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### Mango Media Collective: A look into South Asian representation in Journalism

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Mango Media Collective:

A look into South Asian representation in Journalism

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## **Abstract**

Mango Media Collective is a collection of interviews from South Asian journalists that I've spoken to in the last two years. Each person is reflective of a changing and more inclusive industry. But their responses also prove that there is much more work to be done in regards to equity and inclusion. Culture doesn't interfere — it bolsters, it elevates, and it can even humanize stories that are waiting to be told. More importantly, it makes telling certain stories that need to be told a possibility. But don't take my word for it. I've interviewed 18 South Asians in the journalism industry about their experiences and advice they have for emerging journalists. The following are those interviews with South Asian media professionals. Read their stories, be inspired, and be active in the change we all desperately need to see.

## **Executive Summary**

Magazines play an interesting role in society and it certainly differs across categories and platforms. For example fashion media serves to essentially bridge the gap between the producers and consumers of that fashion by presenting a commentary on all things tangible. News-oriented magazines carry the responsibility to reflect and inform a collective — not a particular race or social class.

Moreover, cultural intermediaries like magazines are responsible for delivering a narrative to their readers that perpetuate notions consistent with the magazine's particular brand. Editorial spreads, magazine covers, and advertising all contribute to that narrative. It's a complex system of interrelated connotations which fuel generations of readers. Since magazines are tastemakers tasked with the responsibility of conveying conceptual, symbolic, and even opinionated tropes concerning the stories readers want to engage with, the current cultural context is vital.

In other words, circumstance and the irrefutable progress of society cannot and should not be ignored. Our neighborhoods are filled with people of all different kinds of ethnicities and sexualities, so it's crucial that our newspapers and magazines reflect that. Our world is no longer silent about topics like inclusion or diversity, but some sure are guilty of complacency. Vocal champions for diversity are proving that the fight is far from over. South Asian representation in particular is a prominent example. Being Indian seems to be synonymous with medicine, engineering, IT consulting, and a few others. We can be more.

The ideologies challenged in this evolving engagement between media and their audiences, as well as the implications of that engagement, kickstart a slightly unfamiliar yet important conversation concerning the relationship between cultural intermediaries and representation. Frankly, who is going to care about the Asian-American experience and, in turn, report on it in an authentic authoritative way? The solution seems simple, but until diversity can be seen on an institutional level across all platforms, we will continue hold cultural intermediaries, like magazines and newspapers, accountable for the lack of representation.

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Mangomediacollective.com



## Chapter 1

### Influences

The biggest influence for this project was the lack of representation I noticed in the journalism Industry. Not just in terms of people but in the coverage as well. I saw cultural concepts and traditions be appropriated, sensationalized or covered in a misinformed way. It's easy for those sort of things to inspire anger and frustration. For me, I used the frustration to engage with the editors and writer who are present in the industry to talk about change. I wanted to create a resource I wish I had.

My progress to get to Syracuse University and my decision to pursue a non-traditional career path wasn't easy. I want someone to read this project and gain the confidence I wish I had at the time. *The Cut* published a long form story about what it's like to be black in the fashion world. It was written by the current editor of *Teen Vogue* — Lindsay Peoples Wagner — and she interviewed 28 people in that industry. That includes models, actors, makeup artists and more. The article was very direct and transparent about people's experience. At that time there were 16 major magazine that all had a black person on the cover. That was historic. The article acknowledged that but also noted problems that still persist. It also talked about how people can be allies. What was particularly interesting is how everything was structured and presented. This work served its audience so well. I wanted my project to do the same. I saw the reaction to this piece and thought to myself: I can serve my niche as well.

But also, I didn't want to undermine the powerful work that is already being done to "move the rock forward" so to speak. Publications like *Brown Girl Magazine* and *The*

*Teal Mango* have and continue to inspire me in my field. The independent publications address what mainstream media has been slow to accept. So, I tried to include them in my snapshot of the industry. These publications are influential to me because of the confidence they carry in filling a space that people claim doesn't exist. Demographics and psychographics are changing and it's crucial that our industries — especially media — reflect that through inclusive and equitable opportunities.

When creative work in my field around these issues are presented to outsiders, like the article published in *The Cut*, or the public, the reception is usually very supportive on social media. I'm hoping it will be the same for my project. The professionals that I've sought out and active in seeking change in the industry. Their work has inspired the project a great deal. Whether it's through a managerial position like Radhika Jones who then applies their authority to promote inclusive hiring practices. Or, if it's through specific stories like Khushbu Shah's article in the *Washington Post* about what Indian grocery stores truly mean. Each person's capacity for change is significant, inspiring and something I wanted to highlight. Shah's article was about the experience of going to an Indian grocery store as an Indian American and what it was like for her mom an immigrant from India to do the same. It was a very effective article in displaying the concept of hyphenated identities. It's stories like those which work to make coverage more inclusive.

The mistakes I've seen, the lack of coverage and the misinformed writing has driven this piece the most. For example, there was an article written about Priyanka Chopra and Nick Jonas. It's a trivial topic, I know, but it also was very misinformed and

ignorant. Interestingly, it was the same publication which published the very representative story about black representation in fashion that also published this article about Priyanka Chopra. The writer called Priyanka Chopra a “global scam artist” and continued to use racist, ageist and sexist stereotypes to talk about Chopra. I thought to myself, “If a South Asian had been given the opportunity to write this story, it would’ve been different.” It’s infuriating for others to claim authority on a culture or certain sensibilities. The article presented misunderstood information about Indian culture as fact. And the idea that a room full of editors, copy editors and management didn’t notice that is problematic

Very recently, there was a column published in *The Guardian* which referred to eating Jackfruit, a fruit native to India and adored by many, as smelly and something people only consume “if they have nothing better to eat.” Jackfruit was a special treat my dad would bring home from the Indian grocery store. It was a part of childhood and when I read those sort of misrepresentations and insensitive coverage it hurts. Again, if the writer of that article had the thought to at the very least talk to Indian people about the fruit, she would’ve learned different.

While my Twitter blew up with replies and retweets relaying similar frustrations, I had to remember that this was my social media echo chamber. And in reality the writer is seeing none of this and nobody cares. My community cares, but nobody else did. There were no apologies or repercussions to those actions. This article just went on the pile of media that made a problematic mistake. It’s that stack that influences my work and specifically this project. The issues I and so many others try to address go beyond a

single article or mistake. But, to me, the mistakes of others are important to remember. Progress is easy to claim and it's easy to take for face-value. We shouldn't take one hire or one well-researched article as a reason to stop speaking for inclusion and equity. It's with this thought in mind that I wanted to create an authentic and authoritative thesis inspired by the role models I have — and the ones I don't have — and by the mistakes that I've grown tired of seeing.

I've also faced personal hardship in pursuing this career choice. Cultural and academic expectations were always put on my shoulders. People said I should go into medicine or asked why I came to Syracuse University. Our motivations as people can be misunderstood as well. I wanted to prove a presence of South Asian journalists does exist. It may not be big, which is part of the problem, but it does exist. Instead of explaining myself or justifying my choices, I was inspired to put work into a thesis that would create, or at the very least prove, community.

I'm very aware of my position in the industry. It can seem very discouraging and close-circled at times. I worry: will I be "othered" for the rest of my career, will people treat me with respect, will people pronounce my name. All of those thoughts worry me and extend to my confidence in the journalism industry. But I want to be the most confident I can. I want what happens to me to be in my control. I want to disregard the noise and do the work to progress. And I want to give that to other people.

## Chapter 2

### Creative Process

#### Sourcing

Anywhere I could do an interview I did. I had done them during my lunch breaks at my internship this past summer, I'd done them in Bird Library and the editing booths in Newhouse and I had even done one in my closet in my bedroom at home over break. The number of responses I got from people who were willing and able to participate in this project surprised me so I gave whatever time I had to them to accommodate their schedules. The typical practice for my work was just untypical. It lacked structure and that's what made it successful in my opinion.

I identified the people I would interview for this these through cold emailing people I follow and admire on social media. Also, I got in touch with the former president of the Asian American Journalism Association who put me in touch with a lot of people who might have had an interest in contributing to the project. I had a master list of who I'd want to reach out to and a timeline for when I should complete them.

The people I sought out for this project were particular. First, I took inspiration from the people who I followed on twitter. I talked to a lot of my role models through this capstone. Anyway, I wanted to get a range of voices. I wanted some managerial, writer, editor and multimedia voices. First I reached out to people I admired or people whose work was cool. Twitter was definitely the biggest mechanism through which I identified people. My internship Boss from Stacker Media also put me in touch with the former president of the Asian American Journalism Association. He was nice enough to

take interest in the project and refer me to people who might be interested. I think the bulk of my success with getting sources for this project are my persistence, twitter and the former president of AAJA.

The repetitive nature of the thesis came down to transcribing the interviews and doing the illustrations. Transcribing all the interviews was by far the most tedious part of this project. I owe a lot of this to the people who helped me workshop ideas and instigate the communication. The challenge came in gaining confidence to ask the personal questions. I learned a lot about my journalistic interviews skills as I continued to interview people. I gained confidence in asking questions thinking of follow up questions on the spot.

## **Branding**

The name Mango Media Collective is intended to play on a well-known cultural element (mangoes) and the idea that this is a small collection of South Asian journalists in the industry. For the branding, the color and typefaces that I ended up choosing were important to the essence of what I wanted the name to be. The Coral-Orange color is intended to be close to a mango color theme but not directly a yellow or orange. I picked a complementary accent color which is a light peach to add variety to the page. The typeface I chose for the logo is Didot italicized. This typeface conveys an elegant simplicity that I want this capstone to evoke.

While considering the different branding options, I didn't want to play on stereotypes (obviously) but also wanted to play into a cultural element in a respectfully

representative way. Using *The Teal Mango* as inspiration, and the help of my advisor, I came up with Mango Media Collective.

### **Web design**

I wanted the website, mangomediacollegitive.com, to be as clean and simple as possible. Since I designed a logo that echoed a similar tone, I thought about how the grid and structure of the page could supplement that. So I decided to go with a tile layout and use white space to break up the profiles. The intention of the thesis is to be interesting and informative so an audience of aspiring journalists. So the user interface was super important. Hover states helped indicate the user could click things. I think as soon as I established the service element of this project, design ideas came forward too. Adam Peruta helped brainstorm layout ideas and we settled on a relatively centered grid with a very prominent dominant image.

The most interesting takeaway from this process is the response I got from people who were willing to participate. I emailed and followed up but I never imagined that people like the editor-in-chief of *Vanity Fair* would agree to talk to me. Overall, my aesthetic choices were based on the tone and audience I set for the project. I wanted to convey a welcoming elegance. I wanted to convey power with the illustrations which is why I decided to do three people per row. The illustrations would be just big enough.





```

1 <!doctype html>
2 <html lang="en">
3   <head>
4     <!-- Required meta tags -->
5     <meta charset="utf-8" />
6     <meta name="viewport" content="width=device-width, initial-scale=1, shrink-to-fit=no" />
7     <link href="https://fonts.googleapis.com/css?family=Quicksand" rel="stylesheet">
8     <title>mango media collective</title>
9
10    <!-- Bootstrap CSS -->
11    <link rel="stylesheet" href="css/bootstrap.min.css" type="text/css" />
12
13    <!-- Put your general CSS file here -->
14    <link rel="stylesheet" href="css/general.css" type="text/css" />
15  </head>
16  <body>
17
18
19  <div class="pos-f-t">
20    <div class="collapse" id="navbarToggleExternalContent">
21      <div class="bg-light p-4">
22        <h5 class="text-black h4 name">mango media collective</h5>
23        <span class="text-muted">South Asian representation in journalism</span>
24      </div>
25    </div>
26    <nav class="navbar navbar-light bg-white">
27      <button class="navbar-toggler" type="button" data-toggle="collapse" data-target="#navbarToggleExternalContent" aria-controls="
28        navbarToggleExternalContent" aria-expanded="false" aria-label="Toggle navigation">
29        <span class="navbar-toggler-icon"></span>
30      </button>
31    </nav>
32  </div>
33
34  <div class="container">
35
36    <div class="row">
37      <div class="name col text-center">
38        
39      </div>
40    </div>
41
42    <div />
43
44
45    <div class="row">
46      <div class="col-2">
47      </div>
48      <div class="body col-8 text-center">
49        <p>>Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. sed do eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua. Ut

```

## Engagement Plan

mangomediacollecive.com

Distribution Platform/Channel	Specific Outreach Target?	Target Justification	Audience Size (est.)	Estimated Actual Reach
Personal Social Media (Twitter)	Friends, colleagues, mentors, interviewees and peers in other professionals in the industry	I follow all of the people I have interviewed on Twitter and I also have a good number of my coworkers and peers on tis social platform as well. I'd encourage people to share and retweet the website. I'd also create individual tweets, creating a thread, to tag each person and include the illustration	416	20-30

		of them as well.		
Personal Social Media (Facebook)	Family and friends	Facebook will serve to primarily reach my friends and family. They'd likely share the project	412	10-15
Personal Social Media (Instagram)	Friends, peers and colleagues	I'd post a screen record of the website on my Instagram story and put the link to my website in the bio of my profile. Based on the average number of views I get on my story, I think I would direct a lot of eyeballs to the site.	389	180
Email	Interviewees and mentors	I'd personally email the finished project to every single person I interviewed for this project. I'd thank them and encourage them to share. I'd also email this to anyone who helped me with the project including mentors, advisors and people who put me in touch with sources.	25	25
Social Media (@theaereogram)	People who follow artistic and creative work about the South Asian Diaspora	This account, which follows me already, promotes work that highlight South Asian stories, artists, writers and more. I'd tweet at	6,314	50

		the account and they could retweet.		
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## Chapter 3

### Reflection

As a person of color in a predominantly white industry in a predominantly white school, I'm not in an incredibly diverse place. The whole question of what it means to be American is personally relevant to me. Sometimes I feel like the sole representative of my ethnicity, and with that comes a lot of responsibility. It's something that I've rejected in the past. The idea that I should speak up about inclusion and be the best advocate and spokesperson I can be. But that's a lot to put one person's shoulders.

On the other hand, there are days where I do want to shout from the top of my lungs and champion diversity. It's a hard thing to negotiate. I have a hyphenated identity and it's hard to be pulled in both directions. Nonetheless, I've grown into the role I'm comfortable having which is to advocate for inclusion and equity in the best way I can. This project is my avenue of doing so. Not only am I hoping to highlight some of the most inspiring people I follow, but also reassure and give guidance to aspiring journalists who may have felt like me when I first started.

To reiterate, my audience is South Asian journalists who are coming into the field of journalism and media. The website serves as a tool. In ten years, I hope to have

expanded the project and include more people. In ten years, I hope people can refer back to the interviews and seek comfort in the advice and stories shared. I hope people can use my site to help uplift their own voices. My work will continue to be displayed on the domain: mangomediacollective.

I'm incredibly thankful for the collaboration working on this site kickstarted. Because of this initiative project, I've been able to talk with some of my biggest role-models. I've created mentors and connections that I never had before. It's easy to feel like an outsider especially when you come from a marginalized community. It's motivating and discouraging. I would urge people to talk about diversity, equity and how to thrive in journalism and, most importantly, share the knowledge with people who aren't privileged enough to inherently have it.

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