12. For more details on the most popular African Americans in television, see "10 Most Powerful Blacks in TV," Ebony, October 2000, 86–96.

Race, Culture, and Gender in the New Media Age

On September 11, 2001, the terrorist suicide attacks by Islamic extremists against U.S. interests abroad visited the homeland in the form of devastating assaults on New York City's World Trade Center and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and an unsuccessful attempt that ended in the crash of a commercial airliner on a rural Pennsylvania field. From that date into the following decade, the American media image of Middle Eastern cultures—particularly those whose members profess the Islamic faith—took an abhorrent turn. The national response was quickly termed a "war on terrorism" as Islamic extremists waged a holy war or "jihad" against the United States and its allies around the world.

The events of the day that Americans now simply call "9/11" created a rush to learn more about the Islamic community. Unfortunately, however, intense media emphasis on the religious fanaticism of the protagonists resulted in stereotyping Americans of Middle Eastern heritage, and worse. Although the vast majority of Middle Eastern Americans are conventional practitioners of the Islamic faith—and share the national abhorrence to terrorism—general media reportage often failed to emphasize that distinction in public discourse. The result was that negative stereotypes across various media platforms in the first decade of the 21st century fostered an atmosphere that led to violence and other acts against fellow Americans who had the misfortune to be Muslim or descendants of Middle Eastern heritage.

During the first nine weeks following the September 2001 terrorist attacks, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) recorded more than 700 violent incidents against Arab Americans, or those perceived to be members of that community. This phenomenon had its antecedent six years earlier when anti-Arab hysteria occurred following the bombing of an FBI building in Oklahoma City only to learn the perpetrator was a White male.
Meanwhile, despite subtle changes to accommodate what some called a
postracial American society, racial stereotypes from the 19th and 20th centu-
ries continued to find expression across various media platforms of the infor-
mation age. The advent of 21st-century communication technologies helped
spread vicious and indiscriminate stereotypes of what the media commonly
called Arabs that ranged from motion picture and television screens to the
new media platforms that pervaded popular culture in America. Stereotypical
treatment of Middle Eastern people clearly moved beyond what Arab Ameri-
can media scholar Jack Shaheen termed the "three B syndrome"—bombers,
belly dancers, and billionaires—of the earlier era into a more sinister imagery.
Shaheen cited the popular film Black Hawk Down (2001) for its depiction of
Somalian Muslims as if "they were gang members in Los Angeles defying the
police department." In Towhead (2007), an abusive Lebanese father severely
beats his teenage daughter who is caught in a cultural dilemma when she
undergoes sexual awakening in an American city where the social milieu dif-
fers greatly from that in Lebanon. Network television contributed to "Arab
bashing" in the first decade of the new century in long-running series NCIS
and The Unit, which began airing on CBS in 2003 and 2006, respectively.

A more benign yet equally offensive example can be found in the feature movie
Sex and the City 2 (2010) in which cultural insensitivities to Islamic tradition are
blatantly apparent. Although the script called for a setting in the
United Arab Emirates city of Abu Dhabi, the production had to be filmed in Morocco
when UAE officials refused permission. Morocco allowed the movie—with its portray-
als of suggestive sexuality and other cultural taboos—to be filmed in Marrakech only
under the stipulation that the city not be identified.

Other critics, however, believe that attitudes toward Middle Eastern cultures and
American Muslim practitioners actually began to soften after the September 2001
attacks because the idea of racial and religious tolerance implanted in the civil rights
era began to influence hegemonic Anglo European attitudes. The films
Kingdom of Heaven (2005) and The Kite Runner (2007) have been cited as
examples of nuanced movies that offer more balanced portrayals of Middle
Eastern Muslims. It is noteworthy that the movie The Kite Runner was
based on a book authored by an Afghani writer.

If it is true that racial stereotypes in pop culture were entering a transi-
tion period at the dawn of the 21st century, the evolution nevertheless
continued to reflect current political viewpoints, popular attitudes, and
moods of the White majority audience. In 2002 Denzel Washington won
the Oscar for "Best Actor" (Training Day, 2001) and Halle Berry won the
award for "Best Actress" (Monster's Ball, 2001), marking the first sweep by
performers of color in the top acting categories. Both played roles, how-
ever, that were reminiscent of long-standing stereotypes consistent with
traditional sensibilities of White racial superiority. The awards to Wash-
ington and Berry began a spate of Oscars for Black actors throughout the

Adding to the phenomena was the rise of African American filmmaker Tyler Perry who rose to prominence in the decade as an actor, director, and producer. Perry's films, including Diary of a Mad Black Woman (2002), Madea Goes to Jail (2006), and Madea's Big Happy Family (2011), were box-office successes. His films carried an underlying religious theme, and predominantly Black audiences filled theaters across the nation to see them. Critics, however, saw throwbacks to the stereotypical "mammy" character as Perry—in drag—portrayed Madea, the matriarchal head of a dysfunctional Black family in many of his films.

The year 2012 brought recognition to Black actresses when the 2011 film, The Help, swept the Screen Actors Guild Awards in three of the five top categories: "Best Leading Actress" (Viola Davis), "Best Female in a Supporting Role" (Octavia Spencer—who also went on to win the Golden Globe and Oscar in this category), and Best Cast in a Motion Picture. In accepting her award, Davis—who triumphed over Hollywood darling Meryl Streep—evoked civil rights issues tackled in the film when she proclaimed, "The stain of racism and sexism is not just for people of color or women. It's all our burden ... I don't care how ordinary you feel, all of us can inspire change, every single one of us." Although Latinos have the largest so-called "minority" group population in the United States, they have fared far worse than African Americans in capturing Oscar recognition since 2000. Benicio del Toro was "Best Supporting Actor" in Traffic (2000) and was a nominee in the same category for 21 Grams (2003). Latinas earned two "Best Actress" nominations in the first decade of the 21st century: Salma Hayek (Frida, 2002) and Catalina Sandino Moreno (Maria Full of Grace, 2004).

Perhaps the 2011 release of The Green Hornet began a trend of reinventing the trusty culturally marginalized sidekick. That version gave Kato clear intellectual and creative prominence over his wealthy, but incompetent, Anglo European crime-fighting partner. The film, however, is a comedy, and general audiences have always accepted people of color in comedic roles throughout American history. Perhaps the humor is based in the role reversal of the characters.

Despite the inroads made in network television, Asian Americans face continued exclusion and discrimination on the big screen. In the article, "Hollywood Whitewash" (2010), writer Chris Lee recounted Hollywood's history of using White actors to play ethnic characters, including John Wayne as Genghis Khan in The Conqueror (1956), Peter Sellers as the bumbling Indian in The Party (1968), and, more notoriously, Mickey Rooney's stereotypical, bucktoothed Mr. Yunioshi in Breakfast at Tiffany's (1961). In 2007, AsianWeek ranked Rooney's character second on the list of "the 25 most infamous yellowface film performances"; third was the Charlie Chan series; and the top spot was claimed by the Fu Manchu series. The proclivity for Hollywood to cast White actors as Asian characters remained well into the 21st century. "Although these portrayals took place decades ago, their legacy lives on," Lee wrote. "Even now, in the age of Obama—when the [2011] Miss USA Rima Fakih is Lebanese American, Will Smith is the biggest movie star in the world and Sonia Sotomayor became the first Latina to sit on the U.S. Supreme Court—movie industry decision-makers can still seem woefully behind the times when it comes to matters of race." He pointed out that even in 2011, major studios like Disney still elected to have actor Jake Gyllenhaal and British actress Gemma Arterton, who are both White, portray Iranian characters in Prince of Persia (2010).

Similarly, when Paramount Studios decided to turn the popular Nickelodeon television show Avatar: The Last Airbender (2005–2008) into a live-action feature film (The Last Airbender, 2010), it also managed to "whitewash" the entire cast—even blatantly promoting racial bias in its casting call for "Caucasian or any other ethnicity." While the television series exclusively featured Asian and Inuit characters and culture, the four lead roles of Aang, Katara, Sokka, and Zuko were eventually given to actors Noah Ringer, Nicola Peltz, Jackson Rathbone, and Jesse McCartney, respectively. Only when Jesse McCartney dropped out, following scheduling conflicts with his music tour, was the role of Zuko—a villain—given to Slumdog Millionaire actor Dev Patel, an artist of Asian Indian heritage.

Guy Aoki, founding president of Media Action Network for Asian Americans (MANAA), was quick to respond. "How can you, in good faith, say you are trying to honor the integrity of the television series by taking a story written with Asian themes, settings, characters, and populating it with White leads—especially when there are so few Asian roles available in Hollywood? You are continuing a generations-long practice of racial discrimination where the opportunity for actors of color to be heroes for a change is taken away (this time in the name of 'diversity')." Aoki added: "Those character names again: Zuko, Aang and Sokka. Played by a Jesse, a Noah and a Jackson ... And the Dev Patel character starts off being a bad guy. The three white people are heroes. It's confusing to us. They're supposed to
be leading a band of Asian- or Inuit-looking people." Casting director Dee Dee Ricketts dismissed the charges of blatant cultural insensitivity with the response that "the best actors were cast, and that was it." 

Some laid the blame on the director—M. Night Shyamalan—who claimed to have complete authority in the casting process. In defending his decisions in an interview on indiemovielinesonline.com ("M. Night Shyamalan in His Own Words on The Last Airbender Race Controversy"), the director said, "I had to eventually make a decision about what nationality each of them are. What happened was, Noah Ringer walked in the door—and there was no other human being on the planet that could play Aang except for this kid. To me, he felt mixed race with an Asian quality to him. I made all the Air nomads mixed race—some of them are Hispanic, some of them are Korean . . .

"You're coming at me, the one Asian filmmaker who has the right to cast anybody I want, and I'm casting this entire movie in this color blind way where everyone is represented. I even had one section of the Earth kingdom as African American, which obviously isn't in the show, but I wanted to represent them, too! . . . So if you need to point the racist finger, point it at me." 

But coproducer Frank Marshall admitted the casting notice for "Caucasian or any other ethnicity" was both poorly worded and offensive, and in his article in the Village Voice, Michael Musto agreed that whitewashing is still a problem in Hollywood today. "One might have more sympathy for this kind of colorblind casting if Asians were more often given parts that weren't written as Asian. But it seems like only whites get that kind of privilege." Film critic Roger Ebert acknowledged the limited roles available to Asian actors when he said, "I suspect the American group most underrepresented in modern Hollywood is young Asian American males." 

Race and Representation in Prime-Time Television: More or Less?

From the mid-2000s forward, television brought numerous programs before national audiences as the demographic swell of multicultural Americans forced producers and advertisers to develop entertainment content to include representation of the exponentially growing markets. The shows were primarily situation comedies featuring Black and Latino characters. Dramatic shows featured people of color in supporting roles, often exhibiting multicultural casts. Among those offerings were The Closer (TNT) and The Office (NBC) that began their multiyear runs in 2005. South Asian Indian characters began to appear during this period including roles in The Office, Royal Pains (USA, 2009), Parks and Recreation (NBC, 2009), and Outsourced (NBC, 2010), a comedy set in Mumbai featuring several stereotypical Indian characters. Outsourced was a throwback to stereotypes of the past wherein a White character supervises Indian employees who appear as weird misfits within their own culture and social setting. Pacific Island Asian characters returned in a major way with the updated version of Hawaii Five-0 on CBS in 2010.

The most significant Mid-Eastern Arab presence on weekly television programming in the first decade of the 21st century was veteran Lebanese American actor Tony Shalhoub who starred as Monk, an eccentric detective on USA from 2002 to 2009. Shalhoub's character was not defined specifically as a person of Arab descent, and the series never focused on his ethnicity or cultural background.

The arrival of the 21st century saw the development of cable and satellite television into major entertainment forces competing with traditional over-the-air networks for viewers. Most Americans—including people of color—gained access to many more channels of programming. Moreover, in what is now called the "video age," visual entertainment also became available to consumers using DVD technology at home and/or in portable computers and tablet devices. Executives and producers of video entertainment are using the expanded capacity to bring audiences specialized "niche" programming including television channels devoted exclusively to ethnic groups and to such diverse areas as vintage movies, sports, comedy, shopping, history, home gardening and décor, and so on. Subcategories of all the above appeared to meet virtually every area of human interest.

However, the exigencies of providing program content 24 hours a day, coupled with the high production costs of original programming, led many outlets to rely on "reruns" of material previously aired. Exceptions are occasional programs produced by pay cable television channels such as Home Box Office (HBO) and Showtime that carry some original movies featuring people of color and/or cultural themes. For example, in 2000 Showtime offered Soul Food, a Black series based on a theatrical film released a few years earlier, and Resurrection Blvd., a Latino American dramatic series.

Source: ©istockphoto.com/EdStocK.
When the Multi-Ethnic Media Coalition released its 2009 Report Card on Television Diversity, Karen Narasaki, then chair of the Asian Pacific American Media Coalition, noted that in the 10 years since the four major networks—ABC, CBS, Fox, and NBC—announced a fall prime-time lineup of shows that were virtually devoid of minority characters, the coalitions have continued to work with the networks on initiatives to boost inclusion of minorities both in front of and behind the camera. “We believe increasing the number of APA [Asian Pacific American] and other minority writers and producers will help lead to the further development and quality of roles for APA and other minority characters. By now, each network should have a strong pipeline of minorities who are ready to become the next Shonda Rhimes (creator, executive producer, and head writer of Grey’s Anatomy and Private Practice).”

However, of the four major networks, only CBS improved its overall grade, from a C+ to a B, while the other networks maintained their previous scores (B- for ABC and C+ for Fox and NBC). Opportunities for Asian American directors at three of the four networks increased from 2000 to 2010, but Asian Americans remain underrepresented as central characters on prime-time shows. Moreover, while many network and cable television shows that aired in the second decade of the 21st century have greater diversity in their ensemble casts—including Fox’s Glee; TBS’s For Better or Worse; TNT’s Leverage; USA’s Psych and Suits; CBS’s Hawaii 5-0, NCIS, and The Big Bang Theory; NBC’s Law & Order franchises; and ABC’s Modern Family—people of color still constitute a relatively small percentage of supporting roles. There is vast room for improvement to increase diversity in programming across the television entertainment spectrum.

Advocacy groups further note that networks continue to treat diversity as an afterthought, and essentially camouflage White shows with a token person of color. For example, Better With You features five White characters and one Latina, Happy Endings features five White characters and one Black male, and the cast of Mr. Sunshine includes four Whites and one Black male. One way to increase representation in network prime-time television is to offer more family-oriented shows that feature a predominantly ethnic cast, such as the George Lopez show, Tyler Perry’s House of Payne, and 1994’s All-American Girl. Although George Lopez centered on a Latino family, it appealed broadly to non-Latinos; similarly, All-American Girl didn’t just appeal to Asian Americans. Producer Gail Berman—who later became president of Fox TV—noted that the show was actually more popular in Louisiana than in San Francisco.

Meanwhile, situation comedies, dramas, and other programs produced in the 1960s, ’70s, ’80s, and ’90s continued to be aired on cable and satellite television networks. Motion pictures from the advent of the sound movie era can still be seen on American television on any given day. In addition, retail sales of “old school” videos are consumed for repetitive viewing in homes across America. Therefore, it is easy to see why old racial stereotypes die hard. In essence, the technology of the video age has resulted in the continued conveyance of old stereotypes to new generations of viewers.

Old Problems Linger in the New Media Age

In the “new media era,” the concepts of racial diversity and multiculturalism have become part of the fabric of American discourse. Consequently, as noted herein, the mass communications industry faces increased pressure from advocacy groups to better reflect the nation’s demographic reality. If prime-time television is to truly reflect the America we live in, the networks must do more to invest in shows that feature diversity among their characters. Many observers of American popular culture believe television fare presented when children are most likely to be viewing is critical to advancing racial tolerance and diversity in the United States.

Racial, cultural, and gender self-esteem is developed during the childhood years, and television programming—outside from educational and public broadcasting venues—has generally failed to fulfill a socially responsible role in that regard. Children Now, a national children’s advocacy organization, periodically conducts research on television programming and its impact on children. The group’s 2004 prime-time diversity report found that although 40% of American youth (ages 19 and under) were children of color, their cultural heritages were woefully underrepresented on television. Despite the fact that television programming featured more ethnically diverse casts in the new century, disparities continue to exist between real-life racial and gender diversity experienced by youth and the world presented to them on prime-time television.

Nevertheless, a few improvements were reflected in the Children Now report. For example, the number of Latino characters on prime-time television increased to the extent that more than half of the shows included at least one Latino character. And in 2010, George Lopez was the first Latino to get his own late-night talk show (TBS) when he was bumped to a prime-time 10 p.m. slot after Conan O’Brien was given his former 11 p.m. time slot. Lopez’s success, however, did not extend to all racial groups, as only one in seven Asian/Pacific Islander characters (14%) were featured in integral roles on prime-time television. These Asian groups were represented mostly as secondary and tertiary characters.

The most diverse programs on television were dramas, and multicultural casting was found in nearly half of such shows. In 2011, examples included top-rated dramas like the Law & Order and CSI franchises, Grey’s Anatomy, Hawaii 5-0, and Castle. Even the plethora of unscripted reality shows began to show greater diversity with such programs as The Real Housewives of Atlanta, Top Chef, Keeping Up With the Kardashians, and
Khloe and Lamar where at least half of the casts feature people of color in starring roles.

However, the Children Now study also found many problematic areas in both representation and programming. For starters, nearly three fourths of all prime-time characters were White. Also, youth characters (18 and under) were less racially diverse than the overall sample (13%), and fewer racial groups were represented. Gains for Latinos were not reflected in youth roles as only 4% of all youth characters were Latino, and Asian/Pacific Islanders composed a mere 1% of the total youth population on prime time, with many appearing only as supporting characters.

Although youth are most likely to watch television during the 8 p.m. prime-time hour, it remained the least racially diverse segment with only one in five shows featuring a multicultural cast. On the other hand, the most racial diversity was found in the 10 p.m. shows where more than two thirds of the casts featured a mixture of races and ethnicities. During that time slot, however, youth are probably less likely to be watching television. Despite the fact that situation comedies are the most popular genre among youth, such programs continued to be the least diverse and most segregated shows on prime-time television as nearly three fourths featured all-White casts.

More than half of the African Americans with starring roles on prime-time television appeared in situation comedies, but Blacks were severely underrepresented (4%) on reality programs. Also, despite the progress Latinos have made in prime-time television, they still continue to be typecast in low-status occupations, and were four times more likely to be portrayed as domestic workers than other racial groups.

Other findings in the study show that Asian/Pacific Islanders were more than three times as likely to play supporting rather than starring roles, and Arab/Middle Eastern characters were most likely (46%) to be portrayed as criminals, compared to Asian/Pacific Islanders (15%), African Americans (10%), and Whites (5%). Not surprisingly, not a single Native American character was featured in any episode in the 2004 Children Now study.

**Inequities Abound**

It would be wishful thinking to conclude the new millennium brought with it a steadfast stream of progress on matters of race, culture, and gender in the media. But the reality is much more of a mixed bag. On the positive side, 2011 proved to be a landmark year of firsts for minorities and women in sports and entertainment wherein they received extensive and nonstereotypical exposure in the media. For the first time, an African American man topped the list of biggest moneymakers in Hollywood with Tyler Perry claiming the top spot with $130 million. Although no women of color were among the top five wage earners in the motion picture industry in 2011, Jennifer Yuh Nelson, an Asian female, was chosen to direct the blockbuster sequel *Kung Fu Panda 2*, while British beauty Cheryl Cole was booted as a judge on Fox television’s *The X Factor* and replaced by former *Pussycat Dolls* frontwoman Nicole Scherzinger, a native of Hawaii. As a result, half the judges on Simon Cowell’s highly anticipated hit show were women of color!

Other unlikely firsts occurred at the 2011 summer movie box office. Walt Disney Studios’ *The Help*—a period drama that daringly tackled the explosive race and class issues of the American South of the 1960s—outpaced the earnings of bigger bankrolled box-office competition for three consecutive weeks. But the extraordinary critical and commercial success of the film—a complex tale of White women in the South and their relationships with Black maids who cleaned their houses and cared for their children—wasn’t without criticism from a host of prominent detractors. “Some critics carp about a white author writing in a black dialect for a pair of maids who serve as two of the book’s three narrators. Others thought the White narrator—an idealistic college grad named Skeeter Phelan, who persuades the Black maids of Jackson, Miss., to tell their stories to her and causes a sensation when she publishes their tales anonymously—was too much of a savior.”

This is a common critique of ensemble casts, where a White character traditionally takes on the “lead” role and is often positioned to “save” the other characters played by actors of color.

The Black actresses also had their share of challenges in combating criticism from their own community. Viola Davis, also an Oscar nominee for *Doubt* (2008), was understandably circumspect about agreeing to play the role of stoic house servant Abileen: “There is huge responsibility within the African American community. I mean huge,” said Davis. “There are entire blogs committed to saying that I’m a sellout just for playing a maid.”

But director Tate Taylor spent hours making Davis feel comfortable with the role and ensuring that *The Help* would not be “a watered-down portrayal of race relations in the 1960s South.” And Davis added the significance of sharing this type of story was “Because we’ve never seen those kinds of relationships on screen, we bastardize it by saying that she’s a ‘great white hope’ and she’s ‘just a mammy.’ Who’s written these kind of complicated relationships ever?”

But before major accolades are bestowed on Hollywood for racial progress, it must be noted that three years earlier so few roles went to Latinas that the Imagen Awards—which honors positive portrayals of Latinos and Latino culture in entertainment—issued no awards for 2009 for either Best Actress or Best Supporting Actress in a feature film. Moreover, Hollywood continued to cast Latina actors, in particular, in stereotypical fashion. Whenever Emmy Award–winning actress Sofia Vergara, known more for her killer curves than her comic timing, is mentioned in the media, it...
is usually accompanied by a “Va-Va-Voom!” or “Muy Caliente”! Vergara recalled that before she got her big break in the ABC series Modern Family, she didn’t fit the traditional stereotype of the sultry, raven-haired Latina vixen. “When I started auditioning for American acting roles, they didn’t know where to put me. A blond Latina? In L.A. They’re used to Latin women looking more Mexican. But if you go to Uruguay, Argentina, Colombia, everybody is blond.”

In her article titled “The Hypersexualization of Latinas in Television and Film,” Eliana Grijalva-Rubio (2011) further lamented that, “twenty years ago, there were hardly any Latinas in any kind of mass media. Unfortunately, the price we’re paying now to see ourselves represented is a set of exaggerated, overdone stereotypes that put the African-American bad boy and the bespectacled Asian math whiz to shame.” As if these stereotypes aren’t bad enough in mainstream television and films, Grijalva-Rubio added that the hypersexualized, vixenish bad-girl depictions where the miniskirts get shorter, the necklines get lower, and the heels get higher even extend into Spanish-language television where “the networks have sexualized women all the way to the news shows... and even the female anchors, women that should be considered professional, are wearing tiny skirts and scanty halter tops that, literally, let it all hang out.”

Dr. Brenda Risch, director of women’s studies at the University of Texas at El Paso, believes that the best—if not only—way to combat these negative portrayals is for Latinas to create their own positive representations, much like Salma Hayek did by starting her own production company after being told to “go back to Mexico” because her accent would prohibit her from getting any roles other than servants or maids. When asked about how she thought the hypersexualized stereotype of Latinas was damaging to women, she replied that “these portrayals are damaging to a young woman’s self-esteem because they confirm the old stereotype that a woman’s main worth lies solely in her appearance, rather than on her creativity, intelligence, emotional maturity, values, and so on.” Alicia Rascon, one of the founding editors of Latinitas, feels that the image of the hypersexualized Latina perpetuates not just a stereotypical—but also a simplistic—view of Latinas as a whole. “I think there’s a big stereotype that Latinas are super-sexy and to me it’s disturbing that that’s the only way they look at us. Very often when we see a show on TV or a movie, we don’t see a lot of Latina characters, and when we do, they’re the really scantily clad Latinas that are going to steal your boyfriends. I think we’re a lot more complex than that, so I think it’s horrible that they’re simplifying us.”

In retrospect it would seem that 2008 was a bad year for all women of color in prime time television. According to an article titled “The Rise and Fall and Rise Again of Black TV,” Jennifer Armstrong (2011) observed that 2008 was the year broadcast television officially “got out of the African-American sitcom business” when it “canceled the long-running Girlfriends, and the following year it yanked both Everybody Hates Chris and the Girlfriends spin-off, The Game—also known as the last two successful black-centric shows on network television.”

While the broadcast networks have made some progress toward casting more diverse ensembles, the crop of new shows for the 2011–2012 season still lacked any series with a predominantly African American, Latino, or Asian American cast. “The world on television should look like the world I see when I walk outside my door,” said Grey’s Anatomy creator Shonda Rhimes. Rhimes pioneered color-blind casting for television and developed a show with a Black female lead, ABC’s Damage Control (later retitled Scandal), starring Kerry Washington as a PR guru. Queen Latifah, who has taken a more proactive stance to produce and promote greater diversity on prime-time television, argued that diverse ensembles in general—and African American series in particular—provide a way to represent a point of view sorely missing on television: “People live in bubbles, and they perpetuate racism and classism. There’s still plenty of places they can go [on TV] that are as un-diverse as they could possibly be... it’s just something that’s going to be a continuing fight, to try to keep making these things happen.”

The African American audience, however, proved to be practically ravenous for these types of shows. In response to direct viewer demands, a resurgence occurred in Black television programming—thanks to cable stations BET, VH1, and TBS. In January 2011, BET revived The Game to a record-breaking 7.7 million viewers, three times the audience it got on the CW channel and twice the size of any show airing on the teen-oriented network. Its success spawned the network’s additional development of Reed Between the Lines, and VH1 joined with Queen Latifah, who became executive producer, to bring the “dramedy” Single Ladies to the small screen. In addition, reruns of previously canceled series such as My Wife and Kids and Everybody Hates Chris remained popular among African American viewers. In an oblique message to the profit-centered television
industry, actor Malcolm-Jamal Warner noted, "The black viewership is important. Black shows do make money. It seems like a no-brainer."

The revival of African American scripted television programming can probably be traced to TBS's successful 2007 run of Tyler Perry's *House of Payne*—and his later shows *For Better or Worse* and an adaptation of his film, *Why Did I Get Married?*. Jacque Edmonds Cofer, executive producer of *Let's Stay Together*, says "I've had plenty of people say to me that it's great to see something on TV that represents them," and "It's also important for people to see that every African-American woman is not a Real Housewife." And Jeff Olde, executive vice president of original programming for VH1, adds, "I think our shows should reflect the country that we're living in... we're thrilled that we have a large number of African-American women who watch us, and quite frankly, we're always looking for new stories to tell."

When the second decade of the century unfolded the prime-time network lineup had yet to feature an Asian American female in a lead role—with the exception of Hawaii-born Maggie Q who starred in the CW series *Nikita*. ABC could have boosted the ranking of its diversity report card when two medical roles—one on *Body of Proof* and the other on *Off the Map*—were written for South Asian women, but instead were given to Jeri Ryan and Meryl Streep's daughter—both White women.24 There were, however, a number of hit shows that featured an Asian male or female in supporting roles. They included *Glee* (Harry Shum Jr. and Jenna Ushkowitz), *Hawaii 5-0* (Daniel Dae Kim and Grace Park), *How I Met Your Mother* (Nazarin Boniadi and Kal Penn), *The Mentalist* (Tim Kang), *Grey's Anatomy* (Sandra Oh), and *The Big Bang Theory* (Kunal Nayyar).

In culturally insensitive Hollywood, however, the revamped version of *Hawaii 5-0* increased the diversity in its cast only following persistent urging of advocacy groups such as MANAA. Despite the state of Hawaii having a 60% majority Asian population, the show initially planned to feature only one Asian—or 25%—among its four lead characters. After persistent negotiations with CBS producers and casting directors, Daniel Dae Kim (*Lost*) was finally cast in the role of Chin Ho Kelly and Grace Park (*Battlestar Galactica*) was chosen to play Kono Kalakaua. The show premiered in September 2010 with 17.59 million views, making it the top-rated "new" show of the 2010–2011 television season.25 However, in its second season, actress Lauren German joined the cast as agent Lori Weston, effectively replacing Grace Park—or Kono Kalakaua—as the lead female in the series, thus decreasing the 50/50 balance of minority characters to a 60/40 dominant cast of White characters.

Impact of Oprah Winfrey

Despite the vacillating inroads and pitfalls of expanding diversity on network and cable television and in film, perhaps no other media personality has had as much impact on shaping American popular cultural landscape as Oprah Winfrey. After launching her iconic talk show in 1986, Winfrey decided to end the program in 2011. Despite being a woman—and a woman of color—Winfrey shot to the top from talk show queen to media icon by interviewing celebrities, authors, and politicians and tackled topics that ranged from weight loss to race relations. In the process, she created a billion-dollar media empire. Most of Winfrey's viewers were White women, and according to University of Southern California Annenberg School for Communication faculty member David Craig, she defined the power of personal narrative that was a precursor to the surge in what became known as "reality" television programming. She was everybody's Black girlfriend, and she developed the Oprah brand that forever changed television and other forms of media.26

When her daily show ended, Winfrey devoted her energy to expanding her OWN (Oprah Winfrey Network) cable television channel. Despite facing formidable challenges to provide appealing and marketable programming on cable television to a broad audience, Winfrey brought to the effort a proven track record of adapting to changing realities. As Lena L. Kennedy, who served on President Barack Obama's National Finance Committee, aptly observed, "When you think of Oprah and her achievements, you think of the impact she's made in the talk show world, but it's so much greater... while it is always nice see someone who looks like you in the media... I think the impact she's made on women transcends beyond race."27

Despite Winfrey's contributions and success, gender inequities continued to persist in the television and film industries even as she closed her talk show. Male characters on prime-time television outnumbered female characters nearly two to one, and males were twice as likely to be older (in their 50s and 60s) compared to their female counterparts. According to the Media Report to Women (2010), in the 2009–2010 prime-time television season, women accounted for 27% of all creators, executive producers, producers, directors, and...
writers, editors, and directors of photography working on sitcoms, dramas, and reality programs airing on the broadcast networks. In the feature film industry, women composed only 16% of all directors, executive producers, producers, writers, cinematographers, and editors working on the top 250 domestic grossing films in 2009. This actually represented a decline of 3% from 2001.28

Racial Gaffes on Radio and the Web

Although the days of popular radio dramas of the 1930s and 1940s had long since passed from the airwaves, syndicated radio programs featuring nationally known personalities drew large audiences in the first two decades of the new century. Network and cable television brought dramatic and comedy shows to the mass American audience with content that expanded the boundaries of social tastes in subject matter including breakage of sexual taboos and civil discourse. This new era ushered in more media content involving racial and cultural themes and frank dialogue that bordered on incivility.

In syndicated radio, the rise of political and sports talk shows often found racial issues as prime subject matter. One such controversial figure was Rush Limbaugh, a politically conservative radio commentator whose sharp tongue and brusque delivery led him to venture occasionally beyond politics into other realms of American life. Limbaugh began his radio career in the 1970s, and he also hosted several television programs. During a brief stint as a sports commentator on ESPN in 2003, Limbaugh was embroiled in racial controversy when he made comments about Black professional football player Donovan McNabb. Limbaugh told his audience that it was "absurd to say that the sports media haven't overrated Donovan McNabb because he's black." Limbaugh said McNabb held his quarterback position primarily because the National Football League desired to see a Black player succeed in the position. The following year McNabb led his team to the Super Bowl, and during his career with the Philadelphia Eagles he quarterbacked the team to four division titles.

Another syndicated radio performer, Don Imus, made racist and sexist comments in 2007 about members of the Rutgers University women's basketball team. Without provocation Imus called the Black female athletes "nappy headed hos" (whores) and "jigaboos" on his CBS broadcast. The ensuing uproar from civil and women's rights organizations and others resulted in his firing. Within a few months, however, Imus had apologized and returned to the airwaves with another syndicated radio deal.

In 2009 two KLBJ-AM radio personalities, Don Pryor and Todd Jeffries ("The Todd and Don Show"), offended many in their Austin, Texas, community when they used the term wetbacks more than 30 times during their one-hour show in reference to undocumented Latino workers. The men were suspended for two weeks after protests from various persons including the city's Mayor Pro Tem Mike Martinez.

Internet radio has also been a platform for racial slurs as evidenced by comments made by South Carolina State Senator Jake Knotts. In June 2011, Knotts accomplished a two-for-one slur when he said of Nikki Haley, then a candidate for governor, "We already got a niggerhead in the White House" and "We don't need another one in the governor's mansion." Knotts apologized but justified his remarks by equating the Internet radio program to the satirical NBC television show Saturday Night Live.

In 2006, syndicated radio host Adam Carolla mocked the Asian Excellence Awards by airing a skit featuring various people saying nothing but variations of "ching chong" on "The Adam Carolla Show." MANAA representative Guy Aoki later went on the show to confront the host and to promote the award show, and was even asked to be a call-in guest to talk about racial issues. But when the station Carolla broadcasted from, KSLX 97.1 Free FM, didn't improve its ratings enough to satisfy parent company CBS, the Top 40 format was dropped, and "The Adam Carolla Show" and everything on that frequency was cancelled. Two days before signing off in 2009, Carolla said when he went to a live podcast format that he wouldn't have to worry about "racist a-holes . . . like Guy Aoki who are gonna climb up my ass if I say anything about all the Asian people that he, evidently, represents. That's every single Asian person on the entire planet."29

Later, on his popular podcast, when Carolla talked to sidekick Teresa Strasser about the Dr. Laura (Schlessinger) controversy where she repeatedly used the "N-word" and decided to end her syndicated radio show, Carolla ranted:

Who was actually hurt, other than the watchdog groups that have to pretend that people were actually hurt? You know what I mean? Like who really, when all these watchdog groups just jump on this shit and it's all extortion deal anyway, and we all have dealt with it, anyone who's been in the media, been in radio for long enough have dealt with all these world class assholes out there, Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, there's a guy named Guy Aoki who speaks for every Asian culture when they're so diverse and there's so many of them on this planet. That he gets to be the mouthpiece for all of them sounds very racist to me. Like if I say, "I speak for all white people, you speak for all Jews, or you speak for all bald people with a tumor."30

Aoki responded by sending a letter to Carolla, stating, "On behalf of the entire Asian American community (which, as you know, I represent), congratulations on the success of our podcast." It was signed, "Your favorite asswipe, Guy Aoki."

The Web has also proven to be a source of trouble for teen Disney sensations Miley Cyrus and Joe Jonas when photos of them making racist gestures went viral on the Internet. In 2008, Miley Cyrus was caught slanting her eyes in a public photo with her girlfriend that offended the Asian
American community. She insisted she was only making “goofy faces” but issued two public statements—although she never fully acknowledged the significance of the hurtful and racially offensive gesture that was satisfactory to civil rights and media groups.

In early 2009, another Disney star, Joe Jonas—who was also part of the pop-rock boy band the Jonas Brothers—was caught on gossip10en.com in a photo showing him pulling back his eyes to look Asian. Although the photo may have been several years old, it surfaced on the Web and created an outcry among the Asian American community. An article titled “Joe Jonas Does the ‘Asian Eyes’” by Gossip Gal asserts that “Miley Cyrus has done it and got into big trouble since everyone started saying she is a racist and mocking Asians, Joe Jonas did the ‘Asian eyes’ too. Now let’s see if someone tries to sue him too!” MANAA demanded that Jonas issue an apology after the photo went viral and was widely seen in cyberspace, and felt that because he was such a popular star and role model, he could have turned an embarrassing situation into a positive learning experience for his fans.

The aforementioned intolerant examples are indicative of relaxed standards of civility in public discourse that was an early-21st-century hallmark not only of American politics—where political parties were firmly entrenched in uncompromising ideological positions—but of the general “in your face” attitude that pervaded much of the content in communications media. That such attitudes would find expression in race relations was an inevitable consequence.

Video Games: One Step Forward, Two Steps Backward

With the 2011 Supreme Court ruling that declared it unconstitutional to ban the sale or rental of violent video games to children, the doors were left wide open for the gaming industry to take aim at its core demographic—young male gamers. Gone are the warm and fuzzy pet simulations and music games that flooded the market a few years before. The industry has shifted toward action and military games that cater to its most loyal and devoted core base.

Despite their efforts to expand their market to “casual” gamers such as women and older adults, those players were the first to curtail their spending on video games when the U.S. economy declined. The casual market tended to switch to less expensive or free games on Facebook and smartphones. However, “core” young male gamers remained a loyal consumer base and continued buying action titles like Activision’s Call of Duty: Modern Warfare and Black Ops and Rockstar Games’ Grand Theft Auto, which have sold many millions of copies. Consequently, other game publishers have launched a slew of new titles geared toward the young male audience, such as Mass Effect 3, Saints Row: The Third, Gears of War 3, and Halo 4.

Meanwhile, as young males garner the marketing and creative attention of the gaming industry, women continue to be left on the sidelines of the video game revolution. A 2007 survey by Game Developer magazine found only 20% of the industry’s workers were female, and only 3% were game programmers. In fact, Kathy Vrabeck, a top executive at one of the largest video game publishers, Electronic Arts Inc., often completes an entire workday without meeting with another woman. Brenda Brathwaite, a game developer who teaches game design at the Savannah College of Art and Design in Georgia describes some of the video recruiting ads as screaming images depicting menacing warriors of undefined—but clearly non-White—ethnicity and scantily clad female combatants have brought racist and sexist stereotypes into the extremely popular video game industry.

Source: Fanatzar Game Studio, Dead Mage Inc. (left). Georges Seguin (right).
“college fraternity” and says “there are still companies that throw recruiting parties with strippers.” However, to combat the pervasive sexist stereotypes—including the Electronic Entertainment Expo’s infamous “booth babes”—the show banned appearances by scantily clad women in 2006.34

But the industry needs to go a step further. Simon Carless, publisher of Game Developer magazine, noted, “It’s important for women to be involved creatively because we need to broaden the reach of games... They should be a universal art form.” In short, the video game industry needs to “become more diverse if it’s to break out of the young male market and into the mainstream.”35 The problem with a skewed video game market is that it tends to perpetuate racial and gender inequities and stereotypes. For example, in a Children Now study titled “Fair Play: Violence, Gender and Race in Video Games” (2001):

- Females were less likely to be player-controlled characters, which in turn means there were fewer characters with whom females could identify.
- Half of all female characters were props or bystanders while male characters were predominantly competitors and thus engaged in action.
- Male characters were more likely to engage in physical aggression (52% to 32%) while female characters were nearly twice as likely to use verbal aggression and ridicule and more than three times as likely to scream.
- Female characters were often hypersexualized or had unhealthy, unrealistic, and disproportionate body sizes, while the males were often hypermuscularized.
- Females were more than twice as likely to wear highly revealing clothing by either having their breasts partially or fully exposed, showing their bare midriffs, or having their buttocks exposed.

Concerning racial diversity and stereotyping, the study found that:

- More than half of all human characters were White, and nearly every video game hero was White. White female characters also outnumbered female characters of every other racial group.
- Games especially created for young children featured only White characters.
- Latinas and Native American characters were virtually nonexistent, while Latino characters only appeared in sports games and were almost always involved in physical harm and pain.
- There were few Asian/Pacific Islander characters, and they were rarely player-controlled, were usually wrestlers or fighters, and were often antagonists.

Chapter 5 Race, Culture, and Gender in the New Media Age

- Most of the African American males were portrayed as competitors, while most African American females were non-action characters. The females were also far more likely than any other group to be victims of violence.36

These data raise several questions and issues: What types of messages do such portrayals send to children and young adults? Do they perpetuate racial and gender stereotypes and social barriers? Does the lack of racial diversity and gender equity have the same impact in video games as it does in traditional forms of media? Do these images consciously—or subconsciously—inform young people that certain groups are valued differently by society?37

2. Media Action Network for Asian Americans, Eyes & Ears 18 (No. 1, Summer 2011).
4. Media Action Network for Asian Americans, Eyes & Ears 18 (No. 1, Summer 2011).
5. Ibid., 26.
6. Ibid., 25.
7. Media Action Network for Asian Americans, Eyes & Ears 18 (No. 1, Summer 2011).
8. Ibid., 15.
9. Ibid., 20.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
13. Ibid., D5.
14. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., 44.
23. Ibid.
24. Media Action Network for Asian Americans, Eyes & Ears 18 (No. 1, Summer 2011).
25. Ibid.
27. Ibid., A4.
30. Ibid., 6–7.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.