

Will the Real  
Asian Pacific American  
Please Stand Up?

## Media Policy

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*Images of angry looters of all colors and all ages laden with consumer goods, running through streets lined by burning buildings juxtaposed against images of defiant Korean Americans hoisting rifles to protect their businesses.*

In the heat of the rioting, journalists risked their lives trying to cover the story. It's a breaking story and everyone is frantically trying to find the right contacts to interview. Mistakes made about who participated in the disturbance and the underlying frustrations were to be expected, right?



*Images of an elementary school playground filled with wounded—some fatally—Southeast Asian children and their shocked and distraught parents juxtaposed against the image of a lone, crazed veteran.*

Can, and should, the news media characterize the acts of this man as “racially motivated”—as the Asian Pacific American community argued—or did the police and mainstream media correctly characterize the man as someone who had just gone berserk and aimed his assault rifle at the first innocent targets he could find?



*Images of a bereaved limited-English-speaking mother crying over the grave of her son, brutally killed by two white autoworkers who blamed him for their unemployed status juxtaposed against images of the two men smiling and triumphant at having beaten the charges filed against them.*

The mainstream news media barely covered the killing. Only after the ethnic community media began looking into the killing and subsequent release of the two alleged killers with only a fine did other news media companies treat it as a legitimate news item. If the media didn't cover it, maybe the killing was not that important. Did community press blow this incident way out of proportion?



*Images of young men clad all in black, with greased-back hair and shades, karate-kicking and gung-fu-chopping their way down a lonely dark street juxtaposed against images of short gray-haired women carrying plastic pink shopping bags of vegetables and noodles through the crowded streets of Chinatown, U.S.A.*

Which is the "real" Chinatown? Or Little Saigon? Or Little Tokyo? Or International District? Or Koreatown? When the news media cover the community, how can they determine how prevalent one image is over the other? Do they care and does it matter anyway?



Most of us have seen these images on television or in newspapers and magazines. We have heard and read not only about these stories but also countless others which follow a similar pattern. They constitute but just a fraction of the news stories to which we find ourselves exposed. And, they are just a few of the stories which journalists prepare and produce for their respective audiences.

They reflect only a very small slice of the lives of Asian Pacific Americans. Yet, for the majority of people in this country, those few images form the basis of their understanding of our entire diverse community.

As the population of the United States becomes more colorful, the news media and the various communities that comprise Asian Pacific

America will have to redefine and refine several ways in which they interact. This learning and growing process will, of necessity, be fraught with fitful starts and stops, radical changes in course and pace, and even, perhaps, an occasional moment of true understanding.

For the purposes of this paper, I will examine several issues facing news media companies, journalists and the Asian Pacific American community. They certainly are not the sole issues, but they are among the ones with which we must grapple if we mean to grow together as a society.

### **Issues for the News Media**

The individual companies which comprise that social institution, the news media, vary throughout the country. Though it is tempting to treat them broadly as a uniform commodity, in truth, some companies are better than others, some chains or networks and affiliates are better than others, some regions are better than others. Whenever possible, I will try to delineate between what is the more common reality and what may be an exception.

Regardless of the differences among the companies, there is one indisputable common point: newsroom inhabitants do not often reflect the general population.

For people of color, for women, the initial impression of the news industry as a whole is fairly clear: it is a world dominated by white males. And it is this dominance that provides the perspective through which most of us receive news about the world around us. Further, it is this dominance that creates the context in which we must consider all our assumptions about, and hopes for, the news media.

At recent national gatherings of the American Society of Newspaper Editors (which represents the top level news executives at American daily newspapers), the American Newspaper Publisher Association (which includes publishers and other top representatives from primarily the business side of the American newspaper industry) and the Radio Television News Directors Association (which represents top level news executives in the broadcast industry), white males outnumber people of color and women by far. No doubt about it. Not even close.

What does this profile mean for the Asian Pacific American community?

## DIVERSITY IN THE NEWSROOM

In some parts of California, such as Los Angeles and San Francisco, you can see Asian Pacific American faces on the news programs of each major television station; you can read stories with Asian Pacific American bylines in each of the major local newspapers. In those areas, you can also pick up a newspaper or tune into a broadcast program in Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Tagalog, Vietnamese, or any of the other various languages used by longtime immigrants or recent arrivals.

California, a longtime favorite stopping place for immigrants and refugees from the Pacific Rim, is unusual, however. What I as a San Francisco Bay Area transplanted resident see, hear and read represents a skewed news world. For most people, the norm is a news team—both print and broadcast—that possesses a certain lack of skin pigment. Even in Hawaii, which boasts a large concentration of Asian Pacific Americans, most of the television newscasters are Caucasian.

News media organizations around the country, especially those outside of the West Coast, have a very hard time understanding the concept of “minority.” For most of news managers and staff members, “minority” and “Black” (or African American) are completely interchangeable. Those who may be a bit more progressive, or who reside and work in areas with many Latinos, may understand that “minority” means brown or black. That the term actually includes other colors—such as yellow and red—is beyond many of them. They don’t “get it” and don’t even realize it.<sup>1</sup>

## STATISTICAL OVERVIEW

U.S. Census data from 1990 peg the Asian Pacific American population at approximately 2.9 percent of the total population. Projections out of the University of California, Los Angeles, peg the year 2000 figure at 4 percent. In California, Hawaii and the Mid-Atlantic region of New York-New Jersey-Pennsylvania, the Asian Pacific American percentage of the general population is much greater.

According to 1991 figures collected by the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Asian Pacific Americans comprise only 1.5 percent (about 836) of the total workforce (55,700) in daily newspaper newsrooms. When one breaks down the overall figure of 1.5 percent, the picture becomes clearer about the limitations faced by Asian Pacific

Americans in this industry. The largest percentage of Asian Pacific Americans is copy editors (173 out of a total of 8,784, or 2 percent) and photographers (154 out of 5,761, or 2.7 percent). They comprise, however, only 0.9 percent of newsroom supervisors (122 out of 13,315) and 1.3 percent of reporters (366 out of 27,656). Most daily newspapers in this country do not have any people of color working in the newsrooms.

In the broadcast industry, the figures paint an even bleaker picture. The National Association of Broadcasters in 1991 found that in 1990, Asian Pacific Americans comprised only 1.3 percent (2,010 out of a total of 158,779) of employees in commercial and non-commercial broadcasting. While the percentage has remained constant since 1988, the actual *number* of Asian Pacific Americans working in the industry has consistently decreased from a high of 2,247 in 1988.

The question about diversity in the newsroom requires a more in-depth observation. According to a 1990 Asian American Journalists Association study, conducted by Alexis Tan of Washington State University's communications school, the glass ceiling that prevents qualified journalists from moving up in their careers is the primary reason that many *former* Asian Pacific American journalists left the profession and one of the key reasons that *current* journalists plan to leave.<sup>2</sup> Without advancement possibilities, then, the few Asian Pacific American journalists there may even become rarer. And as entry-level journalists replace more experienced ones, the group becomes younger and less seasoned: contacts have to be made all over again and the pipeline to decision-making positions is disrupted.

The largest percentage of Asian Pacific Americans in the newspaper industry are photographers; in broadcast, they are found behind cameras or in other production and technical capacities. The few who work at jobs which involve high-level decision-making about news and hiring are just that—few. As of June 1992, in mainstream news media, there was but one Asian Pacific American publisher of a major metropolitan daily (Arlene Lum, *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*), one editor (William Woo, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*), one television news director—who, incidentally, also reports—(Nimi McConigley, KGWC-TV, Casper, Wyoming).

Even with a strong economy and growing job opportunities, the challenge to have the numbers in the newsroom reflect more accurately the proportion in the general populace is great. With a struggling

economy and the down-sizing and closure of news media organizations, prospects for more Asian Pacific Americans to be hired are bleak. Just in terms of sheer numbers, the road ahead remains long and tortuous.

But numbers are just the beginning.

The Asian American Journalists Association (AAJA), a national group of print and broadcast journalists, focuses much of its resources on efforts to increase the number of Asian Pacific Americans in the field. That, however, is not the end in and of itself. Rather, the increased employment is but a means to something that has much more far-reaching impact on the community: how the community is covered.<sup>3</sup>

#### COVERING A CHANGING COMMUNITY

For individuals who aspire to journalism, looking at the numbers in the industry may be of prime interest. For the Asian Pacific American community as a whole, however, the hope is that increased numbers will translate into better and more coverage of issues and the varied aspects of the community, that coverage will be more accurate, more sensitive and fairer.

A good newspaper, news magazine, and television or radio station can somehow manage to find the big or “sexy” story in a community. The smart organizations that have been able to afford to hire will have Asian Pacific Americans on staff; the not-so-smart or not-so-flush ones will be able to find translators and other contacts in the community. Somehow, they will muster resources necessary to cover the big shooting, the New Year’s celebration or that unusual and exotic event or person.

These types of stories, though, result in a very skewed view of what makes up the community. Most of the stories that make up our community do not lend themselves to 30-second sound bites or ten- or 20-inch column spaces. These are the stories that pose many more problems to news media companies and to journalists: they require time and long-term contacts with the community.

To present a more complete view of a community, news media organizations will have to do a better job of including Asian Pacific Americans as regular people in non-ethnic-specific stories. For instance, in a story about lawyers who do *pro bono*, or free, legal work, one Bay Area station talked at length with a Sansei attorney who had recently been honored by his peers for his legal work. The fact that he was Asian Pacific American was irrelevant to the main thrust of the story.

However, the fact that he was Asian Pacific American did a lot in terms of providing the community—both ethnic and mainstream—with a good story and good role model.<sup>4</sup>

#### DIFFERENTIATING AMONG GROUPS

Many news media organizations have had a hard enough time trying to cover the older, more established ethnic groups which comprise the Asian Pacific American community. Now, with the increased presence of newer immigrant and refugee groups, that once-difficult job has become even more demanding.

Though it has always been important, determining when to differentiate among the many ethnic groups that comprise the Asian Pacific American community has become more critical. Most of the older immigrants and the American born within the community know and understand that Asian Pacific Americans form a politically-generated entity, not one based on a culture and value system that crosses all ethnic groups. For most newer arrivals this concept is indeed foreign; they identify themselves by their own ethnic and homeland affiliations.

There are times when that political commonality provides a more accurate perspective; and there are times when it is important to recognize the differences within the community. Culturally oriented stories should probably indicate on *which* particular ethnic group's culture the story focuses. For instance, a New Year's story should indicate whether the subject is a Japanese American *oshogatsu* festival or a Vietnamese Tet celebration. Each ethnic group has its ways of marking a special occasion. To treat them as a blanket Asian Pacific American is effectively to negate the very uniqueness that can enrich our *American* society.

On the other hand, sometimes ethnic distinctions are not warranted and are, in fact, inaccurate. In the case of crimes motivated by racial hatred, perpetrators do not care about a person's specific ethnicity; the mere fact that they *look* like the "enemy" is quite sufficient. Vincent Chin's killers did not bother to determine if the Asian Pacific American whom they were beating with a baseball bat was Japanese or Chinese American, or if that person slipping into unconsciousness was truly responsible for their unemployment as Detroit autoworkers. Vincent Chin's Chinese ethnic background could not protect him against those who looked at him and decided he was a Japanese person that symbolized Japanese auto manufacturers.<sup>5</sup>

## Issues for Asian Pacific American Journalists

Asian Pacific American journalists face their own set of concerns when trying to do their job. The 1990 AAJA study cited above also indicates that both current and former journalists selected the field because they like the excitement of the job and the opportunity to help the community. The journalism occupation carries with it many responsibilities that go beyond merely going out and recording events and disseminating information.

### BEING LEADERS

Many minority professionals not only have to do the job for which they are hired; many also feel obligated to make themselves available as resources to the community. Coupled with their visibility, this often means the community calls upon them to emcee fundraisers, participate in panels and as speakers. And more often than they may want, journalists find themselves held up as role models. While most people don't seek out the responsibility that this entails, and some may not even admit that they are role models, young people do look up to them.

Young people watching the small screen at home may not see too many Asian Pacific Americans in situation comedies, hour-long mysteries or made-for-television movies; the big screen fares no better in presenting realistic images. The one time they may see an Asian Pacific American—at least on the West Coast and in some of the larger urban areas—is on the news. Similarly, when perusing the school reading list or combing through the stacks at the local library, not too many Asian Pacific American names appear—unless, again, the readers reside on the West Coast or in those larger metropolitan areas. It might be possible, though, to see an Asian Pacific American name as a byline in the newspaper or a national magazine, or as a photo credit.

Almost all current (78 percent) and former (77 percent) journalists nationally are Chinese and Japanese Americans.<sup>6</sup> Much smaller numbers come from Filipino, Korean, Vietnamese and other Asian Pacific American ethnic backgrounds. Given the changing face of the community, the near-absence of South Asian, Southeast Asian, Korean, Filipino, and Pacific Islander journalists to act as community resources and role models may prove to be another obstacle along the path of adjusting to American life in these newer and smaller communities.



## PAN-ASIAN PERSPECTIVE

Unless and until more representatives from these other communities find themselves in America's newsrooms, current Asian Pacific American journalists must fill that void, serving not only their own ethnic communities but also these others. This is a heavy load for people who already have to work long, irregular shifts at demanding, pressured more-than-full-time jobs. Along with developing contacts in their own ethnic community, Asian Pacific American journalists must expend resources on identifying and nurturing contacts in other communities. At its best, this means spending time with people, learning about customs and beliefs, maybe learning a new language, gaining their trust and trusting others. At its worst, this means superficial treatment and coverage of these newer and smaller groups in ways no different than mainstream journalists.

Ironically, in many ways, this pan-Asian approach corresponds to the tendency for news media companies to want their few Asian Pacific American journalists—usually Chinese or Japanese, and maybe Filipino or Korean—to communicate and cover equally all the other ethnic groups. For some employers, this may reflect limited hiring resources; for others, this may be the objective manifestation of an inability to understand that each ethnic group that makes up this Asian Pacific American community is unique.

Better still it is for Asian Pacific American journalists to encourage the training and hiring of more and different journalists from the Asian Pacific American communities.

## BEING LIAISONS AND EDUCATORS

The need for more journalists from other, non-Chinese, non-Japanese ethnic groups becomes even more critical in light of the major role that journalists play as liaisons between the ethnic communities and mainstream community. It is journalists who must take complex and sensitive issues from within the community and somehow communicate them to others.

Coverage of the 1992 riots in Los Angeles after the acquittal of the police officers whose videotaped beating of black motorist Rodney King provides a very recent and troubling example of an event that may have been covered quite differently had more Asian Pacific American

journalists been assigned to cover it and had more non-Asian Pacific American journalists had a more in-depth understanding of the racial tensions growing among the many different communities in the Los Angeles area.

Despite the popular news media picture painted in the early days of the rioting, battles did not involve just Blacks and Whites. Hispanics and all Asian Pacific Americans—not just Koreans—were involved. And, despite news media depictions to the contrary, the armed reaction to looting of Koreatown stores is not reinforcement of the image of Asians as valuing life less or of Koreans as more prone to violence.

*Los Angeles Times* reporter John H. Lee, a Korean American, eloquently describes the problems of presenting these inflammatory images without history and context. He describes how one merchant resorted to arms only after drive-by shooters had made his store into a target five times and after his 911 calls and pleas to the police for help resulted in total inaction. Viewers saw rifles and handguns but not the frantic fear that the police had all but abandoned the community.<sup>7</sup>

In 1990, in the very multiethnic, multicultural city of San Francisco, with a news staff more diverse than most, the *San Francisco Examiner* came out with a story which, according to AAJA's *Project Zinger* media analysis report, quickly became the "center of controversy and heated debate." The article, "Asian Women, Caucasian Men: The New Demographics of Love," focused on what writer Joan Walsh described as the "hot trend" of interracial dating. Critics say that Walsh relied on anecdotal evidence to support racial stereotypes about the exotic and passive natures of Asian women and the unattractive and sexless natures of Asian men and that she accepted these images without analysis or critique.<sup>8</sup>

That the topic was interesting and worthy of discussion was not at issue; that Walsh had the right to write about the topic was not an issue. What caused problems among readers was what many believed to be the insensitive, sensationalized and superficial treatment of a very complex and sensitive topic. Perhaps Walsh, in her story, demonstrated the understanding of a white woman, but, critics argue, this understanding is not enough. *Zinger* coordinator Jon Funabiki, himself a journalist with many years' experience, and his staff suggest that news companies should consider "community sensitivities" about the presentation of

such pieces and that they "may wish to ask ethnic minority journalists for additional sources, background and advice on community sensitivity."<sup>9</sup>

This is not to suggest or advocate that only Asians can, or should, cover Asian communities. Asian Pacific American journalists can, however, bring in different perspectives, develop different sources, understand subtleties of ethnic culture, and can bring up story ideas and issues that normally might not make it to the table. At the same time, though, while Chinese and Japanese Americans may be able to cover refugee and immigrant communities and demonstrate an understanding of racism and discrimination, the challenge is to have more members of the newer communities to go into journalism.

#### RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER MINORITIES

The educational role Asian Pacific American journalists must play includes sharing information about the ethnic groups with other journalists of color and with white journalists. Having access to information and contacts means that when major stories affecting the community are happening or about to happen, Asian Pacific American journalists have a responsibility to make waves about how the stories are written, produced or aired and if they are at all.<sup>10</sup>

And, as if this were not enough, Asian Pacific Americans must be sensitive to the needs and concerns of communities beyond their own. As society becomes more racially diverse, there will be many occasions for Asian Pacific American journalists to speak up about coverage of other communities of color. To do this with conviction and strength means that journalists of various colors must communicate with each other to educate each other. Journalists of color are natural allies. However, as the Asian Pacific American community changes, and, hopefully results in concomitant changes in the newsrooms, other minorities must learn about the newer groups.

The four national minority journalism organizations joined together in 1988 to form a separate group, Unity '94, whose goals include a unified response to issues affecting all or any of the group's members. The commonalities among the groups' struggle to have an impact on the news media industry form the foundation of the new entity. Actions have included, among other things, black and Hispanic journalists taking a very verbal and visible position when a white male columnist

attacked a Korean American colleague with graphic sexual and racial epithets. It has also meant Asian, Black and Hispanic journalists joining with Native Americans in commending a newspaper's decision not to refer to sports teams by names offensive to Native American nations.<sup>11</sup>

The process of working with each other requires a great deal of time and trust. For journalists from the newer immigrant and refugee communities, the mere idea of working closely with other minorities can cause anxiety and friction. On the other hand, for American-born Asian Pacific Americans and others who have been in this country long enough to be exposed to the common history of racial discrimination shared by people of color, working with Blacks, Hispanics and Native Americans may be a challenge but not necessarily a source of fear. It is up to the American born and/or raised journalists to help set a cooperative tone.

Once identified, these issues may then give direction to leaders about political and social policies.

#### RESORTING TO STEREOTYPES

Journalists need to learn how to cover a community that no longer corresponds to the already inaccurate "model minority" stereotype that many journalists held. The "community" always was actually more a collection of many different communities, but now, these common stereotypes will become even less applicable as the smaller ethnic groups that more recently arrived here in the United States grow larger.

Journalists, by definition, operate under deadlines. They need to find information fast and get it out even faster. If they don't already have the facts on hand or in their news files, they have to do some research. Or, they may rely on what they believe to be true. Unfortunately, in many instances, this has meant resorting to stereotypes.

Any journalist can be guilty of doing this—color and ethnicity are no guarantees against use of stereotypes. Journalists from the more established Asian Pacific American communities must work hard to avoid including stereotypes about the newer immigrant and refugee groups, and vice versa. And, beyond this one community, Asian Pacific American journalists are in the position to be more sensitive about inaccurate stereotypes applied to different groups.

To ensure that journalists have the latest, most accurate information, the community must take some responsibility for educating them.

## Issues for the Community

The third important component in this discussion of the relationship of the changing Asian Pacific American community and the news media is the community itself. While journalists are still an integral part of the community, there are some specific issues with which the latter must grapple.

### JOURNALISTS OR COMMUNITY ACTIVISTS?

Some of the most difficult questions facing Asian Pacific American journalists are: am I a journalist first or an Asian Pacific American first? How does that affect work as a journalist? Do I advocate or do I remain totally neutral?

In reality, there is no such thing as total objectivity. The only achievable goal is to be fair. Journalists must acknowledge that they can influence how readers and viewers and listeners feel about an issue when they decide what story to pursue, which contacts to interview, even which adjectives and adverbs to use. A community, especially one that is new to the idea of Western journalism with its tenets of freedom of the press and the "right to know," may want journalists to be advocates and, indeed, may even expect its "own" journalists to be out there right in front of the battle.

To place this type of demand on Asian Pacific American journalists unfortunately often puts them in an untenable situation: they may want to cover a community, but once they are perceived as being outright advocates, editors or directors may feel it is time to pull them off and assign them to beats or stories in which they have no personal agendas. No, this is not necessarily fair to individual reporters, but it is an option still exercised by many managers and it is an issue still unresolved in the news media industry as a whole.

For the community, the challenge is to develop and maintain contacts with Asian Pacific American or other sensitive journalists and to keep them informed about what is happening in the community.

### AFFECTING WHAT STORIES ARE COVERED

These contacts can be critical in reporting stories and perspectives that reflect sensibilities that differ from the majority of news industry decision-makers, who are, not surprisingly, white and male. Decisions

about which stories make it to the news—and which don't—often result in defining which issues are considered newsworthy and deserving of attention from the general public and political leaders. The community must fight to have a say in those decisions. There is very limited space and time for stories. After all, how many sound bites can fit within a 30-minute broadcast, and how many articles in a daily newspaper? If the Asian Pacific American community as a whole has not been well covered thus far, how much more will it be neglected or misrepresented now that there are more ethnic groups and our numbers are growing?

The importance of these decisions should not be underestimated. This relationship between the news media and the community can be critical in identifying and defining what an important issue is. This concept has been used by older, more established Asian Pacific American communities that have learned news media savvy.

In one instance, a group of primarily Japanese American attorneys learned how to work effectively with the news media to call attention to an obscure legal procedure, writ of *coram nobis*, that was to be the vehicle through which these attorneys hoped to right the legal wrong visited upon the Japanese American community during World War II.

When attorneys and community activists decided to take on the *coram nobis* case of Fred Korematsu, they wanted the support of the general public. To achieve this, they would need to educate people about the importance of the case and the injustice not only of Korematsu's original criminal conviction for disobeying the World War II orders to relocate but the injustice of the entire internment.

They knew that many people did not even know about the internment. Further, many who *did* might believe that the camps had been necessary to protect either the Japanese Americans against society or society against the Japanese Americans. Thus, to build support for Korematsu (and the two companion cases involving Minoru Yasui and Gordon Hirabayashi, both of whom also refused to obey wartime orders aimed at controlling the movement and choices of Japanese Americans), they joined the campaign of the Japanese American Citizens League to convince the mainstream media about the newsworthiness of the topic. Together, they worked with such news media entities as *The New York Times* and *60 Minutes* to educate them about the nuances of the case and the potential significance not only for Asian Pacific Americans but for all

people concerned with protecting the Constitution.

The *coram nobis* action presented the court with newly discovered evidence showing that the federal government had suppressed, altered and even destroyed evidence which would have exonerated Japanese Americans from any charges of sabotage and espionage. This new evidence demonstrated that the federal government had perpetrated fraud against the court. Such a charge was so grievous that the court chose to reopen the *Korematsu* case even though four decades had passed.

With all the media attention on the unusual case, more people learned about the internment camps and the unjust imprisonment of 120,000 Americans of Japanese descent. The news media, by choosing to cover the issue, helped to depict and define it as an important issue for all Americans. The media attention also coincided with, and reinforced, efforts by Congress to develop the redress and reparations plan for those held in the camps. The case resulted not only in a legal victory but an educational one as well.

#### AN HONORABLE PROFESSION

Some media critics may argue about the respectability of being a journalist. Generally, however, Asian Pacific Americans born and/or raised in this country have grown up with principles such as the First Amendment and the public's "right to know." They understand that being a journalist does not automatically mean that one's life is meaningless, useless and distasteful; most may even believe that there are some journalists who are worthy of respect, honor and well wishes.

For many Asian Pacific American immigrants and refugees, however, journalism is synonymous with working as the voice of government and not exercising any independent thought, with fearing that criticism of the government means sure loss of job and possible loss of life. For young people from these communities, there is little encouragement from parents to enter journalism; instead, they encounter persuasion to become doctors, dentists, business leaders, bankers and engineers. With so much loss in their recent past—loss of jobs, homes and lives—it is understandable why so many refugee and immigrant parents worry about their children being able to make a living at a good job that will bring not only money but honor and that will not risk their survival. Several student members of AAJA have mentioned time and

again how hard it has been to convince their immigrant parents that journalism is all right as a profession, that they will manage to survive. Most of these students report pressure to go into other, more financially rewarding and more prestigious fields.

And, yet, for many of those communities, it is precisely more journalists that they need—journalists who have a clearer insight into issues and concerns and who have gained the ability to communicate those issues and concerns. Community leaders and parents need to work at supporting those who choose journalism as careers.

#### ONE COMMUNITY'S STRATEGY

Recently in one local community, some leaders took matters in their own hands in the fight to improve the media's coverage of its issues and concerns.<sup>12</sup> Though some of the news media in the city had done an adequate job of covering major issues in the Asian Pacific American community, many had not. Only one paper and one television station had a reporter assigned to cover the community on a semi-regular basis. Many issues that were less conducive to one-time only pieces went by unheeded by most of the media. Plus, many in the community felt that the media companies were not too responsive.

A small group of community activists met and brought in representatives from other ethnic groups, especially some of the newer or smaller communities. During the course of their meetings, they outlined some goals and strategies, including a list of which news companies to approach first.

They identified sympathetic Asian Pacific American journalists who worked at the targeted companies. The journalists and community leaders met with each other to determine where their respective objectives overlapped and how they could help each other. With one company, for instance, journalists wanted to be able to do more stories on the community; the community wanted more coverage. The strategy became clear: the community representatives would meet with the company's top-level managers and say that though the company was doing fair so far, they wanted more coverage and they would encourage their friends and other community members to support that paper.

At another company, community leaders again met with sympathetic Asian Pacific American journalists employed there. They learned



that one of the reporters wanted to cover the community as a beat, but that paper had not identified that community as newsworthy enough to have a reporter specially assigned to cover it. At their subsequent manager's meeting, the community group made it quite clear that it was not happy with that company's spotty coverage. As a matter of fact, members said, they all preferred to follow the company's rival since it had assigned someone familiar with the community and its players to cover the community on a regular basis. Disturbed by what it was hearing, the second news company suddenly found a way to assign one of its reporters (who just happened to want the beat) to report on the Asian Pacific American community.

From the beginning, the group knew that the journalists alone would have a tough time putting pressure on their employers about beats and coverage. With the community making similar demands, however, editors and news directors would feel more compelled to act. And that has proved true.

The meetings constituted only the first step. The group has now pledged to try to follow up to make sure that promises are kept. Follow-up includes monitoring the media to see if coverage has increased and improved. They also plan to continue meeting with other local news companies.

### Challenge for the Future

Both the news media and the changing Asian Pacific American community will face challenges. Those who can adjust will be better able to survive and thrive in the coming decade; those who cannot will be left behind wondering what the fuss was all about and thinking there is nothing that can be done anyway.

As a fast-growing community of color, we cannot accept a defeatist attitude about the news media. What we read, hear or watch must be just the beginning of what we and they learn.

It's not that journalists have the *only* perspective or the *correct* perspective. It's not that they have some inherent knowledge about issues or events that endows their opinions with more weight. No. What journalists as a group have that the ordinary Asian Pacific American does not is easier access to the channels through which information can be disseminated, through which opinions are formed. It is critically important

for the community and journalists to work closely together and for them both to fight for what they believe in an effort to make the news media industry more sensitive, accurate and fair in its coverage.

## Notes

1. Many of my observations come from my four and a half years as national executive director of the Asian American Journalists Association, a non-profit organization of print and broadcast journalists and journalism students.  
When discussing Asian Pacific American issues with news media editors, publishers and news directors from all over the country, it became increasingly evident that especially on the East Coast, Midwest and South, Asians were not considered a minority, or, if they were, they were not a minority that should benefit from any affirmative action programs or the like.
2. Alexis Tan, "Why Asian American Journalists Leave Journalism and Why They Stay" (San Francisco: Asian American Journalists Association, 1990), 1, 3, 6. The survey, which was sent to 700 working journalists and 40 former journalists, generated a 38 percent response from the former group and a 70 percent response from the latter. Results also showed a dismayingly high 36 percent of current Asian Pacific American journalists said they were likely or very likely to leave the field within five years.
3. The Asian American Journalists Association's four objectives include (a) increasing the employment of Asian Pacific American journalists; (b) assisting students who are pursuing journalism as a career objective; (c) ensuring that coverage of the Asian Pacific American community is accurate and fair; (d) providing mutual support for Asian Pacific American journalists. These overall goals are similar to those held by the other national minority journalism organizations: National Association of Black Journalists, National Association of Hispanic Journalists and the Native American Journalists Association.
4. This story, which appeared in the mid-1980s, was so unusual in this respect that I wrote to the station commending the reporter and producer for their work.
5. Vincent Chin died on June 23, 1982, after a baseball bat beating by two white men, Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz. For their roles in Chin's death, the two men each received five years' probation and a \$3,000 fine. The incident served as a catalyst for the Asian Pacific American community to organize against anti-Asian violence.
6. According to the Tan study, among former journalists Japanese comprise the largest ethnic group (47 percent), followed by Chinese (30 percent). Among current journalists, Chinese American journalists outnumber Japanese Americans (47 percent versus 31 percent).
7. John H. Lee, "You Have to Explain How We Feel," *AAJA Newsletter* (Summer 1992). That issue of the newsletter also contains several other

articles about Asian Pacific Americans who covered, or commented on coverage of, the Los Angeles riots.

8. Center for Integration and Improvement of Journalism, *Project Zinger: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (San Francisco: Asian American Journalists Association, 1991), 7, 8. The project was headed by long-time journalist Jon Funabiki, who heads the center. When it submitted the article to the center as an example of poor coverage, the San Francisco Bay Area Chapter of AAJA called it an "egregious example of shoddy reporting, sensationalism and woefully irresponsible editorial judgment."
9. *Ibid.*, 8.
10. In "The L.A. Riots and Media Preparedness" *AAJA Newsletter* (Summer 1992), *Los Angeles Times* business writer and AAJA-LA Chapter president Dean Takahashi took on his own paper and observed that many of its minority reporters had been assigned to work out of suburban bureaus and that only a very few worked in the more prestigious downtown Metro section. When the riots began and it "became apparent that a number of white reporters could not gain access to the story, minority reporters, some from the suburbs, were shipped into the riot zone." Takahashi made waves in his newsroom when he wrote about his observations about how the *Los Angeles Times* covered the riots. His article first appeared in the news media industry publication, *Editor & Publisher* (May 23, 1992).
11. Unity '94 includes the Asian American Journalists Association, National Association of Black Journalists, National Association of Hispanic Journalists and the Native American Press Association. It plans a joint national convention in 1994 in Atlanta.

The first incident occurred in 1990 when *Newsday* (NY) columnist Jimmy Breslin became angry at remarks made by reporter Mary Yuh. The incident was covered widely in the news and resulted in the two-week suspension of the Pulitzer Prize-winning Breslin. The second occurred in spring 1992, when *The Oregonian* (Portland) announced its new policy that it would no longer refer to sports teams by racially-oriented names, such as the Washington Redskins.
12. Because the group is still in the process of meeting with news media groups, I have chosen not to reveal the names of the people, news media organizations or even the location. Suffice it to say that the group includes representatives from many different Asian Pacific American ethnic groups (including Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese) and from many different walks of life. The news media are located in a large metropolitan area where there is a concentration of Asian Pacific Americans.