



# News & Views

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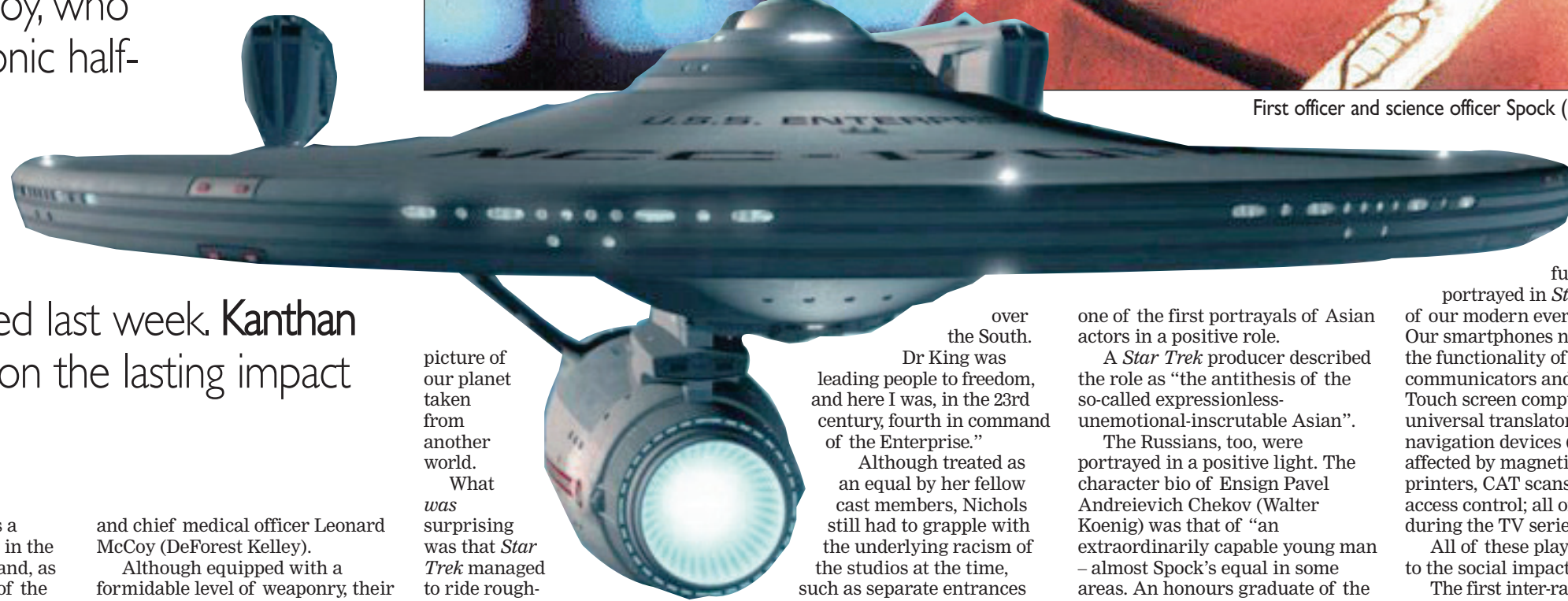
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## LIVE LONG... IN OUR MEMORY



First officer and science officer Spock (Leonard Nimoy).

Leonard Nimoy, who played the iconic half-human half-alien first officer of the Starship Enterprise, died last week. **Kanthan Pillay** reflects on the lasting impact of Star Trek



picture of our planet taken from another world.

What was surprising was that *Star Trek* managed to ride roughshod over many of the social issues of the period: the cold war, American nationalism, sexism, racism, and religious fervour. An anti-war humanist agenda dominated the storytelling. The cast reflected a universe where race or nationality did not matter.

Communications officer Nyota Uhura, effectively fourth in command of the Enterprise, was played by Nichelle Nichols – a black woman. It was a first for TV in the US in that it was unheard of for black and white characters to be portrayed as social equals on the small screen.

"It didn't hit me at the time until somebody told me," Nichols told *The Huffington Post* in 2012. "I splashed on to the TV screen at a propitious historical moment. Black people were marching all

over the South. Dr King was leading people to freedom, and here I was, in the 23rd century, fourth in command of the Enterprise."

Although treated as an equal by her fellow cast members, Nichols still had to grapple with the underlying racism of the studios at the time, such as separate entrances for black and white actors. She says: "Oh, man, there were parts of the South that wouldn't show *Star Trek* because this was an African American woman in a powerful position, and she wasn't a maid or tap dancer."

As a result, she had considered leaving *Star Trek* at the time, but was persuaded not to do so by Dr King. In her words, "He said, 'Don't you realise how important your presence, your character, is? This is not a black role or a female role. You have the first non-stereotypical role on television. You have broken ground. You're an image for us. We look on that screen and we know where we're going.' It was like he was saying, 'Free at last, free at last!'"

The helmsman, Lieutenant Hikaru Sulu (George Takei), is of Japanese heritage. Again, his was

one of the first portrayals of Asian actors in a positive role.

A *Star Trek* producer described the role as "the antithesis of the so-called expressionless-unemotional-inscrutable Asian".

The Russians, too, were portrayed in a positive light. The character bio of Ensign Pavel Andreievich Chekov (Walter Koenig) was that of "an extraordinarily capable young man – almost Spock's equal in some areas. An honours graduate of the Space Academy."



*Star Trek* TV series actors, from left, Leonard Nimoy, honoree Walter Koenig, Nichelle Nichols, and George Takei pose at the unveiling of Koenig's star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in Hollywood on September 10, 2012.

Picture: REUTERS

We can reflect on how many of the depictions of future technology

portrayed in *Star Trek* are part of our modern everyday existence. Our smartphones now encapsulate the functionality of the *Star Trek* communicators and tricorders. Touch screen computer technology, universal translators, personal navigation devices (adversely affected by magnetic storms), 3D printers, CAT scans, biometric access control; all of these debuted during the TV series.

All of these played second fiddle to the social impact of *Star Trek*. The first inter-racial kiss on TV happened in the third and final

season of the show. Under the telekinetic control of an alien species, Kirk and Uhura are "forced" to kiss.

NBC executives were reluctant to screen the shot and asked for alternative takes. Shatner and Nichols deliberately flubbed the alternative takes, so the kiss stayed.

Nichols says she was surprised that the flood of mail the show received after the episode was aired was all positive. A letter from a Southern viewer said: "I am totally opposed to the mixing of the races. However, any time a red-blooded American boy like Captain Kirk gets a beautiful dame in his arms that looks like Uhura, he ain't gonna fight it."

But the defining character was undoubtedly that of Spock (Leonard Nimoy). Born of a human mother with an alien father from the fictitious planet Vulcan, Spock has green blood (from a copper base), distinctive pointed ears, and is mildly telepathic when in physical contact with others.

The conflict between his cold calculating Vulcan heritage and his human emotions became a conduit for many of the humanist lessons woven by the show creators into the script.

His trademark Vulcan salute (an open palm with fingers extended in the shape of a "V") along with a greeting which was more like a benediction ("Live long and prosper") has over the past almost 50 years become a rallying point for thousands of Trekkers who long for the very achievable universe created by Gene Roddenberry.

Leonard Nimoy is no more. He is not the first of the original cast to die, but through his appearances in two recent *Star Trek* movies as an aging version of himself who has travelled back in time to meet his younger self, he provided a bridge between generations.

The world is a poorer place without him in it. I have no doubt that *Star Trek* will find fertile ground in future generations, not because of its technology but because of its dreams and values.

Nimoy himself summarised it perfectly in his final message on Twitter at 9.36pm on February 23: "A life is like a garden. Perfect moments can be had, but not preserved, except in memory. LLAP"

● **Kanthan Pillay** is MD of the Yired group of companies and chief executive of 99.2 Yfm. He writes in his personal capacity



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