

Asian American and Pacific Islanders in Primetime Television (2015-2016 season)

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Journalists heralded 2015 as a “banner year” for Asian Americans on television¹. A decade ago, Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) characters were largely missing or one-dimensional on network television.² Given that AAPIs are the fastest growing racial group in the U.S., comprising 7% of the population, it is only fitting that they are now more visible. Today, two network sitcoms (*Fresh off the Boat* and *Dr. Ken*) center Asian American families; in addition, some streaming shows feature multiple Asian American lead characters, including Netflix’s *Master of None*, which won a 2016 Emmy for Best Writing (Comedy). Yet, the following question remains: Do these improvements signal real progress for AAPIs in television or are they exceptions to a landscape that still excludes AAPIs?

This timely study is a ten-year follow up to our original 2005 and 2006 studies of AAPIs in prime time network television. The 2015-2016 expanded study evaluates not only the raw numbers but also the type, quality, and complexity of regular characters portrayed by AAPIs in network/cable television as well as digital

¹ Traci G. Lee, “2015 Was More than Just a Banner Year for Asian Americans on Television,” *NBC News*, December 28, 2015. <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/2015-year-in-review/2015-was-more-just-banner-year-asian-americans-television-n485426>.

² Christina B. Chin, Meera E. Deo, Jenny J. Lee, Noriko Milman, and Nancy Wang Yuen, “Asian Pacific Americans in Prime Time: Setting the Stage” (Washington D.C.: Asian American Justice Center, 2006).

streaming services like Netflix where many audience members currently receive programming.

Phase One

In phase one, we quantitatively examine the numerical representation of AAPI regulars by race, gender, network, and program setting. Data collection for phase one is complete and we are currently analyzing and publishing this data. Preliminary findings reveal that the seeming growth of AAPIs in Hollywood is concentrated in specific media types, masking the continued underrepresentation of AAPIs as a whole.

Phase 1 Highlights:

- AAPIs comprise 6.6% of all primetime regulars.
- AAPI female actors are featured slightly more than their male counterparts.
- While network broadcast and streaming shows accurately reflect the U.S. AAPI population, AAPI regulars are underrepresented in basic and premium shows (see Figure 1).
- AAPIs are missing from 70% of the 244 total primetime shows (see Figure 2).
- AAPI regulars remain absent from shows set in heavily AAPI-populated cities such as Los Angeles, New York, and Seattle (see Figure 3).

Phase Two

We currently seek funding to complete phase two of this groundbreaking study. In phase two, we examine the quality of AAPI characters. How prominent are they compared to other groups? We measure this through screen time, occupation, and relationships (romantic and familial). We also gauge whether they fall into old stereotypes by noting characters’ names, accents, languages spoken and storylines. We plan to highlight

shows that reflect the AAPI presence in the United States and represent AAPIs as complex characters.

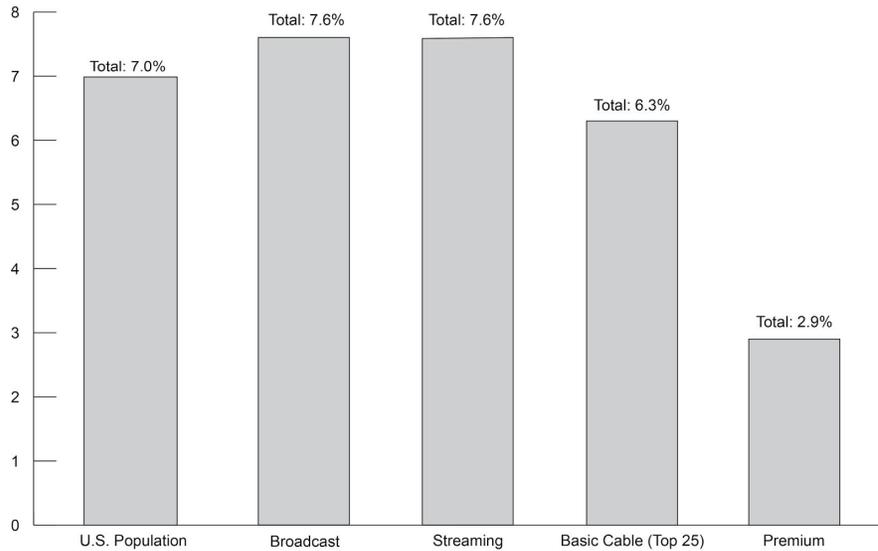


Figure 1: AAPI Regulars by Media Type³ (2015-2016 Season)

AAPIs are not evenly represented across all media types. While AAPIs comprise 7.6% of regulars featured on broadcast and streaming networks, they are underrepresented in basic and premium cable. Premium cable (HBO, Showtime, Cinemax) represent AAPIs at *less than half* of their percentage of the U.S. population.

³ The number of AAPI regulars on the following Media types are: Broadcast (59), Streaming (32), Basic Cable Top 25 (35), Premium Cable (9).

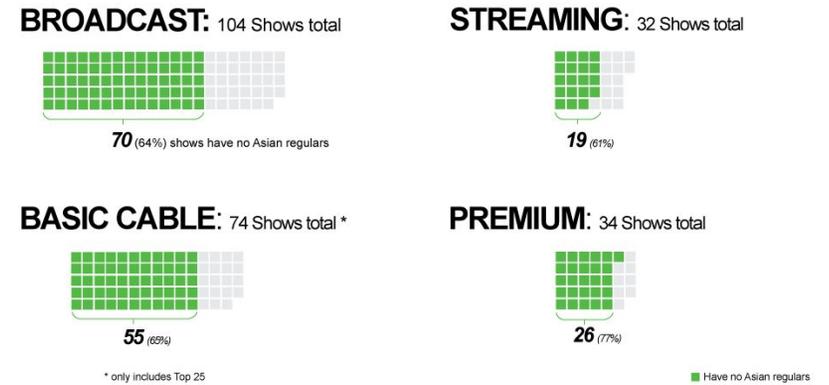


Figure 2: Shows Missing AAPIs (2015-2016 Season)

While there have been increases in AAPI regulars on television, they are missing from 70% of all shows. Audiences may never see an AAPI regular on screen, effectively erasing AAPIs from the television landscape.

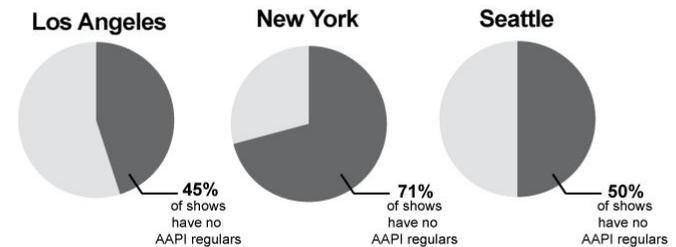


Figure 3: Missed Opportunity Shows (Broadcast, 2015-2016 Season)

Several shows set in cities with higher percentages of AAPIs failed to feature a single AAPI regular. In 2015-2016, 45% of shows set in Los Angeles (14% AAPI population) had no AAPI regulars, 71% of shows set in New York (12.7% AAPI population) had no AAPI regulars, and 50% of shows set in Seattle (14% AAPI population) had no AAPI regulars.