

To be honest, when I was approached to be a part of this hearing, I initially declined. I thought “Why do we need to have a hearing on the importance of diversity? It seems self evident that from its creation, America as we know it has been built on the principles of freedom. Freedom of religion, freedom from tyranny and freedom of speech. In fact the very words inscribed at the at the base of the Statue of Liberty echo with the resounding power of these ideas:

*Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!*

These words signify freedom and safe harbor to all who have suffered, regardless of from where they came. Nowhere does it specify that these ideas only apply to those who are white, or male, or Catholic, or heterosexual. Almost by definition, they are an invitation to diversity – diversity of thought and diversity of people.

So I thought, there’s no need for me to express my thoughts on the subject.

Then I thought of House Resolution 908, passed just this past Friday.

I’m sure you all recall it. It was a bill that simply asked to condemn and denounce anti-Asian sentiment, racism, discrimination, and religious intolerance related to COVID-19. To me, it was a no-brainer. Who wouldn’t support condemning racism in 2020, a full 50 years after the Civil Rights Movement?

But as I looked at the roll call, I saw that 164 representatives in the House voted against it. That’s more than a third of the members of Congress, and more than 80% of the Republican members of the House, - including many of you watching me right now - that could not simply say that Anti-Asian sentiment is wrong and should be condemned.

That was all the reason I needed to rethink my decision, and it’s why I am here before you today.

Now you may ask yourself, what does Anti-Asian sentiment have to do with representation and diversity in media? The short answer is that the two are inextricably intertwined.

The media has always been a reflection of our values and culture. From the early days of television and the popularity of shows like “Dick Van Dyke,” “Ed Sullivan Show,” and “Leave it to Beaver” we got a glimpse into what it meant to be American in the 50’s. Clean cut times when the biggest problem for our hero was being the only boy invited to a girls birthday party (an actual storyline, btw). One look at how different programming is today is a simple reminder of how much our society has changed. A show like “Breaking Bad” or “Atlanta” would hardly make sense in the context of America in the 50’s.

Another way that our storytelling has changed from those times is in those who are telling the stories. Where in the 50's all we had to say was "Look! Up in the sky! It's a bird, it's a plane!" and you know the rest... we would expect to see our hero, who was white, as were most of our heroes, the and now. In fact he was so white that though he was an alien from a planet 27 light years away, he was able to convince everyone that he actually grew up in Kansas! But today one of the exception to that rule also happens to be America's highest grossing Superhero film of all time: Black Panther. A film set in a fictitious country in Africa with African American leads.

Which leads me to my next point. Not only does representation in media reflect the culture of its times, but it also helps shape its values. In the same way that cigarettes are essentially a nicotine delivery system, so is our media a Value delivery system. And that is a responsibility. One that I believe all of us who are producers and creators must take seriously. As a delivery system for values, it is essential that we foster the principles upon which America is built; one of which is that all men are created equal.

Our programming must reflect this. Rather than reinforcing and let's face it, CREATING stereotypes – let's think about that for a minute: how many times have you, esteemed members of Congress, remember something you saw on film or television, maybe as a kid, and asked "Are people like that in real life?" Perhaps watched a Bruce Lee movie and asked yourself if all Asian people know Kung Fu? Or watched Annie Hall and asked do all Californians eat alfalfa sprouts and plates of mashed yeast? Maybe not as a grownup, but it's very possible that it happened when you were a kid and entertainment was your primary passport to the world.

I know that when I was a kid, who I saw on screen shaped my perceptions, and I also know I was, and still am, a victim, of stereotyping, based on the way media has portrayed people of color.

Counteracting those misperceptions is one of the primary reasons I created my own production company. I believe that we must work to create fully realized characters from all places and backgrounds, and showcase them in stories where they can lead, be heroes, be complex, or in some cases, just be simple slice-of-life folks like the Cleavers. Because after all, if you believe that there good people everywhere around the world, then it is important that our media reflect them and that notion.

To be clear, I can't wait for the day that we no longer have to have hearings like this about diversity. I can't wait to for people to say "Can you believe there was a time when people thought all Latino-Americans were illegal immigrants, or that all Muslims were terrorists?" That is the goal, to have so many different portrayals of all races and religions that, as Martin Luther King so eloquently put it, people be judged by "the content of their character," not "the color of their skin."

But we're not there yet. No doubt that you about to be bombarded by statistics that will all reinforce my point, but beyond just the numbers is the stark reality that if you believe that in America, "All men -and women- are created equal, we must continue to do our very best send that message through our media – both entertainment and news – and also acknowledge that diversity is what continues to make America, like Lady Liberty herself, a beacon for the world.

Perhaps then when a bill like 908 comes up, every one of our elected representatives can unanimously show empathy for those who are being mistreated, instead of an embarrassingly high number choosing to see Asian Americans as invisible and ignoring an issue that, like so many others in our society today, occurs on a daily basis and yet, is willfully ignored.

Better yet, what I ultimately hope for is the day when there really isn't a need for a resolution like this at all because hate crimes become nothing more than a relic from a shameful past. Proper representation in the media is one of the most powerful ways we can make that future a reality.

Thank you.