



## STRUGGLE TO SURVIVE ON THE NEWSSTANDS

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If on the landscape of Asian American magazines there was a place set aside for its cemetery, the epitaphs of *Bridge*, *Rice*, *Asiam* (later *Transpacific*), *Face* and *a.Magazine* might read, “We were often caught between what we felt the community needed, and what the market demanded,” or “It was the only thing that was out there,” or “Tried to be something for everybody,” or “Burned through money quicker than Troy.”

It has been a rough ride for Asian American commercial glossies.

“It’s been a couple of decades at the most and these magazines are still trying to find their way, and their audience still in the process of evolution. It’s a very early stage,” said Darrell Y. Hamamoto, professor of Asian American Studies at UC-Davis. “In any evolutionary process some species die out.”

The winning formula in this Darwinian struggle seems to focus on several factors: finding advertisers willing to put down dollars for ethnic-specific media, maintaining a consistent vision and content and being business savvy. Even when all these things seem to be in place, problems can arise, such as with *a.Magazine*, the latest casualty of a series of problems that started with an online collaboration.

Hamamoto, who tracks the representation of Asian Americans in the media said that the bottom line is profit. “It comes down to finances,” he said. “National advertisers want to know how to get to our pocketbooks.”

At first, advertisers had to be convinced that there was a population whose pocket they needed to pick. “We were talking about the fact that the 1990 Census was due the following year, and that early projections indicated that Asian Americans [who were being tracked in detail for the first time] would show incredible growth,” said Jeff Yang, co-founder of the recently defunct *a.Magazine*, which was based out of New York for more than a decade. “And of course, we were aware of how much had changed and evolved in our community firsthand. Yet there was still nothing out there that really talked about Asian America from the inside—explored our issues, showcased our achievements, addressed our needs.”

Like other start-ups, *a.Magazine* cobbled together a business from a crew of volunteers. “We vowed to put out the magazine on a guerrilla basis,” Yang said. They survived as such until 1994. “That’s when we

realized the magazine had grown too big to do part-time, after work and without any kind of real business-side force. We ended up getting a bank loan and raising some ‘friends and family’ money, and hiring a full-time publisher and our first few full-time staffers ... and launching A. as a commercial venture.”

*A.Magazine* would grow to be the most high-profile Asian American magazine, but it folded last year, when it went corporate.

“We’d built up a business over a decade of hard work, and in a year, the whole thing was torn down, millions of dollars were spent, and our erstwhile president had taken a new job in Europe, leaving me to deal with a board of directors who wanted to staunch the bleeding and preserve their ‘Internet valuation,’ forcing us to sell ourselves to a West Coast-based online community called Click2Asia for a whole bunch of worthless stock,” Yang said. “From there, things went from bad to worse.”

### Keeping it Simple

Other magazines eyed *a.Magazine*’s demise warily, mourning its passing but taking lessons from it to keep themselves afloat.

“Personally I’m amazed we’ve survived,” said Alex Luu, editor-in-chief of *Yolk*, the hyper-hip magazine showcasing Asian Americans in entertainment, now in its 10th year. “It’s still a battle, but less of an uphill battle now than six, seven years ago.”

He describes a small but tight-knit office in Los Angeles where good writers are still in demand, but where copy overflows as it never has before. “When *Yolk* first started, the Asian American scene, especially entertainment, was very embryonic. We would be scratching our heads for material,” Luu said. “Now we bump material.”

The secret to success, he said, is keeping it simple.

“*Yolk*, in whatever re-vamped format, has always stayed true to one mission—mainstream American magazines are still not featuring up and comers, unknown Asian Americans in any substantial ways, so that’s our job,” said Luu. He said that *Bend It Like Beckham* is a classic case where *Yolk* went ahead of the mainstream and did a story on the director, Gurinder Chadha, three years ago. “Now this film came out and now she’s being offered anything.”

*A.* was criticized for not being consistent in its content, an assertion former publisher Yang acknowledges as a consequence of survival.

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needed and what market demanded,” he said. “Asian America has a subset of ‘active’ Asians who want hard news and coverage of political and social issues, and a subset of ‘passive’ Asians whose interests are much more in the way of service-and-sizzle. The marginal consumers are mostly in the latter subset, so when we addressed their preferences, we saw issue-to-issue spikes in readership. The core readers who were more active participants in Asian America tended to be subscribers or regular newsstand purchasers, but the ones who bought it because Lucy Liu was on the cover made up a considerable segment of our audience. That business reality meant that as we grew, the editorial makeup had to shift more toward lifestyle and entertainment content—that was where the critical mass of readers were, and that critical mass of readers was essential to our being able to draw advertisers and stay alive.”

Luu knows that the cash flow from Asian America is fueling advertisers to invest more in his magazine, which went from printing quarterly to 10 times a year. “We always appeal to advertisers that Asian Americans are a huge percentage of consumers in this country. They weren’t aware that the Asian American dollar is huge and popular—videogames, clothes, cars.”

**‘Low Maintenance’**

Others have picked up fast that when it comes to the almighty dollar, they need to be creative in marketing themselves—and tightening their budgets. “If you look at other publications, they like to spend money on parties and we’re not at all like that,” said Audrey Panichakoon Crone, publisher of *Jade* magazine, a lifestyle magazine for Asian women. “We have no overhead because we work from home. If we had \$10 million we’d make *Jade* magazine last forever. We’re low maintenance. It forces you to be creative in terms of marketing, everything.”

Crone’s background in advertising and *Jade*’s initial foray onto the Internet helped establish a readership—a move she feels made it a stronger candidate once they went to print, which they started doing last year, after three years of operation. It’s part of a more cautious, more exploratory business model that tests the waters first before making the plunge. “A lot of companies do burn money,” said Crone, who said they tend to burn out too—and fast. Patience pays off in this business. “When you’re producing a magazine you just can’t do it for a year or two and expect to make a profit. It’s a long term type of thing and it takes a long time to build a brand.”

*Noodle*, a newcomer to the Asian American magazines, started three years ago as a gay-oriented publication. They’re working on their fifth issue

and are starting to see the results.

“Within gay media we’re starting to get the idea that other magazines are starting to see us as an emerging wave. They’ve completely ignored Asians in the past and now suddenly we get calls—‘Where can we find your models, your photographers, etc.’” said Chris Bucoy Brown, *Noodle*’s managing editor. He said that the magazine emerged from his group of friends, who’d graduated from UC-Berkeley and had been at the epicenter of one of the school’s most influential clubs, CAL B GAY, which stood for Cal Asian Lesbian Bisexual Gay Alliances United with Y. The ringleader he said, was Max Lau, *Noodle*’s publisher. The friends would continue their work in the community after their graduation in the mid-90s until Lau flexed his entrepreneurial bent and started *Noodle* about two years ago. “We try to stay political but we know we’re a lifestyle magazine, too. We’re sugar coating the political pill with lifestyle. We’re not *Will and Grace* with a yellow face but at the same time some of the stuff we get back from our writers comes off reflecting that kind of very guppie lifestyle,” Brown said.

He praises edgy vanguard *Giant Robot* for their resilience and commitment to their unique voice.

“One of my heroes is *Giant Robot*. We would never be *Giant Robot* and we don’t strive to be, but they have this irreverence in their voice,” Brown said. “They’ve always maintained it since they were on newsprint to now to really nice stock. They’ve always maintained the same voice to say whatever the hell they want. Yeah, kick ass. I don’t know if we can get away with that. I certainly respect them for that. On the newsstands we’re usually right up next to them and if we get some of that punky flavor rubbed off, great. I would love for us to have that kind of ballsy tone.”

Other magazines are following suit in their own voices—distinct, literary and confident about the future. On the horizon is *Hyphen*, “dedicated to smart, fun and comprehensive cultural and investigative reporting of Asian America.” *Monolid* and *Audrey* are also testing the waters, while in San Francisco, *AsianWeek* holds down the fort for hard news.

Yang hopes their future ends up better than his past. “I don’t think that there’s going to be an other *a.Magazine* anytime soon—that is to say, an independent, community-owned, general-interest title that strives to reach a broad base of Asian Americans,” he said. “Well, it’s possible, but it’ll take someone with a lot of personal wealth deciding to devote it to this cause for reasons other than pure return on investment—and there are people out there like that, so maybe I’m wrong. Maybe there’s an angel out there that’ll make it happen.” ■

about the SARS situation improving any time soon, I think the postponement will be lengthened. Journalism veterans in China have told me I must move to Beijing or Shanghai to take my journalism career to the next level. About a month and a half ago I decided to move to Shanghai. One of the deciding factors was that the FIFA Women’s World Cup was to be played in Shanghai and cities in that area in September and October. I was hoping that with a little luck I could free-lance about this World Cup ... but I sincerely doubt that the Women’s World Cup will be held in China [because of SARS].



**May Day in SARS ward:**

With a carnation in her hand, Dr. Li Yahong “shakes hands” with her husband, Dr. Wang Xian, using a video-phone at a Beijing hospital. The videophones are installed for the medical staff who cannot join their family for the holiday. XINHUA PHOTO

**Do you know of any journalists who were asked to leave Asia for their safety? Or were there any who have requested to leave Asia?**

CHENG: Not that I’m aware of. CASKEY: I was a Peace Corps Volunteer in the jungle of Guinea, West Africa, from 1993 to 1995. During that time, I got malaria three times. Had I not had this intimate experience with a nasty disease, I suppose I would be a little more jittery about SARS than I am. But right now I have a “This too will come to pass” attitude about SARS. ■