

The Asian Reporter

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MY TURN

■ **Dmae Roberts**



One tweet at a time

Some of my friends refuse to accept social media as a part of daily life. About a dozen of them still don't have a cellphone, so I don't even broach the subject of Twitter or Facebook with them. If I do, I get brushed off with how it's such a waste of time. They have better ways to spend their lives. And there's truth to that; when I really need to focus, I go offline. I schedule time to engage with social media. It's like a party or meeting friends for lunch. You can't do it all the time. Nor should you. People I meet who are dead set against new technology (I'm making generalities here based on my personal interactions) tend to be white and of the baby-boomer generation. They take pride in their status as Luddites. (Luddites were 19th-century artisans who protested against machines taking their jobs.) The Industrial Revolution won, and now I fear the digital age is leaving my friends behind.

I teach workshops about using social media — how to keep in touch with faraway friends, to find work, and to promote one's business, trade, or art. For me, it's a great career tool. It helps my freelance and nonprofit livelihood by introducing my writing and radio work to new audiences. It also helps me reach out to potential interview subjects and locate research more quickly.

Yet what I've found most meaningful about social media has been the opportunity to connect with other people of color. Readers who are familiar with my work have heard this before: I was born overseas in Taiwan, lived in Japan until I was eight years old, then moved to Reno, Nevada and Boise, Idaho until my family settled down in a small town in Oregon. Growing up in an interracial family with no other people of color in the area was isolating. Despite eventually moving to Portland where there is greater racial diversity than rural Oregon, it's still not unusual to attend events and not see another person of color.

With social media, the ability to connect with others is easier. I currently belong to more than a dozen multicultural, Asian-American, and mixed-race groups on Facebook. We post news, call out racism, and discuss media representation. I can connect with artists and writers and learn about events across the country and around the world. These groups not only help me feel more connected culturally, but they provide new ideas for my work.

For instance, I heard about author Julie Wu, who wrote the first American novel set in Taiwan, on Facebook from members of the TaiwaneseAmerican.org web portal. I discussed her book last year in this column; I wouldn't have known about her as quickly (or possibly at all) without social media.

Through some of the Facebook groups I belong to, I've mentored young people about issues affecting Asian Pacific Americans and others who are mixed race. I have also made friends with multiracial people of my generation who experienced isolation while growing up.

Lately, Twitter has been a great source for calling out racism. Protests develop instantly when racist events take place or when media portray Asian stereotypes. In December, 23-year-old writer and activist Suey Park created a Twitter storm with her #NotYourAsianSidekick tweets. For those who are unfamiliar with Twitter, subject lines are created with "hashtags" that are used to identify a specific topic of conversation people can follow. Park started a "convo" with a tweet about Asian-American feminism. For several days, #NotYourAsianSidekick lit up Twitter accounts worldwide with discussions not only about feminism, but about racism and multiracial identity as well.

In January, "How I Met Your Mother," a popular primetime sitcom, based an entire episode of the show on a satire of martial-arts movies with its white actors in Asian outfits. A wave of messages criticizing the cringe-worthy episode appeared at the hashtag #HowIMetYourRacism. Many people compared the episode to singer Katy Perry's attempt at a geisha outfit and hairdo complete with a parasol during her American Music Awards performance last November.

More recently, late-night comedy sketch show "Saturday Night Live" featured an aerial kung-fu battle in its opening skit with a character speaking faux-Asian style. Twitter was abuzz with comments shortly after the show aired.

The anonymous nature of Twitter can also spark racist comments. When Phyllis M. Wise, an Asian-American chancellor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, denied a "snow day" last month during severe weather, students commented with racist and sexist tweets. Many offensive tweets resulted in the removal of some Twitter accounts. What also followed was a torrent of tweets condemning the cyberbullying directed at Wise.

These examples are just a few of the hot topics that have trended on the internet. Almost since its inception, social media has perhaps been the greatest way for communities of color to not only connect with each other, but also to stage resistance against unfair treatment and stereotyping. Like any tool, it can be utilized for both good and bad, and it's as essential to me as my cell phone and computer. I choose to use social media for constructive discussions, not just for myself, but for the world at large.