

The root word of television is vision from afar, and that's its chief value. It has brought me in my stationary moments visions of ideas and dreams and imaginations and geography that I would never personally experience. So, it has put me in touch with the larger world. Television can be a force for dignifying life, not debasing it.

Though Moyers's comments were made specifically about television, the same argument can be made for a good book, a favorite magazine, music, or a film. And whether the media are a force for dignifying humanity or debasing it is largely in the hands of those who own and work in them.

### SUGGESTED READINGS

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### CASES

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#### CASE 10-A

#### DOCUMENTING CULTURE CLASH IN AMERICAN FACTORY

Emily Callam and Chad Painter  
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The 2019 Academy Award-winning documentary *American Factory* introduces viewers to the transition of a large factory in Dayton, Ohio, from General Motors Company to Fuyao Glass America, a Chinese company. The film attempts to capture an all-encompassing view of this transition as it depicts the effects it has on everyone from the CEO of the company to both American and Chinese workers on the factory

floor. Lifestyles and workplace cultures clash as the productivity levels of those in the United States do not nearly reach those of China. *American Factory* is the first film produced by Barack and Michelle Obama's production company, Higher Ground Productions. It began streaming on Netflix in August 2019.

The former GM plant was purchased in 2014 by Chinese billionaire Cao Dewang. His company, Fuyao, employs 2,300 Americans and 200 Chinese workers in the Dayton-area factory, making it the world's largest complex devoted to producing automotive safety glass.

Filmmakers Julia Reichert and Steven Bognar—who are based in Yellow Springs (about 30 minutes from Dayton) and teach at Dayton's Wright State University—have had a long fascination with the factory. Their previous documentary *The Last Truck: Closing of a GM Plant* (2010) was shot in the same factory and focused on the automotive manufacturer's 2008 decision to close it.

Dayton once had been a manufacturing giant; it had been home to six Fortune 500 companies and the largest concentration of General Motors employees outside of Michigan. That began to change in the 1970s and accelerated in the 1990s, with major employers such as National Cash Register, Mead Paper Company, Delco, and General Motors either leaving Dayton or substantially reducing their workforces in the city. Dayton's population has dropped by more than 100,000 people since 1960.

Reichert and Bognar filmed *American Factory* from 2015 to 2017 in both Dayton and China. They were given almost unfettered access to everything and everyone in the Dayton factory. The resulting documentary “provides a snapshot of the struggle between labor and management that is both timeless and distinctly of its time. Even more surprisingly, it does so in a manner that is often engaging and entertaining, considering the subject matter” (Sobczynski, 2019).

That snapshot includes frank discussions about race, class, and culture. The Americans must learn to assimilate to Chinese work culture and foreign leadership. They earn significantly lower wages than they were accustomed to while working for General Motors, are stymied in their attempts to unionize, and uneasily adjust to unstable employment and at times unsafe working conditions. Chinese Fuyao workers who move to America must learn to live and work in a new culture while they are separated—often for months—from their families.

“And so *American Factory* is only nominally a film about America. The part that is astonishing about *American Factory* is seeing everything about the United States through the eyes of Chinese factory workers and managers arriving to reopen and restaff a plant in the rust belt.

*American Factory* is the view we never get. Americans know how they feel about competing with China. But we don't know how China feels about working with America" (Urstadt, 2019).

### Micro Issues

1. Julia Reichert and Steven Bognar live and work near Dayton and codirected a previous short documentary about the factory and its workers. What are the advantages to their "insider" knowledge about the city and the factory? What are the disadvantages?
2. *American Factory* was distributed through Netflix (and viewed by individuals or small groups) instead of through movie theaters (and viewed by large crowds). How might that distribution change the viewing experience? How might it change conversations about the film?
3. As you watch the film, note the visual images of American workers and Chinese workers. How do those images reaffirm or contradict your view of the two cultures? How are they different from what you might find in popular films?

### Midrange Issues

1. What would Tolstoy say about *American Factory*?
2. Is *American Factory* journalism? Should documentaries be held to the standards of journalism?
3. *American Factory* was produced, in part, by Barack and Michelle Obama, and it was released during an escalating trade war between America and China. As an ex-president, should Obama be commenting on international labor issues? How might your answer change if *American Factory* was a fictional film instead of a documentary?
4. Does the depth of the cultural dimension of the factory workplace portrayed in the film change your understanding of the competitive economic environment in China? In the United States? How might this be reflected in news stories you would write? What ethical values are reflected in your answer?

### Macro Issues

1. Is *American Factory* truthful? How might someone watching this film in China answer that question?

2. Evaluate *American Factory* in terms of social justice. What might John Rawls, Amartya Sen, or Martha Nussbaum say about the film?
3. *One Child Nation*, a documentary about China's one-child policy that was reversed several years ago, also provides an in-depth look at some elements of Chinese culture. Contrast what you learned about China in *American Factory* with those of *One Child Nation* (available on Amazon). How are you developing your own version of "the truth" about contemporary Chinese culture?

### CASE 10-B

#### THE *DAILY SHOW*'S ONE-CLIENT LEGAL TEAM

CHAD PAINTER

*University of Dayton*

Trevor Noah and his *Daily Show* team bought full-page ads on Aug. 27, 2020, in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times* to "promote" their new law firm—Trevor Noah & Associates & Sons Presidential Attorneys. The ads were timed to coincide with Donald Trump's nomination acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention.

The text of the ad reads, "Are you a soon-to-be ex-president? About to lose legal immunity? Has your lawyer gone to jail? Call the very fine people on YOUR side." Noah and his team say they can defend clients against "Corruption," "Mega-corruption," "Emoluments (we know what that is!)," "Shady rich guy tax stuff," "Obstruction of justice (same price for multiple counts!)," "You told people to inject bleach for some reason," and "Mail murder." They also promise to "get you off . . . and you won't even have to pay us \$130,000."

The ad also features the phone number 1-210-WH-CRIME. It is a working number, and callers are prompted to press 1 if they are president, and 2 if they are not president. Pressing 1 prompts the following prerecorded message from Noah:

Hello, Mr. President. I'm Trevor Noah, managing partner of Trevor Noah and Associates and Sons. Have you ever been to Uganda, sir? It's a beautiful country with a strong goat-based economy. And most important, it does not extradite to the United States. At any time on or before January 20th 2021, I can transport you and any members of your family you actually like to Uganda. I can provide the service for, I don't know, \$10 million. Let me know. Oh, and if you made a mistake, and you're