Perhaps there is no more powerful stereotype of Asian Americans than that of the “model minority.” Harkening back to a 1966 *New York Times* article by William Petersen titled “Success Story: Japanese-American Style” and a *U.S. News and World Report* story on Chinese Americans titled “Success Story of One Minority in the US,” the mainstream media has often characterized and depicted Asian Americans as the minority that fulfilled the American dream against all odds and without government assistance. According to Osajima’s germinal article, “Asian Americans as the Model Minority: An Analysis of the Popular Press image in the 1960s and 1980s,” the “overt racial comparisons between the success of Asians and the failures of other minorities are tempered and replaced . . . by a non-racial discourse that focuses primarily on differences between Asian American families and ‘American’ families” (1998: 169–70). This comparison of racial groups and its promotion of non-racial discourses, currently considered post-racial or “colorblind” (Bonilla-Silva) discourses, continues to be a vital part of how Asian Americans are configured and represented within media.

Asian Americans as model minorities arose within the context of the Civil Rights Movement and, among other things, this became a mode for disciplining other minorities, particularly African Americans and Latina/os, hence driving a wedge between racially disprivileged groups. Asian Americans became “model” in part because mainstream media constructed Asian Americans as being silent on social issues and choosing to work themselves out of their situation instead of asking for government aid.1 Deborah Woo (2000) argued that model minority discourse constructed Asian Americans as being successful and highly educated, and that this success was made possible through hard work and a dedication to family, thus constructing Asian Americans as the penniless and poor characters who became successful by dint of their own hard work and accomplishment—essentially modern-day Horatio Algers.

Despite its significance during and after the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s–70s, the model minority representation remains salient in the twenty-first century, relying on the Horatio Alger mythology that helped define the American dream during the late nineteenth century. Jachinson Chan (2001) argued that Charlie Chan—the intelligent, obedient, submissive, and non-threatening sidekick to the white main character—was one of the early precursors to the model minority. Asian-American model minorities
appeared in the form of Asian Americans taking up specific “intelligent” and respectable jobs—Asian-American women journalists in the 1980s and medical doctors in the 2000s (Ono and Pham 2009).

Model minority discourse purports to provide a “positive” stereotype of Asian Americans, even as its effect is wholly negative on other racial groups, as it is ultimately on Asian Americans. The Asian American as model minority can also affect interpersonal relationships, where Asian Americans are seen as “nerdy” and socially inept and hence “left out” (Zhang 2010). Yet even as model minority discourse took up a variety of characters and representations that seemed positive on the surface, it also connected a variety of other historical representations of Asian Americans, particularly that of “Yellow Peril,” where the Asian body and culture would threaten to invade, take jobs, and strip the US of its nationality and productivity. Shim (1998) and Kawai (2005) address the connectedness of Yellow Peril to the model minority stereotype, where it moves within a cycle or in dialectical tension, respectively. Thus, model minorities are always inevitably threatening (Ono and Pham 2009). This is evidenced in a Wall Street Journal article that characterizes a school in northern California as being too Asian and hence difficult for white students, who have to move to different school districts to increase their chance for college entry as well as a supposed holistic education that emphasizes arts and other subjects that Asians would not be interested in (Hwang 2005). The film Akeelah and the Bee highlights the danger of an overachieving Asian-American speller, who acts like a “robot,” as opposed to a human, and thus threatens the integrity of the oral skills (Ono and Pham 2009). In these cases, Asian Americans are a danger because of their advanced academic skills, even as they are acceptable in their success.

Special attention has been given to Asian Americans within advertising and technology. Taylor and Stern (1997) found that advertisements overrepresented Asian Americans in background roles and in working professional roles, rather than in social or domestic ones—thus reinforcing the robotic aspects of hardworking Asian Americans. Paek and Shah’s (2003) quantitative analysis revealed that Asian Americans were “depicted as highly educated, proficient with technology, and affluent” (225). Lee and Joo’s (2005) analysis of print ads reinforced Paek and Shah’s findings about Asian-American alignment with technology and the model minority and added that such representations could have negative effects on group members. Phua’s (2014) study on media priming found that stereotypical aspects of the model minority, such as the idea that Asian Americans are hardworking, can also be transferred to brands but may come with negative aspects too, such as being passive or boring.

At this juncture, model minority discourse is widely known and circulated. Importantly, model minority discourse is not static but also evolves within the context in which it is deployed. Just as Osajima argued in the 1980s, when the model minority myth served to legitimate President Ronald Reagan’s stress on the family, and his attacks on abortion, school busing, and other social programs “originally designed to benefit racial minorities” (170), current discourse about Asian Americans is couched within a logic generated by the model minority myth. Most recently, Shankar (2015) argues that this model minority discourse helped set the foundation for Asian Americans to be considered a “model consumer” for the advertising industry. In this case, the logic of model minority discourse for Asian Americans powers capitalism by constructing Asian Americans as a model consumer worthy of being targeted and also serves as the primary optic through which Asians and Asian Americans are understood in an area where questions about their relevance remain. Thus, the literature regarding Asian Americans as model minorities shows how
model minority discourses reappear, sometimes purely as a reiteration of earlier representations, but in forms that reinforce particular aspects and logics of the discourse.

Such reappearance and recirculation of racial discourses occur because, as Ono and Pham (2009) argue, racial logics as they relate to Asians and Asian Americans are structurally embedded in media, where the model minority myth reappears repeatedly as one mode through which we understand Asians and Asian Americans. But discourse about the model minority discourse has evolved, and so has scholarly and popular engagement with it. Indeed, today, Asian Americans challenge the stereotype overtly, such as in videos on YouTube. Asian-American apparel companies actively try to dispel it. Moreover, rather than model minority discourse merely being about Asian and Asian-American students as “whiz kids” on television, the main way model minority characters appear is as scientists, technicians, or medical staff. In short, the representation of Asian-American model minority has veered toward the “robotic.” At this point, this chapter has briefly discussed the history of model minority myth scholarship and illustrated the expanse and limits of model minority discourse. The following sections will examine the contemporary media landscape by exploring how discourse about Asian and Asian-American digital and Internet builders and inventors—specifically the creators and founders of YouTube—rely on model minority imagery even when that image does not directly align. In doing so, we argue that the model minority trope can operate in an ambivalent way—complicating the simple way in which the trope is mapped onto new situations and stories while also reproducing its racially exceptional self-made success and intelligence aspects.

Critical Economics of Internet Chief Economic Officer (CEO) Discourse

From the mid-1990s to the late 2000s and spurred by the onset of new technologies, the Internet transformed from military communication intra-net (i.e., DARPANET) focused primarily on internal communication into a mass media communication system able to support the dissemination of multi-media content (i.e., Web 1.0) and finally to our current social media-driven and user-generated created Internet (i.e., Web 2.0)—culminating in an Internet environment that allows for unprecedented social interactions and economic transactions without regard to time and space. Technologies like web browsers, search engines, and even free email permitted the widespread use of the Internet and its evolution to a site of information gathering and sharing and consumption practices, structuring our interaction with the Internet and helping us make our way through a complex network of information and media. While innovative at its time of creation, the now taken-for-granted technologies, software, and services allow for the easy navigation of the information-rich worldwide web and enable everyday people to use the Internet to quickly and easily communicate with others. Importantly, these technologies have contributed to an age of hyper-information, an increasingly globalized world, and the building of an unparalleled economic infrastructure.

This no small feat—the relative quick transition from the specialized internal communication function of the Internet to a widespread and multiple one that also allows for quick, inexpensive, and easy transnational communication and, importantly, capitalistic transactions. While we as a society are quick to recognize the quickly evolving technology that changed and reconfigured the utilization of the Internet, what remains unrecognized, hidden, or overlooked when thinking about media technologies are the very people who helped build these Internet start-ups and lead them into our everyday life. These
automated, efficient, and ultimately fantastical technologies, built upon layers and layers of programming code, are developed by people in start-up companies, full of aspirations, goals, and identities not yet thrust into the public eye but that are in many ways racially constructed as Asian and Asian American. Thus, how does the mainstream media make sense of two unforeseen and mostly invisible subjects: technological innovation and the presence of Asians and Asian Americans as the creators, purveyors, leaders, and ultimately CEOs of Internet technology? This chapter attempts to answer this conundrum by considering the development of unforeseen Internet technologies in relation to news media coverage of Asian–American Internet CEOs—all while recognizing that model minority discourses existed prior to both and informed society’s understanding of Asian Americans. By weaving together media coverage of Internet innovation and Asian–American visibility against the backdrop of model minority, we argue that contemporary model minority aspects are emphasized and reinforced while others may be contradicted or altogether absent.

Asians and Asian Americans have been crucial to the development of the Internet. Sociological and anthropological work has focused on Asian Americans in the Silicon Valley, elucidating the presence of Indian-American labor, youth, and identity and their struggles in the Silicon Valley (Shankar 2008) or South-Asian use of ethnic enclaves, employees that cut across class lines, and the resulting establishment of Internet start-ups (Saxenian 2000; Shankar 2008). While research on Asian and Asian–American Internet-related employees exists (Varmi 2002; Wong 2006; Rudruppa 2009–10), it largely examines line workers, outsourcing, and the transnational use of a “coolie” labor force. Despite the popular news stories about the powerful contributions Asians and Asian Americans have made to the establishment of the Internet, very little research has been published on Asian–American Internet moguls, entrepreneurs, and CEOs. Academic scholarship, to our knowledge, has overlooked the increased presence and construction of Asian and Asian-American Internet CEOs. However, that is not to say that they are ignorant of a CEO’s effects. Mainstream news media are familiar with reporting on CEOs, and companies recognize the public impact of CEOs. According to Park and Berger (2004), media coverage on CEOs is generally related to CEO changes or transitions, strategic directions, or a company’s business-related performance and focuses on the competency and personal dimensions of the CEO. In addition, discourse produced by CEOs in the news stories may influence the CEO’s image and affect the company’s reputation and image, especially since CEOs “help define an organization’s image with internal and external stakeholders” (Park and Berger 2004: 95). Although it is debatable whether CEOs can manage their image, they inevitably function on behalf of a company, producing and communicating symbols to the public for the benefit of the company (J. E. Grunig 1993).

Yet the critical research on CEO discourse is sparse. Much of the research highlights the public relations functions of CEOs without giving critical attention to the very representation of CEOs (Budd Jr. 2004; Marken 2004; Foster 1990; L. A. Grunig 1997; Marston 1993). However, Norander’s (2008) analysis of Carly Fiorina, the female CEO of Hewlett Packard, provides a critical look at the gendered news construction and subject positioning of an Internet CEO, recognizing that “Fiorina’s hiring was a significant moment in the history of U.S. business culture” (100) due to her gender, which countered the hegemonic masculinity of the American business CEO (Mumby 1998). While the aforementioned scholarship rightfully considers the public function of CEOs and its benefit, it is remiss in considering how news discourses about CEOs are racially framed or implicitly articulated. Norander’s analysis centers on gender, while only mentioning race
in relation to white male CEOs, the prevalence of white women in middle-management, and the dearth of women of color in any managerial roles. While Norander’s analysis highlighted Fiorina’s slow rise to the top of Hewlett Packard from other business experiences, such as Lucent Technologies, our case attempts to make sense of the rise of both youthful and Asian-American entrepreneurs into positions as CEOs in hurried time, especially as the very Internet technologies being developed have reshaped our understanding of and engagement with the Internet.

As yet, no mention has been made within critical scholarly literature, to our knowledge, about Asian and Asian-American Internet executives. In illustrating the primary issues regarding Asian-American media representations, we examine news discourse surrounding the creators of YouTube, using Lexis/Nexis and ProQuest searches with their names as search terms. By exploring news discourse about Asian and Asian-American Internet CEOs, we consider how the news media constructed the role of Asians and Asian Americans in building the Internet and its American technological dreams.

The characterization of the entrepreneurs-turned-CEOs, coupled with youth and race, posed a distinct problem in reporting the increased presence and news visibility of Asian-American Internet CEOs and their rapid rise in the technology industry. Through our study of discourse representing Asian and Asian-American Internet executive entrepreneurs, we argue that, in part, because of their shockingly fast success, media are unable initially to establish complex narratives of model minority status. A story of Horatio Alger “rags to riches” does not fully set in, even while haphazard mentions of that identity do appear. Rather, they are seen as expendable to the economics of the Internet, another fad to help the Internet evolve to increased efficiency for a changing economy. As a result, the story appears assumed and rushed, though it is seemingly necessary to construct a narrative of U.S. business and its acquisition of the technologies of the future, particularly at the expense of the very people who invented the technologies.

**Two Coders and a Designer**

The online video streaming website, YouTube, remains one of the more public and recent examples of Asian-American Internet entrepreneurs-turned-multi-millionaire and upper-level management. YouTube’s meteoric rise and eventual sale to Google mirrored Hotmail’s rapid popularity and acquisition by Microsoft. However, the collaborative development of YouTube by three people and the controversial nature of YouTube technology and business set it apart from previous Internet start-ups. Articles tend to talk about the three founders together. Most stories focus on things showing on YouTube itself, its increased use, and business deals made regarding copyright. By October 6, 2006, articles reported YouTube’s acquisition by Google for $1.6 billion, approximately 15 percent of Google’s cash balance.

Former PayPal employees Steve Chen, Jawed Karim, and Chad Hurley founded YouTube in February 2005 and drew from many PayPal (the popular online payment system) staff members to help build YouTube in its early years (Terese 2006). Roughly a year and a half later, on October 26, 2006, Google purchased YouTube for $1.65 billion, making the founders millionaires. The initial articles about YouTube rushed to describe their movement from obscurity to fame, often noting their limited finances before stardom and focusing on Chen and Hurley.

Initial articles focused mostly on the novelty of YouTube as it dominated the popular imagination in 2006, its upstart nature, and the changing media environment—hence on
technologies, not the people behind them. YouTube was deemed Time magazine’s 2006 “Invention of the Year,” and was described by the New York Daily News as launching a “revolution by allowing Joe Schmoe everywhere to get their 15 nanoseconds of Web fame” as it beat out other inventions of a “super-economical car and a soldier-saving robot” (Hutchinson 2006: 4). An editorial in the Chicago Tribune ambivalently describes YouTube as an example of “American ingenuity” while stating that audiences might want to “kick yourself because it wasn’t your idea (Wish it were your idea?).” Thus, the creation of YouTube (and its creators) is seen as blatantly obvious and uncreative yet an indication of the potential of America’s promise and dream. The technology is seen as revolutionarily trivial—unimportant in saving lives or changing society for the better but rather a self-serving and self-centered technology that is changing the media environment. Consequently, the people behind YouTube might be viewed as not all that creative, impressive, or important if it wasn’t for the large sums of money that purchased the site.

While the technology was being explained, the profiles of Chen, Karim, and Hurley began to appear. A short article in Investor’s Business Daily tells such a story, titled, “YouTube video website founders: From pure geeks to media moguls.” The article reads:

A year ago, co-founders Chad Hurley and Steve Chen were in between jobs, a pair of twenty-something geeks running up big credit card debts as they tooled around a garage trying to develop an easy way for people to share homemade videos on the Web.

Now, they’re budding media moguls in a new entertainment era that relies on unconventional sites like YouTube—by some measures the top video-sharing site, one that’s cultivated a huge audience while testing the bounds of creativity, monotony, copyrights and obscenity.

(Investor’s Business Daily 2006)

Here, the trope of the inventors in the garage, maxing out credit cards to make their dream happen, serves to establish small beginnings and a lack of resources. Yet this attempt to illustrate their “impoverishment” differs greatly from the poverty-stricken Horatio Algers who made themselves out of nothing. In this case, the inventors of the new media environment are still quite fortunate and privileged with college degrees from flagship land grant institutions known for their science, technology, engineering, and math programs.

David Greising’s 2006 Chicago Tribune business piece titled “YouTube founder rides video clips to dot-com riches” tells a similar story of geek-to-media moguls, of struggling credit-card-maxed-out entrepreneurs that finally strike riches, and the simple idea of online streaming video clips as the vehicle to their success. However, this article focuses on Chen as the primary character. Chen’s ability as a code writer and his aspirations to make “Silicon Valley fortunes” were evident as he left the University of Illinois two semesters early, bypassing graduation. Greising’s article states that “Chen and Karim were exceptional code writers, and Hurley’s gift for design could give a new Web site a compelling look” (2006: 1). Although they all came from the University of Illinois as engineers, Chen became the technology person (and became Chief Technology Officer of YouTube) while Hurley became designated design man. In addition, Karim was the influential coder in building YouTube and acted as the somewhat awkward subject of the first uploaded video. However, as Karim disappears from this narrative (most likely
since he left the company to go to graduate school at Stanford), Chen and Hurley become the driving force of YouTube, propping up the Internet servers with their credit cards until venture capitalists came in, dealing with copyright issues, and eventually striking a deal with Google at a Denny’s restaurant halfway between Google’s and YouTube’s offices. In this story, the trope of the Asian nerd as technology guru arises for Chen and Karim whereas the white partner, Chad Hurley, serves as the artistic design person and is attributed the design aspects of YouTube and hence its most visible and public presence.

These sudden rise to riches stories appear more frequently after Google’s takeover of YouTube. Unsurprisingly, articles often refer to the subjects’ relative youth. An article in the Chicago Daily Herald on October 11, 2006 (Kukec) begins by mentioning Chen’s age, 27. People describe him in his high school days as smart, unmotivated, and wanting to have fun. In one article in Advertising Age, the title makes this reference explicit, “Steve Chen, 27, and Chad Hurley, 29” (Advertising Age 2006). In the Chicago Tribune article, a short paragraph starts with “at age 28” before listing Chen’s affiliations with PayPal and Facebook (Greising 2006). The focus on age implies these people succeed despite their youthfulness and inexperience. Most importantly, their youthfulness and college-like demeanor are repeatedly articulated in discussions of legality, especially as they deal with issues of copyright that span from 2007 until 2010, following the sale to Google. In youthful slang, Karim wrote in an April 2005 email to Hurley and Chen, “It’s all ‘bout da videos, yo. We’ll be an excellent acquisition target once we’re huge” (Whitehouse 2010: 31). Chen is described as being hesitant and beckoned Karim to stop with “stolen videos on the site” (Whitehouse 2010). Age becomes an integral narrative to understanding the behaviors of the founders, one that disregards copyright issues as it unexpectedly reshapes our relationship to media content in a dynamic media environment.

In the backdrop of the story of YouTube are racial and immigrant-like narratives, especially in regards to Chen and Karim. The Chicago Daily Herald article concludes in a question-and-answer format in which Chen is asked about being born in Taiwan (Kukec 2006). Chen also went to the prestigious boarding high school, Illinois Math and Science Academy, only to leave the academy and finish at his local high school. Thus, Chen did not always excel academically. Karim, a son of German and Bangladeshi parents, born in East Germany, grew up in West Germany, immigrated to and went to high school in Minnesota, and left the riches of YouTube and Internet start-ups to complete a master’s degree in computer science at Stanford University. He eventually started “Youniversity Karim Ventures,” meant to help college students with their own start-up companies. Karim’s endeavors focused on education and not purely the riches they might bring. The juxtaposition of Karim’s educational endeavor with Chen’s educational difficulties complicates the model minority narrative. Rather, their stories propose a narrative that emphasizes their youth, slacker ethos, ingenuity, and intelligence minus the work ethic associated with Horatio Algers, countering the media’s model minority stereotype.

A Complicated (Tech) Model Minority

These news media discourses highlight what we describe as the critical economics of Asian-American Internet executive discourses, which position Asian Americans as entrepreneurs and laborers who contribute to neoliberal systems of self-sufficiency, effectiveness, and capitalist economy. The narrative of the YouTube creators—Steve Chen and Jawed Karim—is that they developed a technology, burst onto the scene, and then quickly sold the company to Google before becoming venture capitalists or start-up mentors.
Such discourses inevitably frame and construct Asian Americans in the role of inventors constrained in their rhetorical agency when they sell their goods. Steve Chen and the YouTube founders become relegated to the background, invisible in discussions regarding the economic influence and impact of their beloved technology. They cannot be Steve Jobs, who is deemed as perpetually innovative. Rather, they occupy the position of Internet legend. Of course, their ability to speak and be heard and respected always relies on their ability to generate capital and refashion the Internet in inherently capitalistic ways. Indeed, Google’s acquisition of YouTube served Google’s attempt to get into online video, but for Chen it helped further develop the technology for better user experiences. In a sense, they sacrificed themselves to the larger project of the “Internet.” The quickly transforming media and technological environment that has transformed the global economics by collapsing time (through efficiencies) and space (by crisscrossing geographies) has fundamentally transformed the economic and communicational terrain and era. Still, the ways of making sense of people remain relatively fixed, unable to adjust to the fast-changing technical processes.

To make sense of this highly evolving new media environment spurred by previously unseen Asian-American entrepreneurs, news media constructed narratives that emphasized the unlikely rise and their rational and profit-producing decisions to sell their technology to larger corporations while downplaying their dedication to creating new Internet technologies. Nonetheless, the discursive backdrop and widespread trope of Asian-American model minorities permeate these narratives. They are seen as lucky in creating, robotic in their actions, nerdy in their manner of work, and, hence, socially inept, but eventually successful.

Yet the model minority myth functions differently here by continuing to code Asians and Asian Americans as smart, educated, and successful while avoiding other aspects of the Horatio Alger legend. It particularly avoids the “hard work” aspect and assumes that is essentialized to Asians and Asian Americans as they progress through STEM fields and technology sectors. Thus, hard work is recoded as already part of the job to get to the point where the new model minority’s job is to develop and sell the idea to lubricate the engine of capitalism through its relationship to large multinational companies. The narratives do not construct them as impoverished and in need of money or jobs; rather, they are in need of inspiration and entertainment and to create technology and not art.

As Asians and Asian Americans become more visible in the mainstream, the media attempt to make sense of their accomplishments and widespread visibility by circulating easily understood narratives that draw upon commonly used tropes. Yet these tropes, particularly the model minority myth, do not always easily align with the facts of the narrative and provide avenues in which the tropes can be challenged or complicated, while reproducing salient aspects of these racial tropes. In considering the model minority myth in the age of new media development, we illustrate how intelligence and hard work is already assumed and reinforced, yet the robotic nature of their work (and their nerdiness), without the glitz and glamour of stardom, complicate the model minority myth. In doing so, the flexibility of the model minority myth’s continued relevance lies not only in its widespread representation of Asians as smart and successful but also how that is articulated with societal changes and how one makes sense of them. Just as the origins of the model minority myth were used to downplay civil rights concerns and make sense of civil rights movements, the use of the model minority myth here (and its relevant aspects) makes sense of the technological changes and breakthroughs and renders Asians and Asian Americans as exceptional post-racial entrepreneurs and inventors, but unappealing as CEOs.
Notes

1 This narrative of Asian-American compliance, politeness, complacency, and passivity ignored the history of Asian-American activism, including the role of Asian Americans in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements (see, for instance, Daryl Maeda 2005).

2 Many early Asian-American YouTube stars, like KevJumba and Nigahiga, created fan bases by directly addressing model minority stereotypes.

3 The Asian-American apparel company, Blacklava, sells shirts that display “I suck at Math” or “1 + 1 = 3” to disrupt stereotypes about “smart Asians.”

4 See Ono and Pham (2009) for chapter on model minorities.

5 Additionally, venture capitalists, like Sequoia Capital, also made large profits off their initial investment in the early days of YouTube.

References


Further Reading


