sound to signal the dying hours of my time in Singapore. I was afraid of uprooting from the comfort of my home, and leaving my parents for the longest period of time since they brought me into this world. A confluence of factors had also swayed me in my motivation to study abroad.

On 16 April 2007, Korean American Seung-Hui Cho killed 32 people and injured 17 others in the Virginia Tech massacre. There was some concern, at least on my part, that there might be reprisals against East Asian-looking people in the States. And then, there was my aunt who was based in D.C., who passed away earlier that year. Her presence there and her support were big factors in my decision to study in the States. Her death spelt grief and uncertainty. But despite these events, I soldiered on.

Before I left Singapore, I had yearned to ‘escape’ the city-state, and toyed with the idea of embracing an Asian American identity instead of Singaporean.

Between the months from post-National Service to the start of freshman year, I had taken up a job as a writer for town council and ministry publications. I was out trailing ministers and Members of Parliament (MP) for block visits, meet-the-people sessions, and citizenship ceremonies, among the many grassroots events.

One day after interviewing an up-and-coming MP about a new environmental community project, the man turned to me and asked: “So are you planning to return to SG?”

I was very familiar with this MP as I had interviewed him on multiple occasions as part of my work covering the town council’s activities. During one of our conversations, I revealed that I was leaving Singapore for overseas study.

“I hope not,” I replied. “I would prefer to work in the States, at least for a couple of years.”

“You’ll be missing out,” he said. “There’s so much happening here.”

This was a period when the government was trying to create the image of Singapore as a hip nightlife destination, replete with bar-top dancing and the island’s inaugural Singapore Biennale art exhibition.

The MP continued. “We are building the integrated resorts. And next year, we’re going to be hosting the F1 night races. Singapore is where you want to be.”

One of his minders, a grey-haired senior grassroots leader, interjected in a hushed tone: “There is still plenty of racism in the US,” he said. “Don’t take my word for it, but it’s not going to be easy to be accepted.”

The grassroots leader was a familiar face in the MPs’ weekend activities with constituents. He was known to move around with a slight limp, while relying on a walking stick. His words would resound in my head as the day of departure grew closer.

Before I left Singapore for the States, I noticed a conspicuous surge in the number of diverse faces throughout the city and on public transport. It appeared as if Singapore had opened the flood gates to foreigners. And, now, I was going to experience being in their shoes, living life in a foreign land.

• • •

I was born in the rural American town of Upland, Indiana, where my parents’ life as a wedded couple began. Dad was a college student there, and Mom decided to join him for an adventure of a lifetime. They got married in a small church in 1983 and I was born two years later.

My family has long been rooted in Southeast Asia. My ancestors settled in Borneo, Sumatra and Singapore for generations, after leaving Xiamen, Kinmen and Shantou. Some married locals of Peranakan heritage. Over the generations, my paternal and maternal grandparents converged in Singapore.

My parents spoke English at home, as well as a smattering of Hokkien. As such, growing up, I tended to avoid mixing with kids who spoke Mandarin because I could not converse well with them. This led to a slight disdain for the language and culture.

That changed when I experienced the sting of racism during my time in the States. As a member of a minority, you learn about identity and race very quickly because of how mainstream culture puts you in a box. This happened day-to-day through a non-malicious form of racism: being stereotyped as smart, hardworking, good with math and science, and socially inept.

And then, there's the in-your-face yelling and drive-by taunting using racial slurs. It didn't matter that I was Singaporean Chinese. I looked East Asian and, therefore, Chinese. What I saw as Sinophobia was, thus, unloaded upon me. One incident during a grocery shopping trip stood out: while waiting in line to pay for our items at a crowded supermarket, a middle-aged Caucasian stranger glared at myself and a friend in disgust. He launched an expletive-laden tirade, yelling that he "hated Chinese people". He had probably overheard us speaking in Mandarin.

I read about racism and race relations in US society, through blogs such as Angry Asian Man, and film and TV content. Of course, nothing beats actually having a taste of being singled out as the 'Other'.

Despite all this, my time in the US was overwhelmingly positive. For every negative encounter, there were many more positive experiences with hospitable Americans from all walks of life, who impressed me with their bountiful optimism and warmth.

My time overseas made me acutely aware of my skin colour and racial identity. This is something that would be harder to learn if one were to be part of the majority community. It helped me to reconcile with my heritage by instilling a curiosity to find out about China's history, the global Chinese diaspora and my ancestral roots.

I also began to long for my home, Singapore, and naturally assumed a role as an ambassador for the city-state.

STUDENT JOURNALISM

My four years in college were spent mostly in print newsrooms. One of the first things I did at Indiana University (IU) was to join the campus newspaper, where I got to meet many of my peers who had been exposed for years to reporting and editing. Some of these folks swiftly became the stars of the newsroom, pushing out a high volume of quality work.

My first stint at IU student media was as the city/state reporter, where I covered news of the food donation drives and the Obama fundraising efforts in Indiana. I would go on to hold a variety of roles in campus publications, including writing a column and editing the yearbook. Subsequently, I branched out from student media and became an intern reporter for *IU Alumni Magazine* and major city news broadsheets, the *Herald-Times* and the *Courier-Journal*. These experiences gave me a platform to voice my opinions freely and enabled me to meet Americans from all walks of life.

A striking memory of someone I interviewed was a director overseeing the study abroad programmes. This was for a new scholarship to help students go on overseas exchanges. She told me how her experience going on an exchange programme opened her eyes to America's vast influence in the world. I was struck because it occurred to me, there and then, that for Singaporeans who are based in the US, we, conversely, learn how little Americans and the international community knew about us.

“Is Singapore in China?”

“Do you have household appliances like washing machines?”

“Do your laws include chopping off the hands of thieves?”

These are just some of the questions posed to myself and fellow Singaporeans. There was a huge deficit in knowledge and understanding.

An Asian American peer of mine summed it up best. When I mentioned in class that I was from Singapore, he quipped dismissively that my country was one of those “unknown Asian countries”.

True enough. Fast forward to 2018: when President Donald Trump met North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in Singapore, one of the top Google searches was “Where is Singapore”.¹

CULTURAL LEARNINGS: THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SINGAPOREANS AND AMERICANS

A critical difference between American and Singapore culture is that Americans have a culture of openly expressing themselves, their individualism, opinions, and protecting their rights and freedoms. American society is an individualistic one, where the popular narrative is that the individual can overcome the system.

In my four years of living in the US, it was not unusual for strangers to strike up a conversation on public transport or greet one another. But the flip side of this openness is that sometimes racist and sexist people start to shoot their mouths and taunt and insult others. Women are more likely to get sexually harassed on the streets; minorities have to worry about being unfairly targeted because of their skin colour.

This was the case in 2001 following the 9/11 attacks, when Arab-looking people were targeted for abuse, and in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic when Asians were the victims of discrimination.

¹ *The Straits Times* (2018).

Collectivism vs Individualism

While Singapore may be known as a gateway between East and West, its culture is collectivist. There is a bit of a herd mindset, wherein people follow the well-defined path taken by many others, instead of experimenting and being original. That said, each generation defines its values, and it remains to be seen how Gen-Y and Gen-Z—Singaporeans under 40—will transform society.

One reason for this general social difference is, perhaps, in Singapore's laws. While our founding leaders helped guide Singapore to be a prosperous nation, they did so with policies that curtailed freedom of expression. These include the Newspaper and Printing Press Act, the Films Act and Broadcasting Act, which gives the government powers to determine who could provide information to the masses.

For digital media, there is the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA)² and the licensing framework implemented in 2014 for news websites with a certain following and output. Some of these websites were liable to “post a performance bond of \$50,000” and adhere to a code of conduct against publishing “pornographic content, extremist messages and racially or religiously-insensitive content”.³

These regulations, while useful in ensuring that national interests take priority, serves to engender a society reliant on tried-and-tested conditions and a climate of sterility within the confines of the public conversation.

Within the creative industry, I believe it has a limiting effect on the range of production choices and the variety of creative output. The government is known to clamp down on the expression of sensitive topics like race, religion and politics, citing national interest to justify its actions.

² Details of POFMA in chapter 8

³ Gov.sg (2019).

In the case of Sonny Liew's graphic novel *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*, the National Arts Council withdrew a grant in 2015 prior to the book's launch because of politically sensitive material.⁴ With Swedish black metal band, Watain, the Ministry of Home Affairs cancelled its 2019 concert in Singapore at the last minute, citing religious insensitivity.⁵ Later in 2019, the Singapore police gave YouTuber Preeti and her brother a warning for making a racially offensive video in response to a 'brown face' e-payments ad.⁶

Such actions could have a chilling effect on the creative industry, because it shows that the government can make things very difficult for creatives if the content is judged to be against the regulations. This sets up a barrier whereby creatives would rather self-censor than freely express themselves, knowing that the government can destroy their efforts at any stage, by cancelling and suspending licences, fining companies and banning content.

At the street level, Singaporeans' coffeeshop talk can be freewheeling and critical of the government. But in an officious environment, I believe we are inclined to be careful in choosing our words. I must qualify by saying that aggrieved Singaporeans still speak up and people do rally at Speakers' Corner in Hong Lim Park.

Whereas in the United States, the US Constitution's First Amendment very clearly states that its Congress cannot make any laws curtailing speech and the media.

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

⁴ Yong, C. (2019).

⁵ CNA (2019).

⁶ CNA (2019).

This freedom is a foundation of American culture, which starts from child-raising years. Parents typically treat their young child like adults, reasoning with them about why they should not do certain things. I have witnessed a second aunt of mine who is based in the States taking tremendous pains to persuade my young nephew, her son, on what is right and wrong, and never once talking down to him. I cannot imagine a parent in Singapore making that effort. They may instead use the pain of corporal punishment to keep the young rascal in line.

I believe freedom to speak up and have a robust debate, without fear of reprisals, is a key element in enabling a vibrant creative scene and increasing soft power.

THE GLOBAL DOMINANCE OF US MEDIA

American political scientist Joseph Nye, who is credited for coining the term ‘soft power’, identified three areas as the source of soft power: culture, political values and foreign policy. Freedom of expression is derived from democracy and is a fundamental aspect of American society, along with individualism and optimism. In my interactions with Americans, I can say that validation and being positive comes naturally to many. Ultimately, it is freedom of expression, I believe, that is the backbone of the dominant American media industry, whose films, TV dramas and music are so pervasive in global urban culture.

We live in a world where culture is shaped by economic powers, whose perspective and worldviews are spread through their news outlets (e.g., The Associated Press, BBC, CNN, AFP and Reuters), movies (Hollywood, anime) and music (American pop music, K-pop). But there is no other nation that can match the might of the United States in setting the tone of the stories we read and the

key messages that shape public opinion. The world's sole superpower triumphs over all other countries in setting the cultural tone with media brands such as Disney (Marvel Cinematic Universe), HBO (*Game of Thrones*), *The New York Times* and Netflix, among the big names.

Film and television

The United States' supersized role in the global media system can be traced back to the late 1990s, with the rise of cable and satellite technology. American media scholar Robert W. McChesney noted that this was a period when the world saw a sea change in the media ecosystem, shifting from national media systems to a 'global oligopoly' revolving around the US system. Since then, a consolidation akin to that of the oil and automotive oligarchies has taken place, resulting in the emergence of three major companies: Time Warner, News Corporation and Disney.⁷

More than 20 years later, we still see Disney's immense influence in the global box office and in Singapore. According to a 2019 MarketLine report, "US-produced content dominates the box office in Singapore, with all of the top 10 movies in 2018 being US-made." The leading player in the market is Walt Disney, which owns "five out of the top 10 highest grossing movies at the Singaporean box office in 2018".⁸

As for television content, let me borrow an analogy from Chinese-Malaysian stand-up comedian Ronny Chieng: in a digital video with YouTubers Fung Brothers, he shared about how he was thrilled to get on US television because "TV in America is like the NBA of TV," an analogy to the professional basketball ecosystem where NBA is the highest of global leagues.⁹

⁷ Thussu, D. (2010).

⁸ MarketLine (2019).

⁹ Fung Bros (2019).

RISING VOICES AROUND THE WORLD

There are exceptions in Asia and beyond. The Korean film industry found validation with Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* clinching the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2020; K-pop, too, has somewhat eclipsed American pop music in many Asian and non-US markets. Bollywood is still probably bigger in India than Hollywood films. Japanese video games and anime/manga—Sanrio and the Pokémon franchises—has a huge international appeal. Nigeria has a fledgling movie industry. And China, with hit drama *Story of Yanxi Palace* and the film *Wandering Earth*, has shown the world that it can export its content to a regional audience and science-fiction mega blockbusters can also be made in Asia.

Among news providers, Qatar's Al Jazeera has done a good job pushing the Middle Eastern perspective. China's CGTN and China Daily have been trying to build up a positive reputation of the mainland, while Russia Today has stood up as an alternative voice among the American broadcast news media voices.

THE CREATIVE COMMUNITY'S ROLE

It is easy to argue that the US's position as the world's sole superpower gives it immense leverage to influence world affairs and shape public opinion. But that is just half the story. What I think cannot avoid mentioning is the role of the American creative community in fuelling innovation. I believe freedom of expression fuels creativity, and creativity fuels innovation, and the country is rich in innovative companies such as Apple, Google, Facebook, Tesla and SpaceX, among others.

I think Joseph Nye says it best when he quoted a French foreign minister's observation that Americans are powerful because they

“inspire the dreams and desires of others, thanks to the mastery of global images through film and television”. High-profile creatives around the world are known to have drawn inspiration from the United States, including big-time film directors like Bong Joon-ho and Wong Kar-wai. As the rest of the world fights for a slice of the pie in the global media and entertainment scene, the US will remain a creative benchmark.

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CHAPTER 2

THE ROAD TO LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

My journalism advocacy work for the Asian and Asian American student community helped me secure a scholarship and newspaper internship in Louisville, Kentucky. There, I witnessed a dark chapter in my paper's legacy.

The glass facade of Indiana University's Assembly Hall gleamed in the late morning sun, as thousands of graduating seniors packed the 17,000-seater indoor stadium,¹ along with proud family and friends. The iconic venue is known as the home of Indiana basketball and hosts the university's competitive NCAA basketball games, among other sporting meets. But on the morning of 7 May, this venue was the site of the 2011 summer commencement ceremony.

That day, I stood among my peers from the school of journalism and recited the pledge of allegiance as well as sang to the "The Star-Spangled Banner", before receiving my certificate. On the same night, I crashed on the sofa in a friend's apartment. The lease on my campus apartment ended when I switched from being a student to alumni, rendering me temporarily homeless. I would

¹ Seating capacity of Indiana University's Assembly Hall in 2011 was 17,472 (Hutchens, T., 2016).

have slept in my car, but it was filled to the brim with my furniture and household items, following a three-hour drive to Louisville, Kentucky.

I was on the cusp of a new life as an intern reporter for a big-city newspaper, the *Courier-Journal* (CJ), and was due to leave my campus home of four years the very next morning. The weeks prior to graduation day were a frenetic period for me, as I coped with final papers and projects as well as planning for the big move.

The CJ had a more than 150-year legacy as the premium regional source of news, for both Kentucky and southern Indiana. Getting selected for this internship was one of the milestones in my college career, as the newspaper was known for attracting talented individuals from across the region. The internship would be the most rewarding working experience in my four years in the US, because it would be the first time moving out of the college environment of Bloomington, Indiana for an extended period, and getting to know a new community up close.

LOUISVILLE: THE CITY OF THE STEED

Compared to my college town (well, technically, a city) of Bloomington, Louisville seemed like a metropolis—a city of over a million residents. Its most famous resident was boxing legend Muhammad Ali. There is even a Muhammad Ali Center, a museum memorialising the boxer.

The city is also known for being the home of Yum! Brands, parent company of fast-food chain Kentucky Fried Chicken. Most notably, though, is the city's love for horses, because of the annual Kentucky Derby horse race.

Over the course of three months in Louisville, I would grow familiar and fond of the city both through my leisure explorations and work assignments. One stormy night, I was sent to video record damage done to Churchill Downs, the iconic venue of the Kentucky Derby, when a tornado struck the site. I had stayed past office hours working on a story, when the newsroom received a tip-off that the famous venue had been damaged. The editor marched to my desk, interrupting me while I had earphones plugged in to music and in the midst of drafting a story. With one foot planted on my desk, he leaned forward and gave me instructions to do a drive-around and filming of Churchill Downs.

Armed with a handheld video recorder (mobile video functions weren't as souped-up then), I drove into the 'danger zone' aided by my GPS. Sirens were blaring in the area, a warning for residents to stay indoors. The streets were sparse and dimly lit. Louisville's streets are never that busy, even during peak hours. That night, the vehicles out in full force were mostly fire trucks and police cars. I saw trees that were felled by the strong winds, and several areas cordoned off. As I drove alongside the venue I could barely see the damage to Churchill Downs. The conspicuous spire structures were intact. I would later learn that it was the barn roof housing the horses that were damaged.²

My video was subsequently posted on CJ's Twitter account. It was a poor recording attempt, because I was not able to capture any significant damage. To do so, one would have to be airborne to see damage to the barn. The local TV news channel, WLKY News Louisville, was able to film this via helicopter footage.³ Nevertheless, I relished bringing out my camera to supplement my written reports, and it helped increase my profile among the editors.

² Reuters (2011).

³ WLKY News Louisville (2011).

After I filed stories, I would sit at the photo desk office through the night to edit a 2–3 minute clip to complement the story for the website. This wasn't asked of me, but I did it as a means of practising what I had learned during my mobile journalism course in Vanderbilt University. Little did I know that this would help me when I eventually went into broadcast news when I returned to Singapore.

Chips Quinn Scholars Program for Diversity in Journalism

The road to Louisville started with my advocacy work as a student journalist, shining the spotlight on Asian and Asian American issues. As part of the internship, I was also awarded a scholarship with a partnering programme, the Chips Quinn Scholars Program for Diversity in Journalism. The scholarship made it possible for me to work in Louisville by offering a comfortable salary for the duration of the internship as well as a week-long mobile journalism training at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. The programme is an effort to increase diversity in American newsrooms. I believe I was selected because of an interest in covering Asian and Asian American issues in the student community, as was evident in my portfolio of journalism work.

Nashville, Tennessee is a city that I immediately fell in love with. I was among a batch 23 scholars who were there from 15–24 May in 2011.⁴ We called ourselves Chipsters. The training sessions were structured like university journalism programmes, only more intensive. Every day we'd attend lectures by industry leaders and experienced journalists, many who were alumni of the Chips Quinn programme. The lectures were followed by practical exercises that saw students venture out to the city to do actual reporting, applying the skills learned. We'd go out and tweet, blog and film interesting happenings around the city,

⁴ Pnewswire.com (2011).

including approaching people on the streets, to request for interviews. Each day of the programme was an adventure.



The summer 2011 batch of Chips Quinn scholars. I am fourth from the left in the back row.

(Photo courtesy of the Freedom Forum, 2011.)

Nashville is a city steeped in arts and culture, and widely known as the home of country music. It also has a vibrant nightlife scene, filled with bars playing live music. When I was there, the likeness of Elvis Presley was found in every corner and it was hard to miss folks wearing cowboy boots and hats. Of all the US cities I visited, Nashville felt like the real America—the heartland of this great country.

Having the company of my fellow Chipsters—these young, passionate minority journalists—made the experience that much more special. The gang would go gallivanting after class to tour the city and its many nightspots; other nights we'd congregate at a designated Chipster's room for a get-together. My roommate was an African American Chipster, who'd go on to roles such as the Editor

for *Sports Illustrated* and, presently, as Director of Digital Sports for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Both of us had a shared passion for basketball and we'd catch the broadcast of NBA games after class.

GIVING ASIANS AND ASIAN AMERICANS A VOICE

My time in college was split between two key areas: my journalism work and my advocacy work in Asian and Asian American student affairs.

Understanding the Asian American experience was my way of learning more about this new culture and community I was a part of. Too often, people outside of America see a version of US culture that reflects merely that of white and black America. But the country is so much more: it is a societal melting pot that includes Latinos, Native Americans and Pacific Islanders.

The Asian American experience is unique in its history and issues affecting the community. For example, a generation of Asian Americans who are baby-boomers and older would remember the Japanese American internment during World War II. Those in the generation after that—the Gen-X-ers—would be familiar with the murder of Vincent Chin in 1982, who was bludgeoned by folks who initially assumed he was Japanese. At the time, there was tension between the US and Japan, with Americans fearing their economy would get upstaged by rising Japanese manufacturing prowess.

From the mid-1980s to the 1990s, there was an influx of immigrants from Asia that were typically highly educated and skilled.⁵ These were the medical doctors, academic researchers, IT engineers and so on. This created a 'model minority' stereotype that exists in the

⁵ Barringer, F. (1990).

US public consciousness. As I write this in December 2019, Asian American entertainers and former US presidential candidate, Andrew Yang, would continue to leverage the model minority stereotype to connect with audiences.⁶

While the model minority is a positive stereotype, it puts undue psychological stress and pressure on Asian youth who are not successful and not inclined to perform well in math or science.⁷ It also disadvantages the Asian sub-groups—i.e. the Hmong, Cambodian and Vietnamese—that are not as well-off, in that they may get left behind for aid and other forms of government and charitable support because they get lumped under the ‘model minority’ label.

Asian representation in US media

Unlike Singapore, US media is very much run by private interests, and content that sells is what keeps getting produced. This seemingly unfettered media environment can create inequality in culture and public opinion, because narratives that hinge on stereotypes are pushed out on steroids.

In Singapore’s controlled media environment, there is a healthy dichotomy of Asian and Western cultural products, and children are raised in an environment where they have role models in their own ethnic communities. Each race has its vernacular media outlets catered to them, with the goal of achieving positive socialisation into Singapore society.

US media has had a history of poor representations of Asians on the big screen, right up to recent years. Asian representation in US popular culture and entertainment have tended to play up the exoticism and uglier stereotypes of Asians. Characters tend to be

⁶ *South China Morning Post* (2019).

⁷ Teo, B. (2009).

foreign, and menacing for men (Fu Manchu and angry kung fu fighters), while overtly sexual for women (prostitutes and subservient love interests).

Things have somewhat evolved, thanks to advocacy by Asian Americans to reflect their representation more positively. I was thrilled that a major Hollywood studio would bankroll a film like *Crazy Rich Asians*, casting an Asian male as the romantic lead. On American TV, you'll find television productions where they'll intentionally cast Asian characters in more progressive roles, but the efforts are few and far between. Even in recent times, there's still the scourge of 'yellowface' and 'whitewashing', with major studios still thinking it is okay to produce big-budget movies such as 2012's *Cloud Atlas*,⁸ 2015's *Aloha* and 2017's *Ghost in the Shell*.⁹

In the above-mentioned Hollywood films, characters who are Asian in origin are played by white characters. This is known as 'whitewashing'. I can only speculate that the decision to do so was because the studio executives probably thought that casting a white actor would have a more mass-market appeal. In the case of *Cloud Atlas*, the white actors had facial prosthetics in several scenes, particularly in the eyes, to make them look Asian. Those scenes were repulsive. I tried to give the film a chance, but I had to stop midway as I could not stomach the 'yellowface' scenes. I can only imagine the uproar if the character was black and a white actor had done 'blackface' instead. The African American community would be up in arms.

Being Asian in America

As one of the smallest minority groups in the US, Asian voices and representation in popular culture is often lacking. Walking the streets of most American cities, seeing an Asian face on billboards

⁸ Manaa.org (2013).

⁹ Lee, E. (2019).

and public ad spaces are rare. And every time I spot an Asian face on an advertisement, it would pique my interest because it is just such a novelty.

Popular culture aside, America under the Obama administration was an exciting time for Asian Americans, as the number of Asians in the US cabinet swelled, with a record representation: there was former Ambassador to China and Secretary of Commerce, Gary Locke; Cabinet Secretary, Christopher Lu; Energy Secretary, Steven Chu; and Secretary of Veteran Affairs, Eric Shinseki. But this has almost been reversed in President Trump's White House.

In the fields of business, science and technology, Asian Americans have done exceedingly well. Silicon Valley is known to rely on the skills of a large Asian and Asian American workforce, but their stories are rarely in the national headlines.

In entertainment and sports, basketballer Jeremy Lin fired up Asians all over the world by leading the New York Knicks' brief winning streak known as 'Linsanity', while social media brought a new generation of young Asian American stars into the public eye. YouTube, in particular, became a platform for comedy sketches, music and acting talent to connect with their audiences. I share more about this phenomenon in chapter 5.

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Still, the stories of Asian Americans making strides are rarely told in mainstream media, and many of the injustices in society do not get the attention needed. Hence, I wanted to be an advocate for publicising issues related to Asian and Asian Americans and served as a committee member of the university's Asian American Association, overseeing communication and public relations.

For a year, I also worked part-time at the office of the Asian American studies programme, where I helped raise awareness of the academic course. As part of the efforts, I was involved with bringing in Chinese American MSNBC news anchor, Richard Lui, to be the keynote speaker during the Asian American heritage month. In my youth, I had seen Richard present the news on Channel NewsAsia briefly. Thus, I pitched to the university administrators to have him come to Bloomington, to share more about diversity in America.

Meanwhile, in my work as a journalist, I covered a 2009 assault and robbery case on a group of Korean students on campus. I was then an intern reporter for the *Herald-Times*, Bloomington city's newspaper of record. The incident had alarmed the student community, but the sentiment among students was that the authorities were not putting in enough resources to catch the culprits, who were still at large.

I remember attending a town hall meeting organised by the police community relations team, which was held to assure the students that justice would be done. I interviewed students who expressed their concerns and pressed for more police action. While I knew I had to write a balanced piece, my goal was to raise awareness of the attacks and I interviewed multiple students to capture their voices.

As a columnist for the *Indiana Daily Student*, I highlighted the ill-effects of the model minority stereotype, one of them being the higher-than-average rate of suicides among Asian Americans in US colleges. My column was based on a study by Cornell University. To corroborate the findings, I interviewed a Singaporean professor of counseling psychology, Joel Wong, who shared:

“Asian-Americans may have elevated levels of perfectionism and this creates undue pressure to do well in college. This is a result of number one: expectations of others, including classmates

and parents; and number two: pressure when it (the belief) is internalized—Asian Americans setting unduly high standards for themselves.”

These are just some of my stories covering the Asian community in the US. Where possible, I would always take the opportunity to pitch Asian-related stories for whichever paper I was with.

At the *Courier-Journal* I wrote one a whole range of topics, but business stories seemed to be my forte. My byline appeared on stories about small-and-medium enterprises, property and the electricity market. When I had the opportunity to work on a feature story, I decided to write about Asian markets in the city of Louisville. My reporting noted that there was an increase in ethnic Asian business, which represented a growing trend of Asian immigrants into the Louisville community.

This was a fun story and I enjoyed going to the different markets to recce and to interview the business owners, starting with the oldest. I did some research, interviewed a representative of the Kentucky chapter of the Organization of Chinese Americans, and discovered that this title belonged to Dixie Oriental Food and Gifts Market, a Korean-owned shop.

While I do not know exactly what impact my stories had on the community, I was just glad that I was able to provide coverage of a minority group that was usually marginalised by mainstream media.

LAYOFFS HIT THE CJ

The internship in Louisville opened my eyes to the cold, harsh reality of the corporate world. Within a month into my internship, I would witness a retrenchment exercise unfold in front of my eyes in the CJ newsroom.

On 21 June 2011, some 50 employees of the CJ were laid off, including half this number from the newsroom.¹⁰ In one fell swoop, the soon-to-be retrenched staff members were called into the office that morning and asked to pack up and leave the same day.

From my desk, I could see colleagues getting summoned to the human resources department. I noticed some returning to their seats later, visibly troubled. I remember turning to a fellow intern in the newsroom and gesturing at her as if saying, “What on earth is happening?” She looked back quizzically and shrugged.

The tension and bitterness in the office became palpable when we could hear sobbing from the far reaches of the office. And then it became obvious that people were getting laid off when those directly around me were affected.

One colleague, an African American lady seated a couple of desks behind me, started bawling at her desk as she packed her belongings.

An Asian gentleman—a management executive with a bigger window office—was also seen packing. I realised this when a colleague entered his office to wish him well. I vaguely remember him taking down a painting of a horse from his wall.

On that day, the digital team sent a cryptic tweet noting that it was a dark day at the newsroom. I followed the CJ on Twitter and noticed the tweet on the official Twitter handle, a rare post reporting the inner working of the newsroom as opposed to what’s happening in the world. The newspaper had become the news. From the smiles that typically greeted me in the office, the newsroom had become a morose environment.

¹⁰ Gannett to lay off 700 newspaper workers. (2011).



A town hall meeting was called at the newsroom later in the afternoon, after the retrenched staff had left. And I got to see the man who would face the ‘mob’—then-president and publisher of the CJ.

Murmurs of disgruntlement rippled through the staff gathered for the address.

While I don’t remember what he said exactly, I recall the publisher’s poise and bluster, as he faced off some angry reactions from the crowd calling out corporate greed.

A clue as to what the publisher conveyed can be found in a memo to CJ staff that day, citing a letter from the president of parent company Gannett’s publishing division. According to *The New York Times’* Media Decoder blog, this letter flagged “disappointing midyear advertising figures” as the reason behind the layoffs sweeping Gannett’s newspapers, including Louisville’s:

“As we reach the midpoint of the year, the economic recovery is not happening as quickly or favorably as we had hoped and continues to impact our U.S. community media organizations... With many of our local advertisers reducing their overall budgets, we need to take further steps to align our costs with the current revenue trends.”¹¹

As of late 2019, the CJ remains unchallenged as the city’s paper of record and an integral part of the Kentucky community. But it certainly felt like things were going south in the summer of 2011. A fresh graduate at the time, the experience was like being doused by the cold, harsh realities of the working world, and in particular, that of the journalism industry. It certainly showed me that there was no

¹¹ Peters, J. (2011).

such thing as an iron rice bowl and that the corporate world is subject to disruption and may not always prevail. Employees are expendable. Job security is a thing of the past. That idea of finding a good job in a good company, and staying there till retirement, does not apply to today's economy.

The summer 2011 layoffs were a harbinger of the more tough times yet for the media industry all around the world, as well as in Singapore.

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During his time in the US, Bertrand interned as a reporter for two metropolitan daily newspapers and as a writer for his university's alumni magazine. On returning to Singapore, he worked as a news producer for the nightly prime time television news bulletins, before transitioning to corporate communications in the public and private sectors.

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