

# Race and Ethnicity in Post-network American Television: From MTV-Desi to *Outsourced*

Television & New Media

1–16

© The Author(s) 2014

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1527476414564985

tvnm.sagepub.com



Lia Wolock<sup>1</sup> and Aswin Punathambekar<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article examines post-network American television's fraught relationship with race and ethnicity by exploring two recent media ventures focused on South Asian Americans: MTV-Desi and NBC's *Outsourced*. Approaching these media ventures as productive failures, we examine how industry workers narrate these failures to trace how the contemporary television industry in the United States imagines racial and ethnic identities. Bringing together interviews with media industry professionals, observations at a media industry convention, and thematic analyses of trade press and news coverage, we argue that both media ventures are symptomatic of nationalist logics that inform the operations of television industry professionals even as they seek to target audiences increasingly embedded in transnational media circuits. Industry professionals' misreading of South Asian Americans' position in the racial economies of the United States and changes in patterns of media circulation reveal the challenges confronting the media industry when it comes to issues of race and ethnicity.

## Keywords

post-network television, post-racial, production culture(s), diaspora, globalization, cultural identity

The fall 2010 television season in the United States marked an important moment in the checkered history of mainstream media representations of South Asian Americans. NBC, as part of a broader campaign to be “more colorful,” launched *Outsourced*, a

---

<sup>1</sup>University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Lia Wolock, Department of Communication Studies, University of Michigan, 105 South State Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1285, USA.

Email: lwolock@umich.edu

sitcom that revolved around the lives of workers in a Mumbai-based call center for an American company. As the first mainstream television program to feature a number of actors of South Asian origin, *Outsourced* attracted significant attention from South Asia-centric publications and mainstream news media. However, despite the publicity, good initial ratings, and a commitment from NBC for a complete season, the program was canceled by June 2011. Five years before *Outsourced*, there was another attempt at creating a space for South Asian American culture on television: MTV-Desi. “Desi,” which means “from the homeland,” is a term that is increasingly used to refer to people of South Asian origin in various locations around the world (but most prominently in North America and the United Kingdom). Launched with great fanfare, MTV-Desi featured Bollywood song sequences and Indi-pop music videos, diasporic artists based in North America and the United Kingdom, shows that revolved around Desi culture, and successful programs from MTV-India. Recognizing the transcultural nature of Desi youth culture, producers and writers worked hard to define MTV-Desi as a unique site of cultural production that neither mainstream American television nor the India-centric programming on satellite television could match. Eighteen months later, MTV Networks pulled the plug on MTV-Desi, claiming that the premium distribution model failed to attract audiences and, hence, advertising revenues.

In this article, we analyze MTV-Desi and NBC’s *Outsourced* as key moments in the history of South Asian representation on American television and, more broadly, as highly visible and productive failures that enable us to trace the changing relationship between television and race in a purportedly “post-network” television era. As Vicki Mayer (2009) points out, examining instances of media failure involves listening to the stories that media professionals narrate about failure and how they move on to the next project, as this sheds light on what constitutes success in a given media landscape. Following Mayer, we ask: What other factors, besides the ones offered by industry professionals (distribution, lack of advertiser interest), may have contributed to the failure of MTV-Desi? Similarly, what was obscured by public and industry response to NBC’s *Outsourced*, wherein praise focused on the value of having multiple South Asian actors in a network television program and critique on accusations that the show traded on racist stereotypes?

Bringing together interviews with media industry professionals, observations at a media industry convention, and thematic analyses of trade press and news coverage, we argue that both MTV-Desi and NBC’s *Outsourced* are symptomatic of the nationalist logics that continue to inform the operations of television industry professionals even as they respond to audiences—in this case, South Asian Americans—increasingly embedded in transnational media circuits. In other words, these two cases are significant not only because they reveal the limits of niche programming. More broadly, MTV-Desi and *Outsourced* illuminate how the American television industry’s imagination and cultivation of minority audiences remains mired in a nation-centric understanding of race and ethnicity. As we will see, the strategies deployed by industry executives constrain the production of television programs that might draw in not only diasporic and minority groups but also a larger audience eager for television narratives

that resonate with the shifting contours of racial and ethnic identities in early twenty-first-century America.

In developing this argument, we aim to forge links across three distinct areas of research. First, scholarship on the relationship between media and diasporic identity has tended to focus on issues of reception and the role that media play in shaping cultural identities. Where the South Asian diaspora is concerned, we can now trace an arc beginning with Marie Gillespie's (1995) analysis of media use in a predominantly Punjabi community in a London neighborhood, through Sunaina Maira's (2002) exploration of Indian American youth culture in New York City, to Shalini Shankar's (2008) ethnography of Desi youth culture during the tech boom in Silicon Valley to trace the changing relations between media and identity in the diaspora. With a few notable exceptions, such as Hamid Naficy's (2002) analysis of Iranian diasporic television production in Los Angeles, scholars have yet to pay sustained attention to industry practices and institutional dynamics that shape media production in relation to diasporic audiences in the United States. Further, where the South Asian American diaspora is concerned, popular and scholarly accounts have tended to privilege cinema, Hindi-language films from Bombay, and English-language diasporic films, in particular, over print, television, and other forms of cultural production. While there are several reasons for the privileged position that cinema occupies, such a perspective provides too narrow a template for understanding the relationship between media and diasporic identity.<sup>1</sup>

Second, we aim to broaden the discussion on post-network TV in the American context. We argue that "post-network" cannot simply refer to the shift from the three major networks and classical public service to a media landscape defined by a multi-channel narrowcasting industrial configuration and the attendant changes in production and consumption practices (Lotz 2007). Following Inderpal Grewal's (2005, 2) conceptualization of transnational America, which argues that "America cannot be studied only within the territories of the United States," we argue that the boundaries of post-network television have to extend beyond American television and the geographic boundaries of the United States. Post-network television in America must be situated within a larger matrix of transnational television and digital media that has come to constitute diasporic audiences' media world. Put simply, the mediascape for South Asians in the United States is no longer limited to leased/public access television, the occasional film released in one theater in regions with a strong South Asian presence, or media circulated through ethnic grocery stores. As we will see, American television industry professionals' misrecognition or, at best, inability to respond to new circuits and practices of media exchange that South Asian American (and "mainstream" American) audiences participate in, does explain these television failures.

Finally, the two cases in question here provide fertile ground for exploring how discourses of America having become a post-racial society play out in relation to television. By analyzing various notions of Desi identity mobilized by different stakeholders in these television ventures, we show how minority and diasporic populations, as well as industry professionals, are negotiating questions of race and ethnicity even as they contend with the idea of a post-racial social formation. The emphasis on South

Asian Americans is crucial for this analysis. In the context of the alluring notion of a post-racial society, South Asian Americans continue to be portrayed as “model minorities” and exemplars of assimilation while having to deal with enduring patterns of racialization. As Anne Cheng (2001, 21) explains, Asian Americans hold a special position in the American mythos of nationhood as the historic focus of both racist and xenophobic immigration policies—policies that allowed for the distinction of an American “us” from a foreign “them”—and of admiration as the least threatening, most “white” minority.

However, despite the visibility of South Asian Americans and other minority groups in American public culture, the growing body of scholarly and popular writing on post-racial America remains focused on the question of blackness. This is understandable given that the term post-racial became particularly significant with the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States in 2008.<sup>2</sup> However, this narrow focus once again relegates Asians to the margins and only works to stabilize a binary, black-white racial formation that plays out strictly within national boundaries.<sup>3</sup> As we will see, this long-standing ambivalence regarding South Asians’ place in America’s racial and ethnic economies also structures media professionals’ practices in the post-network era. Thus, the two cases we analyze reveal the limits of post-network-era media practices as well as discourses of a post-racial society when it comes to negotiating South Asian American identities.

## “I Want My Hyphenated-Identity MTV”

In July 2005, MTV Networks announced the launch of MTV-Desi, a niche channel for South Asian American youth. Launched with great fanfare, MTV-Desi sought to respond to ongoing changes in South Asian American culture and create a space within mainstream media that would speak to the particular experiences of Desi youth. In addition to Bollywood song sequences and Indi-pop music videos, the channel would feature U.S.- and U.K.-based artists such as DJ Rekha, M.I.A., and Jay Sean alongside popular American stars to create a multiethnic, multigenre playlist that would resonate with Desi youth. While music would remain the primary focus of programming, MTV-Desi would also develop new segments covering a range of topics related to life in South Asia and the South Asian diaspora worldwide, including original shows such as *Live From*, which would track Desi youth culture in cities across North America and the United Kingdom; *Desi Sweet 16*, which was modeled on the *Sweet 16* series on MTV USA; and hit shows such as *Roadies* from MTV-India. Recognizing the transnational nature of Desi youth culture, writers and producers sought to craft MTV-Desi as a distinctive site of cultural production that neither mainstream American television nor India-centric satellite fare could match.

Declaring that MTV-Desi would soon become the “pop culture destination for Desis,” Nusrat Durrani, general manager and senior vice-president of MTV World, explained, “But more than the music, it is also about articulating the stories from this community—young South Asian Americans who have grown up in the country but have not seen themselves on TV” (Mozumder 2005). At the same time, Durrani aimed

to fashion MTV-Desi not simply as a channel for South Asian American youth but as a space that would showcase South Asian cultural production and invite participation from as diverse an audience as possible. MTV-Desi, furthermore, was part of a larger MTV World initiative, which involved channels targeting Korean American (MTV-K) and Chinese American youth (MTV-Chi) (Sontag 2005). As the very first mainstream media initiative that targeted diasporic youth culture, these “hyphenated-identity” MTV channels attracted a great deal of positive attention despite the fact that they were available only through an international programming package on DirecTV’s satellite television service. MTV-Desi was part of the “Hindi Direct” package that included five Hindi-language, Indian television channels and cost \$29.99 per month.

Eighteen months later, MTV Networks pulled the plug on MTV-Desi, MTV-K, and MTV-Chi, stating that the premium distribution model failed to attract audiences and, hence, advertising revenues. In press releases and interviews, MTV executives also pointed out that a larger process of corporate restructuring that the parent company Viacom undertook at the time shaped the decision. On the one hand, the cancellation of the MTV World initiative did not come as a major surprise to either audiences or media journalists. As one prominent journalist, Arun Venugopal, remarked on February 18, 2007, on the widely read blog of the South Asian Journalists Association (SAJA),

We published next to nothing on the channel, because I couldn’t find anyone who watched the satellite channel: no college students, no twenty-somethings with spare change. And it wasn’t just me. All the tastemakers I interviewed—DJs, other music types—said they didn’t know any MTV Desi subscribers either.

On the other hand, given the fact that all other attempts to carve out a space for Asian American programming on television—AZN, American Desi, and ImaginAsian, for instance—had failed or struggled to remain viable, the dismay among Desis and other Asian American groups was understandable. Relying on advertising and marketing discourse that had, over the past decade, constructed the “Asian consumer” and the Asian American community as an increasingly important audience demographic, protest letters and petitions circulated through South Asian American community publications suggested that these failures reflected a lack of commitment on the part of mainstream media corporations to develop and sustain Asian American programming.

## The Limits of Niche Television

Nusrat Durrani, who was largely responsible for developing the MTV World initiative, understood very well that the relationship between “diaspora” and “home” was much more ambivalent for Desi youth compared with their parents’ generation, and that MTV-Desi could not succeed by mimicking MTV-India or other Indian television channels. Born and raised in North India, Durrani had worked for a decade in India and Dubai before moving to the United States and joining MTV in the early 1990s. His taste in music and popular culture had been shaped by transnational circuits of cultural

flows that were not limited to the Anglo-American cultural sphere that his colleagues at MTV were steeped in and seems to have played a key role in shaping his approach to the MTV-Desi initiative.<sup>4</sup> However, despite Durrani's efforts to position and brand MTV-Desi as a uniquely diasporic space, MTV Networks entered into a distribution deal with DirecTV and located MTV-Desi firmly within an India-centric programming package. This decision was partly a function of television industry professionals grappling with a changing distribution landscape in the United States and certainly spoke to their uncertainty about a channel such as MTV-Desi reaching audiences via satellite television.

Even though Durrani and others at MTV-Desi recognized that it would be a mistake to imagine Desi youth and their engagement with media and popular culture in the same terms as their parents or, generally speaking, first-generation migrants from the Indian subcontinent, statements from others at MTV Networks revealed that this was how Desi identity continued to be mobilized. A particularly telling press release from MTV described the entire MTV World initiative as an attempt to "tap into the rich transcultural nature of the target audiences in a manner that uniquely connects local audiences to *their homeland*" (emphasis added).<sup>5</sup> Statements from other industry executives also revealed how this advertising/marketing discourse positioned Desi youth outside the boundaries of American national culture, rehearsing the contradictory nature of American responses to Asian immigration that has tended to position "Asians 'within' the U.S nation-state, its workplaces, and its market, yet linguistically, culturally, and racially marked Asians as 'foreign' and 'outside' the national polity" (Lowe 1996, 8).<sup>6</sup> This understanding of Desi identity also held implications for how industry professionals thought about the interest that South Asian media might attract from audiences at large.

Consider, for instance, an exchange that took place during the opening keynote session of the 2008 Summit of the South Asians in Media, Marketing, and Entertainment (SAMMA), a New York-based organization consisting predominantly of South Asian American media and marketing professionals. Peter Liguori, who was the chairman of Fox Broadcasting at the time, delivered a keynote address replete with banal industry catchphrases (such as "content will be king") and did not speak to the interests of the convention. But the conference organizers seemed to have anticipated this. SAMMA cofounder and moderator for the session, Rajan Shah, opened the question and answer session by directing Liguori's attention to the lack of South Asia-themed television programming in the United States:

Shah: . . . We don't see, other than individual characters appearing on shows, South Asian families on television. Can you address why this is so? Do you think there is a chance an Indian family will be on television soon?

Liguori: Frankly, I don't think the answer I am going to give you will be popular. I don't think it's going to be too far in the future before we see a South Asian family, an Indian family, portrayed on television. Let's start with why there isn't greater representation. It's just simply a numbers game. Right now, there are two million South Asians in this country. And it's very, very difficult when your job

is on the line, day in and day out, to say that I'm going to put someone in a show that frankly doesn't have an audience outside the walls of our offices.

Liguori's racialized assumption that only South Asian audiences would be interested in a television program featuring a South Asian family hardly merits attention. But it does signal how niche marketing/programming strategies that have become so well entrenched in the American media system over the past two decades intersect with the "discovery" and configuration of ethnic identities as viable marketing segments. The phrase—"It's just a numbers game"—and the specific number that Liguori mentioned—two million South Asians—point to the fact that MTV-Desi and other South Asian media initiatives were working in a context in which advertising and marketing professionals had succeeded in constructing Asian Americans as a consumer demographic that remained untapped and, moreover, had unique needs that were unfulfilled by mainstream media and marketing.

While the intersections of South Asian cultural production and American public culture can be traced through the work of artists such as DJ Rekha and subcultures in cities such as New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, media companies' interest in this hitherto marginalized community was sparked in part by the results of the 2000 U.S. census, which revealed that Asian Americans were the fastest growing ethnic minority as well as the most affluent of all groups. In much the same way that advertisers and marketers worked to commodify Latinos during the mid- to late-1990s, companies such as Ethnik PR and Evershine Group took on the task of constructing a Desi demographic.<sup>7</sup> As one widely circulated article titled "Chasing Desi Dollars" from *Time Magazine* proclaimed,

There are some 2.5 million Desis in the U.S., and the vast majority is Indian. That may not seem terribly significant compared with, say, 40 million Hispanics, but consider how premium a customer a South Asian is: Indians alone commanded \$76 billion worth of disposable income last year . . . median household income is nearly \$64,000—50% higher than the national average. The U.S. has always welcomed the world's poor and working classes. India has sent its professionals. (Kiviat 2005)

It hardly needs to be pointed out that this particular logic of enumeration papers over the diversity of South Asian histories and cultural practices in North America. What is perhaps most problematic is the manner in which these marketing and media reports use the terms *Desi* and *South Asian* but reduce them to *Indian* to conjure a highly educated, well-adjusted, and affluent demographic.<sup>8</sup>

These differences were set aside in the dominant marketing discourse, which focused on the experiences and cultural practices of a very specific class of Indian families to construct a "Desi audience." This narrow imagination of the Desi audience, one that flattened out linguistic, regional, and other forms of diversity in the diaspora, had an impact on programming decisions as well. A majority of the programs on MTV-Desi relied on content that was either sourced from MTV-India or adapted from MTV-USA's programming lineup. Not surprisingly, Bollywood-inspired material dominated



the content that was imported from MTV-India—programs such as *Bollywood on Ice* and a countdown program called *MTV 123*—and did little to distinguish MTV-Desi from the other India-centric channels available through DirecTV or other satellite and cable systems. Further, MTV-Desi's failure cannot be explained by focusing on the logics of American television alone. The growing influence of Indian film and television companies in defining media circulation in the diaspora also played a crucial role in shaping MTV-Desi's programming, distribution, and reception.<sup>9</sup> In one sense, then, MTV-Desi is symptomatic of a larger problem confronting television production geared toward diasporic communities—of being caught between the nationalist logics of two powerful media industries. However, and as we will see when we consider the failure of *Outsourced* and MTV-Desi together, the problem of being caught between two thriving “national” media systems was compounded for Desi Americans by industry workers' post-racial strategies for managing difference.

## Getting the Indian Office on the Air

When launching its three hyphenated-identity channels, MTV announced far and wide its deep yearning to “super-serve multicultural” audiences (Picture 2007). This yearning was tied to the real, hopeful aspirations of industry workers such as Durrani to serve multiple audiences with complicated tastes and experiences with identity. Yet, at its heart, this corporate plea reflected more a facile desire to open up new, readily legible and marketable demographics. Those audiences to be “super-served” were the ultimate losers as cable and satellite television programming simultaneously vied for their attention and money and sought to bank on their cultural assets. Although MTV-Desi's failure was partially accepted as a business necessity, some in the South Asian American community felt betrayed, suggesting that the channel, as established, was destined to fail. “With all the talk of MTV's commitment to diverse markets,” noted an article in the popular U.S.-based magazine *Little India*, “its unwillingness to include MTV-Desi as part of its regular lineup of cable offerings [. . .] is likely more telling of its actual *faith* in the South Asian American community” (Balaji 2007, emphasis added). Moreover, MTV-Desi's shutting down in February of 2007 would undoubtedly scare off other mainstream media interests “looking to tap into the growing South Asian American market” (Balaji 2007). In this context, Peter Liguori's statements at the SAMMA Summit in the fall of 2008 hardly seem surprising. The question then becomes, how was *Outsourced* able to make it onto NBC's fall 2010 lineup, and what can that tell us about evolving industry understandings of race and identity?

As with any story of industry decision-making, a number of factors came together to finally get an office “family” of Indian call-center misfits (and three white, Western managers) on the air. It succeeded in part because of the long-term support of Ken Kwapis, notable showrunner and film director, who had directed the pilot for the *American Office*. When asked by NBC to direct a different show's pilot for the 2010–2011 season, he suggested that they give a sitcom he had previously pitched for the 2007–2008 season another opportunity (Andreeva 2010). With the help of a change in programming executives at NBC, *Outsourced* was given this second chance (Wilson



2010). Kwapis had come to the original *Outsourced* project because of the slow-burning success of the 2006 independent film of the same name. The reconsideration of the show—and the third reconsideration of another sitcom about a South Asian family, *Nirvana*,<sup>10</sup> for FOX in the 2010–2011 season—also benefited from a growing familiarity with and interest in Desi content, in particular the spectacular success of *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) and the gradual inclusion of single Desi faces in network and cable television fare (e.g., Sanjay Gupta, Aasif Mandvi, Mindy Kaling). Yet neither *Nirvana* nor another reconsidered minority-focused show about Iranian immigrants for ABC, *Funny in Farsi*, actually made it to air. Unlike *Nirvana* and *Funny in Farsi*, *Outsourced* fit into NBC's lineup and needs. It helped fill out the “More Colorful” roster of new shows for the season—a complicated rebranding effort that could not decide how much it meant to refer to race. Further, it matched the office-centered settings of other NBC Thursday night comedy block anchors (i.e., *30 Rock*, *The Office*, and *Parks and Recreation*), and it was highly topical. While debates about the offshore outsourcing of American jobs raged,<sup>11</sup> and the domestic economy sluggishly sought to recover from the 2008 financial crisis, *Outsourced* insinuated a little controversy while presenting a familiar and relatable topic—the foibles of office life.

## Authenticity and Ambivalence

Advocates for greater minority representation were thrilled that a sitcom starring so many South Asian heritage actors had been given a chance. Once on the air, debate among critics, fans, and the press centered on whether the show's depictions of Indians employed stereotypes and whether people ought to find it offensive. Although it is not our intention to adjudicate this debate, for those unfamiliar with the show, it offered a mix of both complex and retrograde depictions of Indians. The call-center workers' head “bobbles” and supposedly unpronounceable names were the butt of recurring jokes. Romantic tension was built around the challenging of the Indian female lead's prospective arranged marriage by the good-natured but culturally ignorant white, American protagonist. Nevertheless, the more elaborate jokes on the show frequently drew out the crassness of and contradictions in American culture. Moreover, it is one of the white, male characters—loud, uncouth, hyper-masculine, gun-toting Charlie—who is the show's greatest buffoon. Although both white, male characters experienced story arcs where they were forced to come to an appreciation of Indian culture, it rarely moved beyond a shallow appreciation, both because a facile tolerance seemed to be good enough and because “Indian culture” was so roughly drawn.

One could connect Western, orientalist claims of India's spiritual wealth (usually paired with asserting Western superiority in all other fields) with the way *Outsourced* placed its moral compass firmly in Indian hands. But the most likely reason that people did not like the show, and that *Outsourced* was not renewed, was that it simply was not that good. Its sweet and sincere style of storytelling did not fit in with modern sitcoms in general, or the other Thursday night shows (i.e., *The Office*) specifically, which functioned at the level of knowing, meta-humor. As the discourse around the show—focusing on saving it from lack of renewal—quickly became a moral debate

about the racism of its depictions or the significance of its Desi casting, important questions about the negotiations that led to *this* mobilization of Desi-ness making it to prime time were overshadowed and ignored. Unfortunately, the latter, the choice of *this* mobilization rather than another, is the most damning reason the show could not connect with audiences: why would Americans in general and Desis in particular watch a show that eschewed relatable and relevant portrayals of Desis for yokel-like depictions of Indians? A show that might connect more with audiences, that could meaningfully address the transnational aspects of life in the diaspora, might be a show on Indian call-center workers with a cast of actual Indians,<sup>12</sup> or a show with a similar Desi cast to *Outsourced* that found room to use the cast's hybrid backgrounds as assets.

Consider *Outsourced* in light of the other depictions of South Asian heritage characters and actors available from mainstream television leading up to NBC's India-based sitcom. After decades of very few South Asian heritage characters on television—the notable exception being Apu, voiced by non-Desi Hank Azaria—the early 2000s saw Desi actors taking up surprising roles. The 2003–2004 season of *ER* introduced Parminder Nagra as a South Asian heritage doctor from the United Kingdom while, beginning in the fall of 2004, Naveen Andrews played a former member of the Iraqi Republican Guard on *Lost*. Neither were South Asian *American*, but soon such characters began to pop up in shows such as *The Office* (in 2005), *30 Rock* (in 2006), and *House, M.D.* (in 2007). Perpetual-foreigner depictions of South Asian characters persisted in shows such as *Heroes* (2006–2010), *Aliens in America* (2007–2008), and *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–present), but the breadth of roles for Desi actors by this point had expanded considerably and the perpetual-foreigner depictions were outnumbered by representations that suggested there was nothing particularly foreign or alien about South Asian Americans (e.g., Aziz Ansari as Tom Haverford on *Parks and Recreation*) or strange about South Asian immigrants (e.g., Iqbal Theba as Principal Figgins on *Glee*, beginning in 2009). In this context, it seems startling that *Outsourced*, a show about naïve, even bumpkin-like Indians rather than Indian Americans or cosmopolitan Desis, would be the first majority Desi cast show to make it on the air. More startling still, the public, industry, and Asian advocacy organization discussion of the show did not address this peculiarity but instead focused on a binary of overtly racist representations versus increasing visibility. This may, in fact, be the most troubling aspect of the ascendance of post-racial logics: their ability to short-circuit more nuanced discussions of race into an all-or-nothing binary that renders the majority of racism invisible and the discussion often unproductive. Thus, these were not overtly racist depictions. Rather, Desi-ness was mobilized in *Outsourced* in a way that sought to bank on its market appeal and the positive associations of diversity and multiculturalism while ignoring the complex negotiations of racial and ethnic identity in contemporary America.

In response to the outcry, key members from the production team and various actors went on a public relations (PR) offensive in the spring of 2011 to push for NBC to pick up the show for a second season. Drawing attention to the show's good intentions, Kwapis claimed the sitcom hoped to “humanize [. . .] the voice at the other end of the phone line” (Wilson 2010) while writer Geetika Lizardi (2011) played a central role in

discussing and demonstrating the authentic origins of the show's content. "[P]erhaps they don't realize," she explained in a *Los Angeles Times* op-ed reflective of her overall comments and function in the PR campaign, "that we have five South Asian writers on the show telling stories that often come straight from our personal experiences." Showrunner Robert Borden, being interviewed on a SAMMA podcast run in conjunction with SAJA, walked an uneasy line, first claiming that working on the show was "an honor and a responsibility," presumably to the South Asian American community, but then insinuating that the burden of authenticity that accompanies such a responsibility was not of concern to them. He continued, "Authenticity is not our first goal. Our first goal is tell a good story with really compelling characters" (SAJA 2011).

On the same podcast, however, Lizardi repeatedly made claims to authenticity, reminding listeners of the show's "South Asian" writers and offering specific examples of gags from the show—people getting sick from eating street food, the difficulty of elbowing one's way into a train car—which had come straight from the South Asian heritage writers' personal experiences and family lore. Left uninterrogated were the ways in which the Desi actors and writers of *Outsourced*, most of whom were born or raised in the diaspora, likely had privileged experiences of visiting the subcontinent, experiences that might bear little resemblance to the experiences of middle- and lower-class Indian call-center workers. More striking, it is never made clear why authenticity claims should even be needed, and particularly in the face of vociferous assertions that authenticity was not their goal. Emphasis was instead placed on the show's "really compelling characters," and the ways that they were relatable to anyone who had ever worked in an office. Thus, the production team was at pains to both celebrate the Desi background of the show and avoid demands to offer meaningful, contextualized portrayals of non-Americans or nonwhite Americans.

The work that Lizardi did to shore up the show's credentials as socially progressive warrants particular attention. As she explained in the SAMMA/SAJA podcast:

[I]t's the first show about our community in America. It feels like a coming of age, you know. The South Asian community is pretty young still, in this country. I mean, we weren't—from what I know—we weren't allowed to immigrate until the late '60s in any kind of numbers. So, we're coming of age, we're growing up, we're out there now. We're part of American culture.

As hopeful as such statements were, and as much as they highlighted the positive value of greater minority representation on prime-time television, they elided the fact that *Outsourced* was not about the South Asian American community. Further, such comments naturalize the manner in which marketing discourses use inclusive terms such as *Desi* and *South Asian* to mobilize a pleasant, reductive image of a highly educated and pliant "Indian" demographic. Lizardi's above comment displays, in particular, how such a narrative of 1960s professional immigration and success has become central to negotiations of South Asian American identity both from within the group and without, and how the show plays into these narratives by telling the same story of docile, professional Desi help, displaced abroad.

## The Impossibility of the South Asian American (Family)

Unlike the Desi writers, actors, and other creative personnel who produced *Outsourced*, the characters of the show were not savvy Brit-Asian, Indo-Canadian, Sri Lankan American creative professionals, but sweet Indian rubes. They worked in a call center for a mail-order American novelty company selling lowbrow Americana. They spoke their English with a nonthreatening difference, worked for less money than would American counterparts, and sold American tchotchkes to Americans, propagating American culture to attain an “American Dream”—like success in India, but without threatening American cultural hegemony. For example, they would never export their Indian novelties to the United States. And even though they prove themselves capable of speaking many kinds of differently accented English, they are not the uppity, scheming sort of Asians who might permanently speak without their accent. This is in direct contrast to the intimidating, high-tech outsourcing workers from the top floor of the building, who contract out to multinational IT concerns and code switch between various American accents at will. Heartless, ruthless, and brutally corporate, from their clothing to their thinking, they are the real competition Americans must fear, and thus the foils for the ragtag bunch of underdogs working for Mid America Novelties.

Although the show is at pains to most often make fun of Americans, their cultural ignorance, and American imperialism, the premise of the show frames its Desi characters as perpetual cultural foreigners, removing them from the geographic nation and situating them in India even as they are welcomed into the corporate American family. The specter of racial difference and hybrid American-ness is managed by setting the show in a foreign country. The specter of foreign competition is managed through ungrounded, pleasant depictions of foreigners who are more than willing to join the corporate American family on America’s terms. These representations might have grown more complicated if the show had continued and its many Indian characters were further fleshed out, but only the seeds of critique can be found in the first and only season. As it was, the interaction of post-network understandings of diversity through niche marketing and programming, post-racial mismanagement of questions of race and ethnicity, and the dependence of both logics on the category of the national—as a safe and intelligible organizing category for both media production and identity issues—allowed NBC to feel secure in producing a show with a majority Desi cast. Yet *Outsourced* as produced was unintelligible, both as a modern office sitcom and as a South Asian American (or even simply a South Asian) show.

Central to the greenlighting of this depiction of Indians and the curious belief that this was obviously beneficial for South Asian Americans is the deep ambivalence that marks South Asian Americans’ position within American racial and ethnic hierarchies. The reading above of *Outsourced* draws out one set of inclusions and exclusions relating to the economic acceptance of Asians within American workplaces and markets, but not culturally, or politically. This also helps explain the allure and weakness of articulating demands for cultural acceptance with marketing discourse. More important, however, is the ambivalence that marks South Asian American racial identity. Consider, for example, the censure lobbied against South Carolina Governor Nikki

Haley in the summer of 2011 when news outlets reported that she had marked herself as white on her driver's license and voter ID form. Critics argued that the politician slyly claimed whatever ethnic affiliation was useful in a given situation. While a certain amount of self-interest may have been involved, such a reading of Haley fails to consider the irresolvable options for cultural inclusion that Haley had spent her life navigating, such as when she and her sister were disqualified from a childhood pageant because a white queen and a black queen had already been declared. Letting them compete in either category would disrupt the carefully managed arrangement among the white and black contestants and their parents (Page 2012). Needless to say, such claims and erasures surrounding ethnic identity are hardly new, especially when we situate the Nikki Haley race controversy within a longer historical trajectory. In the 1923 *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* case, for instance, the World War I veteran was found to indeed be Caucasian by new anthropological standards, but not "white" enough, according to commonsense understandings, to be eligible for American citizenship. The flipside of having access to playing up one's diversity or one's blandness in political and economic arenas, it would seem, is the threat of being erased, or at the very least redrawn beyond recognition as a stranger to oneself and one's nation in the very media meant to super-serve. Not only are these media contortions and erasures reflective of the enduring and subtle racialization faced by many nonwhite Americans, but they are also indicative of how mainstream media's mishandling of these "hybrid" demographics promote, reinforce, and then evade culpability for a racialized understanding of identity and belonging.

## **Conclusion: Post-racial Negotiations in the Post-network Era**

In the wake of these post-racial and post-network negotiations, and their investment in national imaginaries that are left largely uninterrogated, their convergence deftly and repeatedly redirects our attention away from racial difference and specific histories of racism. This convergence, moreover, also works to continuously short-circuit transnational perspectives and possibilities. In considering MTV-Desi and *Outsourced* as productive failures that help us trace the contours of industry engagements with ethnicity and identity, our goal has been to resituate debates on race, nation, and citizenship in a transnational frame. It is only due to the power of the articulation of post-racial and post-network logics through a predominantly "national" imaginary that such a reframing—in terms of mainstream American television—seems impossible. It is, nonetheless, critical.

Although America is currently enamored with the idea of a post-racial society, questions of racial and ethnic difference have only assumed greater importance in the current global economic and political climate. It is one marked by a backlash against the multicultural compact that was formed during the 1980s and 1990s and a rising tide of xenophobia across the United States and Western Europe. In the United States specifically, the recent rash of voter ID laws and the effort to instantiate draconian

measures in states such as Arizona purportedly aimed against illegal aliens (e.g., allowing law officers to stop anyone who “looks illegal” and demand they offer documentation refuting the suspicion) highlights the continued liability it is to be brown or black in America. More than that, it draws attention to the danger in propagating understandings of identity and race that allow people to manage discomfort of difference by shifting that difference into less explicitly racist registers, such as that of the national.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Notes

1. A notable exception in the American context is Madhavi Mallapragada's (2014) work on new media and the South Asian diaspora. In the British context, see Anamik Saha (2012).
2. See, for instance, Joseph (2013) and Squires (2014).
3. As LeiLani Nishime (2014, 18) elaborates, Asian placement outside the black–white dichotomy, but within a hierarchy of racialized and gendered identities, helps “stabilize [America's] binary racial and national formations.” With that in mind, as well as Asian Americans' untenable status as simultaneously heavily racialized and successfully assimilated, Nishime urges us to consider the meaning of the enduring marginalization of Asians in American visual culture. Such mobilizations, fraught positioning, and immediate erasure naturalizes the work done by such conceptions of Asian Americans in stabilizing the black–white race binary and in embodying a conflicted national relationship with racial difference (Nishime 2014, 18). For a historically oriented look at this configuration, see Prashad (2000). For more recent accounts of how this plays out in various cultural spheres, see Shankar (2008) and Davé (2013).
4. For more, see Mallapragada (2012).
5. Quoted in Jignya Sheth's July 2005 post, “Desi Making Waves: South Asian Programming,” on the *ABCD Lady* blog, <http://www.abcdlady.com/2005-07/art5.php>.
6. For more recent developments in the economic inclusion and cultural and political exclusion of South Asians in America, see Shankar (2008) and Davé (2013).
7. For a comprehensive account of the politics of creating “Latino/a” consumers, see Dávila (2000).
8. For an analysis of the 2000 census data that complicates and refutes marketing claims about the promise of “Desi Dollars,” see the *Making Data Count* report from the South Asian American Policy & Research Institute (2005). On the oft-repeated smoothing of South Asian immigration history and the diversity of Desi Americans' experiences into the formation of a pliant, wealthy Indian American community, and the harsh realities such a narrative obscures, see Maira (2002) and Prashad (2004).
9. For more, see Dudrah (2002), Mallapragada (2012), and Punathambekar (2013).



10. Variously titled *Nirvana* or *Nevermind Nirvana*, the pitched project led to two pilots for NBC in 2004 (with different casts) and one for FOX in 2010.
11. See Hashmi (2006) for an insightful account of the “outsourcing debate” in American media.
12. Consider, for example, ITV’s 2007 series, *Mumbai Calling*.

## References

- Andreeva, Nellie. 2010. “Indian-Themed Comedies a New TV Trend.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 31. <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/indian-themed-comedies-new-tv-20131>.
- Balaji, Murali. 2007. “When the Music Stopped.” *Little India*, March 4. <http://www.littleindia.com/life/1695-when-the-music-stopped.html>.
- Cheng, Anne A. 2001. *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Davé, Shilpa. 2013. *Indian Accents: Brown Voice and Racial Performance in American Television and Film*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Dávila, Arlene. 2000. *Latinos Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Dudrah, Rajinder Kumar. 2002. “Zee TV-Europe and the Construction of a Pan-European South Asian Identity.” *Contemporary South Asia* 11 (2): 163–81.
- Gillespie, Marie. 1995. *Television, Ethnicity, and Cultural Change*. London: Routledge.
- Grewal, Inderpal. 2005. *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Hashmi, Mobina. 2006. “Outsourcing the American Dream?” *Economic & Political Weekly* 41 (3): 242–49.
- Joseph, Ralina. 2013. *Transcending Blackness: From the New Millennium Mulatta to the Exceptional Multiracial*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Kiviat, Barbara. 2005. “Chasing Desi Dollars.” *Time Magazine*, July 6. <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1079504,00.html>.
- Lizardi, Geetika Tandon. 2011. “Don’t Hate ‘Outsourced.’” *The Los Angeles Times*, March 21. <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/mar/21/opinion/la-oe-lizardi-outsourced-20110321-22>.
- Lotz, Amanda D. 2007. *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*. New York: New York University Press.
- Lowe, Lisa. 1996. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Maira, Sunaina Marr. 2002. *Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in New York City*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Mallapragada, Madhavi. 2012. “Mixed Signals: MTV Desi, South Asian American Audiences and the Discourse of Ethnic Television.” *South Asian History and Culture* 3 (4): 549–65.
- Mallapragada, Madhavi. 2014. *Virtual Homelands: Indian Immigrants and Online Cultures in the United States*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Mayer, Vicki. 2009. “Bring the Social Back in: Studies of Production Cultures and Social Theory.” In *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, edited by Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John T. Caldwell, 15–24. New York: Routledge.
- Mozumder, Suman Guha. 2005. “Desi Television Comes Alive.” *India Abroad*, January 7, A20.
- Naficy, Hamid. 2002. “Narrowcasting in Diaspora: Iranian Television in Los Angeles.” In *Planet TV: A Global Television Reader*, edited by Lisa Parks and Shanti Kumar, 376–401. New York: New York University Press.

- Nishime, LeiLani. 2014. *Undercover Asian: Multiracial Asian Americans in Visual Culture*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Page, Susan. 2012. "Don't Say 'No' to South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley." *USA Today*, April 2. <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/politics/story/2012-04-02/nikki-haley-south-carolina/53957632/1>.
- Picture, Bill. 2007. "MTV World: Narrows Its Geography." *Asianweek*, March 9, 3 (29): 7.
- Prashad, Vijay. 2000. *The Karma of Brown Folk*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Prashad, Vijay. 2004. "Dusra Hindustan." *Seminar* 538. <http://www.india-seminar.com/2004/538/538%20vijay%20prashad.htm>.
- Punathambekar, Aswin. 2013. *From Bombay to Bollywood: The Making of a Global Media Industry*. New York: New York University Press.
- Saha, Anamik. 2012. "'Beards, Scarves, Halal Meat, Terrorists, Forced Marriage': Television Industries and the Production of 'Race.'" *Media, Culture & Society* 34 (4): 424–38.
- Shankar, Shalini. 2008. *Desi Land: Teen Culture, Class, and Success in Silicon Valley*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Sontag, Deborah. 2005. "I Want My Hyphenated-Identity MTV." *The New York Times*, June 19. [http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/19/arts/music/19sont.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/19/arts/music/19sont.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).
- South Asian American Policy & Research Institute. 2005. *Making Data Count: South Asian Americans in the 2000 Census with Focus on Illinois*. Chicago: South Asian American Policy and Research Institute.
- South Asian Journalist Association. 2011. "NBC's 'Outsourced': Meet the Stars and Executive Producer," interview by Aseem Chhabra and Sree Sreenivasan. *SAJA Webcast*, podcast audio, March 17. <http://www.blogtalkradio.com/saja/2011/03/17/tv-nbcs-outsourced>.
- Squires, Catherine R. 2014. *The Post-racial Mystique: Media and Race in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: New York University Press.
- Wilson, Stacey. 2010. "'Outsourced' Creator Defends Indians' Portrayal." *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 20. <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/outourced-creator-defends-indians-portrayal-28037>.

## Author Biographies

**Lia Wolock** is a PhD student in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Michigan–Ann Arbor. Her research and teaching center on transnational media flows, convergence, and the work of minority producers and cultural brokers, with a focus on the South Asian diaspora.

**Aswin Punathambekar** is an associate professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Michigan–Ann Arbor.