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The 2005 AAJA Focus Study Report

Representing the Total Community: Relationships between Asian-American Staff and Asian-American Coverage in U.S. Newspapers

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Founded in 1981, the **Asian American Journalists Association** is a national, non-profit educational association based in San Francisco that has more than 2,300 members. Today, AAJA encourages young Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders to enter the ranks of journalism, to work for fair and accurate coverage of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and to increase the number of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and news managers in the industry. For more information, visit <http://www.aja.org>.

Founded in 1976, the *World Journal* is one of the largest daily newspapers in the United States. World Journal is published in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Houston, Toronto and Vancouver and widely distributed wherever there are Chinese Americans. World Journal's mission is to serve all overseas Chinese by helping immigrants bridge the gap to mainstream America, keep in touch with their homeland and local Chinese community news, and improve their quality of life.

The *World Journal* is a member of the United Daily News Group, one of the leading global media conglomerates. The United Daily News Group's operations include several daily newspapers in Asia, North America and Europe, periodicals, an economic news service, a book publishing and distribution company, the largest Chinese retail bookstore chain in North America and a leading Chinese news website.

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Executive Summary

This research project, commissioned by the Asian American Journalists Association and funded by the *World Journal*, sought to verify a conventional wisdom that the presence of ethnic journalists – Asian Americans – results in more and better coverage of ethnic groups to a given community. Six newspapers were analyzed, including representatives of communities with varying numbers of Asian-American populations and geographic regions across the nation.

The study found that newspapers with larger numbers of Asian-American staff members provide more stories – thus broader community coverage – about Asian Americans. Likewise, newspapers in cities with larger Asian-American populations are more likely to have more Asian-American staff members. The findings go beyond quantity, however, although differences tend to be less striking. For example, identifiable Asian-American writers are only slightly more likely to use Asian-American sources, to provide slightly greater diversity in perspectives and somewhat less likely to be event-driven.

Goal

Conventional wisdom links the number of Asian Americans in the newsroom with the quality of newspaper coverage about Asian Americans. But no solid evidence exists to support this widely shared idea. The AAJA and other civic, journalistic and ethnic organizations have been pushing major media firms to hire more ethnically diverse news professionals to strengthen the breadth of newsroom perspective. The belief is that this will broaden coverage of a community and improve coverage of the nation's ethnic groups. Yet, no empirical examination has been conducted to support this argument.

This research project, therefore, aimed to investigate whether the presence of Asian-American journalists in the newsroom may contribute to elevating the level of quantity, depth, and scope of news stories related to Asian Americans. We also asked whether the stories done by Asian-American journalists would score higher in the attribute assessments, including explanation, substance, perspective diversity, and finally, contextual information.

[Description of the Study](#)

To answer the aforementioned questions, several datasets were used. The researchers conducted a content analysis of six varied newspapers across the nation (some with high Asian-American staff/circulation and some with low Asian-American staff/circulation). The researchers also used U.S. Census Bureau statistics to determine demographics of each of the six cities – specifically the percentage of the Asian-American population of that city. Additionally, we tabulated the AAJA's directory (of those who are currently working in the media) to obtain an indication of the number of Asian-American staff members at each paper. All six papers were contacted to obtain demographics about the number of Asian-American staff members. The information provided by the six papers varies, with *Seattle Times* being the most cooperative and its data most detailed. The *Boston Globe* declined to participate in the study.

The information about each of the papers and the city's demographics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Sampled Cities and Key Statistics

Paper	% of Asian-American population in the city	AAJA members with the paper	Self-reported AA staff members/total news staff
<i>Seattle Times</i>	13.1	30	33/297
<i>San Diego Union-Tribune</i>	13.6	12	19/394
<i>Boston Globe</i> *	7.5	9	
<i>Raleigh News & Observer</i>	3.4	2	9/250
<i>St. Louis Post-Dispatch</i>	2.0	3	x/330
<i>Baton Rouge Advocate</i>	2.6	0	0/119

**Boston Globe* declined to participate in this study, therefore, the statistic about the paper is incomplete.

Originally, Los Angeles and Philadelphia were included in the sample. However, Nexis/Lexis does not include the Philadelphia *Inquirer* in the databank, and the Los Angeles *Times* was stored for only six months. Thus, it was necessary that these two papers be replaced by the *Boston Globe* and the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, which are in the Northeast and Southwest regions, respectively. These substitutions maintained the geographical distribution of the sample. Also, as a result of the replacement, the sizes of the cities and the papers seem to be more comparable.

In this study, we adopted the governmental definition of Asian Americans, which is necessary because Census Bureau's statistics of demographics were needed for sampling and data analysis. The search for relevant news stories was conducted through Nexis/Lexis, using the keywords "Asian American," "Asian," or any of the eleven Asian ethnic groups' names that exceed 1% of total Asian population in the U.S. in 2000 (Asian

Indian, Cambodian, Chinese, Filipino, Hmong, Japanese, Korean, Laotian, Pakistani, Thai, Vietnamese).¹ When either of the key words or any of the eleven Asian ethnicities appears in the text, that story was included in the study sample. As a second layer of the screening process, the coder read each story and decided whether it indeed related to Asian Americans rather than exclusively to Asians internationally.

Stories that were exclusively Asian (read: geographical) were not included in the sample. It also is worth noting that the governmental definition of Asian American differs slightly from that of the AAJA. One major distinction is that Americans of Middle East descent are not included in the official definition of Asian American. The official definition of the Census Bureau considers Middle Eastern Americans to be white. To the researchers' best knowledge, there is no official, systematic census regarding Middle Eastern Americans in each city.

As a result of this analysis, the research team found a total of 166 stories that are relevant to Asian Americans, which are the basis of the following analysis.

For each of these stories, the coders sought to document several characteristics, including:

- **by-line** – Is the story written by an AAJA member, one of the Asian-American staff members provided by the paper, or someone with Asian-looking last name? Even though the method is not bullet-proof, the researchers believe it is effective in providing the information needed for this study.
- **length** – Were the stories longer and therefore more detailed?
- **topics** – What kinds of stories are linked to Asian Americans? Are the topics widely different, or do they focus only on a limited number of subjects?
- **sources** – What kinds of sources are used in the news stories? How many sources may be identified as Asian Americans?
- **depth** – Are the stories related to Asian Americans substantive, or are they superficial and perfunctory? Are the stories event-driven, or are they historically and contextually rich? Are the stories explanatory?

A story's depth is qualitative in nature. But the coding of depth can be executed in an objective, systematic fashion. For example, a story that appeared on September 9, 2004, in the San Diego *Union Tribune*, "A Land of Constant Sorrows: With 'Remains,' Seema Sueko looks for the 'truths' in painful territories," was coded "substantive" since the story covered the play by Sueko in great detail. On July 9, 2004, the San Diego paper published a short story titled, "Daughter of Man Missing 6 Months Turns to the Public," which was coded "not substantive" because the story simply reported the basics of the incident that involved an Asian American. An August 8, 2004 story from the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* was coded "explanatory" since the staff writer, Jerri Stroud, analyzed on the directors of St. Louis area top public companies and explained the reason why women and minorities are underrepresented in that group. In contrast, the same paper on November 1, 2004 published a 168-word story titled, "Obesity Rate in Asian Youths is Catching Up in California." This story was rated "not explanatory" because it offered no

explanation as to why the trend took place. These examples demonstrate the coding of a story's depth. The authors can provide copies of these and other examples upon request.

Based on this information, this study takes Asian American population of the city and the number of Asian American journalists working for the paper into account to examine whether patterns or trends of coverage exist relating to Asian-Americans.

Findings

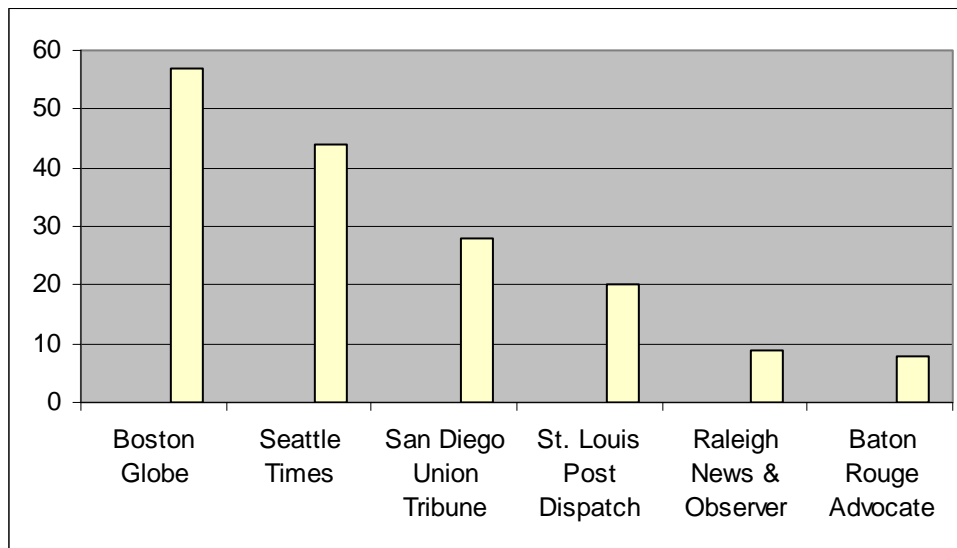
One of the major inquiries of this study is to determine whether the quantity of coverage about Asian Americans is -- in any way -- related to Asian-American representation on news staffs and/or to Asian American population in the city. In both cases, this proved to be the case. A statistically significant relationship was found between the number of AAJA members and the community's Asian-American population. That newspapers with large Asian-American populations were likely to have larger numbers of Asian-American staff members is somewhat predictable but nevertheless important because it does confirm conventional beliefs.

In addition, the study found that the numbers of AAJA (Asian-American staff) members and the numbers of stories are positively related ($r=.642, p = .085$)ⁱⁱ. In other words, it appears clear that the more Asian-American staff members a paper has, the more stories about Asian Americans it is likely to produce. This supports the content implications of having broader perspectives in the newsroom. Asian-American population and numbers of stories are also positively related ($r=.599, p=.105$) in that newspapers are more likely to produce stories about an ethnic group if it functions in a community that includes larger numbers of that group. However, *the staff member-story correlation seems stronger than the story-community relationship* (partial $r=.323, p=.298$ vs. $r=.152, p=.403$), indicating that the number of staff members could be a stronger catalyst to the quantity of coverage than the Asian-American population.ⁱⁱⁱ

During the time frame (between June-November 2004, six months before the Tsunami in South Asia), the Boston *Globe* published a larger number of stories about Asian Americans than any of the other papers in the sample, followed by the Seattle *Times* and the San Diego *Union-Tribune*. In accordance with the findings of this study, it is not surprising that the more coverage was provided by the newspapers from the three cities with larger Asian-American populations.

The comparison of the six papers' coverage is demonstrated in Chart 1.

Chart 1. Number of Stories across the Six Papers



While the number of stories on Asian Americans is important to coverage of a total community, breadth of coverage also is indicated by topics to which attention is paid. As this study initially asked: What kinds of stories are linked to Asian Americans? Are the topics widely different, or do they focus only on a limited number of subjects? Table 2 summarizes the results of this phase of this analysis. Of the topics that were covered by the six newspapers during the time frame, greatest attention was paid to stories involving important issues of culture and to immigration issues. There appeared to be a substantial coverage devoted to culture events and reviews of movies, theaters, and concerts. The immigration issues seemed to center on more stringent immigration procedure and issuing of student visas after September 11. Ranking third were feature stories that placed spotlights on successful or prominent Asian Americans. In addition, attention was dedicated to business, education, domestic politics, food and social issues.

Almost all of the Asian American news stories were written by staff reporters. Only three were from the Associated Press, and four were from freelancers. This statistic suggests that the stories about Asian Americans are predominantly local.

Another journalistic criterion of breadth of coverage of Asian Americans, or any ethnic group, is the degree to which they serve as sources of stories. In this study, it is worth noting that the sources were identified by the coder through the use of their last names and the description -- if any -- that accompanies the sources. This procedure admittedly has its risks, but it nevertheless provides a reasonable indication of the use of Asian Americans in the news. The results of this analysis indicate that 46% of the stories provided by the six newspapers were identified with Asian- American sources. In other words, about half of the time, the sources of information are Asian Americans -- 1.56 Asian American sources per story. A similar analysis of sourcing indicates that 52.8% of the paragraphs in these stories contained identifiable Asian-American sources.

Table 2. Topics of news stories about Asian Americans

Topics	n	% of appearances	% of stories*
Cultures, entertainment	43	17.1	25.9
Feature of person	40	15.9	24.1
Immigration, naturalization	35	13.9	21.1
Business	17	6.8	10.2
Education	16	6.4	9.6
Food	13	5.2	7.8
Social issues	13	5.2	7.8
Domestic politics	12	4.8	7.2
Economics (macro-level)	8	3.2	4.8
Religion	7	2.8	4.2
Sports	6	2.4	3.6
Governmental policy	5	2.0	3.0
International relations	2	.8	1.2
Others	34	13.5	20.5

* The total of this column is more than 100% since multiple topics can exist in a story. There are a total of 251 topic appearances; there are a total of 166 stories.

While this study did determine that the number of Asian American staff members is positively linked to the number of stories about Asian Americans, it also sought to determine whether the ethnicity of the author of a news story might contribute to the attributes of the story. Only slight differences were found. For example, identifiable Asian American writers are only slightly more likely to use Asian American sources and to provide a slightly larger number of paragraphs that include Asian-American sources. In addition, although differences are not great, the result suggests that the stories written by Asian Americans are somewhat more diverse in perspectives.

On the other hand, there is no evidence to indicate that Asian American writers differ from other writers in story length and in providing substantive, contextual information to readers. The average story length for all writers in this study was 882 words, with a range of 95 to 2,995 words

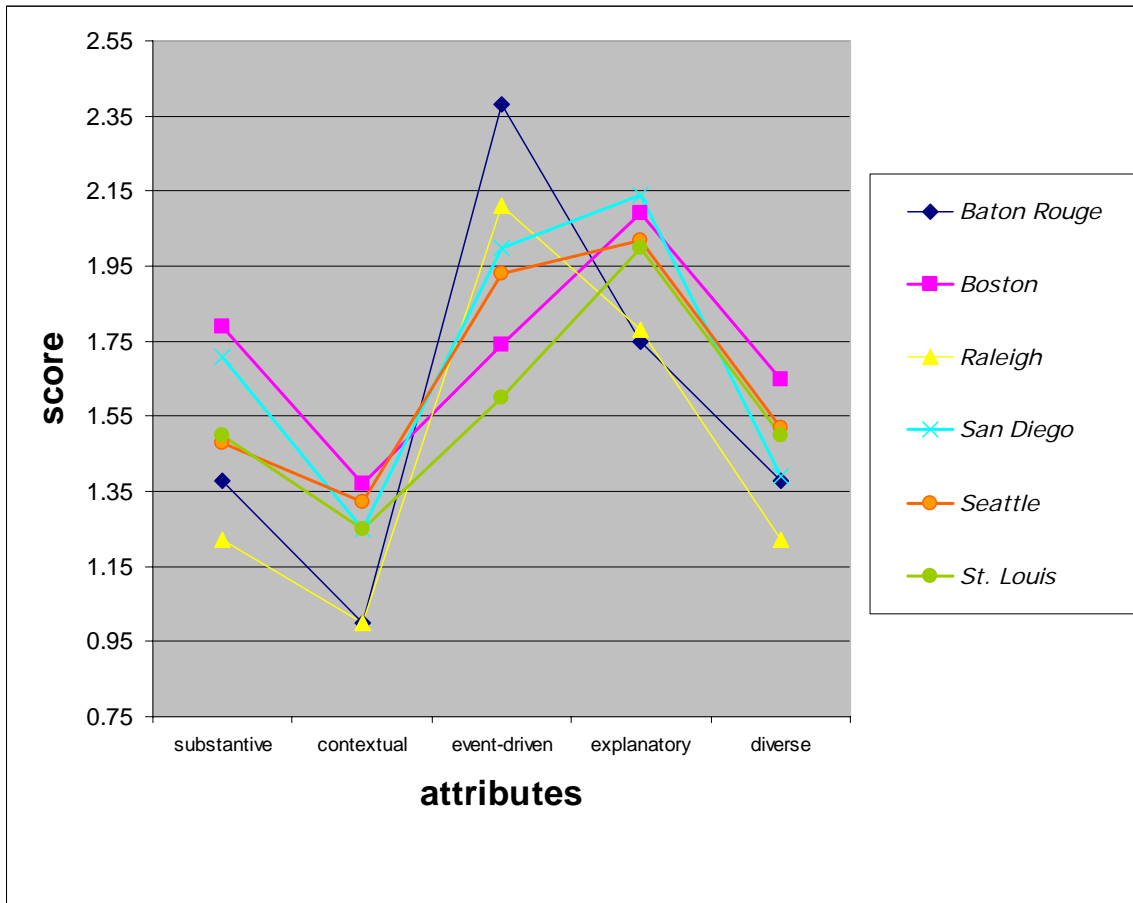
Also, the stories by Asian American writers are not less likely to be event-driven, nor do they provide more information about story background. This finding is somewhat counterintuitive – perhaps newsroom custom is at work.

Regarding the content's depth and attributes, this study executed assessments of each story's substance, contextual information, explanation, and diversity in perspectives. Additionally, it examined whether the stories are event-driven. The results show that most of the stories focused on broader issues and were not event-driven (73%). Of the four attributes, the stories overall scored the highest in explanation (2.04 over 3 points), followed by substance (1.61), perspective diversity (1.52), and, finally, contextual information (1.28).

We asked whether the stories done by Asian-American journalists would score higher in these attribute assessments. Again, the answer is affirmative, but only slightly and not with statistical significance. The Asian-American journalists are slightly more likely to deliver diverse perspectives in their stories (1.74 vs. 1.49), while non-Asian-American reporters are slightly (1.90 vs. 1.63) more likely to be event-driven.

As to the difference among the six papers examined (see Chart 2), the Boston, Seattle, and San Diego papers – with larger numbers of Asian-American staff members and in cities with larger Asian-American populations -- seem to provide a better coverage about Asian American, although this is not statistically significant. These three papers score higher in the four attribute assessments -- substance, contextual information, explanation, and diversity in perspectives -- and lower in event-driven tendency. The other three papers – Baton Rouge, Raleigh, and St. Louis, working in cities with the sample’s lowest Asian American populations and with fewer Asian American staff members – did not fare as well. Various reasons might have contributed to this factor, but the relationships between attributes of coverage and Asian American staff members and populations could be important in this sense.

Chart 2. Attributes by the Six Papers



Conclusions

This study supports the long-suspected association between the presence of ethnic journalists and the quantity and certain attributes of reporting about an ethnic group. Moreover, it appears that the number of Asian-American journalists is a stronger catalyst than the factor of Asian-American population in bolstering the coverage about Asian Americans. Even though Asian-American reporters are slightly more likely to use Asian-American sources and provide diverse perspectives in the stories examined, they do not necessarily produce stories that are more contextual, explanatory, or less event-driven. It is, however, worth stressing that these findings, because of small number of cases, are not statistically significant. It would be more fruitful and satisfactory with more papers added to analysis in the future.

Endnote

ⁱ Terrance J. Reeves and Claudette E. Burnett, "We the People: Asians in the United States." (Washington, DC: US Census Bureau, December 2004).

ⁱⁱ The "r" in the report represents Pearson Correlation Coefficient, which, ranging between 0 and 1 when the relationship is positive, shows how strong a relationship is. As to "p," it indicates whether the examined relationship is statistically significant. Conventionally speaking, if the *p* value is less than .05, usually the finding is very unlikely to be a wrong conclusion; if the *p*-value is bigger than .05, then readers are less sure of the relationship.

ⁱⁱⁱ Partial correlation indicates the net magnitude of relationship between the two examined variables controlling for the third variable. In other words, the first partial correlation coefficient shows the relationship between Asian American staff and story quantity controlling for Asian American population.