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**PREPUBLICATION DRAFT**

**Abstract**

How emergent technologies are imagined, discussed, and implemented reveals social morality about how society, politics, and economics should be organized. For the television industry in the United States, for instance, the development of internet "convergence" provoked the rise of a new discourse about participatory democracy as well as the hopes for lucrative business opportunities. The simultaneity of technical, moral, and social ordering defines the "moral technical imaginary." Populating this concept with ethnographic and historical detail, this article expands the theory of the moral technical imaginary with information from six years of participant observation, interviews, and employment with Current TV, an American-based television news network founded by Vice President Al Gore to democratize television production. This chapter explores the limits of political participation and morality when faced with neoliberal capitalism.

## Current Television and its Moral Technical Imaginaries

Current is a for-profit television network founded in 2005 by Vice President Al Gore and Joel Hyatt to democratize television media production. It later became a progressive news network. Gore remains the chairman of the board, and Hyatt is the CEO. Current claims to be independently owned despite Comcast, the cable and internet service company, owning 10

percent of the network. From primary offices in San Francisco and Los Angeles, the network broadcasts potentially to 71 million homes, 60 million of which are in the United States, via distribution contracts with cable and satellite companies such as Comcast, Time Warner, DISH, AT&T U-Verse, and Verizon FiOS. Its present roster of programs includes *The War Room with Jennifer Granholm* and *The Young Turks*, both progressive television news programs. Throughout its history, Current has had networks in England, Ireland, and Italy but now operates only in the United States and South Africa. It claims to be the "fastest growing cable network in history" (Current.com), but its 2009 IPO listing to the Securities and Exchange Commission clearly indicates that it is not a profitable company.

I worked for Current as a contract-by-contract, freelance citizen video journalist, or what Current called a viewer-created content (VC2) producer, beginning in 2006, and eventually produced 16 documentaries for the network before Current ceased the VC2 program in 2009. Based on the experience gained during these years as a freelance producer for Current, as well as textual analysis of journalistic reports, and over 30 interviews with executives, producers, designers, marketers, and engineers, this article documents how media reform broadcasters imagine technology to diversify the American public sphere. Like Dornfeld (1998), I produced media with my participants, namely 16 television documentaries for the cable and satellite television and internet news network Current between 2006 and 2009. These experiences afforded me a number of opportunities to see, hear, and experience the mission-driven labor of digital workers (Malaby, 2009) attempting to converge the user-based platform of the internet with the professional-based platform of television. I continued to monitor Current's historical development through the trade presses and by watching the network till early 2012. These iterations reflect the evolution and hybridity of broadcasting practices and moral technical values about how to improve diversity in the American public sphere despite economic constraints.

The ambitious goal of reinvigorating the American or hegemonic public sphere[1] was explored intellectually and experienced practically by Current's workers, who attempted to make the technological affordances of the Internet and television converge in order to enact Current's founder Vice President Al Gore's vision of "defeudalizing" the public sphere (Gore, 2007). In the process, they created (and I recorded) documents of experiments and narratives about how best to use the Internet or television to produce an inclusive hegemonic public sphere.

These discourses on convergence form what Kelty calls "moral technical imaginaries" (2008, p. 170). Speaking about open software and the Internet as both technical and moral systems, Kelty writes, "by moral, I mean imaginations of the proper order of collective political and commercial action; referring to much more than simply how individuals should act, moral signifies a vision of how economy and society should be ordered collectively" (2008, p. 140). Both the "technical" and the "moral" are persistently interwoven and collectively constitute imaginaries—the intellectual work performed just prior, and during, practices. Discussions about media convergence reflects personal and corporate moralities—the way the world ought to be ordered socially and politically.

If culture consists of the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, then Current can be understood through the way it imagines itself as a corporation with a social mission to use both the Internet and television to improve the quality of thediscourse within the hegemonic public sphere. However, most informants don't speak directly about a

[1] Current employees see themselves, their work, and their information as central to dominant national issues within a single American public sphere. Media reform broadcasters focus on impacting the diversity of programming within this monolithic public sphere. They are not interested in producing the conditions for a subaltern counterpublic. Their interest is in competing on a national level with the likes of Fox News, MSNBC, and other media giants. Current and sought to contribute diverse voices into a single, national, or what I call an American or hegemonic public sphere (Habermas, 1992, p.427-7; Fraser, 1992, p.122-127). Current is a television network, as opposed to Internet video network, precisely because it intended to engaging in a normative national dialogue, which tends to exist on television, not on the audience-fragmenting Internet.

hegemonic public sphere, nor quote Habermas. They instead speak about technologies, aesthetic decisions, and legal issues. For example,

"The defining story of Current TV," according to Online Marketing Manager Joe Brilliant is

> the constant cultural and business conflict between the goals and objectives of the TV and filmic-based components and the web-centric elements of Current; how those two things were both at the table; how they were reconciled and how they were not in some cases; the challenge of being a new media company where you are trying to draw from both pools and satisfy different distribution platforms and customers and consumers (interviewed 5/26/10).

Information work has both moral and technical components. Information workers bring their subjective morality to the corporation. This is augmented by the corporate moral imperative, in this case, the desire to improve the American public sphere through media democratization. Despite the interviewer's best methods, these subjects rarely address directly these moralities. Instead, they refer to the technical, aesthetic, or business elements of their work. These narratives are explicitly technical and implicitly moral, and form the subjective epistemology of media work (Perin, 2006; Postill, 2008). In fact, one could argue that all technical talk is always moralistic. Peterson argues that "the organization of productive roles is never a simple technological distribution but always also a profoundly moral one" (2005: 194). Brilliant's narrative is about convergence but it is also about the challenges of creating inclusion in the hegemonic public sphere with existing technologies, communications policies, market constraints, and talent pools.

An example of moral technical imaginaries may come from Internet hacker culture. Despite often being demonized as criminals, hackers consistently express moral technical imaginaries. On one level, hackers' moral technical imaginaries begin with technical discussions of computers, networks, protocols, and their distaste of proprietary software. On another level, hackers' talk reveals moralities regarding free speech, meritocracy, privacy, and individualism. Hacker "morality" (Coleman and Golub, 2008, p.267) is experienced in the context of networked participation and resistance and thus offers a revision of selfhood, property, privacy, labor, and creativity for the digital age (2008, p.267). Talk about convergence reflects personal and corporate moralities—the way the world ought to be socially and politically. For Current, the American hegemonic public sphere ought to include diverse voices. In attempts to accomplish this, Current went through four iterations: Current's Prehistory (1991-2005), Viewer-Created Content (2005-2007), Current.com (2007-2009), Hollywood (2009-today).

With a sound engineering metaphor, developer Dan Linder describes Current's history, "We are in this sine wave thing. Before we let ourselves dip way up high or way down low again, let's get a band pass filter in there and keep it bouncing around in the middle, rather than today we are a web company, tomorrow a TV company, tomorrow a web company" (interviewed October 11, 2010). "Sine wave" is a term used in sound engineering and trigonometry to refer to the peaks and troughs in a mathematical curve. This technical imaginary of oscillating allegiances to techno-social systems also reflects the fluctuations of the moral commitment to inclusion within the hegemonic public sphere. Others are less delicate than Linder. "Current is a neurotic company. I define neurosis as actions you return to time and time again even though they don't work," said Current producer Jimmy Goldblum (interview February 6, 2011). This neurosis is a problem Current workers tried to solve through imagining the proper use of

broadband and broadcast technologies as well as its fluctuating commitments to enriching the hegemonic public sphere.

**Case Study: Current Prehistory (1991-2005)**

Former US Vice-President Al Gore has long been a policy supporter of how emergent telecommunications should facilitate pro-democracy activity[2]. In *The Assault on Reason* (Gore, 2007) readers get a full-blown critique of the corporate media landscape and examples of solutions. He argues that conglomeration is antagonistic to the ethos of democracy and that the Internet combined with television can improve democratic functions by routing around conglomerated forces. Gore's reformative mission would be "a democratization 'small d' of media on television [3]," according to Senior Vice President of Programming Justin Gunn who was integral to the first implementations of Gore's vision.

After losing the 2000 US Presidential election, Gore and his partner Joel Hyatt began to conceive a media outlet that could diversify discourse within the public sphere. They approached people capable of helping with this vision. Hyatt, a Democratic Party contributor who made millions through creating a franchise that provides inexpensive

[2] As a Tennessee Senator Gore's Congressional bill, The High Performance Computing and Communication Act of 1991, led to the National Information Infrastructure (NII). Gore said, "high speed networks must be built that tie together millions of computers, providing capabilities that we cannot even imagine" (Gore, 1991, p. 150). In 1994, as US Vice President, Gore gave a speech about convergence: "Our current information industries -- cable, local telephone, long distance telephone, television, film, computers, and others -- seem headed for a Big Crunch/Big Bang of their own. The space between these diverse functions is rapidly shrinking" (Gore, 1994). Three months later, Gore discussed the potential of the information superhighway for democracy, claiming that computer supported "networks of distributed intelligence…will spread participatory democracy" (Brooks and Boal, 1995, p. xii).

[3] The imaginary of the internet facilitating the production of a renewed democratic society has a legacy in the works of Electric Frontier Foundation founder John Perry Barlow and Wired Magazine going back to the 1990s.

legal advice, became a co-founder and CEO. Joanna Earl, with broadband and personalized video as well as strategic planning experience for entertainment conglomerates, joined Gore and Hyatt. Gotham Chopra, son of the New Age guru Deepak, a well-connected television journalist, and representative of the target demographic, was brought on board. Michael Rosenblum, a teacher of citizen video journalism, also joined the team. These individuals were all active believers in the moral imaginary of the Internet's capacities to diversify the hegemonic public sphere but lacked the technical imaginaries to put it into practice. For that they needed creative workers.

As early as those first meetings, the technical imaginaries of television and the Internet came into conflict. Chopra said participants would consistently ask themselves, "Which one, the Internet or TV, is the real platform and which is the complement? It was a debate. Joanna [Earl] was adamant. She thought that online was the portal" (interviewed 9/13/10). Within this small think-tank opinions differed. Chopra, with experience in television at Channel One, carried more of the television imaginary. Rosenblum likely agreed, but also was a fierce supporter of how inexpensive video gear and the Internet would revolutionize television. Gore describes both as equally important; the two-way communication of the Internet paired with the wide audience of television. Hyatt had little experience in either television or the Internet. Each original member of Current brought a different set of talents and expectations that had an impact when Current implemented its moral technical imaginary.

Rosenblum shared Gore's anti-conglomerate sentiment: "the notion that 5 people can control the content for 300 million people is inherently destructive to any kind of democratic society" (interviewed 8/31/10). Founders were more interested in morality and less on television's technical imaginary. "My motivation was always to disband

television," Rosenblum proclaimed. In those early days, "we were trashing professional, reality TV, and not having ever met (potential amateur producers like) you we were saying 'you are capable of doing much better,'" worried Chopra (interviewed 8/4/10). Throughout 2004, these five individuals debated the merits of various forms of programming that could be both economically and politically powerful, all the while attending closely to the moral implications and sidestepping the technical problems of their project.

In May of 2004, Gore and Hyatt made a surprise appearance at the National Cable & Telecommunications Association convention where they announced that they had acquired the news and information network NewsWorld International (NWI) from Vivendi Universal for $70.9 million and renamed it INdTV. Hyatt said, "We have bought a property that's making money, a good medium for growing distribution" (Wallenstein, 2004). Inheriting NWI's lucrative carriage deals with cable companies, INdTV was instantly profitable. With a television network Gore and Hyatt could proceed along a number of paths toward producing content that would satisfy their lofty aim of improving the public sphere. They could make a liberal television network, though that already existed in the non-profit progressive network Free Speech TV. They began with Rosenblum's idea of hiring 200 Digital Correspondents (DC) who would shoot and edit nonfiction stories from around the world. Rosenblum clarified the proposal:

> "[let's] put them through an intensive training course...like a Peace Corp [and] put them on two-year contracts for minimal amounts of money and essentially create this army of new young bright journalists with video cameras [who] go all around the world and make stuff for next to nothing" (interviewed 8/31/10).

Over 10,000 applicants flooded them. They scrapped this plan and hired but one DC, Christof Putzel. Current's eventual plan for content was to ask you, me, and anyone, to shoot, edit, and sell short documentaries to the network which had been renamed and launched in April 2005 as Current.

In the prehistoric phase, Gore's morality regarding the "information superhighway" led into technical talk about how a television network could diversify an American public sphere with diverse voices. As Current began to form, founders hired technical employees—engineers, producers, designers, journalists, outreach personnel—each with various moral technical imaginaries about the Internet and television. During this phase, the moral chorus was strong as the technical imaginary predominantly existed ina virtual as opposed to applied and technical state.

**Viewer-Created Content (2005-2007)**

> In the days of Thomas Paine and Patrick Henry there was a vibrant debate in every tavern and every town square and where was that debate on television? Nowhere. Why? Because no one wanted to have it, because it wasn't in the business interests of the vertically integrated corporations to facilitate it. So I think [Gore] had a very idealistic notion that this was essential for democracy to bust open this monopoly. (David Neuman, interviewed 4/19/10)

At his ultra-chic cliff home perched over the Hollywood Hills, programming president David Neuman explained how a new television network paired with the interactivity of the Internet would solve Gore's perceived issues with the American public sphere: "the selections of stories would be democratized, and the sourcing of the stories would be democratized, and the content of the stories would reflect open thinking that wasn't available elsewhere" (interviewed 4/19/10).

Neumann was the Chief Programming Officer for CNN when he got a call from Hyatt and later Gore in 2004. He suggested to them that instead of following Rosenblum's idea to hire and train 200 Digital Correspondents (DC), the network should use an internet-based video site to train, critique, and collect the works of any video journalist in the world. His plan was to use the Internet to "crowdsource" (Howe, 2008) content production, not from a few well-trained professionals, but from thousands of less-trained and globally distributed media workers. Neuman called this program VC2 or Viewer-Created Content.

Neuman responded to Rosenblum's DC model of hiring and training 200 professional video journalists by saying: "why 200? Why not 30,000? It is virtual. Why not put your training up on the web and teach everybody how to [produce citizen journalism]? And that is what we ultimately did" (interviewed 4/19/10). Chief Operation Officer (COO) Joanna Earl thought that if you gave this talent pool enough "structure, assets, assignments, training, support financially, inspiration-mentoring, then the end result would be good enough to put on TV" (interviewed 9/3/10). Neuman and Earl knew that if this new approach to diversifying the hegemonic public sphere was going to take hold it needed to be reproducible through education. The Internet as a free and

automatic educator appeared like the perfect solution. Current was going to reach 30,000 citizen journalists through an imaginative faith in social media to scale and educate.

Neuman confided in me that he would prefer to have no employees and outsource the entire production operation to freelance VC2 producers. I challenged this assertion by stating: "But it doesn't create a living wage for 200 people." He quickly retorted,

> No it doesn't...I didn't think that was really what the company was about, the company was about facilitating the democratic dialogue, the company wasn't about how many full-time jobs we can create with benefits in San Francisco for an elite cadre of young creators. In fact, we never intended it to be that. In fact, I wanted to have no fulltime employees, really. To me the ideal would have been eBay… my desire was, let's have 30,000 people making content for Current TV. That would be beautiful. (interviewed 4/19/10)

Neuman, clearly, was borrowing from the Internet technical imaginaries of scalability here, despite his decades in television. Traditional long-term employment was not a criterion in this age of networked precarity. A vibrant public sphere was the goal.

VC2 was one type of nonfiction and participatory programming where it was possible to see the conflicts between the technical imaginaries of television and the Internet. Current's VC2 model was that anybody with a camera could tell a story. But the Internet isn't about stories, it is about clips Current program Vanguard Vice President Adam Yamaguchi stated that Current would give participants five minutes "to craft a story from beginning to end and we will air it. That is citizen journalism" (interviewed

4/20/11). He contrasts VC2 with YouTube. They "don't care about the story. Give us the raw ingredient. Give us the clip. That was something we struggled with a lot at Current. Which is it? In the end it was the YouTube thing that resonated, at least on the visual medium" (sic) (interviewed 4/20/11). While Current attempted with VC2 to get not the clip but the edited pod, YouTube exploded on the premise of the clip. Thus Current focused on the narrative techniques of television, the complete story, as the best way of achieving the morality of improved diversity in the hegemonic public sphere.

Both VC2 producers and Current employees and executives were aligned with the moral imaginaries of the need to improve diversity in the hegemonic public sphere in the age of consolidation. But the VC2 program encountered the difficulty of matching the technical imaginary of the rogue and amateur Internet-enabled video producers with the technical imaginary of professional television. This exercise translated an amateur and authentic documentary into a civilized and professional product, exposing the incompatibility of two competing technical imaginaries, one linked with professional and finalizable television content and another linked with amateur and what Zittrain (2008) calls "granular" internet content. These cultural distinctions in the production and consumption of television and internet video expose how the technical challenges of convergence challenge the moral goals of the network.

**Current.com (2007-2009)**

Geographer Bradley L. Garrett and I watched the Democratic Primary debate that occurred in Las Vegas, January 15, 2008. As two Americans from Western states we were upset that the candidates did not discuss Western issues, particularly the growth of

the housing market paired with a mounting drought in Nevada. A few months before the election a blog post appeared on Current's website by Current employee Daniel Beckmann. It requested pods on any issue being discussed by the 2008 Presidential election candidates. We started work on a pod, *Sin City Ghost Town* (Fish and Garrett, 2008), about unchecked growth in the deserts of Las Vegas. A number of our informants stated that they were experiencing the local impact of global warming. We shot the pod featuring 12 speakers including conservationists, Democratic and Republican party spokespersons, developers, and homeowners. We locked down in a seedy hotel on the Strip to edit the pod in a frenzied 24 hours. We were happy to be informed that our pod was selected, along with several others, to anchor Current's 2008 Presidential coverage.

Current paired our pod with its Hack the Debate televisual experiment. On September 26th, 2008, Senator Obama and Senator McCain debated live on national television. Current licensed a broadcast of this feed and "hacked it." Members of the public with a Twitter account could send 140 character messages to a battery of Current employees, who would vet, then publish these real-time messages from the debate-viewing public on live national television. The tweets would appear on the bottom of the screen and percolate up over the bodies of Senators Obama and McCain. "Current is helping Twitter amplify the opinions, news, and trends that matter right now. Together, we're influencing more than media--we're evolving conversation," Twitter co-founder Biz Stone concluded (McCarthy, 2008). "We chose the name 'Hack the Debate' for this interactive TV experiment because our young adult audience often uses 'hack' to mean cleverly modifying something by adding access or features that otherwise aren't available," said Chloe Sladden, vice president of special programming at Current and later employee at Twitter (Harper, 2008). As explored by Coleman and Golub (2008), hacking is an

Internet imaginary but also a morality or free speech and meritocracy, and brought to television with varying results. The period in Current's history is marked by an emphasis on the technical imaginary of the Internet—hacking, social media, a failed IPO, an attempt to buy the social media site Digg (Lacy, 2008.)

I contrast the story of *Sin City Ghost Town* (Fish and Garrett, 2008) to Hack the Debate in order to illustrate how Current transitioned around late-2008 from explicit media democratization through citizen produced television to implicit participation through short Internet-based commentary like Tweeting (Fish et al. 2011; Schafer, 2011).

In the current.com phase Current embraced the Internet and convergence, and like many others, rushed to be the winner of the web 2.0 sweepstakes. However, this Internet moral imaginary belies tensions inherent in a media company with competing Internet and television departments as well as the divisive cultures spread between the network's two offices, with the Internet division in San Francisco and the television division in Los Angeles. The tension was clear between the engineers and the creatives (with their competing interests in consumer features vs. "feel") as was the tension between making something new no one had seen before (Silicon Valley-San Francisco) and competing in a saturated market (television in Los Angeles). The "cultural difference" associated with these two localities were often cited by informants as exacerbating these competitions. In the shift towards the Internet, individuals working on the television programs felt sidelined. The social fact of the Internet's scalability, influencing the profit motive, silenced or masked how technical imaginaries and moralities were envisioned.

Current's primary source of income does not come from the Internet, but from its television properties. In 2008, television advertising sales were more profitable than Internet advertisements. Television is better at finding consistent viewers. The profit from

television carriage deals is superior to the free viewing of Internet video. All around, television is a better business for immediate and steady profit. On the other hand, the gamble of investing in Internet industries is potentially more lucrative because Internet properties can exponentially scale and quickly become billion-dollar properties. “TV doesn’t have the explosive potential,” claims Vanguard Executive Producer Mitch Koss (interviewed 5/24/10). Cable television companies can increase revenue by acquiring more profitable advertising and subscription deals, but the growth is incremental and not as exponential as it can be on the Internet where new customers are almost infinitely distributed anywhere there is a networked computer or mobile device. This is a social fact that influences the tenor of moral technical imaginaries. As the 2008 global financial crisis increased so too did the pressure on Current to abandon the Internet experiments and find more conservative profits through their television property.

**Hollywood Phase (2009-today)**

The years of experiments with outreaching to citizens to encourage videographical participation in the hegemonic public sphere left the company bloated with young personnel. A week after the 2008 US Presidential election, Current fired 30 employees and relocated another 30 to other departments. Exactly one year later, on November 11, 2009 Current fired another 80 people, collectively cutting almost a quarter of its staff. Tech blogs called it a “major bloodbath” (Rao 2009). According to the press release accompanying the firings, the network was shifting away from its trademark short-form video packages and "towards proven 30-60 minute formats" (Rao 2009). Current hired a new CEO, Mark Rosenthal, ex-president and Chief Operating Officer (COO) of

MTV Networks, a network that also exchanged its short-form for long-form content. COO Joanna Earl soberly admitted that, "we have learned that short-form content is not the best to drive audiences and engage large audiences on television" (interviewed 9/3/10). Later Earl told me, regarding the VC2 phase that "we are acknowledging that we did not do a great job on the cable television front" (interviewed 9/3/10). Under Rosenthal, Current would "start operating like a more traditional network" (Schneider 2009). This includes program development, licensing and acquisitions, and talent management—television. Vanguard Vice President Adam Yamaguchi said it this way:

> For a while we were so bullish about the Internet changing everything, we didn't know where it was going and we didn't know what it was going to do and we jumped on it, whatever that meant. It turned out not to be the right move. We took a few steps back. We came to the realization that we have to embrace this somehow. We've also got this TV property. That is not such a bad thing" (interviewed 4/20/11).

Vanguard Producer Jeff Plunkett asked, "How much can you stand aside and say we are not a part of the TV world? And I think Current for a long time said, 'we are not a part of that ugliness'" (interviewed 9/1/10). Yamaguchi and Plunkett, as Vanguard producers were understandably supportive of a shift away from the Internet and towards television. Vanguard was the most television-ready of Current's programs, the most independent from the Internet, and therefore the least likely to be cut.

Others resisted or were fired. What had started as "an empowering, on the ground-up conversation became a Hollywood-down conversation," observed Wilson

Brown (interviewed 7/1/10). "So suddenly the powers-that-be are controlling every fucking script as opposed to 'let's edit a few things out but they have a voice'—it is a big shift," Wilson Brown drily concluded (interviewed 7/1/10). From a perspective internal to the corporation, this is a success story. The people who have been arguing for "proven" models of the television imaginary as illustrated by Plunkett and Yamaguchi finally won out over those "bullish" about the internet imaginaries like Joe Brilliant who could only gesture towards the future. With these contrasting technical imaginaries also came new technical imaginaries about how to achieve the public sphere morality.

COO Earl describes the changes towards television but in the language of Silicon Valley. There was a period when Current was developing current.com that "scaled and monetized and was a big platform and that is where we got divorced from a cohesive experience of the two screens. And what we have been doing more recently is unifying both screens under one brand proposition and providing, from a promotional perspective, more support for our shows. ... So there is a unification happening" (interviewed 9/3/10). The unification is that of the Internet and television,with a much less explicit form of citizen participation on the Internet and more efforts on the TV property. Earl left Current in 2011 to join a mobile apps company, making way for more television centric managers and commentators.

After eight years (2003-2011) at MSNBC and six months off the air, liberal anchor Keith Olbermann returned to television on Current. Gore said, "We are delighted to provide Keith with the independent platform and the freedom that Current can and does uniquely offer" (Schuker 2011). The unique qualities of Current include independence. "Nothing is more vital to a free America than a free media," Olbermann wrote, "and nothing is more vital to my concept of a free media than news that is produced independently of corporate interference" (Schuker

2011). With limited Internet-based citizen participation, *Countdown* is primarily a television program, not a cross-platform entity. However, the recent hire of a new president of programming, with whom Olbermann will work, signifies an increasing interest in cross-platform convergence. David Bohrman, an ex-CNN executive, became president of programming in August 2011, replacing David Neuman almost two years after he was let go.

Bohrman has an interesting background that sheds light on Current's continuing affinities to the idea of convergence. He has a long history of high-tech innovation in television news. In 1988, he created the first electronic site of election information for ABC News. He was the CEO of Pseudo.com, the infamous dotbustInternet video company that churned through employees and millions but managed to be the first Internet video news source to cover a national PresidentialConvention, as it did the Republican convention in 2000. Later, Bohrman became senior vice president and the Washington, DC bureau chief for CNN, where he created the *YouTube Debates* in which viewers submitted video questions to candidates. While Current was broadcasting Tweets on *Hack the Debate,* Bohrman was broadcasting video from YouTube on CNN. Despite the movement towards the television moral technical imaginary, Current brought on a convergence expert in Bohrman.

By 2011 Current's synergy with the Internet was negligible. None of Current's 2011 shows are available online either on its website or on YouTube, including *Countdown*. Current does not provide *Vanguard* or *Countdown* on Hulu or iTunes on an à la carte basis. This lack of legal options to watch Current programming online signifies a network desperately trying to monetize its cable subscriptions as opposed to exploiting some of the interactive and synergistic possibilities of the Internet. *Countdown* and *Vanguard* reporters Tweet short messages, and both programs release trailers, behind-the-scenes shots, and short clips on YouTube, iTunes, and Current.com, but opportunities for interactivity are surprisingly rare. The "blog" for *Vanguard*

consists of a highly edited collection of Tweets sent in by viewers and *Vanguard* reporters. Yamaguchi admits Current could do more, but employees are not incited by their superiors to do so (interviewed April 20, 2011). Below the short videos on *Countdown* are vibrant debates. *Vanguard*'s participatory attempts are a far cry from the rich tapestry of voices, big and small, articulate or loud, competing for viability. After five years of embracing the Internet, Current is now doing as little of the Internet as possible. The "return" to cable television is part of a conservative response to the global financial crisis of 2008 and the advancing hybridization of television and the Internet created by (companies like) Current. This represents participatory culture as an implicit form of interaction: participation in the production of meaning, not participation in the explicit production of media itself (Jenkins, 2006).

Jenkins (2006) abandons the idea that explicit citizen participation is a feasible force for the diversification of a hegemonic public sphere. Current would agree. He believes that corporations as well as audiences are not going to give up the simplicity or the economic potential of implicit participation. The change Jenkins foresees is "towards consumption as a networked practice" (2006, p.244). These "consumption communities" (2006, p.245) will subtly but consistently reform a corporate-driven public sphere into a sphere of greater interactivity, listening, and engagement. This is very different from a media revolution led by video citizen journalists.

The technical imaginaries of Current's morality of the public sphere have undergone several transformations. First, VC2 producers explicitly made difficult documentaries, to "give voice to the voiceless," as host Jason Silva often said. Second, Current.com contributors implicitly provided story links. Now, viewers actively watch as "consumption communities" (Jenkins, 2006, p.245). From the most to the least active, each is one form of engagement with the hegemonic public sphere. Citizens need only watch *Countdown with Keith Olbermann* or the newer

shows, *The Young Turks with Cenk Uygur* and *War Room with Jennifer Granholm* to qualify as participants in a public sphere. This is because along with *Vanguard* and *Countdown* came a renewed moral focus on Current's status as an "independent" news network resisting the negation of access to the public sphere by conglomerated media corporations. It is this elite and professional independence to critique corporate media and oligarchy by a liberal pundit, not explicit citizen television production with VC2 or implicit user contributions with Current.com, that is going to provide the grounds for the development of voice within the American public sphere. This appears to be the present moral technical imaginary logic.

**Current's Imaginaries: From Utopia to Ideology**

In the transition to the Hollywood phase, Current moved out of its numerous eclectic offices ringed around a cozy cafe where one could literally bump into Current workers. Its new offices are in LA Center Studios, a gated skyscraper in downtown Los Angeles looming over Highway 110. Nevertheless, it was in these halls that I conducted some of the most compelling interviews and made some of the most interesting observations about Current's transitions.

On one such encounter, security buzzed me up to Current's 27th floor lobby on my way to conduct some interviews. Beside *Vanguard* promotional posters of Putzel and Yamaguchi with the words "No Lies" and "No Borders" painted in black across their faces was a large monitor that afforded me my first view of Current programming in a long time. Sometimes a network's promotional commercials are as interesting as its content. A commercial begins with a slick narrator saying "It's a Samsung summer road trip featuring Current journalists Max Lugavere and Jason Silva. Their destination? Catalina Island, California, to show how the Samsung Galaxy Tab 10.1 is revolutionizing the way we live." Max and Jason proceed to have a self-

proclaimed "bromance" on this jewel of the Channel Islands guided by their new tablets. There was no "journalism" in this commercial; had there been, "journalists" selling hardware is simply unethical. Max Lugavere and Jason Silva were the first hosts at Current. University of Miami film students, they submitted their senior thesis film, *Textures of Selfhood*, a hedonistic, narcissistic, and psycho-spiritual romp through South Beach, Miami, to Current before it launched, and Current immediately hired them. Their hosted recordings introduced pods in Current's Chemosphere numerous times throughout the day. They took a particular liking to my work, particularly the third pod I produced for Current, *Tantric Tourists*, a reflexive journey about spiritual tourists in the foothills of the Himalayan mountains of Sikkim, and we became friends. As the most recognizable faces to develop out of Current, Silva and Lugavere were kept on a retainer after the downfall of VC2 for just these kinds of collaborative projects with corporations. Silva and Lugavere were most identified with the VC2 project, and therefore any corporate collaboration with these two young men was an attempt to co-opt the movement of citizen video journalism for corporate gain. This commercial combined the technical imaginary of factual VC2 reporting with the morality of capitalism. Combining the same voice-over announcer the network uses to introduce its programs, with its most prominent faces, this commercial exhibits the dishonesty and ambiguity of an infomercial. This corporate-network collaboration to sell communication hardware reveals the ways the media democratization movement can be mobilized for economic gain.

I arrived early to Current's Los Angeles headquarters, so I had time to kill and sat down and watched another commercial. This one was more disturbing. Like a VC2 pod, it starts with a text graphic clearly claiming to be "Viewer-Created Content" with the same narrator as the previous advertisement saying, "Here is a short film about escaping conventions, made by a Current TV viewer, about the new CT Hybrid from Lexus, the most fuel-efficient luxury car

available." This advertisement was thinly veiled as a VC2 pod about someone," the owner of Origami Vinyl, a record store in Echo Park, a hip neighborhood in Los Angeles, "escaping conventions. The ad was produced by Alejandro Heiber, who, according to IMDb, has been producing, directing, and editing films and commercials since 2004, and Salomon Resler, who began his career in 1999 working for advertising firm Saatchi and Saatchi in Caracas, Venezuela, and is presently a senior copy writer for DirecTV. The point should be clear. These are not viewer-creators but seasoned professional producers and marketers. During the VC2 phase, Current had a program for aspiring commercial producers called VCAM, or Viewer-Created Advertising Message, and it was housed in the advertising department. The journalistic version was VC2, and there was a significant effort to keep the separation of powers legitimate. These ads, however, were not promoted as VCAM but as VC2.

These two ads constitute an attempt to co-opt the legitimate journalistic practices of VC2 in the pursuit of "advertising messaging." Much like the earlier advertisement featuring classic Current content, namely Max and Jason, this commercial also focused on a typical Current subject, urban youth's retro-nostalgia for material music in the form of vinyl LPs and Technics turntable-wielding DJs. Thus, in both advertisements Current conflates its VC2 with its Hollywood projects, the public sphere amateur aesthetic with professional production. Both advertisements were devoid of political potency. They were designed to sell luxury goods. The mutability of the public sphere approach in the pursuit of profit cannot be better illustrated than through a description of what I saw awaiting an interview on that office lounge couch.

I was rescued from this disturbing conflation of the public sphere approach and commercial practice by Saskia Wilson-Brown, who breezed in after having had lunch with my interview subject, *Vanguard* Vice President Adam Yamaguchi. She was once the lead in Current's Outreach department and was now working on web audience curation. She survived the first

round of job cuts in November 2008 because she was a "legacy asset" but was let go in November 2009. She returned to her work as an independent film organizer before coming back to Current. She quickly embraced me, looked at the screen and its commercials, shook her head, pointed at the screen, and said rhetorically, "They call this Viewer-Created Content!?" (interviewed April 20, 2011). Wilson-Brown was equally stunned by the gall with which Current was fearlessly peddling its earlier "democratizing" mission for profit production. She believed in Gore's original mission and was one of the last to let go of its possible political potency. We reminisced about the idealistic era of VC2, speculated about whether "media democratization" was all just a sophisticated commercial ruse..

The commercialization of user-generated content and the professionalization of amateurs weren't just happening on the screen in front of us. Many of Current's employees tasked with finding "authentic" user-generated content and producers who were fired on November 11, 2008 and 2009, or left soon thereafter, are now successfully figuring out ways to sell those Internet video producers, and the eyes they carry, to corporations. Their strategy is to get video producers to make commercials, embed products in their videos, and enter into revenue-sharing deals with video websites such as YouTube and Blip. For example, Joe Brilliant writes on his LinkedIn profile that after Current fired him he produced "proof of concept viral video ads illustrating marketing potential of user-generated content" for Butler, Shine, Stern & Partners, an advertising agency. Dan Beckmann started IB5k, a network of freelance video producers that make advertisements for such clients as Kraft and Bank of America. Joanna Earl left Current in September 2011 to join ngmoco, a mobile game start-up. Ezra Cooperstein, head of VC2, founded Maker Studios, Inc., a talent pool of the most subscribed YouTube producers. Maker Studios is a "one-stop shop for reach, control, customization, and quality…providing marketers with streamlined opportunities to further their presence" on YouTube

(makerstudio.com/advertise). Brandon Gross, the first creative executive I worked with as a VC2 producer at Current, started Urgent Content, Inc. with three other Current alums. They describe themselves thusly: "As pioneers of branded user-generated media, we help advertisers and their agencies implement content-based marketing campaigns" (urgentcontent.com/about). VC2 Outreach personnel Sarah Evershed began by working for sxephil, the 13th most subscribed YouTube producer, and proceeded to marry and manage MysteryGuitarMan, the tenth most subscribed YouTube producer. Evershed founded The Cloud Media, a YouTube advertising start-up acquired by Big Frame that "works with online talent doing brand integration, talent development, ad sales and website creation." Prior to becoming the CEO of Big Frame, Steve Raymond was a vice president at NBCUniversal/Comcast. None of the user-generated content promoted by these companies is designed to inform, but rather to entertain. The content produced by these Current alumni is orchestrated to sell merchandise, not improve diversity in the hegemonic public sphere. The political motivation many of these ex-Current employees described to me from 2006 to 2010 was not observable in their contemporary work practices.

Thus the leading internet video companies and those founded by Current's diaspora—much like the two commercials I saw in Current's high-rise lobby that day—use the form and aesthetic of viewer-created content in acts of commercialization. This, according to Flichy (2007), represents the shift that imaginaries often undergo from utopian rhetoric to corporate ideology. In ideology, capitalist domination is hidden or ignored, while the utopian rhetoric persists, yet as a falsity. Indeed, Max and Jason are not journalists, and Cooperstein, Brilliant, Earl, Beckmann, Gross, and Evershed's "branded talent" is not "authentic" user-generated content in the sense of the original morality, but videos made by professionals with little political motivation. This dissonance between the utopian and ideological imaginaries is palpable for those who believed in

the original utopian model. Departing, Wilson-Brown said, "Things have changed, and I can't watch it" (interviewed July 1, 2010).

**Current's "neurotic" or "sinusoidal" imaginary of television vs. the internet has provided it a repertoire of ways to envision itself, here as a social media entrepreneur interested in the public sphere, there as a for-profit television network. The employees, after leaving Current, individually exhibit that same inventive imagination to reinvent themselves to suit their needs: commercial capitalists here, media reformists there. Such flexibility is necessary for media companies but for individuals as well. Media workers need to be flexible in order to acquire and keep their positions. Media workers in particular need to have a number of different competencies. In a competitive and precarious industry, where they do not know where they next job will be, workers need to be mobile. In the digital industries flexible adaptation to risk is seen as a marker of success. Conducting ethnographic work in Silicon Alley companies in New York City, Neff observed that "[ri]sk gives the appearance of choice, power, and individual agency" (Neff, 2012, p. 37). Some individuals, like Gross and Evershed, successfully managed this risk, leveraging it into new positions. Some institutions, take a risk and fail, like Current. It is neoliberal capitalism itself as a social system that thrives from both the individual successes and institutional failures that transpire from risk. Current's capitalist, moralistic, and technological exploration mapped what can and cannot be expected of internet and television convergence. The creative destruction that results from these successful and failed risks are forms of critique that enables neoliberal capitalism to reinvent itself**

**(Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). In this way, Current's moral technical imaginary developing from a Habermasian critique of the capitalization of the public sphere, ostensibly assists capitalism trial and error convergence and thereby learn and grow.**

The theory of the moral technical imaginary provides scholars with a way of understanding the morality that comes with technical work. Throughout Current's history the tenor of the morality and the balance of morality versus technical work fluctuated from emphasis on television to the Internet and back to television. These modulations in technical approach to the possibility of convergence reveal how morality is a handmaiden to the technical work that is often subservient to the necessities of profit generation. This historical analysis provides a way of documenting the flexibility of moral technical imaginaries. As a relatively young theory, moral technical imaginaries require longitudinal case studies to validate how technical work and moral perspectives intermingle within specific socio-technical assemblages. This chapter has contributed to the literature a range of hybridities and transformations such moral technical imaginaries undergo as they are performed in relationship to the particular affordances of television, the Internet, and their convergence.

The moral and technical modulations witnessed at Current are the result of the constant re-positioning and tacking necessary for mission-driven for-profit media companies in the present information environment. Here, morality and technological competencies become two resources from which to draw in acts of successful operating. The only consistency is imagination itself, the capacity for individuals to draft mythologies about how technologies can facilitates the production of a profitable and morally just system.

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